

# Identity Construction of Roman Catholic Religious Sisters in the Church in Nigeria

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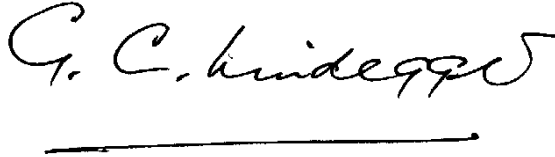
## Declaration

Unless specially indicated to the contrary, this study is a result of my own work. All citations, references and borrowed ideas have been duly acknowledged. It is being submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the School of Applied Human Sciences (Psychology), Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. None of the present work has been submitted previously for any degree or examination in any other University.

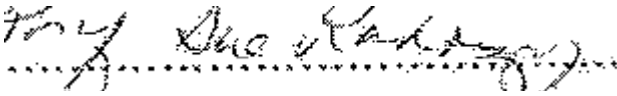
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## **Dedication**

To the memory of my dad, who had always wanted me to do a PhD. Dad, I hope I have made you proud.

## **Acknowledgments**

This research owes its inspiration to personal experience of mine, many religious sisters and friends I have encountered as I live religious life in the Roman Catholic Church. I wish to acknowledge these sisters and friends particularly the sisters who participated in this research, who generously told their stories, offered their time and reflected on their lives, at times laughing and crying as they did so. I thank each one of them for being part of this study. I am grateful to my religious congregation, the Society of the Holy Child Jesus for funding this study and also providing me with kind support that has encouraged me to complete this research.

My gratitude also goes to my two supervisors, Professor Graham Lindegger and Professor Susan Rakoczy, who generously and patiently led me through the process of writing this thesis. Dear supervisors, I appreciate the personal touch not just from you but also from your families during these years of study. I also like to thank Professor Lance Lachenicht, who generously gave me a laptop to work with when mine was stolen. Further, my gratitude goes to Professor Isabel Phiri, whose inspiration prompted me to write my first academic article last year.

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## **List of Biblical References used in this study<sup>1</sup>**

### **Old Testament**

Exodus .....Ex. 3

Genesis .....Gen. 12

Judith .....Jud. 4-5

Jeremiah .....Jer. 1

Psalms .....Ps. 39.9

### **New Testament**

Acts of the Apostles .....Acts 4:32; 17:11; 21: 8

Colossians .....Col. 3: 18-4: 1

Corinthians ..... 1 Cor. 12: 1-10; 2 Cor 8

Ephesians .....Eph. 1:23; 3: 10, 37; 5: 21-6

Galatians .....Gal. 3: 27-28

Hebrews .....Heb. 10: 7-8

John .....Jn. 3: 16; 4: 34; 5: 30; 6: 14; 7: 28-29; 13: 34; 15: 12; 17, 35-51

Luke .....Lk. 7: 16-39; 9: 23; 22: 26

Matthew .....Mt. 9:9; 12: 50; 14: 5; 16: 24; 18: 20; 20: 26; 21: 11; 22: 37

Mark .....Mk. 3: 35-37; 8: 34; 10:13

Philippians .....Phil. 2:7

Timothy .....2 Tim. 3:17

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<sup>1</sup> All Biblical references are taken from The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition, 2004. Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press.

## List of Church's documents used in this study

### Abbreviations

#### Documents of the Second Vatican II Council<sup>2</sup>

- AGD: Decree on the Church's missionary activity–Vatican II, *Ad gentes*, 7 December 1965.
- ES: Paul VI, *Ecclesiae sanctae* II, 6 August 1966.
- ET: Apostolic Exhortation on the Renewal of Religious Life: Paul VI, *Evangelica Testificatio*, 29 June 1971.
- GS: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World-Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 7 December 1965.
- LG: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church–Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 21 November 1964.
- PC: Decree on the Up-To-Date Renewal of Religious Life–Vatican II, *Perfectae Caritatis*, 28 October 1965.
- RC: Instruction on the Renewal of Religious Life S.C.R.I., *Renovationis causam*, 6 January 1969.

#### Documents of the Holy See

- Can: Canon or canons from the Code of Canon Law 1983.
- EE: Essential Elements in the Church's Teaching on Religious Life, SCRIS, 1983.
- MR: Directive for the mutual Relations between Bishops and Religious in the Church, Sacred Congregation for Bishop and SCRIS. 1978.
- RHP: Religious and Human Promotion, SCRIS, 1980.

#### Pontifical Documents

CFMW: Christian Family in the Modern World: Pope John Paul II Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortion*, 1981.

ChL: Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, John Paul II, 1989.

Inter Insigniores: The Declaration on the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood.

IL: *Instrumentum Laboris*.

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<sup>2</sup> All Vatican II documents used in this thesis is taken from Flannery, A. (Ed.), (1975). Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents. New Delhi: St. PAULS.

- MD: Dignity and Vocation of women: Apostolic Letter, *Mulieris Dignitatem* of John Paul II, 1988.
- SA: *Slavorum Apostoli*, 2 June 1985, No. 21: ASS 77 (1985) 802–803. Pope John II, Encyclical: Address to the Pontifical Council for Culture Plenary Assembly.
- RM: *Redemptoris Missio*, Apostolic Exhortation: Pope John Paul II, 1990.
- VC: *Vita Consecrata* Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of the Holy Father John Paul II: Consecrated Life, 1996.

### **Other Abbreviations**

- DDL const: Constitution of the Congregation of the Daughters of Divine Love, 1991.
- CICLSAL: Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.
- SHCJ const: Society of the Holy Child Jesus Foundation Texts and Constitutions, 1983/1998.
- CC: Cornelia Connelly's sayings found in SHCJ Norms of implementation, 1983.

## **Definition of Terms**

**Apostolate:** the work (ministry/service) the sisters are assigned to do for God on behalf of their congregation and the Church.

**Apostolic Order:** an apostolic order is a form of religious life lived by the sisters who are actively engaged with ministry of various kinds such as teaching, nursing, pastoral care etc. Sisters who belong to the apostolic order combine both prayer and work as a way of dedicating their entire life to God in contrast to contemplative orders, such as the Carmelites, who live a secluded life in solitude and prayer. The participants of this study belong to apostolic orders (also referred to as congregation).

**Bishop:** The Church local ordinary who is a male, ordained bishop and designated as the shepherd of the diocese. He is the highest authority of the Catholic Church at diocesan level.

**Charism:** The particular spirit or guiding values of a religious order evident in the intentions and purpose of the founder(s), such as humility, love or care of the poor.

**Clergy:** The ordained priests and deacons of the Church, religious and diocesan men who are members of the Church's hierarchy, unlike religious sisters who belong to the laity of the Church.

**Community:** This refers to either the whole order (congregation) or to a local group of sisters living together. Even two sisters living together are referred to as a community.

**Community Prayer:** The shared prayer that sisters who live together pray at specific times of the day as part of participation in community life.

**Congregation:** Refers to the whole group of the sisters who belong to a particular group of religious life. It may also be referred to as an order or institute.



**Consecrated Life:** Refers to the religious life as a lifeform lived in the Catholic Church.

**Diocesan Congregation:** Refers to a congregation that began originally for ministry in a diocese. They may eventually expand to render services to other dioceses within the Church. The Daughters of Divine Love, whose members participated in this study, is a diocesan congregation (order).

**Evangelical Counsels:** A term from Catholic Canon Law referring to the vows taken by the sisters. The vows are based on the example set by Jesus in the Gospels, and hence are evangelical.

**Final Vows:** As part of initiation as a member of a religious congregation, sisters take final vows which are referred to as perpetual vows by which they are admitted as full members of the congregation. Perpetual vows are usually taken 3–9 years after making the first profession of vows.

**Formation:** The process of initiating new members into the Spirit and mission of the religious congregation. Formation is on-going throughout the life of a religious.

**Formator(s):** These are the official designated personnel by the congregation whose job it is to train and orient the new members into religious life. Formators may also be referred to as candidates or novice mistresses/directresses.

**Laity:** Members of the Church who are not part of the Church hierarchy. Women religious are laity.

**International Congregation:** Refers to a congregation that has Pontifical recognition and draws members from different nations as well as rendering service in different parts of the world.

**Mass/Eucharist:** The official liturgical celebration of thanksgiving in the Church.

**Ministry:** A term used to refer to the work or service that the religious render. It has a direct link to apostolate which is also referred to as work.

**Novice:** Official name for candidates who are at the early stage of religious life. Their training lasts for two years; their place of abode is known as the novitiate.

**Parish:** The wider community of Catholics in a particular geographical region. It consists of the people of God and the priests.

**Prayer:** Forms of communication with God which include attending Mass, Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, Scripture reading, undertaking retreats etc.

**Priests:** The ordained ministers in the Church who are referred to as clergy (cleric) and who are members of the Church's hierarchy.

**Provincial:** Leader of religious life who is usually in charge of a particular region.

**Religious Life:** The way of life or vocation to which a sister is said to be called by God.

**Retreat:** A short period of time (3–30days) spent each year in prayer and reflection. As part of religious commitment every religious is required to make a retreat annually.

**Religious Sister:** The title by which religious women are referred to in the Church; often members of the religious life call each other 'sister.' They are also referred to as nuns.

**Scholasticate:** The period after temporary profession of vows. It is designated as the period for continual formation in which the sister continues to discern her vocation to religious life as well as obtain the necessary educational skills needed for service (ministry).

**Superior:** A term from Canon Law which denotes the sister who is elected or appointed to be in charge of the congregation (order), a region, or a local community of sisters. Today most congregations refer to the superior as the local leader, servant sister etc.

**Temporary Professed:** A term used to refer to sisters who have made their first profession of vows after initial formation and are in the continuous process of discerning their call to religious life and their congregation towards making final vows.

**Vatican II:** The Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) was held in Rome from 1962–1965 which addressed itself to renewal in all aspects of the Church's life including the up-to-date renewal of religious life. Vatican II re-affirmed the ‘theology of religious life’ (O’Murchu, 1991; Schneiders, 2000).

**Vocation:** A call to a particular way of life, such as marriage, religious life or single life. Before Vatican II this was used exclusively for religious life.

**Vows:** The vow is a solemn, public promise made to God. Most sisters take three vows, namely chastity (celibacy), poverty and obedience. In some congregations, the unpronounced fourth vow is community which may be referred to as the small family unit of religious life.

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## **Abstract**

This study was designed against the background of the vital need for a comprehensive research on religious sisters in Africa and Nigeria in particular to address the problems and challenges of identity construction by them within the context of religious community life. It is an interpretative qualitative research study which used an interdisciplinary theoretical approach, drawing on theology of religious life and dialogical self theory to argue that the sisters' performance of identity is a context-bound activity. Interview data was drawn from 18 participants from two religious congregations (Daughters of Divine Love and Society of the Holy Child Jesus) in Nigeria in order to understand the meaning sisters give to their intersubjective exchange and the impact it makes on their development and performance of personal/religious identity. The results showed that the sisters used a multiplicity of I-positions to construct identity. This multiplicity of I-positions arises from self-positioning and self as positioned by others (including superiors/formators, senior/older sisters, priests) which are laden with conflicts and dilemmas of identity construction. The major dilemma of identity construction that the participants encountered is based on the discrepancy between the ideal and the lived reality of religious life. The participants presented the ideal as a call to do God's will in direct imitation of Christ, but the lived reality offers a mixed experience. On the one hand the participants indicated that relationships within the religious community, Church and wider Nigerian society are supportive, facilitating their development and performance of Christ-like identity. But on the other hand the findings reveal that the participants' performance of identity has been hindered by power relations and dominance (including gender related issues) which are prevalent in religious communities, the Church and wider Nigerian society, leading the participants to present their performance of identity as a struggle for survival. Thus their construction of identity is a constant negotiation process, in which they are engaged in appropriation and rejection of positions as they struggle to construct unity-in-multiplicity. To this effect the study recommends that leaders of religious life review their leadership style in order to adopt a more inclusive approach which gives every sister the opportunity to speak and be heard, thus create a more conducive environment for sisters' identity construction.

# **CHAPTER ONE**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### 1.0 Introduction

This thesis examines the construction of religious identity of Roman Catholic religious sisters within the context of religious life within the Catholic Church in Nigeria. Religious life is a life-form in the Church, which is marked by consecration of life of faithful women who feel called by the Spirit to devote their entire life totally to God and to the service of others (PC #1). In doing so, the women (sisters) live in community and are bonded to God through the evangelical counsels (vows) of consecrated celibacy (chastity), poverty and obedience. The religious community provides the basic context of socialisation in terms of initial and on-going formation through which the sisters develop and perform their religious identity (PC #15). In this context, the initial challenge of religious identity construction begins in the religious community but also extends to the myriad interpersonal relationships in the Church and wider Nigerian society.

In this chapter, a brief overview of the background to the research including the rationale will be presented, followed by the aims of the study, objectives and research question. Then the scope and outline of the study will be presented.

### 1.1 Background of the Study

This study of identity construction of Roman Catholic religious sisters in the Church in Nigeria was prompted by my personal experiences as a religious sister. I have lived religious life for 17 years as a member of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, an international congregation. During this period I have watched with keen interest the dynamism of interpersonal relationships among my sisters. I found the power relations between sisters very challenging, particularly between authority figures (including provincials, superiors,



formators and senior sisters) and other sisters. These power relations also extend to gender positioning in the Church and wider Nigerian society in which more often than not sisters are positioned as unimportant and unrecognised workers in the Church. Based on my observation I set out to conduct a study focusing on long-term oppression and psycho-social adjustment among Roman Catholic religious sisters. However, after interaction with my supervisor(s) my initial focus on oppression changed to identity construction of Roman Catholic religious sisters based on the notion that it is partly through interpersonal relationships in any given social context that individuals develop and perform their sense of identity. Therefore, if sisters experience oppression, then its evidence will portray in their performance of identity.

As I began to explore this new topic I discovered anew through available theological literature that the religious community (congregation) is the primary determining context through which sisters develop and perform personal/religious identity (PC #1, 2, 15; Schneiders, 2000; Rulla, 1986). This the community does by offering initial and on-going socialisation in the form of formation which ought to facilitate the sisters' development and performance of identity as persons dedicated to God in direct imitation of Christ (PC #1, 2; DDL const., 2; SHCJ const., 9). Thus the sisters are called to be Christ-like in their performance of identity. But the lived reality of religious life offers a mixture of experiences: on the one hand, the community facilitates relationships that enhance the sisters' identity construction (Mangion, 2007; Stuber, 2002); whilst on the other hand, the relationships within the religious community do often hinder sisters' development and performance of identity (Armstrong, 2005; Gross, 2000). In other words the interpersonal relationships in religious communities explicitly provide experiences of warmth including love, care and support which enhance the sisters' development and performance of identity. But beneath these explicit influences there are at times implicit power relationships emerging from

positions of being a leader, final professed and temporary professed which impact on the sisters' development and performance of identity. As a result the ideal of religious identity construction which is usually stated as taking on the mind of Christ is challenged by power-play and dominance embedded in relationships.

This led me to pose the following questions: how do Roman Catholic religious sisters in the Church in Nigeria understand and interpret their day-to-day relationships of living religious life? What impact does it have on their development and performance of identity? Apart from relationships within the religious community, there are other relationships in the Church and wider Nigerian society that influence the sisters' performance of personal/religious identity, such as gender and cultural issues. In this regard attention was paid to gender discourse in the Church in an attempt to explore what impact it has on sisters' performance of identity. In addition, the cultural issues embedded in these relationships were also examined in order to understand its impact on the sisters' sense of personhood. Religious life as lived in Africa is a Western reality (Onyejekwe, 2001; Udoka, 1992) and the concern is how do African (Nigerian) religious sisters understand and interpret religious life within their local setting toward performance of identity? Against this background this study explores how Roman Catholic religious sisters, in the context of living religious life located in the Catholic Church in Nigeria, understand and interpret their interpersonal relationships and what impact it has on their development and performance of personal/religious identity.

Another source of interest for this study was the need to fill in the gap of research among Catholic religious sisters in the Church in Africa, and particularly in Nigeria. Apart from Church documents and the constitutions of the congregations whose sisters participated in this study (including their renewal documents and history books) there is a lack of previous empirical study conducted with Nigerian religious sisters. All the studies reviewed in this

study were carried out among sisters in Europe and the United States except for three studies done in African settings: Angola, Kenya and Nigeria. In the light of this the necessity to provide the Nigerian Catholic religious sisters an opportunity to tell their stories is important. The Nigerian religious sisters' voices, stories and experiences need to be legitimately heard (Chase & Bell, 1994) in order to appreciate the interpretation they give to the experiences of being religious sisters in an African setting, and how these experiences influence their performance of identity. Thus, this study is significant for the Catholic Church in Nigeria where a large number of women are entering religious life (Pope John Paul II, 1998; Lefevere, 2011), and where limited research work has been done among them.

Since this research focuses its interest on identity as a multiplicity of I-positions that emerge from intersubjective exchange, it relies on Dialogical Self Theory as its conceptual framework. Dialogical Self Theory argues that identity is established through a multiplicity of I-positions that arise from social interaction and is dialogical in nature (Hermans & Herman-Konokpa, 2010; Hermans & Kempen, 1993). It means that the sisters' sense of identity is influenced by their interaction within the context in which they live though not necessarily determined by it because the self has the ability to own or disown positions. In this sense the self, through personal agency, has the ability to appropriate or reject positions, which provides this research with the basic lens for examining the participants' development and performance of identity. In other words, through the theoretical framework of Dialogical Self Theory this study is able to explore how the participants manage conflicts, oppositions, and contradictions involved in making sense of who they are and are becoming as sisters.

This was a qualitative research study which sampled 18 participants from two religious congregations in Nigeria: a diocesan, the Daughters of Divine Love; and an international, Society of the Holy Child Jesus. The sample was distributed among three sub-groups of

sisters: the temporary professed, the finally professed and leaders who are the authority figures of religious life. The study used narrative methods (open-end interview questions) to invite participants to narrate their story of living religious life. The participants were invited to tell their story regarding significant relationships within the context of living religious life and how these have influenced the development and performance of their identity. Probing questions were used to explore these relationships and significant others in relation to whom the participants construct identity. The data drawn from the narrative interviews was transcribed verbatim using Jefferson's (2004) transcription notations in order to capture stresses, hesitations, and pauses which served as an aid to analysis. Thematic analysis based on inductive (bottom up) (Frith & Gleeson, 2004) and deductive (theoretical or top down) (Boyatzis, 1998; Hayes, 1997) approach was used. An inductive approach meant that the patterns/themes are strongly linked to the data which the participants produced (Patton, 1990), whereas the deductive approach reflects that the analysis focused on theoretical issues derived from dialogical self theory, and in this way the participants' I-positions/voices based on the framework of dialogical self theory was used to facilitate analysis. The analysis was interfaced with discourse analysis in order to capture the arguments and discourses the participants used to construct their identity (Potter & Wetherell, 1998).

The results showed that the participants have multiple I-positions/voices through which they perform identity including mutual and conflicting voices/positions.

## 1.2 Aim of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to understand how Catholic religious sisters in Nigeria develop their sense of identity, and the challenges experienced in the process of establishing a viable religious identity. In this regard this research explores the psycho-social factors embedded in relationships located in religious community and the Catholic Church in Nigeria

which mediate and impact on identity construction of the sisters. As a consequence the following objectives are derived from the aim.

### 1.3 Objectives of the Study

- i. To explore the sisters' understanding of religious life and its impact on the construction of their religious identity.
- ii. To identify who are the significant others in relation to whom the sisters construct identity.
- iii. To determine the impact of the implicit and explicit gender order of the Church and Nigerian society on sisters' identity construction.
- iv. To explore the impact of culture on sisters' identity construction.
- v. To highlight the available positions through which sisters' identities are constructed and whether these positions arise out of self-positioning or positioning by others.

### 1.4 Research Question

The key question asked is: How do Catholic religious sisters construct their religious self-identity in the context of community/congregation and the Church in Nigeria?

The sub-questions in an attempt to answer this question are:

1. How do religious sisters understand religious life and its meaning?
  - a) What, in their views, are the ideals of religious life?
  - b) How do they perceive the lived realities of religious life?
2. What I-positions are available to religious sisters in constructing a religious identity?

- a) Do these positions arise from self-positioning or positioning by others?
  - b) How are these positions located in time, space and in relationship with others?
- 3 How does gender impact on the sisters' construction of identity?
- a) What are the available gender-related positions?
  - b) How are these managed in identity construction?
- 4 How does culture impact on the sisters' construction of identity?
- a) What are available cultural-related positions?
  - b) How are these managed in identity construction?
5. How do religious sisters construct identity from these available positions?
- a) How is identity constructed from available positions?
  - b) What is the preferred self-presentation or self-narrative?
  - c) Is there a conflict between I-positions? How is this conflict managed?
  - d) How is identity managed in the face of multiple positions?
  - e) What discursive strategies are employed in identity work?
  - f) What are the challenges (dilemmas) in identity work of religious sisters?
  - g) Are there particular discourses employed in identity construction?

### 1.5 Scope of the Study

The target sample in this study comprised Roman Catholic religious sisters in the Church in Nigeria. For this reason the study refers to the construction of identity among Roman

Catholic religious in the Church in Nigeria. It should be noted that the theological framework that forms the basis of this study is shared by institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life in the Roman Catholic Church and so guides religious congregations in Africa, including the apostolic religious congregations in Nigeria. Therefore, the findings apply predominately to congregations whose members participated but might also extend to other Roman Catholic religious congregations in Nigeria and beyond. However, it would be methodologically sound to wait for similar studies to be repeated with a larger and more representative sample of Roman Catholic religious sisters in Africa before entertaining wider generalisation.

#### 1.6 Outline of the Study

This thesis consists of eight chapters. The present chapter highlights the background and scope of the study. Chapter 2 reviews the historical origin and theology of religious life. Historically, the earliest form of Roman Catholic religious life began with the lives of consecrated virgins and widows in the first century (Brockman, 1990; McNamara, 1996; O'Murchu, 1991; Schneiders, 2000). Vatican II (1962–1965) has greatly influenced the understanding of and the way religious life is lived today in the Roman Catholic Church, emphasising that it is a lifestyle modelled after the life example of Christ (PC #1). Thus the basic context for the development and performance of identity for every religious is located in the congregation under the auspices of the Church within a socio-cultural milieu (in this case, Nigeria).

Chapter 3 presents the review of empirical studies that have been conducted among Roman Catholic religious sisters. Although many of the studies argue that religious communities and the Church are viable sites for religious identity construction there is scarcity of research study done among Roman Catholic religious sisters in Africa, and particularly in Nigeria.

This renders this study of importance as it explores how religious sisters located in Nigeria construct identity within the context of living religious life in the Church.

Chapter 4 analyses the theoretical framework of the Dialogical Self Theory which provides the lens through which the study examines the sisters' process of identity construction as a context-bound activity (Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). Dialogical Self Theory argues that self-identity involves dialoguing a multiplicity of I-positions in multiple contexts (Hermans, 2001, 2003). A feminist approach was also employed in order to address the critical issue of how women's positions in Church and society impact on identity construction. Since this study focuses on a particular group of women who are sisters, it is important that a feminist perspective be used in order to explore their experiences and hear their voices, and their stories (Chase & Bell, 1994).

Chapter 5 discusses the research method, a qualitative empirical study, which focused on exploring an in-depth understanding of how Catholic religious sisters in the context of living religious life construct identity. Based on its qualitative nature narrative interviews were used to source the data from religious sisters in the Catholic Church in Nigeria and a thematic analysis was used to analyse the data, in which the participants' I-positions, based on the theoretical framework of Dialogical Self Theory, were used as an aid to code and develop the themes.

Chapter 6 presents the results of the study which indicate that the participants have a multiplicity of I-positions through which they construct identity and chapter 7 carries the discussion of the results. Finally, chapter 8 addresses the conclusions and implications of the study.



## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **HISTORICAL ORIGINS AND THEOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS LIFE**

#### 2.0 Introduction

This chapter explores the essence of Catholic religious life, by tracing its historical origin back to the life of early Christian living modelled after the lifestyle of Jesus Christ as lived in the Gospels. It provides a background understanding of the basic characteristics of religious life as contained in the Church documents and the constitutions of the religious congregations of the sisters who participated in the study. In so doing a detailed account of the theology of religious life and the meaning of charism is discussed in relation to how religious communities provide the context of socialisation through which sisters develop their personal/religious identity.

This chapter will provide an account of how religious communities provide the experiences that facilitate or hinder the development of its members in their performance of personal/religious identity. These experiences are conveyed through religious formation (socialisation) in the community which includes the dynamism of interpersonal relationships within the community, the Church and wider Nigerian society. The latter part of the chapter focuses more specifically on the Catholic Church's gender construct, and religious life as lived in the African context. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a backdrop for reflection on the insights that emerge from research interviews with Catholic religious sisters in Nigeria as to how they construct their identity in the context of everyday relationships with self and others.

## 2.1 Origin of Religious Life

Religious life is an ancient and universal phenomenon found among many religions of the world including Christianity, Buddhism and Islam. Philo locates them among the Persians and the Indians:

*Among the Persians there is a class of Magi, who investigate the working of nature in order to discover the truth, and silently, through exceptional clear visions, receive and transmit the revelation of the divine virtues. In India, there is the order of the Gymnosophists, who cultivate the ethical as well as physical philosophy and make the whole of their lives an exhibition of virtue (1981, p.249).*

Philo's description of these kinds of people touches on the profundity of the human search for meaning in life. A similar quest underlines the beginning of religious life in the Roman Catholic Christian tradition, which is linked to sacred scriptural stories where individuals were called out of the ordinary circumstances of their lives to place themselves totally and unreservedly at the service of God as a way of bearing witness. In the Old Testament we have stories of individuals such as Abraham (Gen. 12), Moses (Ex. 3), Jeremiah (Jer. 1), and Deborah (Judg. 4–5), to name but a few. Likewise in the New Testament we have God's invitation to Mary to place her entire life in fulfilment of God's redemptive plan (Stöckl, 2003). Jesus' radical way of living the Gospel and his calling of the apostles (cf Mt. 9:9; Jn. 35–51) can be seen as a paradigm of religious life. By the same token, religious life as lived in the past and presently within the Roman Catholic Church is a call from God to which the individual responds relying on the action of the Holy Spirit (PC #1).

Historically, the earliest form of Catholic religious life began with the lives of consecrated virgins and widows in the first century (Brockman, 1990; McNamara, 1996; O'Murchu, 1991; Schneiders, 2000). These virgins and widows are the pioneers who ignited the rich

foundation of Catholic religious life. Early Christians understood virginity as a spiritual state (Brockman, 1990; McNamara, 1996), for instance the four daughters of Philip the Deacon lived as consecrated virgins (Acts 21:8). Later in the second century a monastic form of religious life commenced in the East (Egypt) initiated particularly by men. St. Anthony Abbot (c. 251–356), a Copt and a hermit, began the monastic form of religious life (Boever, 1986; O’Reilly, 1996). He attracted over 500 hermits who followed his life example (Battelli, 1990; O’Murchu, 1991). Each of these hermits lived a penitential life marked by austerity, independently and without regulation. A common characteristics that is identified among the hermits is the radicality of adhering to the word of Christ which says: “He who wants to be my disciple, let him deny himself and follow me” (cf. Mt. 16:24; Lk. 9:23; Mk. 8:34).

Battelli (1990) emphasises that this kind of solitary life had its own shortcomings: it led to insanity of some form, which prompted Pachomius (c. 290–345) to reform the monastic life to communal or cenobitic religious life in the North of Africa. Typical of Pachomius’s reforms was the emergence of a new structure for religious life where consecrated persons lived a community life; together they worked and prayed and performed austere practices directed by common regulation under the responsibility of a superior. In this manner, Pachomius was noted for greatly reforming religious life (Battelli, 1990; O’Reilly, 1996). Equally women lived a monastic form of life, for example St. Brigit (450–525) at Kildare, Ireland led a monastic life (Battelli, 1990; Maloney, 1995). Ever since Pachomius reforms, religious life has under gone myriad stages of development and revolution from the earliest centuries down to our 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

The development of religious life for women has been unique. Despite the fact that religious life started with the lives of early virgins the Church throughout the centuries up to the early modern period of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century has chosen to downplay the contribution of women to the

history of religious life (Maloney, 1995; McNamara, 1979; Schneiders, 2000). Instead women's experiences of religious life are presented as subsidiaries of male religious life (Maloney, 1995). In earnest women are the primary initiators of Catholic religious life although across many centuries they have been subjected to experiences of cloistered forms of religious life (Battelli, 1990; Beyer, 1976; McNamara, 1996; O'Murchu, 1991; Schneiders, 2000). For instance Pope Boniface VIII in his bull of 1298 decreed that all women religious were to observe papal enclosure in perpetuity (Schneiders, 2000) and this was re-invoked by the Council of Trent in 1563 (Brockman, 1990). For example, in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century St. Clare and St. Francis founded the Poor Clares; St. Clare, who wished to preach alongside the Franciscan Friars, was not permitted to do so, she was forced to be cloistered.

In an attempt to negotiate the cloistered form of religious life some women religious orders were begun, for example, "oblates, ladies of Charity, Third Orders, and Confraternities" (Schneiders, 2000, p.294) and notable among such beginnings were the Ursulines, founded by Angela Merici and the Daughters of Charity, co-founded by St. Vincent and Louise de Marillac (Maloney, 1995), to mention but a few. In this way members of such congregations made private rather than public vows and in some cases members did not live together or wear habits and so were able to focus on living a life of consecration and ministry, particularly to the poor (McNamara, 1996; O'Murchu, 1991; Schneiders, 2000; Ranft, 1996). Such beginnings were prevalent among women religious congregations between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Centuries, particularly in France, Italy, and the British Isles (Battelli, 1990; Schneiders, 2000). However, in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century new forms of religious life emerged known as Apostolic Orders/Congregations. These orders were designed to respond to the crisis of the century following the Protestant Reformation and the increasing growth of these communities was witnessed in the wake of the French revolution in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. These communities

were largely founded to build schools and hospitals, and serve the needs of the contemporary world in which they lived; their lifestyle was largely communitarian (McNamara, 1996; Schneiders, 2000). To this very group belong the sisters who participated in this study. Through the 19<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> Centuries there have been remarkable women's religious congregations founded by both men and women and approved by the Church as enriching its salvific mission (PC #1).

## 2.2 Basic Characteristics of Religious Life

According to the Catholic tradition religious life is derived from the mystery of the Church of which is founded on the teaching and life example of Jesus Christ (ES #2; PC #1). This is particularly worthy of note because this research focuses on religious life as modelled on Jesus Christ. Pope Paul VI duly acknowledges that “men and women who consecrate their lives to the Lord in Spirit and practice of evangelical counsels enriches the Church through their generous response” (ET #1) and it is a sign of holiness (LG #44). O’Murchu (1991) describes religious life as an act of inaugurating the ‘reign of God’ in the world which should be marked by right relationships, justice, love and peace. In our contemporary time religious life has been described as an “organic lifeform” (Schneiders, 2000, p.54). These descriptions would serve as the basis for understanding some of the basic characteristics of religious life as lived in the Catholic Church.

### 2. 2. 1 *Religious Life's Theological Foundations*

Researching into the identity construction of Roman Catholic religious sisters in the Church in Nigeria makes it pertinent to understand what religious life's theological foundation is, particularly as lived in the Catholic Church. Catholic religious life is a lifestyle and history that arose from a theological reality even though there are historical and cultural conditions that also define it, which may have some limitations. Thus, to understand Catholic religious

life's basic foundations, those cultural, historical, and theological realities will have to be taken into consideration. The Second Vatican Council has greatly influenced the basic characteristics of religious life, giving it new meaning and understanding. Equally, the cultural realities of our time such as modernity, post-modernity, and the dominant globalisation pose some challenges though the core characteristics of religious life remain intact. These core characteristics follow the traditions of the Church which emphasise that religious life is a gift of God to the Church (cf. LG #43) as well as a lifestyle modelled after Jesus Christ (PC #1). Basically, it is the person of Jesus Christ and his Gospel that have been and still are the greatest inspirations giving birth to various forms of religious life. Therefore its theological foundation flows from Christ's life example which characterises it as anthropological, apostolic, ecclesial and prophetic.

#### *Anthropological Foundations*

The Christian-anthropological identity of religious life rests on the fact that all measures of Christian value find its fullness in Christ (cf. Eph. 1:23). It is through Christ that human wisdom is transformed into Christian faith, and in accordance with tradition this transformation requires the new identity of baptism (LG #33). Thus, a Catholic Christian lives her/his vocation and mission in the world in an original and specific manner after the example of Jesus Christ, who highlights the values of truth, freedom, love, mercy, charity and justice.

#### *Apostolic Foundations*

The religious is called by God. Rulla (1986) proposes that the religious who is called enters into dialogue with God which eventually leads him/her to different forms of multiple relationships with others. Aspects of being in dialogue with God also involve the Holy Spirit

which graces the candidates who are so called with the disposition to respond positively. The first step toward responding to the call is discernment; a process by which each new member seeks to understand the reality of the call and chooses which congregation to join. Once the choice is made the new member begins the journey of being oriented into the spirit of the congregation through formation which will lead to fuller integration into the group.

### *Ecclesial Foundations*

Answering the call to religious life is done under the auspices of the Church through the religious institute (congregation). It is a life of service to God through the Church (PC #5). Vatican II identifies religious life as belonging publicly to the life and holiness of the Church (LG #44), and the document continued to emphasise that the Church by virtue of her authority gladly accepts and approves religious life as a lifeform “which enriches and equips the Church for every good work (cf. 2 Tim. 3:17) toward achieving its ministry of evangelization and manifestation of the multiform wisdom of God (cf. Eph. 3:10)” (PC #1). Therefore it is in the context of the Church that the ecclesial foundation of religious life is realised. Statistically, the Roman Catholic consecrated life forms only 0.12% of the baptised (Arnaiz et. al., 1994), and most of them are women (3 out of 4) (Arnaiz et. al., 1993; O’Murchu, 1991; 1998; Okure, 1983; Schneiders, 2010).

### *Prophetic Foundations*

Religious life following in the radicality and footsteps of Jesus’ lifestyle is seen as prophetic (VC #84). Jesus was regarded as a prophet (c.f. Mt. 14:5, 21:11, 46; Lk. 7:16, 7:39; Jn. 6:14), and he never rejected or refused this identification as he did that of the king (Mbonu, 2004; Schneiders, 2011). Jesus’ prophetic character is vividly expressed in his commitment to justice and concern for the reign of God which is modelled in the tradition of prophets in the

Old Testament (Crosby, 2005; Metz, 1978; O'Murchu, 1991; Schneiders, 2000, 2011). All religious are constantly reminded that their prophetic character is expressed in the radical nature of following Christ and of subsequent dedication to the charism of their founders (PC # 2; VC #84–95). The core identity of all religious is that they should be concerned with the reign of God as Jesus was. The Religious are to live this prophetic identity in their own lives being constant signs and a reminder to the Church that God's reign should be the ideal in all forms of relationships. The prophetic identity of religious life is a dialogical process, an inter-subjective exchange between God, self and the congregation and others. In order to achieve this every religious would need the supportive context of a religious community in order to be attentive to and motivated by the presence of God in their inner relationships with self and others.

In conclusion the theological foundation of religious life is not a given that is achieved once and for all. It is a process, an on-going conversion. This conversion and re-conversion of institutions and persons who form part of them is an arduous task which Vatican II emphasises is only going to be possible through on-going formation (PC #2, 4; ES #1).

### *2.2.2 Forms of Religious Life*

Religious life as lived in the Catholic Church has different forms and its two dominant forms are the Contemplative and the active Apostolic Congregations/Orders. The Contemplative Orders live an enclosed life focusing on prayer as a way of life (PC #16). The Apostolic Congregations are often referred to as the active contemplatives because they combine prayer and ministry (work) as a typical way of living (PC #8). There are some other forms like the Third Orders and the Secular institutes but the interest of this research centres on Apostolic Congregations as the participants whose narratives were used as the primary text for this study are drawn from this context. The contemporary religious life as lived by the



participants of this study has been described as an organic lifeform which marks it out as constantly growing; an entity with multiple coordinates (Schneiders, 2000). Religious life is not an entirely new phenomenon; it has existed throughout history although there are striking differences, whence it began until today, the core remains the same.

In Schneiders' description the first coordinate that characterises contemporary religious life is that it is incarnated in the Catholic Christian faith which is monotheistic, Trinitarian, and Christocentric. Its norm of operation is scriptural; it is a visible, communal and ecclesial organisation. The understanding of contemporary religious life as lifeform recognises the changes that have taken place since the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). Post-Council documents identify religious life as a stable lifeform, belonging to the laity and a sign-value for the Church modelled after the life example of Jesus as lived in the Gospel (PC #1). A striking awareness in our contemporary time are the concerns of women religious who are in a state of serious tension on many fronts with the Church as an institution (Okure, 2010; Schneiders, 2000, 2011). These tensions are focused on the Church's patriarchy which has defined women as inferior to men.

The second coordinate of religious life is "perpetual commitment in consecrated celibacy" Schneiders (2000, p.58). The ultimate goal of every temporary consecration in religious life is perpetual commitment which is religiously motivated as a free response to personal vocation, and individually discerned, although the community has to validate the individual discernment. Historically this coordinate has been lived out in a variety of ways, for example, in the lives of early virgins or hermits as in the case of St. Brigit and her colleagues. It is also lived out by the contemplatives, the order of virgins and the lay religious. Today perpetual commitment is an underlying value of contemporary religious life (O'Murchu, 1998).

Another coordinate of religious life as “organic lifeform” is the lifelong “commitment in a particular, selfsame, and recognizable community” (Schneiders, 2000, p.59). Religious commitment is made to a particular congregation through the profession of vows. Unless the religious transfers formally and permanently to another congregation she will remain for life in the congregation to which she made her vows. Schneiders emphasises that the community remains selfsame in the sense that it continues in its identity even as its membership changes through new entrants and deaths or departures, changes in its government and leadership, revisions of its constitutions or modifications of its lifestyle or ministry. The community as a coordinate is quite significant in terms of the role it plays toward identity construction. It provides the “primary and determining relational context” by which one’s life and sense of self are achieved (Schneiders, 2000, p.60). This was invoked in Vatican II and re-echoed in many of the post-Council documents as emphasis has been laid on the vital role the community plays toward facilitating the individual’s steadfastness in upholding religious values and identity (PC #15; CICLSAL, 2007). In support Schneiders postulates:

*No matter how multiple and various the relationships a religious maintains and/or establishes with persons and groups outside the congregation, including her own family of origin, none of these can become the ultimate determiner of her life, her decisions, her ministry, or her participation in congregational life. A religious may live in a group composed entirely of members of her own congregation, or intercongregational, or in a mixed community, or singly. But her community remains the personal and corporate horizon of her life, no matter how this is actualized in participation in the congregational life (2000, p.60).*

Based on Schneiders’ thesis contained in the above quote, this research argues that the religious community is the bedrock of identity construction for Catholic religious sisters. It provides for them the context/instruction and experiences through which their work of

identity is negotiated. This is in line with many post-Conciliar documents which refer to the communitarian life as the basis for instilling religious identity and renewal (ES #1; RC #1; ET #32–41; VC #38; CICLSAL, 2007). It is in the community that the coordinates of vowed chastity, poverty and obedience are experienced, shared and lived out as members are integrated and form part of the community.

Another important coordinate of religious life is mission, particularly for the apostolic form of religious life from which all the participants in this research were drawn. By mission we refer to the apostolate, meaning the different work that the congregation offers to the world in the name of the Church. Mission is a priority for the religious (Pope John Paul II, 1996). Generally, each congregation has a particular mission, to which they are committed according to their founding charism and spirit; and it is expected that each new member who joins the congregation discerns and continues to discern if her calling is congruent with the congregational spirit and mission. With this in mind we look at the charism and spirit of religious congregations.

### *2.2.3 Charism and Spirit of the Congregation*

The charism is the inspiration of the founding father/mother which describes the mission (work) of the congregation (PC #2; ES #12). This inspiration forms part of the ethos and guiding principles presented as the spirituality of the congregation (Schneiders, 2000), and serves as a resource for orientation of new members and the on-going formation of older members. One of the typical features of charism is that it leads all members of the congregation to the position of “collective effervescence” (Ramano, 1994). In other words, it is the binding character that unites the group to a common identity of shared life and mission. Each religious institute introduces new members to their charism through interaction and instruction via threefold dimensions: first, the individual and the charism; second, the

individual and other members who also experience, interpret and provide instruction for understanding and living the charism; and thirdly, the individual and the action of the Holy Spirit who grants grace to the individual to live out the charism (Ramano, 1994). It is from this interaction that a new kind of psychic life springs up, binding together the members of the congregation in solidarity with one another. In this way charism helps to create social homogeneity among members, which Freud describes as identification with others arising from interaction.

#### *2.2.4 Religious life as a Discernment Process*

Religious life is a call from God (PC #1). As a result, the choice to become a religious is perceived as a response to God's call which is achieved through discernment. The candidate must first listen attentively within herself to ensure that she is hearing the call clearly. She then takes the next step; locating a religious congregation whose charism and spirit she feels attracted to; she then makes contact with the congregation and advises them of her interest. From this point onward the discernment is twofold: on the one hand by the congregation, and on other hand by the proposed entrant, both parties working together to discover if God is truly calling the candidate to the very lifeform of that particular congregation. The discernment is done by initially accepting the candidate into the congregation and through time/space as the candidate goes through initial formation. The formation period has different stages. Each stage includes an on-going process of discernment before the candidate moves to the next stage. At the end of the successful initial formation period, the candidate is permitted to make the three vows of chastity, poverty and obedience; she becomes a more permanent member of the congregation; she then prepares for final/perpetual profession. Apart from discerning the call and membership to the congregation everyone who lives religious life is continuously engaged in the process of discovering the will of God at every event in her life.

In this way religious life can be seen as a discernment process of seeking to know, understand and respond to God's invitation, which varies from day to day.

### 2.2.5 *Formation*

The context by which every religious learns to develop and nurture the religious identity is primarily through the process of initiation and integration into the community/congregation. Formation can best be described as “initiation to the religious life” (Villaume, 1975, p.4), which Rulla (1986) explains involves the process of internalising Christ's values. Vatican II speaks clearly about this when it emphasises that the source of identity for the religious is fixed on going back to “the following of Christ as it is put before us in the Gospel” and a “constant return to the primitive inspiration of the institute, and adaptation to changed conditions of our time” (PC #2–3). Formation entails the shaping of character or ideas in a person's mind (Aringo, 1998) which in religious communities involves the studying of the spirit, ethos and history of a religious community. Padilla (2005) describes religious formation as parallel to the way Jesus Christ was formed by God with the help of Mary and Joseph. Likewise, Allen (2009) postulates that religious formation is similar to the way Jesus Christ formed his own disciples in community. The connection is that Jesus created the space and time to teach his disciples about the reign of God not only during his lifetime but even after his resurrection. Pope John Paul II cites Jesus' life formation as a model for the religious:

*During his earthly life, the Lord Jesus called those whom he wished in order to have them at his side and to train them to live, according to his example, for the Father and for the mission which he had received from the Father... By constantly promoting fraternal love, also in the form of common life, the consecrated life has shown that sharing in the Trinitarian*

*communion can change human relationships and create a new type of solidarity (VC #41).*

In this manner the initiation of the religious to developing Jesus' attitude by means of formation is a permanent, essential task of religious community. It is also an on-going activity; a lifelong process which involves the whole person, heart, mind, and strength (cf. Mt. 22:37) leading to reshaping the person in the likeness of the Son who gives himself for the good of humanity (cf. Jn. 3:16; CICLSAL, 2007; VC #55).

Both the individual and the community are formed and are forming each other (CICLSAL, 2007; SHCJ const. #59). They both share and receive each other's gift. It is a dialogical process through which both the individual and community occupy positions in the internal and external domain of the self. The starting point of religious formation begins with initial formation commencing with the pre-novitiate, novitiate and admittance to membership through profession of the evangelical counsels (temporary professed and scholasticate). The process of initial formation is as follows:

(i) Pre-Novitiate

Like the disciples of Jesus new members known as candidates seeking to enter religious life begin by responding to Jesus' invitation "come follow me" (cf. Mt. 4:18–22; Lk 18:22). During this period the candidate is given opportunities to familiarise herself with the mission and spirit of the congregation through a variety of experiences (DDL const. #113; SHCJ const. #54). According to Vatican II the primary objective at this stage is to assess if God is truly calling the candidate to religious life and to a particular congregation. Consequently, this period provides both the candidate and the congregation with an opportunity to appraise her aptitude for membership, by assessing her depth of faith; basic maturity and the good health required for religious life (cf. RC#11; DDL const. # 114; SHCJ const. #56). The

process is dialogical between the candidate and the congregation, represented by a directress who provides spiritual and temporal guidance. In the constitutions of the two congregations of those sisters who participated in this study, the period of pre-novitiate lasts for a minimum of six months and a maximum of two years; dependent upon the needs of each candidate. At the end of a successful pre-novitiate period the candidate is admitted to the next stage of novitiate formation.

(ii) Novitiate

The act of living religious life begins in the novitiate (Can. #646; RC #13). The basic purpose of the novitiate is to initiate the novice into the ideals and spirituality of religious life in line with the charism of each congregation. During this period, according to Canon law, the novices study the Scriptures, the evangelical counsels, the principles of prayer, Christian asceticism and spirituality, and the relationship between apostolic action (ministry) and contemplation/religious commitment. It also includes the doctrinal formation indispensable for the development of a supernatural life of union with God and initiation into the liturgical life of the Church (Can. #652; RC #5). A sister is designated as the directress of novices and she provides the necessary guidance (DDL const. #118; SHCJ const. #60). The primary objective of the directress is to direct the novice to attune herself to focus on God as she tries to understand her vocation.

Apart from being formed by the directress the novice is also formed by the community. The community provides the exemplary life of what it means to be a religious. It is in the sororal life of the community that the novice learns evangelical simplicity and kindness coupled with gentleness and respect for self and others which prepares her to share in the mission of Christ. However, on the other hand there is relational dynamism in a community which may counteract a healthy community life impeding the success with which the novice participates

in a religious community. Rulla (1986) identifies that the use of referent-power by formators or by the community could influence the full participation of the novice, which might have ambivalent effects. On the one hand, it might favour an internalisation of Christian values, or it may, on the other hand, favour non-internalising identification or compliance. The latter will militate against the development of the ideals of religious identity.

However, at the end of a successful novitiate period the novice is accepted to make her vows of chastity, poverty and obedience to God. These vows unite her to God personally and to the congregation and the Church. By taking the vows the novice begins the next stage of formation, the temporary profession and scholasticate. The vows provide the opportunity for the novice to share more fully in the mission of Christ through membership within a religious congregation.

### (iii) The Evangelical Counsels

The desire to dedicate one's life to Christ by way of the evangelical counsels is a human response to God's initiative of love in a call to consecration. Usually, after formation, candidates in a religious institute who are found worthy are permitted to profess the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. These vows are the evangelical counsels by which the candidate is "set apart for the sacred" (Donovan & Wusinich, 2009, p.15), admitted into fuller membership in the congregation and recognised in the Church as vowed religious. These three vows are an intrinsic aspect of the identity of religious life as they are the ways of identifying with Christ's radical manner of living the Gospel message. They are the bonds by which the religious is totally dedicated to God's honour, and by which the religious work toward the building of the Church and the salvation of the world (cf. Can. #573). Vatican II emphasises that the evangelical counsels should bring the religious to a conduct of "perfect charity" (PC #1). The vows serve as a means through which Christ takes "possession of a



person from within” (RC #6); for the purpose of scaling the heights of the love of God and neighbour under the impulse of the Holy Spirit (cf. ST, III #66). Thus, there is a dialogical process involved in living out the vows, involving the action of the Trinity linked to the individual’s response, the congregational space, the Church and the whole of creation including culture. It is in this process that the identity of the religious through the evangelical counsels is developed and integrated. We turn now to take a detailed look at what each of the counsels stand for.

a) Chastity

The vow of chastity frees the religious to love broadly to the point of having no exclusive relationship with anyone. By professing the evangelical counsel of chastity (consecrated celibacy) the religious wishes to own and reproduce “the pure love of Christ” and to proclaim it to the world (LG #44). In this way the religious makes her life a total gift offered to God and shared with others (ET #13) within instances of inclusive relationships. In this light *Perfectae Caritatis* states:

*Chastity “for the sake of the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 19:12) which religious profess should be counted an outstanding gift of grace. It frees the heart...in a unique fashion (cf. 1 Cor. 7:32–35) so that it may be more inflamed with love for God and for all...the most suitable means by which religious dedicate themselves with undivided heart to the service of God and the work of the apostolate (PC #12).*

The religious through the gift of grace is able to embrace chastity which frees her in a distinct way to love God and all people equally. The religious community is charged with the primacy of providing a suitable environment through which its members are encouraged to live out their vow of chastity. O’Murchu (1991) emphasises that every religious “needs fellow pilgrims whose insights, wisdom, and prayers enable him/her to live out their

commitment” (p.120). In other words the companionship of others in community facilitates in a myriad of ways the instances of living out the evangelical counsels. In as much as chastity is a gift of grace it encounters enormous challenges, which come from the world’s “ravaging eroticism” (ET # 13), and the individual’s weakness. Therefore, to combat these challenges, the community is expected to be a support system which preserves chastity through the “common life in true brotherly [sisterly] love” (PC #12) sustained by “relationships of friendships” (ET #39).

b) Poverty

Through the vow of poverty the religious forms a spirit of detachment from material things for the sake of the kingdom. This frees her to attach herself to God and the things of God. The vow of poverty brings the religious to imitate Christ’s dependence on God, just as “the Son...receives everything from the Father, and gives everything back to the Father in love” (cf. Jn. 17:7). Likewise, the religious receives from her congregation what she needs for her life and apostolate and she in turn, is a total gift, at the disposal of the congregation (SHCJ const. 24). Furthermore, Nolan (2007) argues that the vow of poverty is a promise to share with others in the community rather than be seen as opting to be “poor, needy and destitute” (p.5). O’Murchu (1991) describes religious poverty as having an underlying value of shared talents, time, care and concern for all created things. In other words it is a vow that is experienced through relationships not just with others in community but identifying with Jesus who became poor in order to enrich the world (cf. 2 Cor. 8).

c) Obedience

The religious who vows obedience does so in imitation of Christ who was obedient unto death. The ultimate motive of religious obedience is a loving desire after the example of Jesus, to do God’s will (Pitts, 2009). It involves the act of listening in order to discern (CICLSAL, 2007; O’Murchu, 1991, 1999), and the concern for the religious is to discover

what God is truly asking of her. In other words, the religious who vows obedience is pledging to prayerfully discern God's will in all relevant "voices" and take responsibility for his/her action for the good of others within a concrete context (Schneiders, 2011). To this effect, Vatican II's norm of religious life emphasises:

*By their profession of obedience, religious offer the full dedication of their own wills as a sacrifice of themselves to God, and by this means they are united more permanently and securely with God's saving will. After the example of Jesus Christ, who came to do his Father's will (cf. Jn. 4:34; 5:30; Heb. 10:7; Ps. 39:9) and "who taking the form of a servant" (Phil. 2:7) learned obedience through what he suffered (cf. Heb. 10:8), religious moved by the Holy Spirit subject themselves in faith to those who hold God's place, their superiors. Through them they are led to serve their brothers in Christ...Religious, therefore, in the spirit of faith and love for the divine will should humbly obey their superiors according to their rules and constitutions (PC #14).*

Vatican II, apart from identifying obedience as an act of following Jesus' example, also proclaims that religious obedience is mediated by superiors who act in God's place. In this sense the voice of the superior is vital toward discerning God's will; therefore, there is the challenge for the religious to trust that superiors are speaking in God's voice and to obey them. Although the religious need to trust their superiors as representing God yet the realistic demand of religious obedience calls for authentic dialogue (CICLSAL, 2008; PC #14) between the sender and the recipient. Dialogue facilitates the process of listening and discerning God's will. In this way religious obedience becomes an act of responsibility shared communally though the norm maintains that "the final word belongs to authority" (PC #14; VC #43).

On the one hand, authority figures have been charged with caution to act with the humility of Jesus in discharging their duties (ET #12). But on the other hand, conflict arises when those

who hold an office of authority decide to act without appropriate consultation. However, a dominant feature many contemporary writers of religious life have noted is that some authority figures have constructed obedience as the process of suppressing all other voices except their own (Chittister, 1995; Crosby, 2005; Metz, 1978; McDonough, 1991; Schneiders, 2011; O’Murchu, 1991). In this light obedience has been presented as an instance of absolute submission, submerging all voices that are at variance with official authority, which is of particular interest to this study because the concern is: how do such demands of obedience facilitate or impact on Roman Catholic religious sisters’ identity construction?

(iii) Temporary Profession and the Scholasticate

Temporary profession initiates the candidates into living the religious community life (RC #7). This stage is known as the period of temporary profession, in which the sister lives in community with others and could be assigned to an outside apostolate, though the essence of this period is for continual formation toward final profession and professional preparation for ministry (ES #35–38). This period of temporary profession and scholasticate is an apprenticeship and a preparation (RC #7) towards full integration of members into the congregation and perpetual commitment to God. This period aims to bring the sisters to fuller “spiritual maturity” (RC #6) for a stable religious life as means of perfect and greater love. The duration of this period varies, ranging from 3–6 years in most cases but could extend to nine years when necessary (cf. RC #37; DDL const. 133; SHCJ const. 68).

(iv) Final Profession

Sisters who successfully complete their stage of temporary profession are admitted to make perpetual vows (DDL const. 111–144; SHCJ const. 68). At final profession the sisters enter into a life-long covenant with one another (SHCJ const. 75), which means that the sister is

perpetually bonded to God and to members of the congregation. As noted earlier, in the basic characteristics of religious life, perpetual commitment is the ultimate goal of every first profession or commitment. In most cases it is from among the finally professed that leaders, superiors and formators are chosen. They in turn serve as personnel who initiate new members into religious life, following the norms as stipulated by the Church and in accordance with the spirit and charism of their congregation. However, religious formation is on-going; consequently, sisters are expected to continually engage in life-long formation even after perpetual vows. It is a life journey.

### 2.3 Religious Life Communities and Identity Construction

Religious communities provide the context through which every religious lives out her commitment, and the community provides the background experience and instruction for personal/religious identity construction.

#### 2.3.1 *Religious Life Community*

Religious life is a communal life lived in community and community life is central to any authentic form of religious lifestyle (O'Murchu, 1991). The religious community is modelled on Jesus' example with the disciples and has been described as the fourth evangelical counsel (O'Isah, 2006), the 'heart' (Pope John Paul II, 2004; Schneiders, 2001), or 'key value' of religious life which provides the centre for "interrelatedness" through which the religious is called to live his/her life (O'Murchu, 1998, p.77).

This interrelatedness reflects how others constitute part of self either as voices or positions; oftentimes God occupies an essential position in this process of inter-subjective exchange within the community. In this sense, the religious community is the bedrock through which the religious develops and negotiates her sense of person. No religious lives in isolation from

the community (GS #12). As was noted in the basic characteristics of religious life, when a religious lives alone because of the demands of mission, he/she connects with the congregation as the base for “powerful determinant of behavior and decision” (Schneiders, 2000, p.60). In this sense religious community is advantageous: it gives the religious a sense of belonging and flows from common commitment to Jesus, and sustained by mutual love (Giallanza, 1998; Svoboda, 1998).

Theologically the community is considered a “gift of the Spirit”, which flows from the communion of the Trinitarian God (CICLSAL, 2007), and sustains the religious with graces needed for immersing herself into full identification with the ‘spirit’ of the congregation. In other words, the community provides the instruction and experiences required for identity construction by its members. But in spite of a religious community being a gift of the Holy Spirit it is still a human reality which elicits a mixed experience and response. On the one hand it provides love, care, support and encouragement which facilitate the process of living religious life, but on the other hand, a contrary religious community may offer experiences that position the religious as a “perpetual visitor in someone else’s family” (Schneiders, 2011, p.23). The sustaining paradigm for religious life as communitarian is understood “as a true family in the Lord’s name enjoys his presence” (cf. Mt. 18:20) (PC #15). Evidently every religious enters into communion with God and his/her brothers and sisters both within the religious institute and the surrounding environment (CICLSAL, 2007). Pope Paul VI emphasises:

*In institutes dedicated to apostolic activities, community life must be encouraged by all possible means, and in ways suitable to the vocation of each institute. It is of greatest importance that the members should establish a fraternal life in common (commercium fraternum), as a family united in Christ (ES #25).*

Clearly community is a foundation for religious life and ideally it ought to provide space for a bond relationship of mutual love (cf. Jn. 13:34; 15:12) leading to unity of all the members in Christ. In this way community is viewed as family, communion with one another and mission.

### 2.3.2 *Community as Family*

Constantly religious community has been described as ‘family’: the Church’s usual assent is that religious institutes are “a family united in the Lord’s name” (CICLSAL, 2007; PC #15). Frequently Vatican II refers to religious institutes as a “wondrous variety of religious families which enrich the Church and equip her for every good work” (PC #1). The constitutions of the sisters who participated in this study used the discourse of family repeatedly in its foundational text, thereby encouraging their members to perceive each other as “daughters” (DDL const. 10, 68) and “people who share root as SHCJ” (SHCJ Chapter proceedings, 1992, 1998, 2010). In agreement, it can be argued that the sisters have been oriented toward seeing themselves as belonging to family units of their different congregations within the institution of consecrated life in the Church. This family identity is based on shared commitment and support (cf. LG #43). The discourse of being a daughter or joined to another by common root depicts aspects of sharing a common descendant which binds children together. Musonda (1997) argues that the religious have “Christ as the ancestor par excellence” (p. 167). In this light, it has been argued that “no family bond is more important than the bond of discipleship (cf. Mk. 3:31–35)” (Rakoczy, 2004, p.217). Conversely the structures of relationship in religious communities differ since there is no room for fathers or mothers. In other words, it means that although the religious attempt to adhere to altruistic behaviours of using familial relational terms such as ‘sister’, ‘mother’, ‘brother’ in referring to each other, there is no

room for models of relationships parallel to that of child-parent, where the former occupies the lowest place but rather all share equality as children of God.

Furthermore, Okure (2010) argues that religious communities seen as family are a manifestation of God's family where the Trinitarian relationships of Father, Son and Spirit provide the dynamism against which relationships are measured. To put it another way, she argues that in a religious family like all authentic Christian families the model for relationships is based on according "every citizen the dignity of the first born" (cf. Heb. 12:22–23) (p.7). In this situation all members of the religious congregation have a right to mutual respect, love, care, responsibility and active participation in decision-making, not only in matters that concern him/her personally but also in all issues concerning communal life.

The theological foundation explaining the "oneness" of life shared by all Christians is founded on the basis of Jesus Christ's teaching that anyone who does the will of God is his "mother, brother or sister" (cf. Jn. 7:28–29; Mk. 3:35; Mt. 12:50). Thus religious communities are seen as family units formed in the Lord's name, since every religious left everything to come and pitch her tent with each other, with the singular objective of doing God's will. It is the desire to do God's will that binds the religious together, not only as family members but also brings them into communion with each other through God. Their family relationship is dialogical and should be parallel to natural family relationships, where the other's voice or collective voices occupy positions in the self and would to some extent influence how each member defines 'who they are' or 'are becoming'.

### *2.3.3 Community as Communion*

According to the theology of religious life, the community as communion flows from the example of Trinitarian unity. Religious life as communal is modelled on the relatedness of



the three persons in one God, which the whole Church is called to emulate; the Church is referred to as communion (LG #43-7) not just the religious. The authentic understanding of religious life as communal goes back to the identification with Christ in the context of the Gospel reality in which the community space is described as “God-enlightened space” where every religious experiences “mutual love” that provides the essential support for religious identity construction (VC #42).

Pope John Paul II appeals to all religious to embrace and practice the “spirituality of communion” in order to promote “a way of thinking, speaking and acting which enables the Church to grow in depth and extension” (VC #46). In the words of the Pope the community as communion is based on the fact that:

*The life of communion in fact becomes a sign for all the world and a compelling force that leads people to faith in Christ... In this way communion leads to mission, and itself becomes mission; indeed, “communion begets communion: in essence it is a communion that is missionary” (PSAECL # 81 cited in VC # 46).*

By extension the community as communion is not an option for religious life; rather it is a constitutive attribute which makes religious life a sign in the world by which others are brought to faith in God. In essence, religious are intended to be ‘experts in communion’ (CICLSAL, 2007; cf. RHP #24) witnessing to God’s plan of unity. The constitutions of the two congregations whose members participated in the study elaborated in similar ways that consecration in community causes them to act with “one heart and one mind” (cf. Acts 4:32; DDL const.70; SHCJ const. 40). But the reality of religious community as communal is fused with a multiplicity of inter-subjective exchanges intertwined in a variety of relationships between formators/superiors and other sisters, and these other sisters with one another. All these relationships are laden with multiple dynamisms of power relations which some have

argued should be “designed to support personal conversion, growth in self-knowledge and virtue” (Donovan & Wusinich, 2009, p.38) resulting in growing holiness for its members.

The communitarian aspect of community also embraces mission. The participants of this study are drawn from apostolic orders, thus their priority is focussed on bearing witness through service. We will look briefly at the details of religious community as mission.

#### *2.3.4 Community as Mission*

Religious community is traditionally built on the model of mission in a multiplicity of ways. First, the community is mission based on the nature of its communitarian life (PC #5). On the other hand communion gives rise to mission (apostolate: work, service) (CICLSAL, 2007, 2008; ChL #32). In essence, it is communion that begets mission based on the notion that the religious come together in companionship to bear witness to the faith which aims at service. Pope Paul II (1992) reminds all the religious that “all the fruitfulness of religious life depends on the quality of community life” (p.2).

The participants of this study are devoted to prayer and service. For them prayer and service interpenetrate each other and Vatican II states:

*Let religious see well to it that the Church truly show [sic] forth Christ through them with ever-increasing clarity to believers and unbelievers...Christ in contemplation on the mountain, or proclaiming the kingdom of God to the multitudes, or healing the sick and maimed and converting sinners to a good life, or blessing children and doing good to all men, always in obedience to the will of the Father who sent him (LG #46a).*

There is no doubt that the focus of religious life is both communitarian and missionary but the community needs to balance the two so that one does not dominate the other. There could be tension arising between communion and mission when not well planned. It has been

recognised that “there is the tendency in some institutes to emphasize mission over community, and to favour diversity over unity” (CICLSAL, 2007); such situations may have a profound impact on how the religious develop and construct identity. It could lead to a unilateral tendency of letting one dominate the other rather than making the two an integral part of the core identity of religious.

### 2.3.5 *The Community and Service of Authority*

The religious community as a communion of consecrated persons professes to seek together and carry out the will of God. But from among the members of the community some are designated as leaders, and are responsible for others, thus they are referred to as superiors and formators (cf. PC #14). However, leadership in a religious community is conceived as “spiritual” (CICLSAL, 2008). The main task of leaders should focus on building unity among the sisters in the community where God is sought and loved above all (Can. 619), facilitating the members’ development of identity. Therefore, persons in authority are at the service of the community “as was the Lord Jesus who washed the feet of his disciples, in order that the community in its turn be at the service of the reign of God (cf. Jn. 13:1–17)” (CICLSAL, 2007). Ideally, persons in authority are expected to act in a manner that makes others feel “nothing is done without your [their] agreement” yet “you [they] do not do anything without God’s agreement” (St. Ignatius of Antioch, cited in CICLSAL, 2008). In this way authority must be exercised to promote cooperation which Vatican II describes as “fostering ... a spirit of voluntary subjection” (PC #14).

In order to be effective in discharging their duties and ensuring quality relationships in the community for the good of the mission, persons in authority have been charged with the specific responsibility of creating a conducive atmosphere for dialogue (PC #14; CICLSAL, 2007). Dialogue creates space for listening to the voices of others in order to discern together

what the will of God is with regard to any given issue. Unfortunately, authority in religious community has been used as source of power to control others (Bahati, 2003; Kupalo, 1997; Souci et. al., 1998; O'Murchu, 1998; Okure, 2010) into subordinate positions. The concern for this study is, what kind of impact would such power relations have on the participants' sense of identity if they happen to encounter any such situation.

## 2.4 Religious Life and Gender Construct: The Catholic Church's Gender Construct

The tradition of the early Catholic Church has been heavily influenced by Roman Imperial culture (Chukwu, 2011; Okure, 2010; Nnamani, 2005; Uti, 2011), as well as Jewish traditions (Küng, 2001) both of which position women as having a lesser worth than men. As a consequence the Church's gender construct is patriarchal in nature, which devalues and discredits women.

### 2.4.1 *The Catholic Church's Traditional Gender Constructs*

The traditional gender construction of the Catholic Church has often been predominantly influenced by Jewish and Roman cultural worldviews. Basically this was so because the Church's origin was rooted in the cultural context of Judeo-Greek and Roman traditions in which women were treated as "slaves" (Küng, 2001, p.2). St Paul in some of his epistles reflected the Jewish traditional views particularly in his letter to the Colossians (3:18–4:1) in which he positioned women as submissive to men and in his letter to the Ephesians (5:21–6:1) he reiterated similar ideas of placing men above women. In fact, the theology in the Catholic Church during the first century was called "theology of the Fathers" (Fiorenza, 1983, p.48). Accordingly many early Catholic Church fathers comfortably defined women as inferior to men. Clement of Alexandria (c.150–c.215), who defended the equality of man and woman in the spirit of Stoicism, was still noted as an advocate of women's subordination (Küng, 2001).

Tertullian (c.160–c.220 AD), a prominent leading father in the early Church used offensive attributes to describe women. He defined women as “the gateway of the devil”, and argues that women should not be permitted “to speak in the Church, to teach, to baptize, to sacrifice, to fulfil any other male function, or to claim any form of priestly functions” (Coyle cited in Fiorenza, 1983, p.55). Origen (185–254 AD) affirms that “women had been prophets, but stresses that they did not speak publicly and especially not in the worship assembly of the Church” (Fiorenza, 1983, p.54). Likewise, St. Augustine of Hippo (c.354–430) was outstanding in his postulations which speculate that “the woman together with the man is the image of God, so that the whole substance is one image. But when she is assigned as a helpmate, which pertains to her alone, she is not the image of God: however, in what pertains to man alone, is the image of God just as fully and completely as he is joined with the woman into one” (*De Trinitate*, 12, 7, 10). St. Jerome attributes the origin, not only of sin, but of all heresy, to women (Po-Chia Hisa, 1998). Such attributes have been noted as patristic, misogynist, contemptuous and demonstrating a fear of women (Fiorenza, 1983).

In Medieval times Thomas of Aquinas argued that woman is a “defective and misbegotten male ... destined to live under man’s influence” (ST I, q92, al). To some extent Thomas’s description of women was founded on Aristotle’s and Plato’s misogynist views on women which were very predominant in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century. In his writings Aristotle projected that “the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and that the one rules and the other is ruled; this principle, of necessity extends to all mankind” (Gonzalez, 2007, p.22). He went further to emphasise that the female is a “mutilated male”. Sadly, many of the Church’s fathers have fallen into the same guilt of constructing women as not only second class citizens to men but also as problems that need to be dealt with (Küng, 2001). Due to the Church’s persistent misogyny women religious, particularly between the 13–16<sup>th</sup> Centuries

were forced into living the cloistered form of religious life (Po-Chia Hisa, 1998) which portrays a constant supervision of female religious by the male Church hierarchy. As already mentioned in the historical origin of religious life, St. Clare and the Poor Clares were enclosed by St. Francis. But on the other hand St. Clare resisted further attempt from Cardinal Hugolino of Osita, the Papal legate of Northern Italy, to divert the Poor Clares' attention from absolute poverty (Kruse, 2011). The majority of these contested attempts originating from the male Church hierarchy to control women religious is fundamentally based on the preconception that women need to be protected and controlled (Maloney, 1994; Po-Chia Hisa, 1998). In other words, women are constructed as incapable of taking care of themselves and historically, women who resisted control by clerics sometimes did so at the risk of their own lives (Abbot, 1999; Maloney, 1994; McNamara, 1996; Po-Chia Hisa, 1998). For example, Joan of Arc (1412–1431) lost her life because she resisted the Church's male hierarchal control (Abbot, 1999).

Many women religious across time have been treated with varying levels of ambivalence and persecution which temporarily silenced their voice. St. Teresa of Avila (1515–1582) was investigated by the Inquisition for heresy (Po-Chia Hisa, 1998) not because she was a heretic but rather because she resisted male cleric control. However, St. Teresa only gained posthumous fame and her *Vida*, which was held by Dominican Domingo Báñez on the account that “it is not fitting that writings by women be made public” (Po-Chia Hisa, 1998, p.139), was released four years after her death. Women have continued to struggle in defence of their position as created in God's image regardless of the Church's countless gender discourses which describe and position them as inferior to men. In addition, the Catholic Church's official language has been masculine, effectively positioning God as man and stating that all men are like God, and who must therefore be obeyed (Küng, 2001; O'Murchu,

1991, 1998; Rakoczy, 2004). Such positioning of men as God-like has led the Church to continuously construct women as unequal to men, so much so that even in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century women are treated as undeserving (Küng, 2001) and as a group to be perpetually controlled and relegated to the background.

#### 2.4.2 *The Catholic Church's Contemporary Gender Constructs*

The Catholic Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century continues to present women as having less dignity in comparison to men. This, in spite of the fact that in 1988 Pope John Paul II took the lead to reinterpret those biblical texts that are often used to advance the subjugation of women, such as Gen. 2:18–25; Eph. 5:21–33, in an effort to advocate that the account of creation in Genesis should be interpreted to reflect the divine image in women (MD #6–8). However, there has been no follow-up and no practical implementation. Theoretically the Church pronounces:

*The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. That is why, at this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation, women imbued with a spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid humanity in not falling (MD #1, 1988).*

In this pronouncement Pope John Paul II re-echoed what had already been expressed in two documents of Vatican II (cf. GS #2; AAS #13–14). Accordingly it affirms similar thinking that had been advanced prior to the Second Vatican Council of 1962–65 contained in a number of Pope Pius XII's Discourses and in the Encyclical *Pacem in Terris* of Pope John XXIII (5). In support, many recent documents of the Church affirm that women have been relegated to the background and treated as inferior in the sense that they have been denied opportunities for active participation particularly in leadership positions (IL #59–61). Clearly

the document states “women continue to be subjected to many forms of injustice ... women are oftentimes given an inferior role” (IL #117). Unfortunately, beyond this admission the Church has not developed a meaningful action plan toward “translating expressions of concern into deeds of justice, fairness and equality” (Orobator, 2009, p.1). For example, women’s participation at the Second Vatican Council was the result of a contested effort which led to a mere 23 women being invited only to the third session of the Council’s meeting to join men auditors already present (Ciernick, 1995) and such exclusion speaks clearly of the Church’s perception of women. It has been noted that the Catholic Church’s Canon Law is andocentric and male-dominated (Fiorenza, 1983; Küng, 2001; Okure, 2010; O’Murchu, 1991; Schneiders, 2000, 2011) and fails to acknowledge the countless contributions made by women in general and particularly by women religious.

On the contrary the Church’s hierarchy would rather passionately oppose anyone who makes practical moves toward involving women actively in the Church’s ministry, especially any discussion addressing the ordination of women. Recently the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of faith demanded Maryknoll Fr. Roy Bourgeois of the U.S. to recant his “belief and public statements that support ordination of women or face automatic excommunication” (Robert, 2011, p.1). The contrast is striking: that the Church would excommunicate anyone who supports women’s ordination whilst at the same time expressing an interest in promoting women’s dignity. In fact Doyle (cited in Robert, 2011), a canon lawyer in defence of Fr. Bourgeois’ excommunication, accused the Church of having “humiliated” and “removed” from office four Bishops who supported women’s ordination. In the light of such occurrences, the Church cannot claim that she has interest in alleviating the cause of women’s subordination. Undoubtedly, women are continually treated as second class members of the Church. The recent case of the ‘apostolic visitation’ from the Vatican to



women religious in the United States of America from 2009 to 2011 is another example of how the Catholic Church's hierarchy downgrades the position of women. There was an outcry emphasising that this 'apostolic visitation' was in reality perceived as a "Vatican investigation" of U.S. women religious and the objectives and methodology of the investigation are "lacking in transparency, mutuality, respect, and even honesty" (Schneiders, 2011, p.1-9).

It is important to note that women religious were taken unaware by this visitation: they were not duly informed or consulted before the visitation. Secondly, since religious life is lived by both men and women, the visitation was blatantly discriminatory because it only targeted women religious. Besides, the reason for calling forth the visitation, i.e. the concern for the low number of new entrants into women religious life in the U.S., though couched, is not credible, but blurred. Evidently, the investigation has been accused of being laden with a Vatican "misogynistic agenda" which brings about the experience of being "*personae non grata*" for religious women in the Church they belong to and serve (Schneiders, 2011, p.22, 53). Consequently, the women religious in the U.S. express that they feel sidelined. Armstrong (1992/2005), in her autobiography recounting her experiences within a religious community in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, maintains that the Church's male dominated hierarchy treats women religious as a naive group requiring protection, who must show absolute obedience and submission to ecclesial authority. Equally, Burrows (2008) laments that women religious are a group that is often undermined in the Church by the priests who treat them as unworthy of recognition.

#### 2.4.3 *The African Catholic Church Gender Constructs*

The Church in Africa and particularly in Nigeria uses the same gambit of patriarchal discourses to keep women behind the scenes. Some scholars have identified that the Catholic

Church's positioning of women as unequal to men originates from the socialisation process in the family and society where the male child is oriented to see himself as superior (Eya, 2005; Nnamani, 2005; Umoren, 2005). From this perspective they argue that the socialisation process in society is disadvantageous to both men and women because on the one hand, it positions women as inferior and, on the other hand, it initiates men into thinking and believing that they are more important than women. In light of this, the Catholic Church in Nigeria has been accused of using cultural tools of patriarchy to define women and have thus succeeded in keeping women from leadership positions (Chukwu, 2011; Okure, 2010; Orobator, 2000; Uti, 2011; Uzuoku, 2006).

There have been numerous outcries (protests) because women are excluded from office and positions of leadership in the Nigerian Catholic Church and their contributions are not recognised (Chukwu, 2011; Nya, 2005; Nnamani, 2005; Okure, 1993, 2010; Orobator, 2000; Umoren, 2005; Uzuoku, 2006). These authors argue that the Church's liturgical language is predominately male oriented. Even though more women than men attend Church, the Church still uses masculine pronouns to represent both male and female. They criticise the argument of the Church which justifies such misrepresentation by stating that the pronoun 'he' is a generic term which women ought to accept as inclusive of them. To address such misrepresentation many African theologians have cautioned that the Catholic Church needs to give serious attention to women's needs and their need for inclusivity at all levels of the Church's life (Chukwu, 2011; Okure, 2009; Orobator, 2000; Uzuoku, 2006). They argue that the Church must refrain from using cultural constructs that undermine women and should begin to negotiate ways of affirming women and giving them the space to be seen and heard. In support, Bishop Charles Palmer Buckle of Ghana acknowledges:

*Women constitute about 55 to 66 percent of African society. They constitute about 70 to 75 percent of the Church...yet when it comes to the leadership, they are a negligible minority... The need to hear women is a fact that we cannot run away [from]. The only thing is how to make it effective, not just decorative...but the tendency is to bring in just as choreography. That is not it. Bring them because they are qualified, because they have something to contribute (African Synod 2009).*

The recognition that women have been left out is duly attested to but the challenge is how to address it. An example at hand is the case of the 2009 Special Assembly of Bishops of African Synod held in Rome with 244 delegates of which 30 were women as observers (allAfrica.com). This is an improvement because previously women had not been permitted to attend: however, it is not laudable that they had no voice. That they were not allowed to vote limited their participation and in most cases the experience of limited participation is a shared experience for women, not only in Africa but throughout the whole Church. In support of women's leadership Küng observed:

*If the Catholic Church, whose power structures and officers are entirely dominated by males, is to become a Church for all people, women must be represented in all decision-making bodies: at parish, diocesan, national and global level. A blatant example of the non-representation of women is the Roman congregation for religious orders, which does not have a single women member; according to present legislation even an ecumenical council can consist only of males and the pope can only be elected by males. None of this is a matter of divine law; it is purely human law (2001, p.99).*

Obviously Küng underscores that women's subjugation is kept alive in the Church through human (male) decision. Similarly Uchem, in her doctoral thesis titled "*Overcoming women's subordination in the Igbo African culture and in the Catholic Church: envisioning an inclusive theology with reference to women*", identified that the one viable model through

which the Church could dismantle inequality between men and women would be to retrieve the original Christian ethos modelled on inclusivity. She argues that this Christian ethos contains the egalitarian principles which would confront the multiple contradictory consciousness of knowing that God is not sexual yet the Church speaks and acts as if God is male, on the side of men, thereby sanctifying women's secondary position. Equally, Fiorenza (1983) stress that women need to research Church history and theology with a view to redefining those symbols which are used to limit women. In this vein, many African theologians, both men and women, have called for an inclusive theology which would bring to an end the many centuries of women's subordination not only in the Church but throughout society as a whole.

#### *2.4.4 The Call for Inclusivity: The Catholic Church's Challenges of Gender Construct*

The challenge facing the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Catholic Church in Africa, and in Nigeria in particular, is to devise ways of ensuring that every member of the Church is equally respected. In so doing everyone would feel at home in the Church. This, as many theologians have emphasised, is the beginning of achieving the "reign of God" which is the ideal of Christian living (Chukwu, 2011; Okure, 2010; Uzukwu, 2006). There should be no room for any group to assume the privileged position of being better than the other; rather Jesus' paradigm of welcoming and inclusivity for all should prevail (Kanyoro, 1996; Oduyoye, 2001; Okure, 1993, 2010; O'Murchu, 1991; Rakoczy, 2004, Schneiders, 2000, 2001; Uchem, 2001; Uzukwu, 2006; Uti, 2011). In the light of this call for inclusivity it is proposed that an egalitarian Christian ethos be adopted which advocates the view that female and male are both created in the image of God. The Church should make an authentic move to return to early Christian democratic freedom and equality for all (Küng, 2001), which will give every member of the Church the opportunity to speak and be heard (Uzukwu, 2006). Thus there

would be true 'koinonia' – “discipleship of equals” of women and men sharing the life of the Church in all its dimensions (Rakoczy, 2004, p.216).

Pope John Paul II has called for the reinterpretation of the story of creation of Genesis 2 to mean that female and male are created in the image of God. This reinterpretation is in line with the concept of '*imago Dei*' (cf. Jn. 1:18; Col 1:15), an understanding that the human being's highest identity originates from a covenant relationship with God through Christ (Okure, 1988; Oduyoye, 2001; Rakoczy, 2004). This perspective that female and male share in the image of God invalidates the Church's early construct based on the early Church Fathers' premise (for example, St. Augustine) that only man is created in God's image and a woman is only the full image of God when joined to a man. In other words, it restores the balance of equality between men and women as children of God. In this way the Church is challenged to move away from using andocentric norms in devaluing the status of women and in making them subordinates of men.

Furthermore, based on the same '*imago Dei*' the Church is challenged to incorporate aspects of equal participation for all its members. The image of God is the primary Christian category for understanding of personal value as reflected in Paul's letter to the Galatians 3: 27–28:

*For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave or nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

The emphasis in the '*imago Dei*' is focused on our oneness in Christ where no particular person is more important than the other; rather we share equally in the new Christology of belonging to God. Each person is called to image Christ as de Gruchy (1997) acknowledges that there is nothing in our being-ness that offends God. Practically everyone should be given a place of pride in the Church; that place of pride of the first born child (Okure, 2011), which

is associated with the dignity of being baptised into Christ (LG #33). Building on these understandings women would no longer be denied access to full participation in the Church's leadership, particularly with regard to admission to the ministerial priesthood where women are told that only a man can act in *persona Christi* (Inter Insigniores #5).

The challenge for inclusivity has confronted women to be equally alert in taking the lead toward reconstructing who they are. In this manner women are challenged to no longer accept the traditional socialisation orientation which positioned them as second to men as Oduyoye acknowledges:

*We African women have been brought up, and folktalk has been part of our education, to be devoted daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers, to always love others more than self. It seems to me that in this process we have also learned to vote against the self, always preferring others and loving them more than we love ourselves, doing for them what we decline to do for ourselves because we consider ourselves unworthy of such attention (1995b, p.195).*

The challenge is that women should contribute effectively toward redefining who they are. To this effect many African theologians have emphasised that women must join in the fight against their own subordination and not abrogating this to men (Chukwu, 2011; Mbuy-Beya, 2009; Okure, 2010; Uchem, 2005). Women's ethics challenges all women to participate actively in solidarity with others in keeping women's plight in the public realm (Njoroge, 2000; Oduyoye, 1995) and in so doing take "creative responsibility" (Patrick, 1998:27 cited in Rakoczy, 2004) as moral agents toward constructive reconstruction of women's dignity.

## 2.5 Religious Life and the African Context

The inception of contemporary Catholic Christian religious life in Africa went hand in hand with the advent of Christianity from the West. The missionaries from Portugal arrived in

Nigeria in the 1570s (Isichei, 1995), but their stability was precarious because the missionary enterprise was interfaced with socio-political interest of the colonial masters (Baur, 1994; Isichei, 1995). Although it is asserted that Catholic religious life started in North of Africa much of it did not thrive. It was believed that Cassian from the West reformed the monastic religious life that existed in Egypt into what it is today (Battelli, 1998; O'Murchu, 1991). Therefore the origin of religious life as lived in Africa today emerged from the West in the wake of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century when the missionaries made a renewed attempt at establishing a stronger presence in the continent. This new encounter exposed the African people toward greater acceptance of the Christian faith which eventually caused many to develop a desire to become religious.

### *2.5.1 The Nigerian Experience: Historical Background*

As mentioned earlier, Catholic religious life is a Christian reality which came to Africa with the advent of the missionaries. Its history in Nigeria is relatively young; dating back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Okure, 2007). The first known ordained priest of the then old South East province of the Catholic Church in Nigeria is Cardinal Dominic Ekandem who was ordained on 7 December 1947 (Faneye, 2002). The Cardinal and many other new entrants into religious life and priesthood of this era were trained abroad (Anb-bia, 1998). Many international congregations were still making their appearance in Nigeria up until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Notably, among the first arrivals were the French Sisters of St. Joseph Cluny, then Father Shanahan, a Holy Ghost priest who arrived in 1908 in Calabar coastland, followed by Sister Mary Charles Walker, an Irish sister of Charity (Hackett, 1988). Sister Walker proved to be outstanding in initiating the beginning of an indigenous religious congregation, the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus in 1931 (Isong, 1981) as the first religious congregation started for women in Nigeria. Later in 1937 Archbishop Charles

Heerey, a Holy Ghost priest, started the second indigenous religious congregation for women, the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Mother of Christ (Catholic Encyclopaedia, 2011).

The Society of the Holy Child Jesus, an international congregation whose members participated in this study, arrived in Nigeria in 1930 but did not start accepting Nigerian entrants until 1965 (Okure, 2005). The congregation of Daughters of Divine Love, whose members also participated in this study, was founded by Bishop Godfrey MaryPaul Okoye in 1969 (DDL const. 1991). In fact the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century saw the upsurge of many Catholic religious institutes in Nigeria both for men and women ranging from indigenous to international congregations. Although the Catholic faith in Nigeria is young it has experienced tremendous growth and a continuous inculturation process is essential in order to make the Catholic faith an authentic means of self-expression for the African members of the Church. Pope John Paul II (1998) in meeting with Nigerian Bishops affirms Nigeria as a country with not only the highest number of Catholics in Africa, but a country with the highest number of priests and religious in Africa. But beyond this immense growth of membership, the Catholic Church in Nigeria faces the challenge of engaging cultural world views particularly the perspectives that are life-giving into the lived expression of the faith. It is necessary to adapt the Christian faith to the cultural circumstances of the local mission in order to ensure that the faithful (including the religious) feel more at home in the faith they profess and live (cf. PC #3, 20).

### *2.5.2 Challenges of Religious Life: The African Context/Identity*

Religious life as a Christian reality which has come to Africa from the West encounters the problem of inculturation. There has been consistent concern expressing the need for the Catholic Christian faith to find adaptable ways of incorporating the African world view into



both the Christian expression of living the gospel and the consecrated life (Nwagwu, 1997; Musonda, 1997; Onyejekwe, 2001; Udoka, 1992; Uzuoku, 2006). These writers have emphasised that religious life would be more meaningfully lived out in Africa if African values, norms and ethics are embraced. This concern is in line with the Church's expressed desire during and after the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), that every culture enriches the Church and religious life (McElwee, 2011). Indeed the Catholic Church is passionate about adapting the Christian faith to the cultural circumstances of the immediate environment where the faith is lived and practised (SA #21; RM #52), though caution must be taken to avoid watering down the essentials (L'Oss Romano #4). Pope Pius XII in his *Summi Pontificatus* insists:

*The herald of the Gospel and messenger of Christ is an apostle. His office does not demand that he transplant European civilization and culture, and no other, to foreign soil, there to take root and propagate itself. His task in dealing with these peoples, who sometimes boast of a very old and highly developed culture of their own, is to teach and form them so that they are ready to accept willingly and in a practical manner the principles of Christian life and morality; principles, I might add, that fit into any culture, provided it be good and sound, and which give that culture greater force in safeguarding human dignity and in gaining human happiness (1944: 60).*

The Pope's injunction is clear; it calls for deeper appreciation of other cultures and its meaningful application to the Christian faith. In line with the Pope's call, Mugambi (2002, p.90) reiterates that "becoming a Christian has nothing to do with adopting the western or any other culture." Thus the introduction of the gospel to mission lands should not mean destruction of local cultures; it is not necessarily a process of acculturation; instead it should reflect a critical acceptance of the gospel and its transition into the good of the new culture (Ejizu, 2006; Mugambi, 2002). Although much has been achieved in this area of

inculturation, still more needs to be done, particularly in the area of embracing Africa's communitarian identity (AGD #26; Onyejekwe, 2001; Udoka, 1992) which harmoniously fits into the Christian expression of living the gospel truth. The gospel is a relational reality; as such the African philosophy of solidarity and hospitality should form an authentic way of not just living the Christian faith but should also be a constitutive feature of religious community life.

### *2.5.3 Solidarity as Africa's Way of Life*

Although no culture is completely homogenous particularly in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century where cultures are perceived to be intertwined with each other, African culture has been strongly affirmed as having a communitarian outlook (Famakinwa, 2010; Masolo, 2009; Menkiti, 1984). This communitarian feature of Africa's world view is encapsulated in Mbiti's (1991, p.106) postulation that the African's sense of person is embedded in the concept of: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am." This definition of the African person goes a long way to portray that there is a collective sense of others that is embedded in an individual's sense of who I am. It accords well with Bakhtin's (1980) proposal that the self is dialogical and forms one of the basic concepts of Dialogical Self Theory. Indeed Menkiti (1984) posits that the African person is defined by reference to the surrounding community and in support, Ejizu (2006) accentuates that the reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of the individual life histories, whatever these may be. On the other hand, Menkiti (1984) identifies that the Western view of self projects the individual as essentially a self-contained entity which is parallel to the Cartesian notion of self: 'I think, therefore I am', as was expressed by Rene Descartes (1596–1650). As a result there is a distinction between African and Western world views. Along these lines, Africans are seen as persons who are formed in relationships through interaction with others, whereas the

individual in the Western perspective is perceived as a lone entity who has the capacity to be or not to be. Thus, the major challenge for the African religious has been that of conflict arising from living in the interface of religious culture which has been identified as heavily influenced by Western cultures (Onyejekwe, 2001; Udoka, 1992) and his/her African world view. Hence there is a constant need for the Christian faith and more importantly for religious life to position itself toward inculturation (AGD #20–22) in order to make the lived reality not only authentic but meaningful.

## 2.6 The Constitutions of the Congregations of Sisters who participated in the Study

The constitutions of the two congregations whose sisters participated in the study will be briefly reviewed in order to provide us with some insight into what theological concepts inform their identity perceptions.

### 2.6.1 *The SHCJ Constitutions: Norms, Values and Identity Construct*

The Society of the Holy Child Jesus was founded on the 15<sup>th</sup> of October 1846 in England by an American woman, Cornelia Connelly, who was a wife, mother and a convert to Catholicism. The primary intention for beginning this congregation was based on Cornelia's meditations on the mystery of the "Incarnation" of Christ (SHCJ Const. p.vii), and from that spiritual perspective the sisters are meant to follow the example of Jesus' lifestyle (SHCJ Const. p.xi). In a unique way the SHCJ constitution expresses that the congregation "is spiritually founded on the virtues of poverty, suffering and obedience, which our most blessed Redeemer came down from heaven to practice ... through His whole life unto Calvary" (SHCJ Const. p.xiv). Therefore,

*The spirit of this institute [congregation], being that of the Holy Child Jesus, is a spirit of simplicity, humility, obedience and charity, together*

*with a spirit of affectionate devotion to the works of zeal and charity undertaken by its members (SHCJ const. FT 15).*

In this sense the sisters are called to invoke the identity of one who is simple, humble, obedient, charitable and full of zeal for work as designated by the congregation. Nonetheless the constitutions charge the sisters to be a sign of God's mercy and compassion to the world (SHCJ const. p.10) and in this way invite the sisters to "trust and reverence" the dignity of every human being (SHCJ const. p.5). The practical demand that the constitutions put before the sisters is to accept suffering (CC #1) and the love of Christ, and grow in intimacy with Christ in God in order to reproduce that same love for all (SHCJ const. p.9). In this way all who see them will acknowledge that God lives and acts in our world.

The primary apostolate engaged in by the congregation was the education of women of all classes of society (SCHJ const. FT8). But since Vatican II the congregation has been responding to the Church's call to new areas of evangelisation; in addition to apostolic works in schools and colleges, the sisters have undertaken other pastoral and spiritual ministries which are appropriate to their charism.

#### *2.6.2 The SHCJ Renewal Texts: Norms, Values and Identity Construct*

The renewal text of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus continues to build on the initial vision that brought the congregation into being. The 2010 General Chapter norm of implementation calls the sisters to be 'women of integrity' who like 'Cornelia are called to be humbler, true signs of God's inclusive and reconciling love' for the world. The emphasis is on inviting the sisters to continue to live out the 'incarnation spirituality' through seeking new ways of expressing it in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In addition the norm asks the sisters to be concerned about maintaining ties of solidarity with each other; these ties are described as '*Cor Unum*', and to be open to respect other people's culture. The Provincial of the African province of the

congregation in her end of year letter written in August 2011 acknowledges the sisters for faithfully bearing witness to Christ through the various apostolates. On the other hand she cautions:

*Our life in community has suffered greatly in some of our communities for various reasons: workacholism, friendships outside the community that have taken us out almost completely from our relationship with one another, over concern and attachment to our families, inter-personal conflicts that have not been resolved, resulting in anger, hatred, resentment, ethnicity, jealousy, gossips, and unhealthy competition...*  
(Provincial letter: 2 August, 2011).

This quote calls on the sisters not to lose sight of who they are. They are Holy Child Sisters who are called to imitate Christ, thus the listed attributes are contrary to their identity. In this way they are invited to return to the original goal of being simple, humble, charitable, loving and people who trust and reverence the other's dignity. There is a challenge that needs to be addressed; the challenge to uphold the ideal identity of being a Holy Child Sister.

### *2.6.3 Daughters of Divine Love's Constitutions: Norms, Values and Identity Construct*

The congregation of the Daughters of Divine Love was founded in 1969 by Godfrey MaryPaul Okoye, C.S.Sp (Bishop of Port Harcourt). Remarkably the congregation was founded after Vatican II; therefore it is privileged to have been founded on principles of renewal and norms prescribed by the Council from its inception. Although the congregation was founded as a diocesan congregation it has a pontifical right which permits it to be recognised as belonging to the Institute of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life in Rome.

The Daughters of Divine Love motto is "*Caritas Christi Urget Nos*" (the love of Christ urges us on). In accordance 'The Daughter' would "be known in a special manner for their love of

God and love of neighbour, coupled with deep humility, self-sacrifice and solid piety” (Founder’s preface, p.v). Therefore, every daughter is to be rooted and grounded in love, which love their constitutions describe as ‘self-sacrificing’. They are called to share this love with one another and with all the people of God. In other words, they are impelled to reincarnate “Divine Love” in their relationships in response to God’s call to love God and others (DDL const. p.2). In this way the sisters are to be mindful of their identity as sharers of God’s love, and should endeavour to exhibit Christ-like qualities such as joy, peace, love and charity, to mention but a few. Indeed the core spirituality of the congregation is rooted in expressing “Divine-love-in-action” (Const. Art. 2), therefore:

*The Daughters should seek to acquire the spirit of ... our congregation through a careful study, reflection and meditation on the scriptures ... constitutions and ... injunction that we should often read and mediate on 1 Cor 13. They should be faithful to the practice of “itu flower” i.e. performing charitable acts for fellow sisters in “secret” (DDL const. p.4).*

The practice of practical charity is an act that the Daughters are invited to share with one another. They are called to love one another to the point of secretly taking care of each other.

The primary apostolate assigned to the Daughters is to witness with her entire life to the love of Christ along with carrying out the diverse possible fields of apostolate, ranging from educational work, hospital services, social work, and catecheses, to name but a few.

## 2.7 Conclusion

This chapter has used substantial literature regarding the historical and theological foundation of Catholic religious life. Religious life is best understood as a call from God in direct imitation of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the religious responds to God’s call by following in Jesus’ footsteps, by inserting herself into a religious community within a particular cultural

context. The community in turn provides her with instruction and experiences for living out the vowed life. The community relationships offer a mixed experience: on the one hand, the community provides experiences that facilitate the construction of the ideal identity of being Christ-like; but on the other hand, the religious community could also provide experiences that hinder the process of developing the appropriate religious identity. In addition the Church's gender construct is an identity marker which may impact on how the religious sister develops and constructs identity. However, literature does not provide adequate information specifically on how the religious, who lives a religious life, engages with her experiences and the meaning she derives from it towards the construction of a personal/religious identity. Therefore, there is a need to explore how contextual experiences of religious impact on the development and performance of identity, and hopefully the review of empirical studies conducted among Catholic religious sisters in the next chapter will provide some insight into how sisters engage with their experiences of living religious life and how those self-same experiences influence their performance of identity.

## CHAPTER THREE

### REVIEW OF EMPIRICAL LITERATURE

#### 3.0 Introduction

There has been an improved relationship between Catholicism and psychology since the beginning of Second Vatican Council of 1962–65 (Kugelman, 2011); hence psychologists are beginning to focus attention on the Catholic Church as a research subject (Kloos & Moore, 2000; McMinn, 2003; Weaver et al., 1994). Likewise, Catholic religious sisters are beginning to attract research interest. Prior to Vatican II, Catholic sisters lived regimented lives which restricted them from interaction with the world outside their convents; they were not accessible as research subjects (Brock, 2007) and research focus on them was limited. As a result religious sisters have been poorly represented in previous research on Catholic religious professionals (Gafford, 2001; Mangion, 2007) as well as in mental health research on women (Neto, 2003). Recent studies have begun to address issues related to changes arising from Vatican II including the communal and individual consequences resulting from increased freedom in the lives of Catholic sisters (Gallivan, 1994; Meiring, 1985). Empirical literature on Catholic religious sisters has expanded gradually to include issues related to identity development, community life, mental health and ministry. In addition studies have explored the reasons for the diminishing numbers of sisters in the West, gendered issues of power dominance and socio-cultural issues.

This chapter will examine some of these themes but will focus on studies exploring how religious life influences the sisters' performance of identity, including gendered and socio-cultural issues and their impact on religious sisters' sense of identity and personhood. Lastly,



the chapter will discuss the salient issue of the limited literature that exists on religious sisters in Africa as a whole and Nigeria in particular.

### 3.1 Religious Life as Context for Identity Construction

Catholic religious community has been identified as “*Schola Amoris*” (a school of love) that facilitates human growth (CICLSAL, 2007); the community is expected to provide quality interpersonal relationships empowering its members to create meaning in life. Mangion (2007) argues that the two formal stages of religious formation (training) of postulancy and novitiate are the ‘Good Strong Foundations’ through which the sisters are prepared for spiritual, vocational and communal aspects of religious life. She postulates that at this stage the “solid foundations of virtues” (p.409) of religious life are laid: virtues such as the meaning of poverty, chastity and obedience; the spirituality of the order; Church history; and charity. Furthermore, she points out that the novices are specifically trained to be obedient and docile: ‘to be indifferent to whatever employment are given them, always to prefer the work which obedience puts into their hands as a sign of humility’ (p.410). That means formation programmes are tailored to develop a sense of submissiveness among the novices, a passivity of spirit of belonging to a religious family, of which Mangion argues that obedience, docility and charity are a priority.

The theme of religious obedience raises the question: to whom is/are novice/s supposed to be obedient? In Mangion’s submission obedience required of the novices was meant to be channelled toward the congregation by obeying the authority figures. In other words, obedience to the congregation is constructed as obedience to God. She argues that such obedience is an expression of “self-abnegation” which serves as a sign of ‘privation and difficulty that must be withstood in order to become a ‘good nun’ (p.410). This effectively means that the sisters are invited to subjugate their views and interests. But the question is,

when obedience to the congregation explicitly or implicitly jeopardises God's will, how should the sister respond? The Catholic Church's Canon Law says that all authority proceeds from God, therefore, no level of authority can ever properly subjugate God's position (Can. 573–746). Consequently, whenever the use of authority risks obedience to God, anyone has the right and even the duty to resist (Can. 212; Berchmans, 2005). In such situations resistance becomes a virtue.

Furthermore, Mangion argues that “dutiful performance of rigorous manual labour” is an essential element of obedience, which if missing is considered a sign of lack of vocation to religious life (p.406). If this be the aim of religious formation then it can be argued that the formation programme does not only orient the novices to imbibe an identity of submissiveness, but also distracts them from developing an identity of commitment to God, as has been argued in Chapter 2, as the primary aim of living religious life (PC #1). It signifies that the sisters must learn to subjugate their voices and interests and what kind of impact will this have on the sisters' process of identity development? This provides this study with one of the relevant lenses with which to examine how the participants negotiate religious obedience in relation to their performance of identity.

Stuber (2000) conducted a qualitative study with a Catholic religious community in the USA in an endeavour to understand how the sisters create meaning in their lives in the light of their family background and their decision to enter and live religious life. She also examined how participation in the religious community shaped the individual life of the sister. She used a dialogic retrospection approach, which she explains as a process where participants are interviewed, and later they review the analysis of data and provide feedback for the researcher. In analysing the findings, Stuber discovered that the participants' decision to enter and live religious life was motivated by what they describe as a ‘call from God’. The

participants' narratives express that this call gave them a sense of control over their lives, since they had the option to choose alternative lifestyles. But on the basis of participation in the religious community, Stuber reported that the participants presented themselves as being "strongly shaped" (2000, p.515) by the three-year formation programme, in which they were trained, moulded and educated in the life of the religious community. She argues that on the basis of this formation process the participants position themselves as identifying with the religious community's values, such as self-giving, care, hospitality, love of work and family spirit. She stated that these values are characteristics of the community's fundamental values which were lived by their founding father and mother.

Stuber's research is important to the present research, in that it examines how a religious community functions as a site for religious identity construction. The religious community was presented as mirroring the discipline of communitarian spirit which was discussed in Chapter 2: Historical and Theological Background. In this case, the community acted as a processing space facilitating the participants' identification with community values and norms. However, Stuber's study seems to have some limitations such as using one religious community as sample population, not stating the number of participants and gaining access to the participants through friendship with the leader (superior). The latter might have influenced the sisters' freedom to participate in the study and their responses yet Stuber did not critique it. These issues might affect the research findings. Further, this study was conducted in a different socio-historical context that is distinct from Nigeria, so it is hoped that this present research will contribute uniquely towards understanding African sisters and how, in the context of living religious life, they construct identity.

There are other studies that have attempted to focus on the psychological issues embedded in the establishment and maintenance of adult identity in the context of communal identity and

communal living. One such study was Gallivan (1994) doctoral thesis, a qualitative research conducted with 10 sisters, who had been in religious life for at least 10 years. The study drew samples from five different religious congregations in the USA. The sisters, to whom the researcher refers as 'co-researchers', were interviewed and engaged in a two-part drawing task to explore and understand how they saw themselves before they entered religious life and how they perceived themselves at the time of the study.

All the participants in Gallivan's study described themselves as idealistic at the time of their entry into religious life. At the time of the study the participants position themselves as content, aware of their strengths, and aware of the need for further growth in the present state of their life. In the analysis, Gallivan reported that the participants describe their relationship with their religious congregation, including individual communities, as being of central importance in their lives. This emphasises that the religious community is an environment in which the participants' sense of self is formed and in which they are socialised through continuous formation to become who they ought to be. In describing this process, Gallivan noted that religious life acts as a social institution, and like any social organisation holds power in relation to an individual's identity formation. However, Gallivan did not comment on the possible influence of power relations within interpersonal relationships and the potential impact they may have on the participants' sense of identity.

Out of the 29 sisters who were sampled in Gallivan's study, 23 were nominated by their leaders as being appropriate participants for the research. This sampling approach introduces some elements of bias, in that the sisters who were nominated by the leaders are likely to be compliant because they were chosen by their authority figures. In other words they are more likely to have a consenting voice to what the authority figures want rather than speak from their own subjective/objective point of view. This may be the case since the researcher

indicated that the introductory letter sent to each of these participants specified that they had been nominated by the superior as a potential participant. Thus, in the researcher's perspective, it is the authority in the institution (community) which both nominates and authorises the sisters (participants) to speak. In effect, Okure (2009, 2010) notes that in women religious communities superiors use their authority under the discourse of the vow of obedience to subjugate others into submissive positions, particularly young sisters who are restrained and who have no voice of their own. As a consequence, the experience of sisters not authorised, or deemed fit by the superior to be a participant, may produce other interesting data regarding the interplay between adult identity and community living for the sisters.

Chandler (2002) in a paper presentation examined the impact of the changes of Vatican II on the social identities of sisters. The study sample was focused on one order whose members are contemplative, which is an order with limited contact with the outside world. The study proposed two levels of identity for the participants: a woman religious sister in the Catholic Church, and a member of her own religious community. In this study 500 participants from the order answered a 300 item questionnaire designed to gather data on identity as woman and identity as sister. The results reveal that the participants (sisters) who have greater involvement with the world outside the community have to grapple with multiple social identities, including that of professionalism. The finding of this study is valuable insofar as it shows how the context of living religious life impacts on its members' performance of identity and how these identities are managed although conducted in a different socio-cultural background.

A Masters thesis carried out by Van Deusen (2009) in one religious order in the USA examined factors influencing happiness in women religious. The researcher used a random

sampling and a semi-structured interview to invite the participants to narrate their stories of religious life. The study aimed at examining the participants' level of happiness, communal living, ministries and ministry preferences. The results showed that the participants who reported happiness were those working in a variety of ministries. The participants also reported that religious communities provided them with supportive relationships which enhanced their performance of identity. However, this study did not explore the nature of these supportive relationships. Thus it differs slightly from this present study which intends to explore and understand how Catholic sisters interpret their experiences of community relationships and its impact on their construction of self.

Dunn's (1993) doctoral thesis was a qualitative study carried out among Catholic sisters in Southern California in which she explored the possible connections between the structural changes brought about by the reforms of Vatican II and the phenomenon of psychological loneliness in the sisters' lives. The study interviewed 15 sisters drawn from two religious congregations. The research focused on what emptiness (may be relating to aspects of loneliness) means for the sisters, what the predisposing factors are leading to such experiences of emptiness, if any. Using semi-structured interviews, the researcher invited the sisters to talk about their familial experiences as well as their experience of being a sister prior to Vatican II and post-Vatican II. Almost all the participants reported sadness and emptiness as factors in their lives. The results show that 93% of the sisters in the study presented relational impoverishment, proscriptive regulations regarding relationships in their training and present intimacy difficulties as contributing to their feelings of emptiness. Furthermore, the sisters reported feelings of failure, loss of self-identity as part of their sense of emptiness. In addition the results show that a small number of the participants reported that the changes brought about by Vatican II were factors influencing their feeling of emptiness.

In discussing the result Dunn argues that negative familial experiences such as sexual abuse in childhood, alcoholic parents, feelings of abandonment by parents, or the death of parents in early years of religious life, play a significant part in the sisters' reported sense of emptiness at midlife. In this way Dunn predicted that negative familial experiences were predetermining factors that impact on the sisters' report of feeling of emptiness, thereby neglecting to interrogate how participation in religious life has impacted on the sisters' sense of personhood. Instead, she emphasised that the sisters in her study indicated a sense of being lost, and unable to rewrite 'the script' of their lives. This may be related to the sampling techniques used in Dunn's study as the participants in the study were selected on the basis of a self-report of having experienced emptiness, thus, they may not have had the psychological resources or the power to rewrite the script themselves. This also raised the question whether or not the sisters act as agents of their self-construction or whether the influence of communal life takes precedence over their own act of self-construction.

Leung and Wittberg (2004) in journal article examined Catholic religious orders of women in China and reported that internal and external factors prevent Chinese sisters from "gaining power and autonomy they would need to serve as change agents in the Chinese Catholic Church" (p.67). The data collection for this study involved interviewing three groups of sisters in different Chinese cities, all under the age of 35 years and still in the formation period prior to taking the religious vows. Church officials at the Vatican, Chinese Bishops and religious professionals responsible for the formation of the sisters were also interviewed.

The study revealed that the factors reducing the sisters' power and status are internal and embedded in their experiences of communal living where the religious communities lack adequate leadership and have poor religious training including inadequate professional education. As a result sisters relinquish power and authority to external personnel, including

bishops and older priests who take charge of and control over convent life. The researcher commented that there is difficulty in procuring “qualified formation personnel in China” (p.75) and as a result bishops or secular priests run the convents and appoint diocesan priests to train the sisters. Thus, the sisters in this study are presented as vulnerable; they are constructed by the bishops as “extensions of the diocesan working team” (p.76), and experience the oppression of patriarchal structures both within Chinese society and the Church. In this context the sisters are often relegated to powerless positions as domestic workers. This study is important in that it examines factors which influence sisters’ construction of power and status and the finding is insightful toward understanding how the sisters’ work of identity is achieved within a culture-specific context, in this case, China. The male Church and the patriarchal society of China act as external factors which constrain the sisters’ ability to assume power. However, the researcher argues that the sisters could do more to help themselves by availing themselves of education.

On the other hand, there are some autobiographies which express that experience of communal life often does not enhance sisters’ position as agents of their own self-construction. For example, Armstrong (2005) writing her autobiography presented her experiences in a Catholic religious community where the formation processes devalued her worth as a human person:

*Our training had been an initiation. We too had been segregated from the world, deprived of normal affection... The training was designed to make us wholly self-reliant, so that we no longer needed human love or approval... Of course we were not buried alive in a tomb or anything of that sort, but we were constantly undermined, belittled, publicly castigated, or ordered to do things that were patently absurd (Armstrong, 2005, p.45).*

Based on the above quote it is clear that Armstrong’s description of formation within the religious community is humiliating and describes it as making her “become less than human”



(p.46). The experience she presented was such that it paved the space for self-abnegation as was argued by Mangion (2007), in contrast to the communitarian discipline of ‘right-in-relationship’ discussed in the chapter on theology and historical foundation (Okure, 2010; O’Murchu, 1998). Right-in-relationship embodies the sincere acknowledgement that the other needs to be treated with dignity; according to the Church’s teaching of giving each other pride of place (cf. Rom 12:10; PC #15). In addition, Armstrong pointed out that she experienced being “ordered to do things that were patently absurd”, meaning she felt controlled and subverted which is in contrast with the ideal of co-responsibility (PC # 4) that marks the communal spirit. In all, the account Armstrong presented depicts how the formation training twisted to the negative her capacity to love, in that she began to find it difficult to receive and return love:

*The training seemed to have worked... My capacity for affection had either atrophied or been so badly damaged that it could not function normally. I felt frozen and could see what people meant when they said that their heart had turned to stone...I had become a person who could not love and who seemed incapable of reaching out to others. Whether I like it or not, I was now a garden enclosed, a well sealed up (p.44).*

Although Armstrong’s experience is subjective and located in a socio-cultural context different from Africa and Nigeria, her experiences are pertinent to this research’s interest regarding how the participants of this study are constructed by others (positioned) and what impact such constructions have on their sense of identity.

In a similar way, Sister Inigo, an Asian in an interview narrative in describing her experiences of “*Religious life in Asia Today*”, laments that “there is a community in every religious house, but often no communion” (Amaladoss, 2011, p.251). She attributes this lack of relatedness to the structure of monastic form of religious life which has impacted on the 21<sup>st</sup> Century religious community living. Gross (2000) in a German studies review narrated

*The Strange Case of the Nun in the Dungeon*, a story of how a young Carmelite sister, Barbara Ubryk, was “imprisoned in the convent in the city of Cracow ... in a cold, dark, barren dungeon-cell”, where “a cesspool drained into her cell: filth vermin, and human waste” for breaking “the vow of celibacy” (p.69). Gross reported that Barbara lived in this dungeon from 1848–69 and survived on rotten potatoes and water.

This imprisonment was imposed by the superior and the confessor but she was rescued by state authorities. The report reveals that Sister Barbara in her testimony given later before the Austrian state courts claimed she survived the imprisonment by “fervent prayer and by repeatedly counting year after year the individual strands of hair on her head one by one” (p.69). Gross reported that according to the liberal newspapers, “she (Barbara) was a picture of death.” This story seems unpleasant but the question is, if it happened, then there is no doubt that it contradicts religious community’s position as communion (CICLSAL, 2007), as was expressed in the chapter on religious life’s theological foundation, as well as the idea of religious life as “special family in Christ” (Can 602) and a “family gathered together in the Lord’s name” (PC #15). Olisah (2006) observes that the root cause of psychological problems among Catholic religious sisters in Nigeria emerges from interpersonal relationships within the religious communities.

The implication is that religious life as context for identity construction produces a mixture of experiences: on the one hand, it has facilitated the sisters’ human growth and sense of personal/religious identity as argued by Mangion (2007) and Stuber’s (2002) findings which emphasise that the sisters’ participation in community life orient the sisters to internalise and appropriate as personal the community values and norms. But on the other hand, religious community life has also induced experiences which have seriously constrained the sisters’ sense of worth and identity, as seen in Armstrong’s autobiography and Barbara’s

imprisonment in the dungeon. Yet research has paid scant attention to explore how religious communities facilitate or hinder the personal growth of their members, as reflected in Dunn's (1993) study, where the participants' reports of loss of meaning and feelings of emptiness were interpreted to emerge from personal/familial psychological histories which the sisters brought with them before they became religious. Thus there is the need to research how the experiences of living religious life impact on its members' performance of identity which is the primary focus of the present study.

### 3.2 Community Life and Mental Health Issues

There is some research which has focused attention on mental health for sisters. More often than not they are based on the assumption that presumed pathologies are cases which unhappy sisters brought with them when they entered religious life, including depression, loss of meaning, and stress, alcohol dependency and anger. This section will examine research in this field.

#### 3.2.1 *Depression, Loss of Meaning and Stress*

A research review covering a period of 25 years, from 1975–2000, focused on mental health issues among clergy and other religious professionals reported that Catholic religious sisters repeatedly scored the lowest regarding stress and depression as compared to women rabbis (Koenig, Weaver, Larson, Flannelly & Stapleton, 2002). Koenig et al., argue that this is because Catholic sisters have “stronger supportive community” (p.396) which helps them to deal with issues relating to stress and depression. While this conclusion may be correct, mental health issues, or what was sometimes described as “anguish” (Vaughan, 1958, p.73), were reported many years ago in sisters as features which lead to a crippling of the sister's religious spirit. Vaughan (1958), a priest and psychiatrist, reported that there was high level of mental illness among women religious. He concludes that “the roots of the disorder spring

from those periods of life which preceded entrance into the convent or cloister” (1958, p.80). However, he fails to consider how the religious community may have influenced the sisters’ behaviour and exacerbated their conditions; instead, he argues that the individual with low self-esteem is responsible for her own condition. He recommends that psychotherapy is offered to such individuals by a Catholic psychiatrist, someone who, presumably, has a good understanding of religious life and its demands. However, he duly acknowledged also that there is resistance coming from superiors to give individuals affected the permission to access psychological help but did not critique such resistance as dysfunctional.

Meiring (1985) developed a questionnaire to test sisters’ behavioural responses to stress. He conducted a pilot study with seven sisters from a single order in the USA and administered the questionnaire to 52 sisters from one order aged 27–78, who had been sisters for 6–50 years. The instrument was designed to determine not only the factors which caused stress for the sisters, but also the extent to which they engaged in various stress behaviours when stressed. One of the interesting findings was that 73% of the participants indicated “rigidity in others” and 75% indicated “problems that continue to go on, nothing being done about them” (p.36) as stressful factors in their lives, while 23% of the sisters recorded living the vowed life in community, as the cause of their stress. The researcher’s interpretation of this data emphasised that the sisters have accepted the implications and goals of their choice to be sisters, especially concerning interpersonal conflict. But, another interpretation of this data could be that most of the sisters in this study are recognizing interpersonal relationships in convent life as stress-inducing in contrast to the intrinsic values of the life itself, such as in living out the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience which involves renunciation of money, sex, and power, and the impact of this renunciation on the life of the individual sister.

However, Meiring's method for inviting participation to this study was achieved through superiors who nominated participants and the result was communicated back to them via their superiors. Although Meiring stated that there was no difficulty in administering the stress indicator questionnaires, it could be argued that the sample was drawn from sisters who were already compliant with the superior's instruction as noted before in the case of Stuber's (2000) study. Maybe an attempt to administer the same questionnaire to other sisters who were not nominated by superiors will yield a different result.

A study conducted by Neto (2003) examined predictors of loneliness among sisters in Portugal and Angola. The research was a two-part study in which research involving college students was replicated with a sample of sisters, and the rationale for the study was based on the notion that sisters are a largely ignored population in terms of research in this era; therefore, the study intended to examine the impact of religious commitment and religious engagement of the sisters' subjective experience of loneliness, specifically investigating whether religious engagement prevents loneliness. The researcher's argument is that living religious life could be stressful but the communal nature of religious life and commitment thereto could ameliorate the impact of loneliness on the sisters' lives. The sample comprised of 74 sisters at midlife in Portugal and 105 sisters at midlife in Angola who completed scales measuring loneliness, neuroticism, optimism and satisfaction with life. The result indicated that there was a higher level of loneliness in Angolan sisters than the Portuguese sisters. But the results also reveal that sisters' level of loneliness when compared with the college students showed no significant difference which led the researcher to emphasise that sisters' engagement with religious life has no consequence on their level of loneliness. However, this study did not specifically explore how engagement in religious life facilitates the sisters' level of loneliness and also by combining the sisters' sample for analysis; it is assumed that

sisters are a homogenous sample across culture. That means the study failed to take into account the impact of cultural values and practices on the sisters' lives.

In spite of the fact that Koenig et al., (2002) acknowledged that sisters rate lowest in scales measuring mental illness and related stress issues, there is evidence that incidences of loneliness (Neto, 2003) and stress (Meiring 1985) are found among sisters; however, not much attention has been devoted to how the communal life described by the Church "as a family gathered in the Lord's name" (PC #15) mediates or moderates these experiences for the sisters. As a result, there is a need to explore further how the religious community impacts on the issues of mental health for the sisters, which directly or indirectly link to how they perform identity.

### *3.2.2 Alcohol Dependency*

The specific risk factors for alcoholic and other substance addiction within religious community members have been poorly understood and identified (King & Castelli, 1995). In similar ways that alcohol dependency in wider society can be overlooked and misunderstood even by health professionals (Fryer, 1998), so also it has been ignored by religious communities to which a sister belongs. There is a paucity of empirical research exploring the prevalence of alcohol dependency among religious sisters.

A survey during 1979–1980 of the major superiors in the USA of 18 sisters' communities reported that 2.2% of their memberships were alcoholics (King & Castelli, 1995; McKeon, 1982). Another survey carried out in the 1990s by the Centre for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) in the USA, spearheaded by 373 religious communities, representing 56.5% of all US sisters, reported increased prevalence of alcoholism among religious sisters, estimated as 2.6% (King & Castelli, 1995). These are clear indications that there is alcoholic dependency found among Catholic sisters though risk factors associated with its development

are often seen as biological and psychological, along with environmental factors (McKechnie & Hill, 2009).

McKechnie and Hill (2009) carried out a study among Catholic religious sisters in the US to examine factors that predispose sisters to alcohol dependency. The sample population was drawn from sisters who are in treatment for alcohol dependency and a control group made up of sisters who are non-alcoholic. The study discovered that family factors such as parental separation or divorce, or early loss of the mother, act as major factors predisposing sisters to alcohol dependency. The results also showed that the treatment group had higher levels of mental health symptoms and a past history of childhood trauma which led the researchers to conclude that the primary risk factor was genetic coupled with familial relationships. Although the researchers noted that the control group was significantly older than the treatment group, which could have introduced age disparity bias, they did not give due attention to how the participants' engagement in religious life mediates or moderates these experiences. Maybe one of the issues that need clarification is whether religious communities in which participants are located play a significant role or not. On these grounds there is a need to explore how their religious communities have impacted on the sisters' engagement with alcohol.

### *3.2.3 Anger*

The experience of anger is a source of dilemma for sisters who live religious life, not just because the expression of anger is socially unacceptable for women (Piran & Cormier, 2005; Ussher, 2003), but also because it invalidates the sisters' status as people who should not exhibit negative emotions (P.M. Smith, 2004 cited in Brock, 2007).

In a qualitative study that invited 21 participants from an international congregation in USA, Central America and Canada, Malone (1991a, b), a sister herself from the same congregation,

addressed the issue of anger and conflict and the meaning the sisters give to these terms. All the participants were well educated, at least holding one degree. Some (number not specified) participants had entered religious life prior to Vatican II and others had become sisters after the changes had taken place. The research rationale was based on the notion that even though sisters suppress anger and deny interpersonal conflict, they still experience the effect of this suppression which manifests later in various forms of bodily, psychological and spiritual distress. In addition, the researcher hypothesised that there would be variance in data produced by sisters who entered religious life prior to Vatican II and post-Vatican entrants, particularly in relation to norms and taboos around conflict and anger.

In relation to conflict, the results showed that the participants commonly constructed conflict as an inappropriate behaviour/emotion that sisters should not experience, especially interpersonal conflict, and based on their governance structure they emphasized that authority figures are persons who must be obeyed, and that peace must be achieved at any price. Although the sisters in this study reported that they have experienced conflict in their relationships with their peers (including others in the community and those in authorities) they presented themselves as suppressing their own voice, which means subjugating their own interest. The researcher interpreted this result to mean that the sisters have internalised the image of 'the good sister'. There were some participants who acknowledged that they experience emotions such as hurt, frustration and fear; they reported that they resolved the dilemma by using strategies such as confrontation, avoidance, cynicism, explosion, and third party mediation.

The results also revealed that the young sisters in the study reported that they are constrained by the fear of being labelled troublemakers or being seen as difficult to deal with by authority in their congregation to subjugate their voice of anger. According to Malone, the inability of



the sisters to express anger emerged from the notion of 'good sisters' where she states that the sisters have been socialised in their training not to express anger. Unexpectedly, there was no difference recorded with regard to participants' description of norms and taboos irrespective of who entered religious life prior to Vatican II changes or not, and this led the researcher to explain the result to signify that the changes after Vatican II were merely cosmetic, despite all the effort the congregation has made toward organisational change and encouragement to the members for co-responsibility following the renewal and changes called for by Vatican II.

There are other themes which emerged from Malone's study such as, intrapersonal conflict issues concerning the meaning of religious life, the decision to stay or leave, constraints of the vows, healthy/unhealthy communal living, the denial of sexuality and taboos around sexual issues and homosexuality. Some of the participants reported that their self-esteem was irrevocably damaged during their period of initial formation and such experiences made them angry. This is parallel to the experiences of Armstrong (2005), as stated above, in which her ability to love had been damaged. Anger in connection to perceived organisational denial of these issues emerged for some of the participants, which were noted but the researcher did not explore further as the focus of her study was interpersonal rather intrapersonal. In conclusion, Malone expressed that there is a need for the congregation to address the issue of conflict and suppressed anger as is evident in the results and she recognised the need for further studies to be conducted in order to explore how sisters make sense of themselves in religious life.

Malone's study is quite relevant to this present study because it explores how the context of religious life has influenced sisters' understanding of life and what meaning they make out of it. Notably anger has been presented as an attribute found among sisters and the possible relational experiences that ignite it have been highlighted. There is an ambivalence

surrounding anger and the tension it creates in the community whether intra/interpersonally, therefore it is interesting to explore, if there are any similarities to how the context of religious life elicit from the participants (of both Malone's study and the present study) an identity of persons who are angry.

### 3.3 Religious Life and Sisters' Performance of Identity through Ministry

The creation of identity is a process, shaped by a myriad of forces, including formal and informal structures such as family, friends, work and religion (Matchinske, 1998). In the case of Catholic religious sisters work described as ministry has been identified as one of the core concepts through which they develop and perform personal/religious identity, including the manual, spiritual and professional services they render in the name of their congregation, the Church on behalf of or for God, and for the general good of humanity (Fox, 2012; Mangion, 2005, 2007; Ryan, 2012).

Ryan (2012), a *National Catholic Reporter* interviewed Sr. Kathleen Judge, a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet in the U.S., who had lived and worked in Peru for over 40 years. In the interview Judge describes her ministry as part of her "DNA make-up" (p.1), where she expressed that she derives immeasurable joy from teaching children and adults alike. She presented herself as an educator who not only taught in the formal school setting but used every possible opportunity to educate the people she encounters. She also reported that she was involved with pastoral ministry after the formal classroom learning and teaching, and with the help of other sisters in her congregation she set up a breakfast programme in order to provide food for the 'undernourished children' (p.2). She stated that her involvement with ministry, through such programmes, forms an essential aspect of her personal and religious identity.

Similarly Mangion (2005) describes women religious within the historical context of 19<sup>th</sup> Century England and Wales as a professional workforce, employed in the name of the Church and their congregation. She argues that the sisters' personal and religious identity was intricately linked to the labour of active service in the fields of education, health care and social services which flow from the objectives of the congregations. She points out that the constitutions construct women religious as labouring "for the salvation of souls and especially those of the poor" (p.226). Consequently, ministry is an intrinsic aspect of sisters' identity. Conversely, she also argues that the vowed life definitely involves prayer as a means through which women as active religious gain personal salvation and salvation of others. In so doing she introduces the complexity concerning work versus commitment to prayer. On the one hand, the religious has to include labour in the public sphere as part of her identity and balance it with commitment to what she describes as contemplation, which means having a prayerful life. It is essential that the religious combine these two composite aspects of religious and personal identity in such a way as to avoid allowing the one to dominate the other.

Furthermore, Mangion argues that women religious are often recognised and are recognisable as "unskilled" labourers, which she describes as undeserving (p.227). Mangion used Anthony Fahey's (1982) thesis on 19<sup>th</sup> Century women religious and asceticism in Ireland to portray how Catholic religious sisters have been described as unskilled labourers. Fahey in his thesis describes the work of Irish women religious as "caring for and training children, caring for the sick, attendants and comforters rather than technical experts" (p.154 cited in Mangion, 2005). This, Mangion argues, presents women religious as incompetent and devalues their labours as 'simple' despite the fact that a good number of women religious in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century were professionally trained for the services they rendered. She argues that such

devaluation reflects the widespread misconceptions of viewing women's work as centered on care and nurture which may have implications on their performance of identity. Indeed it can be classified as a gendered marked description which always positions women as incompetent workers (Ruether, 1995).

Mangion (2008) in her doctoral thesis undertook the task of researching the archives of 10 Catholic religious communities of sisters in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Britain in order to provide a historical analysis of sisters' sense of identity. Her thesis appears in three parts. Part one is titled '*Developing Identities*', in which she describes the dramatic growth in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century of women's religious congregations in England. In this section she predominantly presented these congregations as primarily involved in running schools, visiting parishioners and nursing the sick. In the second part of the thesis, titled '*Working Identities*', she narrows her analysis to focus on how these congregations were visible in the public sphere through the institutions they built, and in their interactions with students, patients, parishioners and Church leaders. She also presented religious women as actively gaining professional training and certification which enabled them to achieve their mission effectively. She argues that they did this by creating Catholic teacher training colleges to ensure that their participation would be in a Catholic setting. Part three of her thesis is titled '*Corporate Identities*', in which she portrays how each congregation reinforced the production of work based on the founder's ideals and objectives. This identity in turn served to bind the women religious together and separated them from the outside world.

The central focus of her thesis lays emphasis on how participation in religious life provides the sisters with a sense of identity which encompasses both religious and professional identity. On the whole she defines the sisters' identity as a 'Contested Identity' which on the one hand reveals the tension between fusing the temporal duties and the spiritual, and on the

other hand involves the demand of obedience, which positions sisters as docile to their religious superiors and Church authority. Mangion's analysis is of great significance to this study because it provides meaningful insights into how Catholic religious women have been constructed and are constructing their personal and religious identity with particular reference to ministry, although located within a historical-cultural setting different from our contemporary time and Africa. Hopefully it will either contradict or endorse the findings of this study in terms of how the participants perform personal and religious identity with reference to work (ministry) within the context of living religious life.

#### 3.4 The Diminishing Number of Entrants into Religious Life

The number of women entering religious life in the Western world has been on the decline (Brink, 2007; Sacred Congregation for Religious, 1983; Schneiders, 1994). This has been a major source of concern not only for the West but for the universal Catholic Church. There have been different explanations for the declining number of entrants into religious life. Brink (2007) argues that one of the reasons is due to vocational depression of persons within religious life. Steichen (2001) argues that the docile obedience expected of sisters has hastened this phenomenon of declining numbers, whereas, Wittberg (1993) suggests that the diminishing number of new entrants into religious life evident in the USA in the 1990s and obviously today, may be due to the eroding sense of commitment and structural changes including the increasing number of individual sisters that live alone in place of the old structure of shared residency (common life). While these changes may have direct or indirect implications for the decline in numbers, Chittister (1995) argues that this time should be used to reflect on the blessings of a vowed life and to focus on exploring more important questions such as what shall we do to revitalise religious life.

The African context offers a different experience. Religious life is booming, particularly in Nigeria where it has been recognised that the country has the highest number of Catholics as well as priests and religious in Africa (Pope John Paul II, 1998). This was reiterated by Lefevere (2011) who in a report for the *National Catholic Reporter*, describes Nigeria as experiencing a “vocation boom in Africa” (p.1). She states that Catholic religious sisters are growing in number and engaged in different kinds of apostolates in the Church and wider Nigerian society. But there was no mention of how the formation programmes in the different communities impact on the sisters’ understanding of religious life or the sense they are making out of it toward performing personal and religious identity. This present research focuses on exploring how these large numbers of women who become religious understand and negotiate relationships in the community, the Church and wider Nigerian society toward constructing personal and religious identity.

### 3.5 Gendered Issues of Power Dominance

Not only have socialisation processes in religious communities provided the context through which sisters develop and perform personal/religious identity, but also themes emerging from gendered discourse in the Church. The Catholic Church’s dominant gender discourse is based on Judeo-Greek and Roman patriarchal traditions as discussed in Chapter 2 (Küng, 2001; Po-Chia Hsia, 1998). This discourse constructs men as superior to women; therefore sisters are perceived as subordinate to priests in contrast to upholding the theological theory and practice of equality of persons (Okure, 2009; Padgett, 2010; Tobin, 1985). As a result, religious sisters, in interpreting the available gendered positions in the Church, argue that the discourses had been used to keep sisters in the background as a group that can only be heard but not seen (Schneiders, 2011; Okure, 2010).

Okure (2010) criticises the Church's hierarchy which she describes as having pyramid features in which the bishops and priests who occupy the top places dominate and control others at the bottom including religious sisters, leading to the tension of sisters struggling to redefine who they are. Ackermann (1991) argues that the reason why women need to define their own humanity is simple; it is "because it has always been done for us. Women's humanity ... thoughts and beliefs, have by and large been defined for us by men. This is particularly true in the Christian tradition ... This kind of stereotyping has made scant allowance for us to define our own humanity" (p.93). Reid (2002) conducted a qualitative study, which examined the life story of "three religious sisters who entered the convent in love with a dream" (p.1). Their love and dream were to re-enact the work of justice for humanity through the Church. The context of this study was an Irish Catholic Church which the researcher describes as an institution that can both suppress women as well as provide opportunities for change. The aim of the study was to explore and understand gender-based constraints within the Church using the life story of the three sisters, and what strategies they used to negotiate their experiences and construction of self.

The findings revealed, amongst other things, that the sisters are positioned as subordinates, and the Church delimits the space in which they can render service, causing them to feel constrained. The researcher in discussing this finding insists that being positioned as subordinate was a source of much dilemma based on the fact that the Catholic Church challenges religious sisters to advocate for those who are marginalised and neglected by society. Yet the Church's gendered discourse marginalises sisters by denying them access to ministries for which they are qualified, for example, the priesthood and other senior positions of leadership, which has been discussed extensively in Chapter 2 under gender issues. The

researcher used the analytical tool of ‘exit-voice dilemma in organizational membership’ to report that the sisters left religious life as well the Catholic Church.

Although the three sisters in Reid’s study responded to their position of subordination by leaving religious life and the Church, there are some sisters who claim to have been ordained to the priesthood of the Catholic Church. Padgett (2010) reported on the story of a group founded eight years ago in Europe, the *Roman Catholic Womenpriests*, which has ordained more than 100 women including former sisters. The report stated that these women priests minister in more than 20 American states and also in Canada. Padgett reported that the Womenpriests organisation acknowledges that they “don’t expect to change Vatican doctrine anytime soon” but are motivated by their resolution which states: “we no longer accept second-class status in our own religion” (p.54). The leader of the group is a former religious sister, Bridget Mary Meehan, 62 years old, ordained in 2006 by a group of German female theologians, who four years earlier had been ordained by a Catholic cleric. Meehan is a Womenpriests bishop, and in her days as a sister, her ministry included everything a priest did, except celebrate Mass and other sacramental ministries. The Womenpriests celebrate Mass in private homes or sanctuaries lent to them by Protestant Churches; they also perform baptisms and legally recognised marriages.

The Vatican is aware of their existence, and in reaction describes their ordination as a *delictum gravius*, a grave crime, and in addition has excommunicated them and those who attend the Mass they preside over. But that has not deterred them from ministering and Meehan insists that their intention is to reform the Church from the inside, thus she says: “we’re leading, not leaving, the Church” (p.55) in order to reform an insular, hyper-hierarchical Church that betrays early Christianity’s more democratic culture. Clearly, from the above submissions, it can be argued that Catholic religious sisters are responding



differently to the gender-based discrimination. The sisters are taking the responsibility to redefine who they are and who they ought to be. However, they are aware of the challenges and tensions involved in reconstructing a different identity other than the patriarchal constructions which minimise their worth.

Tobin (1985) states that the Second Vatican Council in which she participated as an auditor, though invited to it after the Council had already begun, has paved the way for sisters to make contributions vis-à-vis issues that concern them as well as the Church in general. She acknowledges that their (women's) participation at the Council was minimal but regarding "the status of women" their participation served as "a tiny crack in the door, to a recognition of the vast indifference to women and the ignoring of their potential for the whole body of the Church" (p.296). She affirms that, 30 years (we could reframe this, to say 50 years) after Vatican II, sisters still "face the question of their own minimization with responsibility and determination. They are becoming partners in the dialogue" (p.305), leading to meaningful negotiation and recognition of their worth in the Church.

Brock (2007) in her doctoral thesis describes Catholic religious sisters as resisting the Church's dominant construction of them as self-sacrificing and subject to male domination. The study noted that gender-based discrimination was the primary source that has influenced the Church's discourse of sisters as workers who do not have full participation alongside men. This study adopted a Foucauldian and feminist approach to examine six important Church texts with regard to the Church's dominant discursive constructions of sisters. In addition, individual and focus group interview data were sampled from 43 sisters in Australia and New Zealand with the aim of examining ways in which sisters negotiated their sense of personhood based on their lived experiences in the Church.

The result of this study showed that although sisters are subjugated by the male institutional Church as persons who live lives of self-sacrifice, devoting themselves wholeheartedly and single-mindedly to God and to the Church's work, the sisters have constructed two different kinds of identity based on their identity as sisters in the Church. On the one hand, the sisters have been regulated by the formation training to present themselves as institutionalised in that they have internalised the dominant Church discourse of them as docile, submissive, controlled by Church authority, and loyal to its mission. But on the other hand, the sisters positioned themselves as resistant to control by the principles laid down by the Church, in that they exercise personal autonomy over the choice of who to live with, and are therefore no longer bound by rule to live communally. In addition, the results show that sisters decide what kind of ministry to engage in, and in so doing they present themselves as working for the poor and marginalised in the world, not necessarily for the Church. The researcher presented the sisters' position of resistance as a process of individuation. This finding led the researcher to conclude that the sisters' self-construction is flexible, positioning themselves neither wholly as institutionalised or individuated, since they give an account of both taking up and resisting the Church's construction of what a sister should be.

Brock's study is relevant to this study because it focuses on hearing from the sisters what their experience of being sisters in the Church has been and how they engage with these experiences toward constructing who they are. Generally, it can be argued from the above discussion that gendered constructions in the Church constitute part of the discourses through which Catholic religious sisters perform personal and religious identity.

### 3.6 Socio-Cultural Issues

*The Church has ... utilized the resources of different cultures in its preaching to spread and explain the message of Christ, to examine and*

*understand it more deeply, and to express it more perfectly in the liturgy and in various aspects of the life of the faithful (CMW #58).*

From the above quote, it can be argued that the Catholic Church recognises the important role that culture plays in making the Christian faith an authentic reality in people's lives; therefore, it has and continues to advocate that all manner of religious practices take into consideration the culture of the people to whom the message of the Gospel is preached. In this light, the Church advises that part of the proper and continuous renewal of religious life should include adapting itself "to the immediate cultural realities of mission territories" (PC #3) as presented in Chapter 2. This adaptation of culture into lived expression of the faith allows people to express their faith in culturally familiar ways. But the challenge is that there has been tension regarding inculturation of other cultures (including Nigerian culture) into religious life (Uwem, 1996).

Onyejekwe (2001) in describing the past and present challenges of Christian consecrated life in Sub-Saharan Africa with reference to the people of Nigeria (Igbo-Africa), identified that the greatest debilitating experience for the African religious has been the inability to translate the gospel and its charism into his/her cultural ways of life. He argues that in varying ways religious formation, as presented in most institutes of consecrated life, has not adapted the African perspective of personhood. Consequently, both missionary and indigenous congregations have continued to initiate new members into religious life using cultural paradigms that are foreign and he argues that this alienates the African religious from his/her own culture. He cited examples of how formation programmes deny African religious the opportunity to make a "personal contribution" which he describes as having no voice but accepting everything taught as gospel truth (p.577). In agreement, Udoka (1992) remarks "despite almost 26 post-Counciliar years, the pattern of priestly [religious] formation in many parts of Nigeria has remained grossly Western." (P.56). Therefore, the tendency is that

African religious are replicas of foreign missionaries (Kimaryo, 1993; Nwagwu, 1992).

Indeed Udoka noted that formation:

*... was mainly according to the traditions of Western Monasticism founded often in alienation. Accordingly, their person, manner, place of dwelling, life style and work fell, in toto, outside the socio-cultural milieu and the traditional categories of the Igbo. In many respects, they remained alien to and isolated from their people and society (1992, p. 388).*

Based on Udoka's postulation in the above quote Africans who join religious life are likely to experience various kinds of discontinuity with their Africanness. Nwagwu (1997) argues that the African people's sense of support for one another is often not upheld in religious life. She emphasised that this lack of support is experienced in a myriad of ways: some could be in the form of lack of care, denial of active participation in community life, and sometimes lack of warmth extended to the members' family. Similarly, Onyejekwe (2001) testifies that religious communities are noted for taking little or no interest in their members' welfare especially when it comes to the members' family needs. He indicated that sometimes religious communities refuse to receive visitors from the members' family because the visitor had not sought the community's permission to visit. This kind of situation impacts on the African religious sense of personhood and identification with her cultural orientation, in the sense that she is compelled not to receive her visitors warmly. Nwagwu (1997) laments that this is contrary to the African concept of hospitality which she describes with this proverb: "A visitor is a blessing" (p.140), and by implication one does not refuse blessings and blessings do not give notice before coming. It is a fundamental concept in Africa to receive visitors warmly irrespective of who they are or at what time they call.

Musonda (1997) in discussing African relational characteristics in relation to consecrated life identified, among other things, that Africans are well disposed to understand community life better than any other aspect of consecrated life because communal living is often prized

above individualism in Africa. In this way, he elaborated that one of the most vital relational characteristics in Africa is communal life where “mutual help” (p.165) is offered to anyone in need. This need he identifies to include lack of food, shelter, clothes and sometimes visits to the sick, attending funerals and activities celebrating life. On the other hand he acknowledges that the African religious is often challenged by the blatant lack of mutual help in the lived experience of religious life. Similarly, Souci, Kamara, Nyawira, and Gerbalet’s (1998) study carried out among 278 young Kenyan religious (a mixed group comprising of 134 Africans and 144 participants from international congregations) among other things found that young African religious do not feel at home in religious communities. In particular they found that the young religious were concerned about hospitality. According to them the young religious’ perception is that hospitality within religious life had been stressful on community resources in terms of space, time and money. Therefore there is always tension regarding how to treat visitors and as such is a source of concern for the African religious.

Further, they reported that a second issue which was raised in connection to the feeling of “at homeness” was with regards to personal interaction with others in the community. In explaining the result, they posited that young religious feel like “strangers” in their own communities because sometimes no one cares about them, which is contrary to relational situations in their family-of-origin, where everybody at home gives time and attention to others and their concerns. They suggest that in a religious community most people appear to be too busy to spend time with their brothers and sisters. They argued that this lack of care impacts on African religious performance of cultural and religious identity which by extension is part of his/her identity.

The third issue associated with “at homeness” of the young religious focused on the vows, particularly the vow of obedience, which they found to be a huge challenge particularly when

there is no constructive dialogue or the dialogue remains dialogue without change. They emphasise that superiors and/or formators under the discourse of religious obedience do not respect others but rather treat others as children, who must obey all instructions given. They pointed out that this is contrary to African culture where the young are expected to respect the elders or authority figures but in turn the young expect the elders to respect and listen to them. In addition, they found that the young religious experienced religious life as too structured and authoritarian for many Africans. The participants expressed that the structure of religious communities seemed “designed to make adults to keep acting like children” (p.28). They stated that this happens when community superiors want to know what is happening at all times. They emphasised that this is linked to the strong demand of obedience which requires all religious to ask for permission for virtually everything. In this regard, they concluded that the freedom to move and grow is lacking and equate community life to “boarding school for older people” crowded with rules and regulations.

However, the participants in this study were young religious who were predominately male (118 males as against 34 females), working mostly in urban centres, most of whom were not engaged in full time ministry, but it nevertheless gives an insight into how young African religious view religious life. It has provided this study with some background information regarding challenges faced by African religious which impact somewhat on identity construction. It can be used as a backdrop to question whether African communitarian values are neglected in religious life, causing religious to experience serious challenges regarding the development and performance of personal and religious identity.

### 3.7 Lack of Research on Religious Sisters in Africa/Nigeria

The empirical research on sisters reviewed above has relevance for this study and promotes an understanding of the lives of sisters worldwide. Unfortunately, it does not involve

participants from Africa or Nigeria, with the exception of the survey on Kenyan young religious men and women. The majority of research published in Africa has focused on the history of sisters (Isong, 1981), formation programmes (Anochie, 1994; Onyejekwe, 2001, Udoka, 1992) and the kinds of work (Fox, 2012; Lefevere, 2011; Okure, 1988) they do in Africa and Nigeria but much of it is not empirical. Most of the work has concentrated on describing religious life. For example, Anochie (1994) published a descriptive work on the Igbo woman and consecrated life, and described a religious formation programme in detail, likening it to the socialisation process provided for a young woman in preparation for marriage. Olisah (2006) focused her doctoral thesis on Nigerian religious sisters and psychosocial adjustment, done as a document analysis, and thus did not source or explore from the sisters' point of view how the experiences of living religious life impacted on their sense of self. Fox (2012), reporting on behalf of *The Catholic National Reporter*, presented a picture of African religious sisters as hard workers, whose lives are marked by “effective and uncharacteristic generosity to the wider society” as they play major roles “in pastoral, merciful and charitable services to humanity” (p.1).

*African Ecclesial Review* has published a number of articles on religious life in Africa, focusing on sisters in particular whilst concentrating on themes such as religious vows in the traditional African context (Nwagwu, 2008), psychological aspects of religious formation (Bahati, 2003), and inculturation of consecrated life in Africa (Lott, 1995; Nwagwu, 1997). But while these articles discuss the benefits and challenges of living religious life, little attention is given to explore how the individual sister located in a religious community understands and interprets interpersonal relationships and the impact they have on her sense of person. This suggests that there is a dearth of empirical research which attempts to explore the meaning sisters draw from their lived experiences of religious life in Africa in general,

and Nigeria in particular. As a consequence, there is great need in Africa and Nigeria for empirical studies focusing on sisters in order to appreciate the meaning they give to their lives and how these experiences influence the development and performance of personal and religious identity.

### 3.8 Conclusion

In spite of the fact that Catholic religious sisters have attracted the interest of researchers, there is still a dearth of research into understanding how the religious community impacts on the sisters' emerging personal and religious identity. There are few qualitative research studies which explore the subjective experience of sisters in an effort to understand from their perspective, what their understanding is of living religious life and how they engage and negotiate these realities toward development of identity. However, in some of the studies examined above, the religious community has been presented as bringing forth a mixture of experiences. On the one hand, it has facilitated sisters' construction of personal and religious identity as presented in Stuber's (2000) and Malone's (1991a) studies. On the other hand, Armstrong's (2005) autobiography and Gross' (2000) story of Barbara indicate that interactional exchange in religious community often does not yield a positive influence but can also hinder a sister's performance of identity. Furthermore, some studies such as Stuber's (2000) and Dunn's (1994) presented sisters as persons controlled by superiors which reflected in Mangion's (2007) argument stating that formation in a religious community aims at making sisters docile and obedient to superiors. In addition, Mangion (2005, 2007) and Ryan (2012) presented ministry as an intrinsic aspect of sisters' performance of identity. Another interesting theme that has surfaced in the studies reviewed above is anger, though denied in the lives of sisters (Malone, 1994), but it is particularly relevant to this study in reviewing



how sisters interpret and negotiate their relationships in community toward constructing identity.

In addition some of the studies reveal that apart from the religious community, the Church's gendered discourse also influences the sisters' development and performance of identity (Brock, 2007; Reid, 2002). Equally, some of the studies reveal that cultural adaptation is an essential concept that impacts on the religious' performance of identity with reference to young Kenyan religious (Souci et al., 1998). But all these studies have been carried out in socio-cultural contexts different from Africa, and Nigeria in particular. Olisah (2006) focused her study on Nigerian indigenous religious congregations for women but chose to do document analysis and did not represent how the sisters understand and interpret their experiences of living religious lives. Therefore, there is dearth of research work conducted among Catholic religious sisters in Africa even in the face of the increasing number of new entrants into religious life, particularly in Nigeria where it has been stated that there is a vocation boom (Pope John Paul II, 1998; Lefevere, 2011). This lack of research among African religious sisters makes it pertinent for this research to be conducted in an endeavour to explore how Nigerian Catholic religious sisters understand, interpret and negotiate their sense of personhood based on interpersonal relationships of living religious life in the Church and wider Nigerian society. Leung and Wittberg's (2004) study reveals that being a sister is always located in a cultural-specific context, as in the case of the Chinese sisters. Therefore it is necessary to give African (Nigerian) sisters the opportunity to tell their own stories from their own perspective, indicating how the context in which they live impacts on the construction of identity. With this view in mind, in the next chapter, we look at the theoretical framework of Dialogical Self Theory, which emphasises that identity is constituted by a multiplicity of I-positions emerging from interpersonal relationships.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **DIALOGICAL SELF THEORY & IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION: IDENTITY AS MULTIPLICITY OF I-POSITIONS & CONTEXT-BOUND**

#### 4.0 Introduction

This study of identity construction of Catholic religious sisters proposes that the development of identity is an on-going process and a context-bound activity. With this purpose in mind, this research focuses on one of the principal concepts of Dialogical Self Theory, which reiterates that identity construction is a context-bound activity (Bhatia, 2002; Esgalhado, 2002; Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010; Sfar & Prusak, 2005) in which the self by “its extension to the environment” (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010, p.127) makes sense of “who I am” as well as “who I am becoming” in relation to others. Catholic religious sisters’ identity development is a socialisation process (as was expressed in the literature of theology and historical foundations of religious life) achieved through initial and long-life formation. This includes experiences of relationship with God, others in the religious community, in the Church and the wider Nigerian society.

In this chapter attention is drawn to how the individual involved in the process of intersubjective exchange constructs identity. That means reviewing the process of dialogical relations both within the self and with others. This will be achieved by exploring dialogical self’s concept of identity as a negotiation process, through which the self is able to voice the position it agrees or disagrees with. Thus a person’s identity is conveyed through I-positions which arise from both self-positioning and self, as positioned by others (Hermans, 2001, 2003, 2004; Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010; Hermans & Kempen, 1993). In addition culture and gender will be considered as resources through which the self’s ‘I’-positions emerge. In view of gendered discourse a feminist approach is incorporated in order to justify

the participants' stories which serve as aid to understanding and interpreting social practices from a woman's perspective and their impact on identity construction. The reason for engaging the feminist approach is based on the notion that Dialogical Self Theory has not paid in-depth attention to identity and gender issues, hence the need to adopt a feminist perspective. Finally, a critical evaluation of theory will be undertaken.

#### 4.1 Theoretical Origin of Dialogical Self Theory

Dialogical Self Theory is a contemporary psychological theory of self that brings two concepts together (self and dialogue) into a composite term, reflecting that dialogical relationships exist not only between individuals, groups and cultures, but also within the internal self of the individual person. The theory's central focus is that these dialogical relationships are essential resources through which a person understands 'who I am' and 'who I am becoming'. However, a proper understanding of dialogical self will take into consideration the works of two theorists: William James (1842–1910) and Mikhail Bakhtin (1895–1975), who significantly influenced the dialogical self concept.

The dialogical concept of the self as being in relationship with itself and others received great influence from James's (1890) thesis of I-Me relationship of the self. The concept of self as multiple within the field of psychology was first pronounced by James (Rosenberg, 1979). In this light, James's thesis presents the self as entertaining a dialogical relationship with itself in terms of self-knowledge and self-consciousness (Hermans, 2003). He conceptualised this by introducing a distinction between the 'I' and the 'Me' aspects of the self in which the 'I' is equated as the 'subject' of the self, and functions as the 'self-as-knower' in three different capacities: continuity, distinctness, and volition (Damon & Hart, 1982). The self-as-knower is characterised by a sense of personal identity, that is, a sense of sameness through time. In James's view the 'I' expresses the feeling of the self as different from others or having a

sense of individuality. A sense of personal volition refers to the agency of the self which is characterised by continuous appropriation and rejection through which the self-as-knower proves itself as an active processor of experience (Hermans, 2003).

The 'me' aspect of the self is described by James as the 'object' of that which is known and is composed of a variety of empirical elements of all that the self feels as belonging to oneself. For James, the self is able to achieve this feeling of possession through the gradual transition between 'me' and 'mine' (Hermans, 2003). He considered the empirical self to be made of three parts: the material self, social self and spiritual self. The 'me' aspect is composed of all that the person can call his or her own:

*not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account (James, 1890, p.291).*

This quotation suggests that people and things in the environment belong to the self, as far as they are felt as 'mine.' In James's view the 'me' aspect of the self extends the self to the environment (Rosenberg, 1979) which contradicts with the Cartesian notion of the self as an entity on its own.

In the Cartesian worldview the self is presented as a "fixed entity, essentially isolated and disembodied, an ego-logical thing, encapsulated in a machine of corruptible matter" (Johnson, 1987, p.15). This conception of the self as a fixed entity was projected by Descartes (1641/1884) who conceives the self as a 'thinking matter' expressed in his sentence "I think, therefore I am" (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p.3). Descartes' view has influenced the concept of the self as unitary, promoting the notion that the self is inside which has given rise to the varying cognitivist psychological theories of the self as self-contained (autonomous) (Sampson, 1985). If the self is self-contained and autonomous it follows that the environment has little or no bearing on self-knowledge or consciousness; therefore, the self is presented as

having no relationship with its context. Further, this idea that the self is a self-contained individualism has found congruence with the social science positivistic approach in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Cushman, 1990). The positivist paradigm draws from the Cartesian argument that the mind and the world are two separate entities to conceptualise the body as dissociated from the mind (Johnson, 1985). But these views are in contrast to Bakhtin's (1981) views of the self as multivoicedness resulting from interaction within a historical milieu (Hermans, 2001a, 2003) which has influenced the conception of the dialogical self as multi-voiced.

Bakhtin's (1981) multivoicedness of the self was created from the metaphoric notion of the polyphonic novel based on Dostoevsky's thesis (Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). Bakhtin in his analysis of the *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art* elaborated that the self is composed of a number of independent and mutually-opposing viewpoints embodied in an individual who can enter into dialogical relationship with each other (Hermans, 1999, 2001a, b, 2003). In his view, there is not one single author; rather there are several authors or thinkers, each having their own voice and telling their own story. Each character in this novel is considered as "ideologically authoritative and independent" (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p.40). That means each character is perceived as the author of his or her own legitimate ideological position and is thus capable of disagreeing with the author (creator), or even rebelling against him or her. Out of these voices arises the notion of multiplicity, which is associated with discontinuity (Hermans, 2006). The discontinuity that arises from multiplicity is managed through dialogue by the individual. On this premise, the self is conceptualised as having the intrinsic features of a polyphonic novel in which the self is in constant communication with itself and others. This conception widens the scope of understanding the self as an open-end endeavour that is not finished but rather is perceived as on-going.

In this regard the theory draws insight from Mikhail Bakhtin's (1981) view of the self as dialogical in nature, which is constituted by many voices within the environment. Building on these two influences the dialogical self has been conceptualised as a multiplicity of voices (I-positions) (Hermans, 1999, 2001a, 2003; Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010; Hermans & Kempen, 1993). These voices are described as having the capability to express the positions they agree or disagree with (Hermans & Kempen, 1993). In this way the construction of self-identity is presented as a negotiation process in which the self is constantly involved in the process of appropriation or conciliation of contradictions, differences, and opposition in order to construct a coherent sense of self leading to the achievement of unity-in-multiplicity. According to Hermans (2008) the self is able to construct identity by either moving toward, away from or in opposite directions. In this way the self is constantly involved in a process of positioning and re-positioning. As a consequence, the dialogical self presented as a multiplicity of voices organises its sense of personhood through intersubjective exchange within the self and with others.

Against this background this research proposes that dialogical self theory provides an appropriate framework for understanding how Catholic religious sisters are constructing identity within the context of intersubjective exchange in their religious communities, the Church and wider Nigerian society. It provides the insight into how the sisters' I-positions emerge; reflecting the different points of views and how the voices and/or positioning of others influence these views. Furthermore, as a self-organising theory, it offers great insight into how the participants negotiate the multiple I-positions that emerge as a result of self-positioning and self as positioned by others. In this light, the participants' self-identity is conceptualised as 'multi-voiced' in line with the self as a polyphonic novel (Bakhtin, 1973, 1981).

#### 4.2 The Self: Dialogical Relationships and Identity Construction

One of the fundamental concepts of Dialogical Self Theory is that self-identity is a product of social interaction. It conceives the self as emerging from dialogical relationships which are both personal, as well as societal. The self is in relationship with itself and a clear understanding of how the self relates to itself starts with understanding “the self as a multiplicity of parts (voices, characters, positions) that have the potential of entertaining dialogical relationships” with each other (Hermans, 2004, p.13). According to Hermans the multiple parts of the self do not arise from within the self because the self is not just located ‘within the skin’ or ‘deep down inside’; rather the self is a product of different interactions. The different parts of the self emerge as a result of social interaction and they are involved in communicative interchange within the self and between the self and others. Out of these interactions arise the multiple positions and/or voices that are inherent in the self. On the one hand, there are multiple positions from which society defines the individual including public features such as characteristics of a group or the institutions to which the person belongs (Hermans, 2001a, b). But on the other hand the self, due to its ability to engage in continuous dialogue, integrates and negotiates the various positions through agreement, disagreement, opposition, or submission (Hermans, 2004; Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010; Hermans & Kempen, 1993). This gives rise to a theoretical conception of self-positioning and self as positioned by others or society. Along this line the self is not determined by societal positioning within a system of intersubjective exchange (relationships) but rather could be influenced by it, because the self as author of its own story has the capacity to ideologically position itself (Bakhtin, 1981).

Basically, the dialogical self is grounded on the premise that the social interactions taking place in the broader society in which the self participates are also taking place within the

individual self. This conception that the self is in dialogue with itself is in accordance with James's (1890) concept of the self, as already discussed above based on the 'I-Me relationship'. This construction of the self as in relationship with itself was projected in the *I-Thou* dialogical philosophy of Buber (1970) and affirmed by Bakhtin's (1973, 1981) postulation that the core of the self is based on its relatedness to others, self and the world. Thus the self has been described as a 'society of mind' (Hermans, 2002; Minsky, 1985). That means the dialogical interactions within the self reflect the broader society in which the self participates. Hence, the self's internal dialogical interaction reflects similar interactions that take place within wider society such as agreement, criticism, and consultation.

#### *Self-agreement*

Self-agreement involves the process of judging and rewarding one's actions (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). It acts as a source of internal social control, which creates social order in the self. It takes different forms including self-promise, self-persuasion and self-bargaining (Kenen, 1984).

#### *Self-criticism*

This is the act of evaluating one's performance against self-set standards. It is part of everyday life and is often expressed in sentences like "too bad", "stupid" (Hermans & Hermans-konokpa, 2010, p.123). It acts as a form of self-correction and evaluation. The self involved in identity construction uses self-criticism to critically examine the multiple positions within self and between self and others, and from there make decisions for a possible move.



### *Self-consultation*

Self-consultation occurs when people are in need of high-quality answers that give direction to future behaviour. It includes setting up an action plan by an individual toward coping with a particular problem. Hermans and Hermans-Konokpa (2010) propose that the efficacy of self-consultation depends on the problem presented. It can also be facilitated by talking to significant others such as friends, teachers, colleagues, parents, mentors etc.

In support of the idea that the self is dialogical, Bertau (2004) argues that from the beginning, human beings are enveloped in “dialogicity and speech” through which a sense of personhood is constructed and reconstructed (p.29). She argues that from early childhood, infants are mutually involved with their caregivers even from the first moment of life in determining the rhythms of sleeping and waking up. In this way she presents infants as partners who build the exchange act of relatedness and dialogue with their caregivers. Stern (1983) argues that in early infant development the mother-child relationship is guided by mutual gazing, vocalisation which he describes as ‘state sharing.’ Also Kaye (1977) and Clarke-Stewart, Perlmutter, Friedman (1988) posit that there is a dialogical relationship involved in suck-response pattern between the mother and the infant. They state that from birth, babies suck in regular patterns of bursts and mothers are sensitive to this pattern and act in a corresponding manner. When the baby sucks, the mother is quiet; when baby pauses, the mother touches it and talks to it. In this way they are involved in *pseudo-dialogue* (Clarke-Stewart et al., 1988). Therefore the notion of dialogue is an irreversible process in which the self is constantly involved from the onset of life.

#### 4.3 The Self: ‘I’-Positions/Voices and Multiplicity

The dialogical self has been conceptualised as the dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous ‘I’-positions (Hermans, Kempen, & Van Loon, 1992) based on the assumption

that individuals are made up of many voices/characters (Hermans, 2004). These voices/characters arise from the dynamics of mutual or opposing internal and external dialogical relationships (Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Holquist, 1990; Leiman, 2002; Morris, 1994; Valsiner, 2000; Wertsch, 1991). In other words, the individual's voice is populated by the voices of others within the socio-cultural environment including culture. Social constructionists also share the idea that the self is multiple, although they approach it differently using discursive practices (Edward & Potter, 1992; Harrè, 2002; Shotter & Gergen, 1994). In addition, the idea that the self is multiple is shared with others like Markus and Wurf (1987) who conceive the self as multi-faceted.

This concept that the self is a multiplicity of 'I'-positions has its backdrop on James's (1890) hypothesis of 'I-Me' or 'I-Mine' constituent of the self, as discussed above. In James's view the several parts of the self are unified by the functions of the 'I', from which the self derives its sense of continuity and identity across time. In the same way Bakhtin's (1973, 1981) notion of the self as having many characters represented by different and opposing voices within a dialogical space, also contributes to the idea of the self as a multiplicity of 'I'-positions. Bakhtin's conceptions of multiple characters that make up the self project more of discontinuity than continuity. His central premise is based on the notion of agreement and disagreement, which he describes as question and answer through which the self negotiates and manages differences, conflicts, contradictions and oppositions (Hermans, 2006).

At the interface of James's and Bakhtin's concept of the self as multiple, Hermans (2002) defines the dialogical self as "a dynamic multiplicity of I-positions in the landscape of the mind, intertwined as this mind is with the minds of other people" (p.147). According to this definition the self is populated by a multiplicity of voices which emerge from internal and external dialogue. These voices are laden with differences, oppositions, and contradictions,

and all these provide the self with its sense of multiplicity. These voices/positions are described in terms of a polyphony of voices, in which some voices are central, consonant, dissonant and peripheral (Hermans, 2001a, b). As a result some voices/positions may dominate others within any system of interpersonal relationship. This idea of multiplicity provides the self with a sense of discontinuity as opposed to the unifying actions of the 'I', which offer a sense of continuity across time. But Hermans (2001a) argues that discontinuity offers a healthy functioning self the opportunity to take risks and embrace new chances. In this way the dialogical self in the process of identity construction is constantly negotiating positions/voices through appropriation, cancellation and submission toward achieving unity in the face of multiplicity.

In this negotiation process the self moves toward, away or against voices/positions (Hermans, 2006, 2008). That means the self is involved in the process of positioning and re-positioning through which it is able to achieve the attainment of unity-in-multiplicity (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). Within the concept of Dialogical Self Theory the verb positioning is used in two ways: both as an active and a passive verb. It is active when the individual takes up the personal agency in positioning itself to particular position(s). In this sense it is described as self-positioning. It is passive when the individual is positioned by others including social positioning of the group to which the individual belongs. In this line Hermans and Salgado (2010) describe the self as '*unitas multiplex*' in the sense that unity and multiplicity do not exclude each other but rather complement each other as parts of the 'composition' which the self is. Further understanding of how the 'I' functions is gained by the detailed explanation offered by Hermans *et al.* (1992):

*The I has the possibility to move, as in a space, from one position to the other in accordance with changes in situation and time. The I fluctuates among different and even opposed positions. The I has the capacity to*

*imaginatively endow each position with a voice so that dialogical relations between positions can be established. The voices function like interacting characters in a story. Once a character is set in motion in a story, the character takes on life of its own and thus assumes a certain narrative necessity. Each character has a story to tell about experiences from its own stance. As different voices these characters exchange information about their respective Me(s) and their worlds, resulting in a complex, narratively structured self (p. 28–29).*

The basic features of the ‘I’ as presented in this description portray it as multi-voiced because it includes the voices of others within the socio-historical context in which the self is located. In this way the self’s sense of identity is extended to the environment *vis-à-vis* people, culture and the historical perspective. Thus the multiplicity of voices/positions arises from internal and external dialogues which are spatially and temporally distributed but the self as autonomous (self-agency) has the ability to appropriate or reject and oppose positions/voices. This is parallel to Erikson’s (1963) stage of identity development whereby young adults cannot change what actually happened in their childhood years but rather are able to change the meaning of what happened and also develop an image of what may happen in the future (McAdams, 2001). The implications are that the ‘I’ fluctuates across space and time depending on the situations and persons it encounters (Hermans, 2001, 2003). Thus self-identity is spatial and temporarily structured.

#### 4.4 Spatial and Temporary Nature of the Self

The self is made up of ‘I’-positions that are spatially and temporally organised. The idea that the ‘I’-positions are considered as having the possibility to move in space, from one position to the other in accordance with changes in situation and time, implies that the self is not only ‘here’ but also ‘there’ (Hermans, 2001a), and between here and there dialogical relations may emerge. In other words, the self is not fixed to a particular position across time. The scope of

dialogical relations is likely to occur within the self as well as with others (either internalised or externalised). Hermans and Hermans-Konokpa (2010) explain that:

*... when a person positions herself “somewhere,” there are always, explicitly or implicitly, other positions involved that are located in the outer space around us or in the inner metaphorical space of the self (p. 8).*

That means there are spaces within (which is described as metaphorical) and outside the self through which the ‘I’-positions shift around. In this light the self has been described as a ‘mind-space’ that entertains dialogical relationships (Jaynes, 1976; Lindegger & Alberts, 2011). The ‘I’ that fluctuates in the process of a narrative construction of identity has the ability to position itself “as agreeing or disagreeing, as loving or hating, or being close or opposed to another or to myself” (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010, p.8).

In this argument the dialogical self differs in two important ways from the Cartesian *cogito* particularly in its dualism about self and soul (Hermans, 2001). Considering the Cartesian conception of the phrase ‘I think and therefore I am’ this assumes that there is one ‘I’ responsible for the steps in reasoning. Secondly, the Cartesian ‘I think’ is conceived of as a disembodied mental process essentially different from the body and its spatial extensions (Hermans, 2001a, b, 2003). Thus, in opposition to the Cartesian *cogito*, the dialogical self goes beyond individualism to permit one and the same person to occupy a decentralised ‘manyness of ‘I’-positions’ which shift from one position to another (Hermans, 2001a).

Theoretically the ‘I’-positions stem from the premise that “functional multi-voicedness” is achieved by allowing a healthy play of voices within one’s self, rather than seeking to impose monologism or a restricted number of dominating voices (Adams, 2010). As a consequence, the dialogical self operates by encouraging conflicting voices to be spoken and listened to, and to be brought into open dialogue with each other (Raggatt, 2006). For this reason Hermans (1999) posits that “self-discrepancies and self-contradictions between voices are

seen as intrinsic to a healthy functioning of the self and as contributing to its innovation” (p.128). Märtsin (2010) in analysing an interview narrative focused on “Identity-dialogues” among young Estonians in the context of contemporary Britain discovered that the interviewee, Vera, used a combination of voices from the past and present to construct identity. The particular voice of the past that Vera brought into the present was the voice of her mother which contrasted with her present socio-cultural context. Vera mother’s voice represents the Estonian tradition that questions partying as not acceptable. But in her narrative Vera feels comfortable partying with friends, which is congruent with her contemporary context of Britain. Thus she shifts positions around when talking about the contradiction she experiences. In the interview data, she argues that her friends position her as changed because of her freedom to go to parties as opposed to her Estonian traditional self. Märtsin interpreted this result as “rupture” of experience from which some positions are sidelined (pushed to the background) in order to bring other positions forward. This confirms the idea that the ‘I’ is multiple and can move between different positions across time/space and even opposing positions. Between the two cultural spaces of Estonian and British culture her ‘I’-position has shifted. The implication is that across time and space her ‘I’-position fluctuates. This has great significance for this study because it provides explanations that will aid our understanding of how the participants’ ‘I’-positions shift across time/space in relation to persons and situations.

#### 4.5 ‘I’-Positions as Extended to the Environment

As has already been discussed, the ‘I’ functions not only to position the self ‘here’ but also ‘there’ (Hermans, 2001). As a result the self is not tied to a particular position or combination of positions but rather it is extended to the environment (James, 1890). The dialogical self permits a gradual transition between ‘Me’ (as social aspect of the self) and ‘Mine’ (positions

as owned) (James, 1890) as well as between 'I' and 'You' (Hermans, 2001a, b). In this case the 'I' coordinates the workings of 'Me' and 'Mine' that relates the self to the external world. In Bakhtin's (1973) view, the different 'I'-positions are not separated since for him there is "this persistent urge to see all things as being coexistent and to perceive and depict all things side by side and simultaneously, as if in space and time ..." (p.23). This implies that the dialogical relationship as part of an extended self can develop within the individual person (e.g., 'I'-as an optimist disagreeing with myself as a pessimist), as well as between this person and another person (e.g., 'I'-as novice mistress answering the questions of my novice) or even between other people (e.g., 'I'-as witnessing a concert from the school drama club) (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa 2010). The emphasis is that all these relationships are relationships in a "multi-voiced, decentralized self who is intensely intertwined with the so-called "external' reality" (Hermans, 2001a, p.55). The idea that the other is not really outside the self is one of the basic concepts of dialogical self:

*The extended I is a contextualized I that is not alone but always together with, and even extended to, something or somebody else: the hero of a book, a friend with whom you identify ... or a person you met only briefly but felt as if you had known him or her for a long time. For a highly developed person, such as the Dalai Lama, Buddha or Christ, even an enemy can be experienced as an accepted and valued aspect of the extending I, although the distinction between self and other and between I and You is not removed (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, p.143).*

From this submission, the 'I' is structured by experiences with others. It does not make sense of itself in isolation even though it has its own agentic capacity to appropriate or reject positions as will be seen in the following sub-session. This is outstandingly important to this study as the participants' interview data may portray narrative voices identifying significant others in relation with whom they agree or disagree as they construct identity.

#### 4.6 'I'-Positions as Agents of the Self

The agency of the self lies primarily in the ability of a shifting 'I' to voice the perspectives it moves between: "the 'I' ... has the capacity imaginatively to endow each position with a voice so that dialogical relations between positions can be established" (Hermans *et al.*, 1992). In James's (1890) postulation, the 'I' as a stream of consciousness which appropriates or rejects positions has been a source of dialogical self theoretical inspiration. In James's speculation, the 'I' is seen as establishing unity and continuity while at the same time preserving its multiplicity. It is the 'I' that synchronises multiplicity of positions into a sense of unity. The theoretical implication is that it is the same 'I' (located in time and space) that is confronted with a variety of new positions and possible positions, and in response appropriates or rejects positions. Those positions that are appropriated, are experienced as 'mine' and as "belonging to myself" (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010, p.139). As a consequence, they add to the unity and continuity in the self. Based on the temporal perspective, the appropriated parts contribute to constancy of the self over time while existing positions receive an imprint as 'me' or 'mine.' New positions that are appropriated receive the same imprint (Barresi, 2002) and add to unity and continuity in the self despite its apparent differences (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010).

For example, Hermans and Hermans-Jansen (1995) in discussing the narrative dream of a 50-year-old man, Paul, who was interested in carrying out a self-investigation, commented that Paul has multiple I-positions which are conflicting. They stated that Paul's conflicting I-position was based on both the protagonist and antagonist perspective, which reflected in his dream, in which he saw himself acting as a priest who was confronted with a dangerous opponent who had the double identity of priest and murderer. Upon translating this dream into his life experiences Paul was puzzled to discover that the double identity of priest and



murderer was in relation to his aggression towards his partner – the older woman in his life and in the dream, whom he wanted to murder. Initially Paul, through agentic functioning of the ‘I’ appropriated the position of the priest to himself while rejecting the position of the murderer. This makes it important to explore the functioning of the ‘I’ in rejecting or disowning positions.

The ‘I’ involved in the process of positioning rejects some positions through “(dis)-identification” (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010, p.142). The process of ‘(dis)-identification’ occur by disowning some ‘I’-positions as ‘not me’ or ‘not belonging to me.’ The ‘I’-positions that are disowned are often listed as having devaluing or negative attributes as was evident in the case of Paul discussed above (Hermans, 2001b; Schwartz, 1995). The implication is that the positive positions become more dominant in the self (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). All the same, Gregg (1991) argues that even the disowned positions form part of the self’s ‘I’-positions. He describes them as belonging to the ambiguous border-zone between self and non-self which can be characterised as “identity-in-difference” (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010, p.142). These ‘I’-positions are paradoxical in nature. In other words these positions are expressed as not me yet they constitute part of the self. To a large extent this can occur as a result of self-positioning by others or the awareness of positions within the self that seem devaluing, as in the case of being aware that “I’m sometimes jealous, but at the same time I do not recognize jealousy as ‘belonging to me’” (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010).

The concern has been how the individual, conflicted between owned and disowned positions, maintains its ethical subjectivity (Butler, 2005; Märtsin, 2010). What strategies are employed by the ‘I’ to manage the conflicts? This concern for understanding how the ‘I’ contributes to

the agency of the self has been shared by Hermans and Hermans-Konokpa (2010) who suggest that:

*A theory is needed that is able to explain the mechanisms by which individuals, as agentic subjects, do or do not identify with positions to which they are summoned through dialogical or discursive relationships (p.49).*

In response to such concern they observed that the 'I' in its unifying function adopts some positioning techniques which enable it to manage difference, multiplicity, contradiction and discontinuity.

#### 4.7 The I's Positioning Techniques

There are different strategies through which the 'I' manages and negotiates the diversity of positions that confront it in the face of contradictions, oppositions, discontinuity and difference. Three of these strategies as presented by Hermans and Hermans-Konokpa (2010) have great significance for this study, and will therefore be discussed: meta-positions, coalition of positions and third positioning.

##### *Meta-positions*

Meta-positions are described as the process through which the 'I' is able to perform acts of self-reflection (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010; Leiman & Stiles, 2001). It acts as a coordinating position that harmonises all the other positions. In essence a well-developed meta-position is described as an observer position (Leiman & Stiles, 2001) or meta-cognitive activity (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). It enables individuals to separate themselves from the on-going stream of experiences in order to place themselves as evaluator (authors or actors).

A meta-position could be taken alone or together with others like talking to a friend or colleague. It manifests itself in constructing “bridges of meaning” which a person employs to recourse their line of action (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010, p.9). By implication meta-position helps people to integrate positions born out of experiences into organising a coherent sense of self. In this way the individual will be able to execute a well thought out plan. Hermans and Hermans-Jansen (1995) in using “personal position repertoire” (PPR) method (Hermans, 2001b) which is a combination of a qualitative and quantitative procedure, described how they helped a client, Richard take up a meta-position. Richard contacted the psychotherapist after many years of general dissatisfaction with his life. He was assisted to investigate the psychological background of his problem. This background examination is a good example of developing a meta-position from which other positions including their mutual relationships and specific organisation were explored. By the end of therapy three significant positions within Richard were integrated into a resource which helped him to negotiate other positions. The therapists were involved in a cooperative enterprise with Richard as part of his external meta-position.

### *Coalition of positions*

The self in attempting to establish unity and continuity may tend to combine two or more positions. The assumption is that positions do not work in splendid isolation but can cooperate with each other, much like the way people cooperate in society at large. Hermans and Hermans-Konokpa (2010) describe this concept as “conglomerations” of positions that cooperate and support each other (p.9). In a narrative the ‘I’-positions can be constructed in such a way that two or more positions support each other, forming a new sub-system in the self (Hermans, 2003). Coalition of positions can take place within the self or between self and others including significant others such as parents, teachers, colleagues, and friends etc. In

one sense coalition can happen between opposing positions or positions that have similar purposes and orientations. Some positions in forming coalition with each other may tend to dominate other positions or voices in the self (Hermans and Hermans-Jansen, 2004; Honos-Webb *et al.*1999).

### *Third-positioning*

The act of reconciling conflict between two positions within the self is known as third-positioning. A well-established third-position enables the self to manage unity-in-multiplicity. In this case the self has the potential of unifying two original conflicted positions by creating a third-position without denying or removing their differences (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). For instance Branco *et al.*, (2008) using the case study of a 25-year-old Brazilian woman, Rosanne, describe how the creation of a third-position was employed to resolve the conflict between 'I'-positions of Catholic daughter versus the lesbian woman. They reported that Rosanne in an interview narrative was conflicted between the 'I'-positions of being a Catholic and lesbian. Her conflict was based on the contradictions between the two opposing worlds: the Catholic Church community and the gay community. But Rosanne in her narrative constructed arguments to justify herself as a good Catholic person, who is committed to the wellbeing of others according to values of Christianity.

In this way she argues that her participation among the lesbian community has not stopped her from going to Church. But rather as a Christian woman she helps forsaken and lost people, including many gays and lesbians, to find meaning in life. Based on the latter argument she presents herself as a missionary within the gay community. By considering gays and lesbians as lost people to be rescued she constructed a good reason to affirm her presence in the gay community. As a result the new position of a missionary reconciles the

conflict between being Catholic and lesbian. In this way the creation of a new position has helped her manage the conflicting positions.

#### 4.8 The-Other-in-the-Self and Identity: Collectivity of Voices/Positions

Theoretically, a truly dialogical self exists on the assumption that “the self is not an intrapsychic but a relational phenomenon” (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p.xxi), as a result “the other person is not purely outside, but simultaneously part of the self and constantly constitutive of it” (Hermans & Salgado, 2010, p.184). This concept of the-other-in-the-self is supported by many theorists who argue that the self is extended to the environment (Burr, 2006; Bakhtin, 1973; Gergen, 1997, 2001a; James 1890; Mead 1930; Shotter, 1995b). A prolific researcher of the orbitofrontal cortex, Schore (1994, 2001) confirms that the other is not simply “outside the brain”, but represented as part of a developing brain. He argues that the complex functional brain systems are formed in the process of social contact between child and caregivers. He maintained that the early social environment, mediated by the primary caregiver, directly influences the evolution of structures in the brain that are responsible for the socio-emotional development of the child.

Based on the idea of the existence of the-other-in-the-self, dialogical self theory proposes that the individual’s sense of identity is populated by the collective voices of others within the social environment. The other’s voice permeates the individual’s voice and occupies positions which sometimes agree or disagree with, and even oppose or contradict, each other (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). In this way the individual’s development and performance of identity arise from dialogue within the internal and external domain of the self. Thus the two are intensely intertwined and cannot be separated, as they form part of the resources through which individuals understand and construct ‘who they are’ (Hermans, 2001a, 2003; Raggatt, 2006; Valsiner, 2000). In this light Gergen (1999) argues that

“... when I perform I am carrying a history of relationships, manifesting them, expressing them. They inhabit my every motion” (p.133). The implication is that self-knowledge and understanding of ‘who I am’ comprises how others view me (alter ego) (Barresi, 2002; Burkitt, 2010). As long as the self is in dialogue with others, it is expected that across time these others’ voices become increasingly reflexive as the self begins to appropriate “new attachments, new stories, and new voices” to its description of the self (Raggatt, 2006, p.22). In this light contemporary researchers argue that one of the ways to study self and identity is to ask how groups behave within individuals (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher & Wetherell, 1987).

This idea of the-other-in-the-self also extends to communication between self and collective voices of the group, institution or nation. That is to say that an individual does not only communicate with others but also communicates with the collective voices within his/her social milieu. For Bakhtin (1973) the act of dialogue involves interaction with the collective voices which he describes as engagement with ‘social language’. He argues that individuals’ utterances are populated by the discourses available within the social environment. Thus no one invents his/her own language of construction but takes up already existing discourses in which he/she is located. In this way the individual’s utterance reflects language of age groups, religion, profession etc (Hermans, 2001). Collective voices shape what individual voices may say although the speaker may not be aware of this influence. When this happens Bakhtin describes the person’s act of speech as ‘ventriloquation’, which accounts for how one voice speaks through another voice or voice type (Hermans, 2001, 2003). In other words, the individual develops and performs identity through participation in community (Burkitt, 2008; Menkiti, 1984; Hekman, 2000).

Social languages not only shape what individual voices may say but also how they construct meaning out of it. For Hermans and Kempen (1993) collective voices convey rules, conventions, attitudes, and established views of the world inherent in a particular social group. Therefore in the process of identity construction an individual may use the collective voice of the community to communicate personal views or shared views consciously or unconsciously. On the one hand the use of social language (discourses) facilitates the individual's act of sense by providing a multiplicity of resources from which the individual makes the choice of what to use. In this way the notion of the self as a multiplicity of I-positions is multi-voiced (Hermans, 2001a, 2003; Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010; Hermans & Kempen, 1993). But on the other hand the use of social language may constrain the way an individual constructs meaning and makes sense of the world in which he/she lives. In this sense collectivity of voices opens the space for conflict, opposition, and disagreement which portrays the self as a multiplicity of positions, though it may result in some voices being more dominant than others.

#### 4.9 The Self: Imagination and Identity

The dialogical self has been described as an "... imaginal landscape ..." of many voices from which dialogical or conversational relationships exist in relation to each other (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p.58). Drawing from the work of Watkins (1986, 1992) they argue that the individual's 'I'-positions are influenced not only by actual interaction with the other but also by imaginal dialogue with significant others. Watkins (1992) argues that within the individual there are "imaginal dialogues" leading to "conservation between a self and an imaginal other(s), between aspects of the self such as "me" and "I", between imaginal others with a self as audience to the imaginal scene" (p.2). In this light the individual communicates with

not only the actual other on a face-to-face basis but also interacts and communicates with the imaginal other who is not physically present.

Herman and Kempen (1993) describe imagination as a constructive activity that not only uses realistic elements but combines or transforms them so that new meaningful structures are produced. In other words, human imagination uses experiences derived from actual interaction to construct meaning about themselves and the world. The self's 'I'-positions are populated by imaginal figures' voices/positions. For example, one can interact with the voice of her/his mother even when the mother is absent or the picture of a loved one (Watkins, 1992). The mother's voice used in an imaginal landscape influences thoughts and actions. Hermans (2001b) argues that the "power of imagination" enables the self to "act as if he or she were the other" (p.250). The self using imagination is able to construe another person or be in a position he/she can occupy and in a position that creates an alternative perspective for him- or herself. This constructed perspective may or may not be congruent with the perspective of the actual other; thus it can be described as purely imaginary (Hermans, 2001).

These significant others with whom individuals enter into conversation include mother, father, siblings, friends, teachers, figures in a movie or dream, gods and critics etc (Hermans, Rijks & Kempen, 1993). This is in line with McAdams' (1985b) concept of 'imagoes' where the self's positioning by others is one of the resources with which individuals construct and perform identity. The idea is that across time/space a person may use the others' voice as self-reflexive such as 'you are a good person' becomes 'I am a good person' including 'you are a bad person' becomes 'I am a bad person'. Within this context the person's imagination is partly structured by social interaction which in turn influences the self's 'I'-positions.

Caughey (1984) identified three groups of people with whom a person can develop an imaginable relationship. Some of these persons are media figures with whom the individual



never had face-to-face contact, but rather encountered them in imaginal interactions; imaginal replicas of parents, friends, family members, or lovers who are treated as if they were really present; and other imaginal figures produced in dreams and fantasies. This research adds God as a fourth group emerging from a religious encounter (belief system). Hermans and Gieser (2012) argue that people with a religious or spiritual background have daily contact with an image of divinity through which they perform identity. For example the participants in Gillivan's (1994) study describe their vocation as a call from God which was born out of imaginary interaction. According to Caughey (1984) and Watkins (1986, 1999) these relationships take place in an imaginal social world. Significantly, the concept of using imagination is of great benefit to this study because contextual relationships are laden with imagination which may influence the individual's sense of personhood.

#### 4.10 The Self: Power Relations and Dominance

The notion of intersubjective exchange and dominance is a common feature of the self that is described as dialogical and possessing a multiplicity of 'I'-positions. The self's multiplicity of 'I'-positions is not organised by her/himself alone but also by others in the social environment (Hermans & Kempen, 1993). In this intersubjective exchange dominance is a common feature and some voices/positions may subordinate others. In every dialogical relationship there is an existence of symmetry and asymmetry positions which portray power relations and dominance (Hermans, 2001a, b, 2003; Linell, 1990). Within symmetry relationships individuals are relatively free to ask questions to/of each other at any time. This kind of relationship is described as mutual (Hermans, 2001a, b, 2003; Hermans & Kempen, 1993). In other words the dialogical relationship is co-constructed. But in situations where differences in power are strongly evident, one party tends to dominate the others. In such situations individuals located within the dialogical relationship are not free to ask questions

but are rather compelled to answer questions posed by the dominating party. This kind of relationship is not only described as asymmetry and uneven but also hegemonic (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010).

Both kinds of relationship could occur within the internal relationship of the self with itself as well as between the self and others. Hermans (2001, 2003) and Sampson (1993) posit that the relationship in which one party is not allowed to play an active role is governed by polar opposites. Within dialogical self theory the term polar opposite refers to the dichotomy between groups or individuals which Hermans (1996) says:

*... represents a socially and institutionally established position that is devaluing, suppressing, even splitting off the opposite position. This structure reflects an asymmetrical dialogical relationship not only among positions between different people but also among positions within the individual self (p.46).*

Hermans' assertion portrays how individuals are subjected to mutually dependent but unequal relationships. The binary division presents negative and positive views of the different parties such as male vs. female, young vs. old, superior vs. inferior etc (Hermans, 2001a; Sampson, 1993). In such dichotomies, the master term (e.g., the male) is defined as having particular features which the opposite term (e.g., female) lacks. As a result one party is constantly tied to either a negative or a positive position. In this kind of relationship respect for the alterity of the other, which Hermans and Hermans-Konokpa (2010) describe as the moral aspect of dialogue, is neglected. This respect for the alterity of the other involves acknowledging the other's worth.

Dominance and power relations serve as a discursive practice which put constraints on the process of identity construction because the party that is described with negative attributes continues to construct identity in a field of tension. Burr (2006) describes it as a social

positioning in which institutions govern and police people's behaviour. In this perspective social power and dominance which is considered as an intrinsic feature of a dialogical self becomes:

*... problematic when institutional and societal structures and ideologies prevent individuals and groups from expressing their voices from their own particular points of view and on the basis of their own specific sources of experience (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010, p.65).*

Essentially this is of great interest to this study because it touches on how the self located in the context of relationship is affected by intersubjective exchange. What are the possible consequences and how does the self located in such position respond? Hermans and Kempen (1993) say that individuals may take the strategic move of resistance or the conventional move of being conformist. For example, in the empirical literature review, Brock's (2007, 2010) study reported that many Catholic nuns are resisting the Catholic Church's definition of them as self-sacrificing. Malone's (1991a) study reported that the young sisters who participated in her study subjugate their voice of anger in order to avoid being described by the authority of their congregation as rebellious. Thus they become submissive to what the authority figures say.

Generally the self conceptualised as dialogical indicates that in every dialogical relationship there are differences in positions/voices which are negotiated through agreement and disagreement. But power relations make some 'I'-positions more dominant and serve to restrict "... the multiplicity of possible positions" (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p.73) both within the internal and external domain of the self. As a result power relations which exhibit themselves within social relationships in the self or in relationships with the others impact on the individual's process of identity construction. The concept of power relations and dominance will provide useful insight into how Catholic religious sisters in Nigeria are

constructing identity within the lived context of intersubjective exchange and power relations embedded in relationships.

#### 4.11 Culture, Self and Identity

The study of dialogical self insists that culture plays a significant role in identity development (Hermans, 2001; Josephs, 2002). In this view, Hermans and Hermans-Konokpa (2010) argue that “selves and identities are culture-inclusive” (p.111). That is to say, culture is an interactional space. It is a context in which a person locates him/herself sharing with others a common worldview, although there are opinions suggesting that culture and identities are situation-bound (Ewing, 1990; van Meijl, 2008). That means the individual’s culture I-positions are structured by the context of the relationship but to understand these culture I-positions requires an in-depth examination of the philosophies, language and worldviews of the culture in which the subject studied is located. Since the participants studied in this research are African (Nigerian) religious sisters in the Catholic Church in Nigeria, there is need to briefly discuss some of the basic African worldviews with specific reference to interpersonal relationships. This will provide the opportunity to see how Africans understand themselves and relate to the world, which constitutes part of their I-positions.

##### *Traditional African Worldview as Culture I-Position*

It will be difficult to argue that Africa as a continent has a unified worldview because variations abound. Because cultures are conceived as moving and mixing (Bhatia, 2002), it would have been most appropriate to observe each worldview in a cultural-specific perspective (Wiredu, 1991, 1992). That notwithstanding, there is an approach to reality that is shared by Africans (Menkiti, 1984; Mkhize, 2003). Some of the central tenets are beliefs about God, the universe, mode of relationships among people, notion of causality, time etc (Myers, 1988). As the majority of these views have been historically associated with large

parts of Africa they can be considered as a typical African's worldview. With this in mind discussion will focus on the basic relational concept of persons within the African worldview.

### *The African Communal View of Personhood as Culture I-Position*

The traditional African person on the basis of interpersonal relationships has been described as communitarian (Famakinwa, 2010; Masolo, 2009; Menkiti, 1984). In this sense, persons in African cultures are defined in terms of interconnectedness with the environment. This has been summed up in Mbiti's (1991) statement: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am" (p.106). One obvious conclusion that can be drawn from Mbiti's statement is that, as far as Africans are concerned, the reality of the communal world takes precedence over the reality of the individual's life, histories and values. That means an individual's interest does not transcend over the community's interest. In other words, there is interdependence between the individual and the community from which the community is preserved and enriched by the qualities of the individual and in turn the individual is enriched by the collective giftedness of the community (Ogbonnaya, 1994). It acts an eco-web system.

The idea of community in Africa includes the recognition of all those in the environment with whom the individual is interconnected and shares a mutual and moral obligation to be responsible for each other (Mkhize, 2003). Community in Africa extends to all in the environment, including plants, trees and animals. Community does not mean a mere collection of people but rather refers to association with others which is a source of empowerment (Menkiti, 1984). This has resulted in the tendency among Africans to include a number of people as members of one's family irrespective of actual genetic relationship (Uzukwu, 2006). On this basis one's relations are not limited to members of one's nuclear family; that means, others form part of voices/positions through which a sense of self is constructed and reconstructed.

#### 4.12 Cultural Influence on Identity Construction

Literature on the dialogical self and cultural psychology persistently insists that people's sense of identity is partly intertwined with collective cultural values and norms (Bakhtin, 1981; Raggatt, 2006) which play themselves in a collectivity of voice and position. Lo *et al.*, (2011) in their study reported that their participants' self-presentation reflects the different cultural orientations in which they were located. This finding is in line with the opinion of Hermans and Hermans-Konokpa (2010), which state that culture forms part of "the positioned nature of self" from which emerge "value systems that largely determine our lives from young age onwards" (p.144). For example, Leung and Wittberg's (2004) study as was presented in Chapter 3 indicated that Chinese Catholic sisters perform identity within the culture-specific context of China's patriarchal system which positions them as being submissive to bishops/priests. This suggests that culture provides the context (site) through which identities are constructed and which Hermans (2001) describes "self as culture-inclusive and culture as self-inclusive", therefore, the two are integrated (p.243).

However, the self in experiencing and expressing cultural orientations may encounter dominance relationships which constrain the space for cultural positions/voices (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). Dominance relegates some cultural voices/positions to the background and it is speculated that such "sharpen ... the differences between ... self and other, with one's own group and self defined as superior and the other group and self defined as inferior" (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010, p.65). The consequence is that the self's 'I'-positions are restricted or may even be denied resulting in experiences of constructing identity in a field of tension as reflected in social power and dominance. The autobiography of Edward Said (1999) can serve as an example of the impact of cultural dominance on a person's sense of identity. Bhatia (2002) in analysing Said's autobiography describes the

struggles that he encountered with regards to experiences of being trained in colonial Cairo in a British school. The experiences in the English school were that of dominance whereby the rule favoured English language against Arabic:

*Rule 1 stated categorically: 'English is the language of the school. Anyone caught speaking other languages will be severely punished.' So Arabic became our haven, a criminalized discourse where we took refuge from the world of masters and complicit prefects and anglicized older boys who lorded it over us as enforcers of the hierarchy and its rules. Because of Rule 1 we spoke more, rather than less, Arabic, as an act of defiance against what seemed then, and seems even more so now, an arbitrary, ludicrously gratuitous symbol of their power (Bhatia, 2002, p. 68).*

In this quote, Said portrays different cultural positions within the self and the struggles leading to resistance of dominant culture. This indicates that even though cultures are mixing and moving (Bhatia, 2002) the individuals' identification with their culture-of-origin may continue to remain an intrinsic aspect of voices/positions through which identities are constructed (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). In this case, Said's internal struggles reflect the power struggles within the community (between the two nations: Britain and Egypt presented in the values ascribed to language). Said and the other boys had to negotiate their cultural identity (Arab identity) through resistance. They refused to accept the institutionalisation of English as a better and more valued language over Arabic.

In addition some cultural research findings reveal that individuals are disposed to take up narrative diverse cultural positions as well as contextual cultural specific identity positions (Bell & Das, 2010). In their study of identity narrative they reported that an American born young woman (Yastha), who was second-generation Asian Indian, took up a mixture of culture I-positions of I-as Indian and I-as American to construct identity. Bell and Das emphasised that despite the differences in the two cultures (America and Indian) Yastha in the different segments of her interview narrative combined the two positions toward making

sense of who she was. Initially, she narrated I-as Indian as an identity story when exploring the macro-context of relatedness which was pushed to the background but in relation to arranged marriages she took up a variability emphasising the need for integration of *I-as* American born Indian who desires to reconcile the conflict of not being included in the choice of whom to marry. In this case she integrated both *I-as* Indian/American toward constructing identity. This kind of positioning reflects what Robertson (1995) calls “glocalization” (cited in Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010, p.23): an instance of blending two or more cultural values into a coherent construction of self and identity.

Generally there is a need to explore the multiple sites of identities constructed at the interface of cultures (Bhatia, 2002; Bhatia & Ram, 2001; Hermans & Kempen, 1998; Lugones, 1994). This facet is important to this study as it provides the framework for understanding how Catholic religious sisters who live at the interface of cultures (African culture versus religious culture) negotiate the different culture *I*-positions. Moreover, Hermans (2004) expresses that “cultural actions and the construction of identities take place not in the ‘middle’ of the dwelling but in the contact zones between nations, peoples, and locales” (p.306).

#### 4.13 The Self: Globalisation and Identity

Globalisation in terms of increased movement of goods, services, technology, ideas and people has real social and economic consequences (Baylis & Smith, 2002; Held & McGrew, 1999; Manners, 2000) but above all it influences the process of identity construction both within the individual and society at large (Hermans, 2004; Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). The dialogical self describes that spatial and temporal process of positioning is neither ‘here’ nor ‘there’; thus the self’s ‘I’-positions are “distributed in a spatial world” (Hermans, 2002, p.298). Like a traveller, the self located in a global world (post-modernity) takes a variety of perspectives where some positions are opened and others closed off. The



implication is that the self in constructing identity encounters multiplicity, difference, and opposition that are part of society at large due to massive immigration, increased communication, diaspora, worldwide economic transactions, ecological problems, and disasters etc. (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010).

In a globalising context the self experiences tension between the local culture and the influx of other cultures. In situations of cross-cultural meeting there are bound to be contradictions and oppositions which can lead to binary relations of polar opposites (Bhatia, 2002; Hermans, 2003; Kinnvall, 2004; Sampson 1993), as was discussed in the section of power relations and dominance. In a relationship of power dominance the global encounters the local as superior and dominates. In response the local culture is continuously constructed as resisting the global culture (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010) and so does the self's 'I'-position. Generally, globalisation influences identity by opening the space for uncertainty (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). These include the production of hyphenated identities, hybrid positions, and on-going negotiations between the selves of homeland and a globalising world (Bhatia, 2007; Bhatia & Ram, 2001; Hermans & Kempen, 1998; Kinnvall, 2004; O'Sullivan, 2011). It has been argued that only a dialogical self equipped with the shifting 'I'-positions of agreement and disagreement in a continuous process of positioning and counter-positioning is able to deal with the challenges of a globalising world (social context) (Bhatia, 2007; Bell & Das, 2010; Hermans, 2003; Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). In this light this study concerns itself with how the self in the context of globalisation negotiates its work of identity construction.

#### 4.14 The Self: Religion and Identity

Religion has been described as an "identity marker" (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010, p.42). This means religious space provides belief systems (values and norms) through which

people understand the world. Religious belief systems are ideological in nature (Erikson, 1958; McAdams, 1988; Zittoun, 2006) consisting of a body of ideas, languages, principles, and histories concerning human life and culture. Thus religion, apart from providing a set of belief systems, is context-bound, located in a setting (culture-bound) with a history of human activity. Effectively, religious beliefs are grounded in culture and to a large extent deal with relationships. This research interest regarding religion and identity construction will centre on the religious belief systems and how these belief systems are reflected in voices/positions since the research participants are religious sisters and explores how these belief systems influence identity.

#### *Religious Belief Systems and Influence on Identity*

*We will call what young people in their teens and early 20s look for in religion and in other dogmatic systems ideology. At the most it is a militant system with uniformed members and uniform goals; at least it is a "way of life," or ... a world view which is consonant with existing theory, available knowledge, and common sense, and yet is significantly more: an utopian outlook, a cosmic mood, or a doctrinal logic, all shared as self-evident beyond any need for demonstration (Erikson, 1958, p.41).*

This quote captures the basic tenet of how religion impacts on an individual's sense of personhood. It proffers the lens through which the individual views the world and derives meaning from it. The dialogical self located in the context of religion is bound to encounter the belief systems composed of values and norms which are historically and culturally structured. There is the possibility that the self located in such context internalises and transforms the values and norms and personalises them (owns them). In this way the person allows the values and norms to constitute part of the voices/positions through which her/his identity is developed. On the other hand, the person may question some of the values and norms or disagree with them leading to rejection or disassociation. In either situation religion becomes a resource (site) for identity development.

The idea that religion influences identity is also premised on the fact that it is a relational phenomenon. The texts of most religions and belief systems place great value on the role of the community (ter Avest, 2008; Zittoun, 2006). Religious ideologies develop in and through communication with others (Erikson, 1958; Fowler, 1981). Religion, therefore, is a relationship with the world, with other people and with God. The meanings people construct from religious beliefs are transmitted into action through relationship with the world in which they live. Erikson (1958) says religion produces uniformed behaviour among people. Identification with a particular religious belief also means sharing a similar worldview with other members of that religion. In this way, religion then becomes a site for social relationships (Erikson, 1958; King, 2003; McAdams, 1988). In Chapter 2, the literature on historical and theological foundations presented Catholic religious sisters as being in solidarity with one another through identification with Christ in critiquing patriarchal systems that prevent them from active participation in the Church (Fiorenza, 1983; Okure, 2007, 2010; Schneiders, 2000, 2001; Uti, 2009).

A great number of studies provide support for the argument that religion can function as a resource in positive self-development among youth (Benson, Roehlkeparain & Rude, 2003; King, 2003; McAdams, 1988). For example, the findings of Stuber (2000) and Gallivan (1994) presented in Chapter 3 reported that participation in religious community facilitates religious sisters' performance of shared family identity. Likewise, Furrow, King and White (2004) examined the role of religious identity in positive youth self-development of 801 urban public high school students and discovered, among other things, that religion was a developmental resource through which the participants created personal meaning and concern for others. Thus religion provides "a new zest which adds itself like a gift to life" (James, 1902/1958; cited in McAdams, 1988, p.225).

However, it is not always that religious belief “adds itself like a gift to life” as proposed by William James. There are some studies which found weak co-relationship between identity achievement and religious commitment (Hunsberger *et al.*, 2001). McAdams (1988) presented the findings of a study he conducted among college undergraduates regarding religious belief in adolescence and adulthood. Some of the participants recounted in their narratives stories reflecting a position of moratorium (grounded in serious questioning regarding religious ideology). The narrative of one such participant reads as follows:

*I don't know if I can actually call this a serious religious crisis, but many of the courses at St. Olaf (such as Bio, Psy, Religion) tend to make one question their religious beliefs or at least study and re-evaluate them. In Religion 19 we are studying such problems as: the problem of good and evil, reason and faith, religion versus science, etc. I wouldn't say that I believe any less than I did before, but I am learning that questioning is good and that blind faith, as I have been taught to engage in previously, is actually quite unstable (weak) and useless (McAdams, 1988, p.221).*

This participant's text bears testimony to the fact that religious beliefs across time and space can be questioned and re-evaluated. As a consequence religious beliefs are not always “owned” or incorporated into a sense of self. In addressing Catholic religious sisters' identity construction in the context of religious beliefs (including Church doctrines and norms) one cannot overlook how these beliefs are interpreted and lived out. A detailed account of the belief systems and understanding was presented in Chapter 2: Theology and Historical Foundations of Religious Life, which will enhance the analysis and discussion.

#### 4.15 The Self: Gender and Identity

Gender is a “positioned nature of the self” (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010 p.144). In this regard gender reflects a social position which is socio-culturally ascribed; therefore, out of gender discourses a social group emerges: men and women. The grouping of people into men and women is the most common way of interpreting gender. It carries social descriptions

that identify the two as different from each other, and is one of the resources through which an individual constructs identity (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006). Consciously or unconsciously every one of us tends to include the gendered position of “I-as female” or “I-as male” as part of the ordinary ‘I’-positions in the self (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010, p.144). The differentiation between men and women is associated with social power and control (Butler, 1990; Elliott, 2008; Oduyoye, 2007; Reuther, 1983). Dialogical self theory has not paid adequate attention to gender issues. To fill this gap this study uses a feminist approach in order to be attentive to the different ways in which women and men relate to and are treated by institutions in society (Bartky, 1997).

### *Feminist Approach*

A common premise among feminist theorists is the acknowledgement that women are universally defined as inferior and subordinates of men (Ortner, 1974 cited in Reuther, 1983; Fiorenza, 1986; Oduyoye, 2007). Detailed literature on this position of inferiority ascribed to women was discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 (Historical Origins and Theology of Religious Life and Literature Review, respectively) which shows that the gendered construction of women is based on universal patriarchy. Within patriarchal institutions, men regulate the lives of women, particularly in the Catholic Church, where all positions of ultimate power and authority are occupied by men (Brock, 2007, 2010). This patriarchal control was also evident in the findings of the studies carried out by Reid (2002) and Brock (2007). Their studies reveal that Catholic religious sisters are controlled by the male Church and positioned as ‘self-sacrificing’ women who should serve from behind the scenes.

This is to suggest that gender is a “set of structures with regulatory power upon identity” (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p.26). Therefore, feminist research takes into account the experiences of women, and specifically the ways in which their lives are constructed and

experienced within the context of discursive frameworks that regulate their femininity and their female bodies (Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor & Tindall, 1994). For Chouliaraki (2002) feminist research focuses on exploring a diversity of discursive ‘truth’ embedded in the experiences of women and men, and assists women and men to discover and acknowledge the truth. Scholars have observed that a woman’s sexuality in terms of the totality of her physical make-up has been used in dehumanising ways to describe her as weak (Fiorenza, 1983; Okure, 1985, 2007; Wolf, 2002), needing men to protect, guide and discipline her. Thus men have always constructed women as incapable of reasoning, unintelligent, and slow in understanding (Umoren, 2005), and beings who should be restricted to menial jobs such as cooking, cleaning and child rearing, chores which men consider substandard (Nya, 2005; Nnamani 2005; Umoren, 2005). On the other hand, feminist scholars as reflected in the theology of religious life (Chapter 2) ask that men and women use the concept of “*imago Dei*” emphasising the identity of oneness shared in Christ to define each person (Okure, 2010; Oduyoye, 1985; Rakoczy, 2004).

Feminist research invariably identifies women’s experience as a focus of study (Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantly, 1998). It aims to “capture women’s lived experiences in a respectful manner that legitimates women’s voices as sources of knowledge” (Campbell & Wasco, 2000, p.783). This present study in terms of gendered construction and discourse is conducted from a feminist perspective focusing on a particular group of women who are sisters, exploring the experience of their lives, legitimising their voices, their stories and their experiences (Chase & Bell, 1994). This study examines the subjective experience of a group of women whose experiences as women normally ‘fall outside patriarchal framework of understanding’ (Phillips & Jorgensen, 2002) and whose lives as sisters may have been impacted upon by the Church’s patriarchal framework within the Nigerian cultural setting,

where the dominant gendered discourse privileges male dominance over women (Asiyanbola, 2005; Nya, 2005; Oduyoye, 1995; Uchem, 2005; Umoren, 2005).

#### 4.16 Critical Evaluation: Theory and Psychological Practice

Despite the fact that Dialogical Self Theory has instigated a variety of empirical studies, several criticisms have been levelled against it. Among these critical views are the observations made about discrepancy between theory and research (Miller et al., 2010). This criticism of the gap between theory and research focuses on the fact that the theory lacks a research procedure that is common to researchers. Although a variety of research tools have been developed such as Personal Position Repertoire (PPR: Hermans, 2001); Self-Confrontation Method (SCM: Hermans, 1987a, 1987b, 1988, 1989; Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995); The Personality Web Protocol (PWP: Raggatt, 1998); and The Initial Questionnaire method developed by a group of researchers under the supervision of Piotr Oleś (Raggatt, 2000), the practice has often been that researchers use a multiplicity of research tools which is both a merit and a demerit. On the one hand it provides a richness of information, but at the same time, it makes generalisation and comparison of research findings impossible based on variability (Beebe, 2002; Miller et al., 2010). Consequently there is a need to streamline theory with research method in spite of the fact that flexibility is resourceful.

Furthermore, it has been observed that scientific work done so far is too verbal in nature (Beebe, 2002). This criticism highlights the point that the theory acknowledges pre-linguistic, non-verbal forms of dialogue but typically the actual research takes place on a verbal level to the neglect of the non-verbal (Gieser, 2006). As a consequence researchers need to pay more attention to the bodily aspects of dialogue (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010).

The basic challenge for the theory is focused on how to resolve the issue of integration of multiplicity into a coherent sense of unity and continuity of self (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010; Raggatt, 1999). This challenge arises from the fact that the self is deeply penetrated by others and the question is: how does the self involved in the process of intersubjectivity exchange manage its alterity (ethical subjectivity) (Adams, 2010; Butler, 2005; Burkitt, 2008)? In addressing this challenge Dialogical Self Theory maintains that the agency of the 'I'-position acts as a unifier (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010) and that the 'I' does so by taking different perspectives across time and space to voice its position. In this sense it is argued that the notion of dialogue

*... bridge[s] the domains of social conflicts and unity, because dialogical relationships allow for the existence of both agreement and disagreement and for both intersubjective exchange and dominance (Hermans & Kempen, 1993, p.116).*

As a result the self through intra- and interpersonal dialogue is able to integrate and negotiate multiplicity toward unity.

#### 4.17 Conclusion

In this chapter the fundamental components of Dialogical Self Theory have been presented, arguing that identity construction is a multiplicity of I-positions which are context-bound, portraying the relationship of the self with itself and its extension to the environment. Within the context of relationship the self's construction of identity is best understood as a negotiation process that is achieved through self-positioning as well as self as positioned by others (including social group, religion, culture and gendered constructions). Thus self-positioning is multi-voiced levelled with differences, contradictions, oppositions and conflict, which the self has to integrate and negotiate via a process of appropriation or rejection of positions. In this way the self is able to achieve a sense of unity-in-multiplicity which



portrays that “self-discrepancies and ‘self-contradictions’ between voices are seen as intrinsic to a healthy functioning ... self and as contributing to its innovation” (Hermans, 1999, p.128). As a consequence the Dialogical Self Theory provides this study with a suitable framework within which to understand how Catholic religious sisters located in the context of interpersonal relationships construct identity based on the meaning they derive from the world in which they live. The next chapter presents the methodology of this thesis.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

#### 5.0 Introduction

This chapter discusses the research design and methodology used in this study. Bearing this in mind the rationale and importance of this research will be presented. There will be a brief discussion of the theoretical framework that informs this study, the research design and methodology, qualitative research inquiry and reasons for this choice. Furthermore, the sampling procedure, the participants, data collection methods and data analysis tools used will be described. This chapter will end with a discussion of research quality (trustworthiness) and ethical considerations.

#### 5.1 The Rationale for this Study

Religious sisters in Nigeria live the consecrated life in the Catholic Church. It is a lifeform marked by consecration of life of those faithful who feel called by the Spirit to devote their entire life totally to God and to the service of others (PC #1). Within the Catholic Church the process of becoming a religious is achieved through initial and lifelong formation (socialisation) in a religious community (Allen, 2009; PC #15, CICLSAL, 2007; Schneiders, 2000, 2001). The community, therefore, provides the religious sister the context through which she develops a sense of personal and religious identity. In this structure the religious community is charged with the responsibility of providing the sister with orientation, care and support needed for constructing the relevant, credible and authentic identity of being Christ-like (Allen, 2009; CICLSAL, 2007; Crosby, 2005; O'Murchu, 1991, 2006; Schneiders, 2000, 2001). The primary aim of religious formation is to socialise the individual into the lifestyle

which was discussed extensively in Chapter 2: Historical Origins and Theology of Religious Life.

It is an intersubjective exchange which exposes the religious sister to the norms and values of religious life, and the particular characteristics (mission, spirit and charism) of the congregation (PC #2), through the leadership of formators and superiors (DDL const. #118; SHCJ const. #60). Being an intersubjective process it has been observed that there are matrixes of interpersonal relationships which impact on the process of identity construction (Allen, 2009; Brock, 2007, 2010; Okure, 2010). But alongside these explicit sources of influence, there is an implicit structure of power relations, including those founded in gender, which impact on the development of religious identity (Armstrong, 2005; Rulla, 1986; Burrows, 2008). In addition, there are the challenges of the Gospel values (PC #5) including issues of inculturation (PC #3; Pope John Paul II, 1985, 1996; Onyejekwe, 2001), which also influence the process of identity construction. Consequently, the ideal of religious formation which is explicitly stated as taking on the mind of Christ is implicitly challenged by power play and dominance embedded in relationships. Scant attention has been paid to explore how Catholic religious sisters respond to these relationships affecting development and performance of identity. The Catholic Church is a relatively new area for psychological research (Kloos & Moore, 2000; McMinn, 2003; Weaver *et al.*, 1994). The Second Vatican Council of 1962–1965 marked a new beginning for the Catholic Church and its relationship with the outside world (Kugelmann, 2011), and from this point onward the Catholic religious sisters, who had lived regimented lives and were restricted from interaction with the world outside their convent, became more interactive and accessible as research subjects (Brock, 2007, 2010). But not much research has been done on African religious sisters, particularly in Nigeria. Virtually all empirical research reviewed in this study was conducted in Western

cultures, except three studies that were conducted in Angola, China and Kenya. Most of the literature that exists in Africa for Catholic religious sisters is drawn from Church documents, specifically the Vatican II documents and the subsequent follow-up documents, and the constitutions and chapter documents of these religious congregations. As a consequence, this study seeks to provide Nigerian religious sisters with an opportunity to tell their own stories in their own voices. In accordance with a feminist approach, this study aims to legitimise the sisters' voices, and their stories, as valid sources of knowledge (Campbell & Wasco, 2000; Chase & Bell, 1994) and in so doing seeks to understand the personal agency the sisters assume toward constructing identity.

## 5.2 Importance of the Study

This study will help us understand who sisters are, how (why) they construct identity in the context of interpersonal relationships in a religious community, the Church and wider Nigerian society, and the challenges and dilemmas they face in the process of identity construction. The significance of this study lies in the fact that not much research has been done on religious sisters, particularly in Nigeria. As a result, this study will help to increase literature in this area, identify the challenges in the sisters' work of identity and suggest possible avenues of improvement, as well as ignite further studies. In addition, the findings of this study will be resourceful to religious leaders including formators and superiors to guard against using power play relationships which impact on a sister's development and performance of religious identity.

## 5.3 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that informs this study is interdisciplinary. It draws on the theology of religious life in the Catholic Church. In addition, it uses Dialogical Self Theory based on the premise that identity construction is a context-bound activity (Bhatia 2002;

Esgalhado, 2002; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010; Sfard and Prusak, 2005), in which the self by “its extension to the environment” (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010, p.127) makes sense of ‘who I am’, as well as ‘who I am becoming’ in relation to others. Dialogical Self Theory conceptualises identity as a multiplicity of I-positions where the self integrates or negotiates positions in making sense of ‘who I am’ and ‘who I am becoming’ (Hermans & Kempen, 1993). In other words identity construction is conceived as a negotiation process which achieves the individual’s performance of identity through appropriation, rejection or combination of positions (Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). Dialogical Self Theory provides this study with a method of data collection, by means of which the self is conceptualised as a narrative construction (Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Sarbin, 1986). In this way the use of interview narratives falls within the framework of the theory, and allows participants to assume the position of storytellers, who are continuously involved in a process of meaning construction based on a multiplicity of I-positions (Hermans & Kempen, 1993).

The theory has found diversity of applications in a number of fields of academic specializations such as developmental psychology (Bertau, 2004; Fogel et al., 2002), social psychology (Stemplewska-Zakowicz, Walecka, & Gabinska, 2006), personal construct psychology (Hermans, 2003; Neimeyer & Bauchanan-Arvey, 2004), cultural psychology (Bhatia & Ram, 2002; Hermans & Kempen, 1998; Valsiner, 2002), brain sciences (Lewis, 2002; Schore, 1994), philosophy (Cooper, 2003), cultural anthropology (Van Meijl, 2006), psychotherapy (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2004), and narrative psychology (Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995). As a result Dialogical Self Theory provides a theoretical lens through which the identity work of the participants of this study is examined. However, one area which Dialogical Self Theory has not paid adequate attention to is the issue of gender

identity. As a result, this study adopted a feminist approach in order to give the participants (sisters) the opportunity to tell their own story in the way that is meaningful to them (Lengermann & Niebrugge-Brantly, 1998).

Although this study acknowledges that the theoretical framework of Social Constructionism has immensely contributed to our understanding of how identities are structured by the world in which the self is located (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999; Burr, 2006; Gergen & Gergen, 1988; Shotter & Gergen, 1994), the choice to use Dialogical Self Theory is based on a number of factors. First, Dialogical Self Theory (“DST”) falls within the genre of constructionist psychological theories (Hermans, 2001, 2003) which present the self as having a multiplicity of identities (Hermans, Rijks & Kempen, 1993). Therefore, DST shares some similarity with constructivist theories but the advantage of using dialogical self is its integrative process of managing the paradox of unity-in-multiplicity (Hermans, 2003; Batory, 2010). In this way, the self is presented as having the agency to appropriate, reject or amalgamate positions and/or voices towards constructing unity out of multiplicity (Hermans, 2008). Thus it provides a viable lens for understanding the participants’ multiple voices and positions in order to appreciate how they manage conflicts, oppositions and contradictions.

#### 5.4 Research Design

This is a qualitative empirical research study. A qualitative approach was chosen because of the nature of the study which aims to undertake in-depth exploration (Patton, 1990; Silverman, 2005) of identity construction of the participants based on contextual life experiences (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative design is a research approach which focuses on gaining understanding by assuming the insider perspective (Babbie & Mouton, 2005). Consequently, a qualitative approach is most suited for this research which attempts to explore the participants’ point of view, an understanding of the world they live in and how

this world structures their ongoing personal and religious identity construction. This research is interested in evaluating and interpreting the meaning the participants draw from their everyday relationships toward construction of identity (Baylin, 2002; Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999).

The nature of this qualitative research is interpretive based on the epistemology that the participants' on-going identity development is structured by the context (world) in which they live and how they individually create meaning from it. The interpretive nature of this research focused on capturing the in-depth wealth of experience the participants presented (Riessman, 2008; Ulin et al., 2002). The assumption is that the participants are in the best position to voice their narrative of religious identity construction, including the position out of which their identities are constructed (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 1999).

## 5.5 Study Sample

The sampling technique employed in this study was purposive, restricted to Roman Catholic religious sisters in Nigeria. It was purposive because there is a predefined group of participants who are the specific focus of this study (Trochim, 2006). In particular, this study explored the process of identity construction among Catholic religious sisters in Nigeria, so the sisters themselves are best positioned to tell their own story from their own perspective.

The study sampling was drawn from two religious congregations: one diocesan (local) congregation, Daughters of Divine Love, and the other, an international congregation, Society of the Holy Child Jesus. The intention was to draw participation from different sites in order to ensure diversity of experience. Patton (2006) posits that "the logic and power of purposive sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth. Information-rich cases are those from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research" (p.169). It was anticipated that data collected from the two

religious congregations will enrich the findings on the basis that the two sites offer diversity of experience to the participants. On the one hand, the diocesan congregation was founded in Nigeria after Vatican II in comparison to the targeted international congregation which was founded in Europe in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

From among the two congregations three categories of sisters were chosen to participate in this study as shown in the Table below:

Demographic Table Describing Characteristics of the Participants

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Daughters of Divine Love</b>	<b>Society of the Holy Child Jesus</b>	<b>Participants' age</b>
Temporary professed	3	3	30–35
Finally professed	3	3	30–50
Leaders: superiors/formators	3	3	35–60

Altogether 18 sisters participated in the study selected across two religious congregations as was reflected in the table above. The reason for selecting participants from these groups was to ensure that a diversity and wealth of experiences were represented in the interview narrative. In this way there would be triangulation of voices in the participants' stories which would cover a wide range of positions. This selection takes into consideration the different categories of sisters who live religious life and how their different voices act as information-rich cases which add to the validity and reliability of the narratives (Patton, 1990). These participants were drawn from across Nigeria ranging from Abuja, Bauchi, Enugu, Jos, Lagos and Otukpo, representing different geographical locations. Among the participants were six temporary professed sisters who are the young sisters. Because they have been in the



congregation for five years or more, they are not considered novices. The vows they have taken are on a temporary basis and that is what defines them as temporary professed and they can best be identified as provisional members of religious life. The age range among this group of participants is between 30–35 years.

There were six finally professed sisters who participated in the study. These are sisters who can best be described as having vowed to perpetually live religious life. They have spent at least 10 years or more in the community/congregation and their ages range between 30–50 years. They can best be described as having permanent membership in their religious congregations.

The six formators/superiors (whether past or present) who participated in the study are designated leaders who are charged with the formation of the young sisters as their instructors or mentors. This group of participants represents the authority figures in the community/congregation and apart from forming young sisters are positioned as overseers. The age range among them is between 35–60 years.

## 5.6 Data Collection Methods

An in-depth open-ended (semi-structured) narrative interview (Riessman, 2008; Silverman, 2005) was used to obtain the necessary information to answer the research questions.

As a qualitative empirical study concerned with on-going identity development based on how relationships and social context shape identity, a face-to-face interview using a narrative approach was used. This provided the sisters the freedom to talk in depth about how they feel about themselves through interaction in the community, the Church and the wider Nigerian society. The use of narratives gave the participants the opportunity to tell their stories in ways that were meaningful to them. The choice to use narrative interviews was primarily governed

by the qualitative nature of the study and was further informed by the theoretical framework of dialogical self which strongly affirms that identity and self are narratively configured (Hermans, 2001b, 2003; Hermans, Kempen & van Loop, 1992; Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 1995; Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010; Rosenberg, 1988). Thus, the self is regarded as a storyteller or “dialogical narrator”, whose narrative is defined by the history and time in which it finds itself (Bakhtin, 1973, 1980; Hermans et al., 1992). This is in line with recent developments in psychology proposing that the self be studied from the perspective of ‘narrative’ or ‘story’ (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001; Bruner, 2004; Crossely, 2000; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Linde, 1993; Sarbin, 1986; Riessman, 2008).

The narrative interview gave the researcher the opportunity to obtain a detailed account from the participants rather than elicit brief answers or general statements. Rubin and Rubin (2005) argue that “interviews operate for qualitative researchers like night-vision goggles. It not only permits them to see what ordinarily is not in view but also to examine what is often looked at but seldom seen” (p.vii). In this light, the fundamental basis for using narrative interviews as in most qualitative approaches, is that reality is constructed by individuals through social involvement (Lana-Khong, 2004) by which “ideas, experiences and events cannot be fully understood if isolated from the circumstance in which and through which they naturally occur” (Schram, 2006, p.9). This is congruent with the argument that:

*Who one is is always an open question with a shifting answer depending upon the position made available within one’s own and others’ discursive practices and within those practices, the stories through which we make sense of our own and others’ lives. Stories are located within a number of different discourses, and thus vary dramatically in terms of the language used, the concepts, issues and moral judgements made relevant and the subject positions made available within them (Davies & Harrè, 2001:263).*

Hence the stories we tell about ourselves and others are indispensable tools by means of which we construct identity. Denzin (2000) argues that we live in a 'story telling society' and it is in narrative that we construct identities by integrating the past, present and future into a coherent sense of self (Erikson, 1963; McAdams, 1988, 1993, 1996). It has been observed that people not only plot their lives retrospectively when they relate events in narrative format, but also construct memories in narrative form (Brockmeier & Carbaugh, 2001; Burner, 1999; Crossely, 2000; Sarbin, 1986; Skinner & Cain, 1998; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Linde, 1993; Riessman, 2008). Besides, the use of narrative interviewing is consistent with the tradition of storytelling, prized in most African communities, thus, the participants are invited to tread on familiar ground (Akbar, 1984; Verhoef & Michel, 1997). Hence, the choice of employing narrative interviews as a means of data collection was to gain insight into the participants' world of experiences through storytelling in order to understand and interpret how the world they live in, influences and shapes their sense of identity.

Furthermore, a narrative interview is a discursive accomplishment (Mishler, 1986) involving two active participants who jointly construct narrative and meaning (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002; Riessman, 2008). That means the narrative interview provided the researcher the privilege to co-participate by entering the participants' perspectives and gathering their stories (Paton, 2002). The notion of co-construction of meaning in this study was particularly facilitated by the researcher's insider perspective as a religious sister herself, which on the one hand was an aid toward understanding the normative language that the interviewees used but on other hand could result in bias. However, the possible biases were checked through reflexivity as was reported in the field journal notes.

As the narrative interview was semi-structured a guide to interview questions was developed (Appendix A) to probe further the meanings and ideas the participants might raise. The

narratives revolved around the following themes: understanding of religious life, who the significant others are in relationship to whom identities are constructed, available gender and culture positions and their impact on identity construction.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 18 Catholic religious sisters. A semi-structured interview guide was used (see Appendix A). Instead of closed or leading questions, the broad open-ended questions were designed to encourage participants to share their own personal experiences and views as they determined appropriate and pertinent (Creswell, 2003; DeCuir-Gunby, 2007). It also allowed the participants to have or share control over these discussions; after all, their stories were the focus of the interviews. The questions in the interview guide served as compass for interviewing the participants. The interview guide facilitated the follow-up (probing) questions which were used to maintain focus on the topic of this study and to explore more deeply pertinent themes as they arose. The follow-up questions (ref: Appendix A) were not uniform for all participants; the questions varied according to the issues that emerged although there was a guide format. The participants were informed that there were no wrong answers to the questions.

### *Procedure*

In order to recruit the participants for this study, the first step was to make contact with the leadership of each religious congregation of members who participated in the study. The researcher made contact to obtain permission which allowed her access to invite sisters who might wish to participate. In the case of the congregation of Daughters of Divine Love the researcher was asked to provide proof showing that she herself was an authentic Catholic religious sister. In addition the researcher had to write an official letter introducing herself and stating her intentions for the study (Appendix C). For proof the researcher used the official letter of her provincial (leader) to the University Ethics Committee to assert that she

was given permission to conduct this study (Appendix D) and added a photocopy of her national identity card from the Catholic secretariat. After providing the proof that she was indeed a Catholic religious sister, the researcher was given permission to personally invite sisters to participate.

I made face-to-face contact with 21 sisters, out of which 18 voluntarily agreed to participate. Three sisters refused to participate in the study on the grounds that they were not prepared to share their personal stories. Although it is difficult to establish why these sisters refused to participate, their refusal could in part be due to negative rather than positive experiences. In order to acquire the desired number of participants the researcher had to use purposive snowball sampling in some cases. This enabled her to “get all the possible cases that fit a particular criteria” through the recommendation of other participants (Neuman, 1997, p.196). An advantage of snowball sampling is to use known social networks to select potentially-rich information.

In scheduling the interviews, the convenience of the participants was respected and considered. In most cases the venue for the interview was in their community (house) or office. Some of the participants showed maximum cooperation by calling the researcher to request a rescheduling. However, there were others whom the researcher had to call to re-confirm their availability for the scheduled time. Thirteen of the 18 interviews took place in the religious communities of the participants. Four interviews were conducted in the office and one interview was held in the hospital (private room). Each interview was scheduled to last between 45 to 60 minutes. All interviews took place between February 2010 and April 2010, at a rate of approximately six interviews per month.

Each participant took time to familiarise herself with the content of the letter of consent (Appendix B). The participants read the letter of consent, asked questions when in doubt and

eventually signed the letter before the commencement of the interview, indicating their voluntariness to participate in the study. The letter of consent also permits the participant to withdraw at any point should she no longer feel comfortable in continuing.

All the interviews were recorded using a digital tape recorder as permission was given by each participant and with an audiotape recorder as a back-up in case of technical difficulties.

### 5.7 Research Journal

The researcher kept a journal during the research process, to record her research procedure (audit trail), thoughts, questions, feelings, emerging analytical ideas, and any other issues that may have been helpful in developing analyses and interpretations. This served as reflexivity process since the researcher herself is a Catholic religious sister; therefore, she has both an insider's and an outsider's voice (Pillow, 2003). Her insider's voice is familiar with the life challenges of relationships in a religious community and the Church. For example, the participants' stories about religious obedience which positioned them as subservient evoked in the researcher the recognition of what she knew from her own experiences. Thus the research journal note taking helped the researcher to reflect (self-awareness) back on her own position in the research process which she shared with her supervisors in order to moderate undue biases stemming from her personal experiences and views. In this way issues in the researcher's own subjective positioning (Heron, 2005) were addressed and recorded through personal and epistemological reflexivity. Text from journal notes were also used for the analysis, which helped strengthen data collected.

### 5.8 Data Analysis

The 18 participants' interview narratives constituted the data set used for this research analysis including notes from the research journal. The analysis method used was thematic

analysis which was interfaced with discourse analysis. Thematic analysis involves identifying, analysing and reporting patterns and/or themes, and also ideas and/or views (Braun & Clarke, 2006) with the aim of interpreting and deconstructing the meaning participants are drawing from their lived experiences (Boyatzis, 1998; Ulin *et al.*, 2002). The use of discourse analysis facilitated an understanding of how participants drew from available discourses to argue or give account of the position they took (Billig, 1991, 1996; Potter & Wetherell, 1998). In this sense attention was given to the various discursive resources, such as the discourse of religious obedience, religious life as family which the participants employed to convey ideas, meanings and realities of their everyday experiences. Thus language is seen as constitutive of meaning which is socially derived. This means the analysis was conducted at a semantic level (Patton, 1990) as well as at a latent (dormant) level by examining the underlying ideas, assumptions, ideologies and conflicts (Burr, 2006) that shaped or informed the participants' semantic content of the data. By interfacing the thematic analysis with discourse analysis, the analysis focus on the ontological and epistemological assumptions behind the participants' version of story, in support of why they used certain words, phrases, and metaphors etc in their constructions (Antaki, Billig, Edwards & Potter, 2001). The six phase thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) as a step-by-step guide was used.

The particular type of thematic analysis employed toward analysing this study's data was an inductive (bottom up) (Frith & Gleeson, 2004) and deductive (theoretical or top down) (Boyatzis, 1998; Hayes, 1997) approach. Inductive approach entails act of searching for the patterns/themes that emerge from the data (Patton, 1990) produced by the participants. On the other hand, the deductive approach to analysis requires that the data be analysed based on theoretical interest. As a result the researcher approached the analysis bearing in mind the

conceptual framework of the Dialogical Self Theory. In this case the analysis focused on the participants' I-positions as presented in the data set reflecting self-positioning as well as self as positioned by others. This means the analysis tends toward answering the specific research question: How do Catholic religious sisters construct identity based on their interpersonal relationships in community, the Church and wider Nigerian society?

The six phases of thematic analysis used were as follows: (i) familiarising oneself with the data; (ii) generating initial codes; (iii) searching for themes; (iv) reviewing the themes; (v) defining and naming themes; and (vi) producing the report.

#### *Familiarising Oneself with the Data*

As the researcher collected the data herself through interviews there were some initial thoughts and interests that started emerging during data collection. These thoughts were noted in the journal and some of the notes were used as text in the analysis. The first step in the familiarisation process was to upload the interviews from the digital recorder to a computer and label them using pseudonyms in order to maintain confidentiality. Then all the interview narratives were transcribed verbatim into text as “a key phase of data analysis within interpretative qualitative methodology” (Bird, 2005, p.227). The researcher used Jefferson's (2004) transcription symbols (Appendix E) in order to capture stresses, hesitations, and pauses which served as an aid to analysis, and attempts to capture the talk as it is heard by participants (both interviewee and interviewer) facilitating the interview as co-constructed which is necessary for performing an adequate discursive/thematic analysis. At this stage field notes were integrated as interactive resources towards transcription which helped capture what was said. Although Jefferson's transcription method can initially appear complex and hard to read, the system is intended to build intuitively on familiar ideas (e.g., underlining for emphasis, etc.). Through this process, the researcher constructed informed,



vivid reports which aimed to answer the research question. After transcription the researcher immersed herself into the data by repeatedly reading in order to identify meanings and patterns. In addition the repeated reading helped verify the transcripts against the original audio recordings for accuracy. In this way the researcher was able to make a survey across the data set for repeated patterns of meaning.

### *Generating Initial Codes*

The researcher started coding by making use of repeated patterns of meaning derived from repeated readings. This initial coding aimed to organise the data extracts into meaningful groups (Tuckett, 2005) in relation to the research questions. Informed by theoretical framework of Dialogical Self Theory attention was paid to the different forms of positions/voices the participants presented (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). The complete data set was manually coded with regard to the research questions: How do participants understand religious life, what I-positions are available to the participants in constructing identity, what are the available gender and cultural positions and how are these positions used in constructing identity? In this way a list of the participants' I-positions was compiled, which initially helped to generate codes. The researcher coded as many potential patterns as possible in order to ensure that relevant themes would not be lost (Bryman, 2001). All the codes were collated into a long list which enabled the researcher search for themes.

### *Searching for Themes*

All the different codes were sorted into potential themes and matched to relevant data extracts. At this stage visual representations such as 'mind-map' (Braun & Clarke, 2006) were used to help sort the different codes into themes. Mind-maps work like an organising chart table that showed at a glance what the dominant views, ideas and experiences of the

participants are. At this point the researcher began establishing relationships between codes, between themes and between levels of themes based on the participants' I-position in relation to time and space and the audience with whom these I-positions were constructed. Some themes stood out on their own whilst others could be merged.

### *Reviewing the Themes*

At this stage the researcher reviewed all the themes across each participant's data and the entire data set against the extract to ensure that there was a form of coherent pattern correlating them to each other (Patton, 1990). Some of the themes that did not match were reworked and refined to reflect accuracy of meaning of the data set as a whole based on theoretical assumptions.

### *Defining and Naming Themes*

Themes were 'defined and refined' (Braun & Clarke, 2006) by identifying the essence of each theme. At this stage the researcher focused on what aspect of the data/question each theme captured. So as not to belabour the themes, some themes were sub-divided even further. For instance, the participants' expression of work reflected a multiplicity of positions including work as a joyful response to doing God's will and work as subservient workers who have no time for self-care. As a result the theme of work is broken down into sub-themes of interest considering the participants' views and positions. Thus, the format of the report was developed.

### *Producing the Report*

Once the themes had been determined, the final analysis and write-up of the report commenced. At this stage analysis of the data was addressed by introducing the ideas, views, ideologies and positions that inform the theme. Data extracts were also presented to support

the report and in each case attention was paid to the discourse employed in the extract to communicate meanings and ideas. In writing the report the participants' I-positions (Hermans et al., 1992) were described as multi-voiced and used to synthesize the discourses they employ toward construction of identity. The analysis, particularly with regard to the participants' use of available positions, highlighted how the participants position themselves or have been positioned by others across time and space including the dilemmas and strategies they employ to negotiate their performance of identity. Emphasis is placed on how the participants integrate their experiences (including past, present and future) into construction of personal and religious identity (Erikson, 1963; Hermans, 2001; Hermans and Hermans-Konokpa, 2010; McAdams, 1993; Raggatt, 2002). In this case the analyses portray how the participants are able to sustain a unified sense of self despite the multiplicity of I-positions which are levelled with differences, contradictions and oppositions.

#### 5.9 Storing Data

The researcher stored the data in a secure place, in a locked cabinet at her home accessible only to her and in a password-protected personal computer.

#### 5.10 Research Quality

Establishing and maintaining quality are important criteria for both qualitative and quantitative research (Devers, 1999) but each has its own appropriate and no less rigorous standards for ensuring that quality is maintained (Ulin et al., 2002). For the qualitative researcher the issue concerning quality rests on, "How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.290)? In addition, "how did I, the researcher address these challenges and enhance the credibility (reliability) of my study and conclusions?" (Schram, 2006, p.173)? Addressing these concerns Lincoln and Guba (1985)

argue that the fundamental criterion for qualitative reports rests on trustworthiness expressed through credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. In this section, the researcher discusses the challenges and measures employed to ensure quality in reference to the four criteria for judging trustworthiness for this study. Lastly, the researcher presents herself and her position in relation to the research.

### 5.11 Criteria for Establishing Trustworthiness

The four criteria for judging the soundness of a qualitative research that Guba and Lincoln (1985) posit are credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

#### (i) Credibility—Are the findings of the Research plausible?

Credibility seeks to convince the reader that the researcher presents a “true picture of the phenomenon under scrutiny” (Shenton, 2003, p.63). Credibility focuses on confidence in the truth of the findings, including an accurate understanding of the context: are the findings consistent in terms of the explanations they support and is the narrative data sufficiently rich to support the specific findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994)?

The researcher’s attempt to ensure that credibility was maintained is based on the detailed description of the research context which is presented in the section method and design regarding the participants, method of data collection and analysis. Firstly, data was collected from a variety of participants and settings, e.g. superiors/formators, final and temporarily professed sisters from two different congregations: one diocesan and the other international. The data collected from these two sites ensured that multiple perspectives were engaged with, which in some cases were complementary and sometimes portrayed dissonance in positions and/or voices between the two sites. When possible, the interviews were transcribed the week after they were conducted. Each participant was given a transcribed e-copy of her interview to confirm whether it accurately represented her opinions or stories and no participant refuted

the information contained in the transcribed text. The participants' own words were used in the reporting and analysis (see Chapter 6), and used verbatim extracts (including text from field notes) to allow participants' own voices to transparently emerge in the findings. Background information on the participants was provided when using their extract, which information was elicited during the interviews (see Chapter 6). Such information helped to convey the actual situation and thus added credibility to the findings.

(ii) Transferability—Can the Result be Applicable or Relevant to Other Contexts?

At the heart of the issue of transferability is the question “how might my inquiry contribute to an understanding of similar issues in other settings” (Schram, 2006, p.59)? Are the findings of the study transferable to other contexts (Miles & Huberman, 1994)? The response to this is that an accurate account of sample population has been provided which reflects the subjects being studied and the key issues in the research problem. Therefore, transferability is possible to the extent that a similar context is selected for study. In particular, this study was focused on Roman Catholic religious sisters in Nigeria and a diverse sample was drawn from them to ensure that multiple perspectives were used to represent the findings. Thus the findings generated satisfied the conceptual requirement of qualitative research (Ulin et al., 2002).

(iii) Dependability—Do the Data have the same Meaning that the Researcher Asserts?

Lincoln and Guba (1985) established a link between credibility and dependability, noting, “there can be no credibility without dependability” (p.316). From this perspective, dependability has to do with whether or not the research questions are clear and logical with reference to the proposed research design? Does the data reported on actually say what the researcher meant them to say? Can a reader depend on the meaning the researcher ascribes to the data presented in the study? In response, the researcher states that the research questions are clear and they maintained focus on exploring how Catholic sisters' lived context

influences their identity construction, something which the researcher regularly discussed with both supervisors in the process of developing the research design and method. In addition pilot interviews were conducted to refine the questions.

Another aspect of dependability has to do with research as a systematic process. Therefore, dependability as a criterion for judging the trustworthiness of research is to ask whether the researcher followed the step-by-step process of research systematically (Patton, 2002, p.546). As Miles and Huberman (1994) emphasize, reliability (or dependability) is concerned with the extent to which the research is consistent and stable over time and across researchers and methods. The researcher followed an acceptable qualitative and narrative inquiry research procedure which fits the contextual nature of the study. This includes selecting participants, using interview guides, conducting and taping in-depth interviews, transcribing, coding, analysing and reporting the interviews. The steps taken in this study have proved successful in other related studies (Brock, 2007, 2010). This systematic process confirms the reliability, transferability and validity of this study.

(iv) Confirmability—what is the Extent of the Researcher’s Bias, Interest or Neutrality?

To ensure confirmability the following questions need to be answered: Are the findings of the study grounded in data? Are themes, categories and inferences derived logically from the data? Irrespective of bias or interest, can others confirm the findings? Confirmability as a criterion focuses on the degree to which the researcher’s bias, interest or motivation influences the result of the study. Essentially, confirmability ensures that the result of the study genuinely derives from the experiences and ideas of the participants, rather than a reflection of the researcher’s preferences and motivation (Shenton, 2004). The researcher kept an audit trail record (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) of all communication and transitions regarding this study. This includes the raw data: uncoded transcripts, tape recordings, field

observation notes, participants' letter of consent, interview guides and a write-up of the procedures and research experiences in the dissertation including a methodological reflection (Appendix F). These documents provide evidence that the research is focused and grounded in data obtained from the participants. In addition the researcher's personal research journal notes facilitated self-reflexivity that helped her check the level of interference of her personal interest and values in the study. Applying reflexivity has contributed to the confirmability of the study (Ulin et al., 2002) because it has helped to distinguish between the researcher's personal interest and values and the interest and values of the study participants.

#### 5.12 Researcher Reflexivity: The Researcher's Position Taking and Background

To enhance the credibility of a study, Patton (2002) recommends stating personal and professional information — experience, training and perspective — about the researcher, because such information may affect data collection, analysis and interpretation. It also helps readers to better interpret the research. He goes on to say that, “the essence of such step is that the researcher is the instrument in the qualitative inquiry” (p.566). In this light the researcher presents the following relevant information about herself, the instrument of this qualitative inquiry:

“Researching the process of identity construction among Catholic religious sisters is a phenomenon that interests me because I have been a Catholic religious sister myself for 17 years. Therefore, I have an insider perspective which has both merit and demerit (Kelly, 1999; Patton, 2002). On the side of merit is the advantage that, there is an assumed knowledge and understanding of contextual relationships within religious communities, the Church and wider Nigerian society. In this case I have the advantage of contextual experiences of relationship dynamics in religious communities where power relations conveyed through religious obedience between superiors/formators and other sisters has led

to positions of inferiority on the part of young sisters and others. I have also witnessed and experienced the Church's gender position of women as inferior which often causes sisters to struggle to re-define who they are and who they ought to be.

On the negative side there is the possibility that because I am a 'fellow sister' I will therefore presume to understand the sisters' lives which could likely cause the participants to revert to use of stereotypes (particularly spiritual stereotypes) in describing their experiences. If I were not a sister, the participants would have to describe their lived experience in a different way. Our shared life of being sisters has the capacity to limit the ways in which I conducted the interviews. There was an assumption on both parties: I the researcher and the participants both knew what was being said without the need to explain. An interviewer who is not a sister would have to elicit more specific details, ask questions which were more 'unknowing', simply because of not having had the experience of sharing the common knowledge of what it is to be a sister. For instance, many of the participants used the expression 'God's call' to describe their membership to religious life, which is a 'master narrative' (normative) spiritual genre of religious life (Riessman, 2008). In this way, the narrative that I generated was co-constructed. But beyond this I was challenged to employ step-by-step systematic research processes which were critical in order to ensure that I was not completely context-bound. To be able to achieve the balance I used my journal recordings as a reflexivity process which helped me to monitor my own thoughts, feelings, biases and values in order to prevent them from interfering with the study. At the beginning of the interview the participants and I established a rapport which helped us understand the process we were engaged in. I tried to keep to the practicality of the interview by asking probing questions to explore and clarify further when what was said was not clear. The participants in turn asked questions to clear



their own doubts about the study; some participants especially wanted to know why I was undertaking such a study.

I hold a Bachelor of Arts in Education B.A. (Ed): Curriculum and Teaching and Master of Arts (M. Ed) in Guidance and Counselling. As a Catholic religious sister, I have several years of teaching experience and counselling work in Nigeria and Ghana. I have also been a school administrator for a number of years. I am currently pursuing a doctorate in psychology. My qualifications and experience have given me a certain exposure and knowledge that has enabled me to carry out this research. The participants have diverse qualifications: among them were doctors, engineers, teachers, nurses and social workers.

In spite of my educational qualification and experiences, fieldwork (the research process) was a learning opportunity for me. Hence as a student (researcher) I was open to learning. I listened attentively to the participants during the interviews and conversations. Although I have an insider perspective I considered no question too small for clarification during the interviews. I did not act as a teacher of the participants, but rather as their student. This was no easy task because I had to have both a first- and third-person perspective (Kelly, 1999) of endeavouring to understand and interpret the context as presented by the participants. I allowed their stories to educate me. Their stories are the primary source of my data and text for my analysis.”

### 5.13 Ethical Considerations

The main issues of concern here as listed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) include doing no harm, obtaining fully informed consent, not deceiving the participants, presenting reliable data, protection of participant privacy and confidentiality. Ethical clearance was granted by the College of Humanities and Social Science Research Committee at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Appendix G).

(i) Protection of Participants from Harm

There was no harm done to any of the participants. Each participant voluntarily committed to giving 45 to 60 minutes. All the interviews were completed in one session. None of the participants asked to split the interviews in two nor requested further sessions. There was a debriefing before the scheduled date to duly inform each participant about the interest of the study; this I believe gave them ample information concerning the intention and expectation of the interviews. Besides, the participant had the prerogative to choose the venue for the interview.

(ii) No Deception of Participants

This study seeks to understand how Catholic religious sisters are constructing identity based on their experiences within the lived context of religious life. The letter of informed consent introduces the purpose of the study, and the participants' expected role in the research. This was reiterated before the interview when the researcher introduced herself and explained the purpose of the study. The researcher welcomed any questions that any participant asked, especially with respect to the study. As a result the participants were duly informed about the intention of the study and what was required of them.

(iii) Confidentiality—Protection of Participants' Identity

Confidentiality as an ethical consideration requires a researcher to keep the data information about participants confidential. Pseudonyms were used for all participants as well as other people and locations mentioned in this research. The uploaded (digital) interviews were protected by use of a password, while transcribed interviews appropriately labelled were always kept in a drawer at the researcher's home under lock and key, the researcher being the only person with a key to the drawer. All digital interviews will be deleted and all transcripts

shredded after the study is completed following the requirements of the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

(iv) Privacy

Participants were invited to participate in the study without invading their privacy. The study was by voluntary participation. The purpose of the study, benefits and the risks associated with taking part in the study were well explained to the participants to assist them in making an informed decision about participation. Participants also had the prerogative to choose the venue and time of the interview.

(v) Benefit

Right from the beginning of this research, I explained to the participants that they would not receive any direct individual benefits. There might be an indirect benefit to members of religious communities and to society at large if this study is able to help raise awareness about sisters' identity construction in the Church in Nigeria. I imagine that individual participants found therapeutic benefit in telling their stories, besides the two that had an emotional breakdown; fortunately, they were referred to further counselling. Participants thanked the researcher for giving them the opportunity to participate in the study.

(vi) Risk

There were no foreseeable risks involved in participating in the interview. At most, the interview used the participants' time which meant re-arranging their routine. The researcher respected the participants' emotions and did not probe into areas that were emotionally sensitive. Furthermore, it was made known in advance that participation was voluntary, and that participants could withdraw at any time. None of the participants found any question too sensitive or uncomfortable, except for the two who were deeply touched while recapturing their experiences and broke down in tears. It is hoped that the immediate counselling within

the interview session helped and that the follow-up referral will further help them to resolve their issues. Participants were encouraged to use pseudonyms when talking about significant others whom they did not wish to name.

(vii) Informed Consent

Ethical requirements *vis-à-vis* participation in a research project demands that participants sign informed consent forms. A standard consent form contains the following: the purpose of the study; benefits associated with being in the study and the risks associated with being in the study. In addition, it informs participants that participation is voluntary and that they have the right to discontinue their participation in the research at any point should they feel uncomfortable. In order to ensure that participants understood the details in the consent form the researcher went through the form with each participant before commencing the interview sessions. Each participant was encouraged to sign the form after she had understood and accepted the conditions in the form. The time spent explaining the consent form (letter) varied for each participant as some participants asked numerous questions. This gave each participant the opportunity to be made aware of what she was agreeing to.

(viii) Disclosure and Exchange

The researcher explained to participants that they had the right to know the results of the research. Each participant was offered a transcribed e-copy of her interview to confirm whether it accurately represented her opinions or stories. Although the researcher would be happy to provide each participant with a copy of the dissertation, if requested, this would be impossible due to production costs; at the very least, the researcher may possibly give a copy to each of the two congregations whose members participated in the study. Again, as a public document, copies of this dissertation will be sent to the UKZN library when the research is

completed and approved by the college. The researcher also hopes to publish this research as a book in the near future, rendering the findings of this study accessible to all.

#### 5.14 Conclusion

This study seeks to understand how Catholic religious sisters are constructing identity based on lived experiences. In this chapter, a blueprint was presented of how the research was conducted. The researcher commenced by stating that this is a qualitative empirical research aimed at understanding identity construction of Catholic religious sisters. The methodology, narrative inquiry, and the reasons for such choice were made known. The researcher also presented how she recruited participants, collected and analyzed data. Finally, the criteria and strategies employed to ensure that the study was methodologically and ethically sound, were outlined and discussed.

Next follows the presentation of the research findings, in relation to the research questions.

## CHAPTER SIX

### PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

#### 6.0 Introduction

In this chapter the results of the study are presented based on the key research question: how do Catholic religious sisters construct their self identity in the context of living religious life in their congregation and the Church in Nigeria? The five sub-research questions that aim at answering this question are used as a guide for the presentation of the results, including the participants' understanding of religious life, the available positions through which the participants construct identity, what the gendered related positions are and their impact on the participants' identity, and what the cultural related positions are and their impact on identity. How do the participants use these positions in constructing their sense of person? The main focus here is to present data, from the narrative interview, of the participants' report and the understanding and interpretation they give to their intersubjective exchange and how these experiences have shaped or are influencing their sense of personhood.

#### 6.1 Question 1: How do Catholic Religious Sisters Understand Religious Life and its Impact on Identity Construction?

The findings reveal that participants' understanding of religious life is multifaceted including both the ideal and lived reality. Their concept of the ideal is based on the visions or expectations with which they came into religious life. In the interview data some of the participants presented their views of the ideal as emerging from previous opinions they held about religious life or partly based on the initial orientation they had when they joined religious life. These ideals, they essentially described as a life of "communion with God and others", "service", and "holiness". Basically, the ideal focuses on values and norms of

religious life. On the other hand, the lived reality focuses on experiences they have encountered within the context of living religious life. The results have a twofold dimension: one shows congruence between the ideal and lived reality, and another shows significant discrepancies between the participants' lived experiences and their ideal views about religious life. Some of the participants observed that the ideals of "love", "care" and "support" have been what they experienced in the context of living religious life. On the contrary, many participants indicated in their narratives that they are disappointed with the lived reality; in this sense they presented the lived reality as intertwined with status and power struggles, which opposes their ideal of mutual relationship with one another and commitment to God. In addition they reported that they experience conflict arising from being positioned predominately as workers in opposition to their self-positioning as happy and committed workers for God. In interpreting the variations participants presented in the interview data, an attempt was made to synthesise their understanding of religious life into three different themes, each for the ideal and lived reality. The three themes for the ideal understanding of religious life reflect religious life as commitment to God's call, religious life as communion, and religious life as happy family. The three themes for lived reality present religious life as space for status and power, the religious as subjugated worker, and religious life as oppressive family.

## 6.2 The Ideal Understanding of Religious Life

The ideal understanding of religious life is basically focused on the values and norms of religious life. These are values that the participants presented as their own understanding of religious life, which they conveyed as the guiding principles. The reports from the interview data are used as evidence to portray what these ideals are and their possible impact on

identity construction. This is done under three sub-themes of religious life as commitment to God's call, as communion with others, and as a happy family.

### *6.2.1 Religious Life as Commitment to God's Call*

Many participants presented their understanding of religious life as a response to God's call. They emphasised that it is God who called and invited them to religious life. Frequently, they expressed that "religious life is a gift from God" which triggered a motivation or desire to respond willingly and positively and to dedicate their lives "totally" to God. An interesting aspect of this call, as some of them described, was that God called his "favourites" or "beloved" to religious life for closer union. In this way, they persistently presented the view that they are invited to a special and privileged relationship with God. Furthermore, they indicated that this relationship with God is sustained through prayer and studying the scriptures and other spiritual readings. However, there were some distinctions in the way some of the participants presented this understanding of their call and commitment. A common way of framing the call was that it is an invitation to do "God's will". As recorded in the research journal, this meant being constantly attentive to what they describe as God speaking to them in every experience of the day. They suggest that there are multiple ways in which this takes place ranging from "prayers, encounter with friends, family, other sisters, spiritual directors, and reading the Bible, and other spiritual readings." They maintained that these activities sustain and guide them against losing the focus of commitment to God. For example, one participant from the international congregation says:

*... life of religious is a life of commitment to God's call – to God's service  
... life of availability to answer God's call anywhere and everywhere God  
calls ... and wherever God wants us to answer the call.*

In this text, the ideal of religious life is presented as one of constant service and availability, being disposed constantly to answer God's call. This implies that being oriented to God is the



primary source of meaning and direction in life. This participant's use of the expression "anywhere and everywhere" introduces a spatial dimension to her understanding of God's call, revealing that the commitment to God is not restricted to some places but is everywhere. Also, by using the word "availability", she indicates that there is a disposition in terms of constant readiness which is required to answer to God's call.

The idea of service as an expression of commitment to doing God's will is one that emerges often in the interview narratives. Some of the participants described service using the language that they were following in Jesus' footsteps. They positioned Jesus as their "model" who went around all the time "working" in either "healing the sick", "feeding people", "teaching people", "caring for people", or "loving people." In this way, most of the participants saw Jesus as constantly "doing", always engaged in one activity or the other; therefore, they described their life of service as imitation of Jesus. In some instances, service is expressed as "mission assigned to them for the good of God's people." Part of this commitment is expressed as being "co-creators" or "partners with God", and this is lived out in working with "God's people", and serving them by sharing God's love. Some participants emphasised that serious commitment to work described as "apostolate" (ministry) is integral to religious life because this is where they strive always to see and meet God in every encounter with others. They described this as a process of self-emptying, an on-going activity of totally giving their best. There are times when service entails just being present to others, sharing stories and in this way they witness to God's goodness and love. For example, a participant emphasized: "apostolate is something that we should embrace where we should see God ... praise him, and share his love with other people." (Field note).

### 6.2.2 *Religious Life as Communion*

Some of the participants construct the ideal of religious life as a relationship with one another. Religious life is constructed as a communal life of sharing with others, expressed in terms such as love, care, joy, support, forgiveness, prayers and service. It was presented as a shared space of mutual support where sisters, through care and love, help each other to feel at home. This communion is enacted especially through community prayers, which are described as a source of unity. This communion was also described as being expressed in ways of helping each other with everyday chores such as laundry, cooking and ironing. For instance, one participant from the diocesan congregation enunciates:

*You know there was something – something we called “itu flower” that’s a way of >practical charity< which we really embark on ... there was the fetching water ... washing of cloths, you know sweeping corners ...*

This participant enumerates the different services they render to each other. The ideal communion is also expressed in taking time to find out how each other is faring, particularly after each day’s busy life at apostolate, and socialising in the evening after the day’s work. They share stories and relax to enjoy each other’s company. Some participants described how the shared stories have helped them to get to know one another more deeply. One participant drew on the ideal expressed in the scriptures in the so-called “servant song”, to picture what the ideal is; “saying we are here to help one another; we are here to walk with one another – we are here to bear one another’s load.” Generally, the findings show a consistency in the participants’ understanding of religious life as communion. One participant explained the ideal of communion by employing the idea of religious life as similar to early Christian life:

*... religious life was-is dated back to the community of the early Christians, we share things together; pray together; break bread together ... this breaking of bread together and sharing together is not just a magic ... people are = they are people who made it possible and the-e ... you see I*

*can sell my pride in order to buy community-community of Christ to be able to work with ...*

In this text, she emphasised that the communal life they live is based on the replication of the early Christians' lifestyle. The repetitive use of the words "sharing" and "together" in this extract conveys a sense of what communion with others means. The use of the word "magic" to describe the experience is in contrast with the phrase "people who made it possible", conveying the impression that communion is a product of deliberate intent and effort rather than an automatic phenomenon. Therefore, the success of living the shared life is dependent on people, and suggestively she situated "pride" as in opposition toward achieving instances of true community life.

In addition, for some participants this communion with one another is an indirect manifestation of the commitment to God described above. It is their relationship with God that brought them into this communal relationship with others. As some participants expressed it, it is the love of God that they share with others in community. So, when they render service to one another in the community, this is described as being done for God, not just the sisters with whom they live. In other words, therefore, it is the love of God that urges them to engage in the communal exchange with others. For example, a participant from the diocesan congregation emphasised that it is "Divine-love-in-action" that is keeping them in communion. Some participants emphasised that it is God's love which is helping them to forgive each other when need be.

This ideal of being in communion with each other is congruent with the lived reality for some participants. The results show ample evidence that some participants have experienced love, care and support in community. This love and care, they illustrated were experienced in the form of "trust", "encouragement", and sometimes as "appreciation". Some participants emphasised that they have experienced support when they are faced with difficult tasks like

going to teach for the first time. In this situation the community helps them to get started which they expressed was helpful. There are some participants who have experienced love, care, and support when they were mourning. Particularly, one participant pointed out that when her father died the community really showed her a lot of empathy that people could not tell who among them lost their father. There are other participants too who have experienced encouragement which helped them to work on their personal area of needed growth such as over-coming “hot-temperedness” or getting into “moods”. However, some participants expressed that the ideal is discordant with their lived reality, and in such narratives, they presented the experiences of lived reality as “humiliating”. Further discussion of this will be attended to under the lived reality session.

### *6.2.3 Religious Life as Family*

Some of the participants employed the discourse of family in presenting the ideal of religious life. They constructed religious life as a happy family where mutual relationships bind them together. They describe these relationships as inclusive, where every member works toward the general good, and participates actively in decision-making. The discourse of family life goes so far as to present sisters as mothers and/or siblings. For instance, one participant from the diocesan congregation articulated that formators and superiors are “looked upon as mothers in the house followed by the other sisters then comes the newly professed as the young ones.” In both the interview data and from the field journal, superiors are constructed as “mothers” and also models who are convinced about what they are doing, and therefore, are to be emulated by others. This is parallel to a parent-child process, and they are depicted as being charged with the duties of taking care of others. This construction of formators and superiors as “mothers” evokes a mixed experience and response. On the one hand they have the duty of nurturing others and acting as models, while on the other hand they control others.

Some participants observed that the notion of superior(s) as ‘mothers’ stands the chance of making the superior(s) controller of others under the guise of the vow of obedience, which by extension conflicts with their commitment to religious life. This is because some participants noted that they have experienced such requirement of “obedience” as intimidating. In this way, the use of this discourse of mother-child relationship is ambivalent because it can lead to confusion about positions and relationships. On the one hand religious life is constructed as an ideal family relationship but in the lived experiences of most of the participants it is constructed as a status and power struggle, which will be discussed extensively under the lived reality of religious life.

The discourse of religious life as family suggests that participants dissolve to some extent the ties with their families-of-origin in order to form ties with their new families made up of other sisters in their religious congregations. This discourse is parallel to that of marriage in which a young woman is expected to leave her parental home and form new bonds with her husband, though not necessarily cut-off from her family-of-origin. In fact, some of the participants presented the ideals of religious life as a marriage covenant with God through their various congregations by which they are given “rings” as symbols of their perpetual profession. For example, one participant described herself “as somebody who is entering marriage covenant with my God and a group of people.” However, the majority of the participants described this ideal as the initial orientation they had when they joined religious life. They expressed that they were oriented toward seeing other sisters as their “blood sisters”, and to make efforts toward accepting the community as their new home. They maintained that this is what they were taught in initial formation: to work toward seeing the community as their new home, and not allow attachment to their families-of-origin deter them from accepting other sisters as siblings.

Some of the participants portrayed religious life as family by drawing on a certain religious discourse which described that union with each other through their common commitment to Christ is stronger than all natural or biological ties. As a consequence, these participants conveyed their religious family relationships as having something stronger that binds them together. This was well articulated by one participant who says, “Our family is united in Christ and through him and that is greater than all other family ties.” However, some participants emphasised that the lived reality is often different, because they have experienced abandonment particularly in the face of sickness. Also, there are other participants who insisted that they have experienced “rejection”, “jealousy”, “envy”, and “unhealthy competition”. These experiences they constructed have led them to reconstruct religious life as an oppressive family. A detailed discussion of this will be dealt with under the theme of lived reality.

Interestingly, there were some noticeable differences in how different participants portray the ideal of religious life as family. The young participants generally placed greater emphasis on formators/superiors as “mothers”, who are in charge of them and as models to emulate in religious life, while older participants generally talk of religious life as a family unit of oneness in Christ, and see everyone as equal participants in the family. There is yet another difference in relation to the two congregations: the majority of the participants from the diocesan order used the concept of family to describe religious life, as against only a small minority of those from the international group.

### 6.3 Understanding of the Lived Reality of Religious Life

From the results of the study it emerged that some participants’ lived reality of religious life showed remarkable differences from the ideal understanding. Many of the participants expressed distress at their lived reality which they presented as smothering their “sense of

humanity.” In line with this, some participants described the disappointment of realising that in religious life “those little things that they used to over-look” are “serious matters”, such as expressing an opinion in interaction with others. Some participants (both temporary and finally professed) emphasised that superiors treat and talk to them as “if they were children”, which they consider to be a sign of total disrespect for their human worth. Yet this is in congruence with the ideals of superiors as mothers who are charged with the duty of looking after others. In this kind of situation there is always a paradox with regard to language of construction and practice; are superiors ‘mothers’ in order to exert control or to show care and love? Most of the participants reported that in the lived reality of religious life power and status is a fundamental feature, with many sisters perceiving formators/superiors as exerting coercive authority, making them subordinate or subservient. In addition, the participants expressed that being positioned predominantly as workers rather than ministers of the Gospel is another lived reality, which distracts them from the ideal of religious life with regard to commitment to God expressed in prayer and other religious practices. These three issues are now considered in detail.

### *6.3.1 Religious Life as Space for Status and Power*

In the interview data many of the participants portrayed religious life as space for rank or class distinctions which they presented as a core feature of their lived experience which is in conflict with the ideals of communion in accord with the Gospel values. A good number of the participants reported that their experience of religious life constantly involved being reminded of distinctions between novices and others, temporary or finally professed, formator/superior and others, young and old; with power belonging to the finally professed, superiors/formators and senior/older sisters. These differences determine whose voice is heard and whose voice is silenced. In most cases, temporary professed sisters report their own

voices as being silenced, and subjugated by those who are older or senior. In this way, the participants present religious life as decidedly oppressive. This lived experience is in contrast with the ideal of religious life as family or communion with others, where active participation in community is the norm. In this manner the lived reality presents some kind of ambivalence through which the participants struggle to construct religious identity. The oppressive nature of their lived experiences was such that many feel taken for granted, and their humanness ridiculed. For example a temporary professed sister from the international congregation expresses her plight as follows:

*One thing I noticed in Religious life is that ... When one is temporarily professed eh, you know some people can take advantage of you, take you for granted and say all sort of things to you. Some people can come and say one ... rubbish to you and go away with it.*

In this text, the emphasis is that temporary professed sisters are not considered worthy of attention and respect, and are thus taken advantage of. As a result, “some people” talk to them in a manner that is considered inappropriate. The extract also portrays that the assumed superior status of some sisters allows their talking inappropriately (“say ... rubbish to you”). “Some people” in this text refer to superiors, formators and senior sisters, or others who position themselves as superior, and this foreshadows the contradiction between lived reality and the ideal of communion with one another or even religious life as a happy family.

The findings also show that unnecessary domination is constructed and justified through the discourse of religious obedience, with superiors/formators or senior sisters using obedience as a means to subjugate or coax others into subservient positions. In this way, some of the participants voiced that in contrast to the ideals of a happy family and communion with one another, the lived experience of religious life is of constant humiliation, and they are constantly fighting the battle not to lose their humanity. Accordingly, the participants reveal that such “unnecessary domination” couched under “religious obedience” is simply



“oppressive” or “irresponsible”, and amounts to pressure on them, leaving them with a dilemma which impacts on their work of identity. Accounting for such dilemma, some of the participants located themselves as having to deal with either being submissive or resistant to “compulsive obedience”. A number of the participants in their discourse of obedience as compulsive or oppressive observed that they have experienced superiors who give no room for “dialogue” but rather insist that they “listen” and do what they are asked to do. One participant from the international congregation expressed that she had lived with a superior who came across saying “in this house it is only what I say you should do, you must do”; if not, “I write the report to say you’re disobedient” (Field note journal). In this manner, some of the participants showed that they have been intimidated into obeying orders which normally they would not. For instance, this extract from a diocesan temporary professed participant brings out the picture clearly:

*I feel because I am not yet finally professed ... this sister tends to shout at me all the time when talking with me. I wonder why and I have watched her with other sisters who are finally professed and yes I can say she has cantankerous tendencies but it seems more when talking to me. Take for example, I'm preparing lunch with her in the kitchen and there she goes e::m >Come on↑ don't you know how to cut onions< and there I think in my head a simple thing as small as cutting onions. But because I am shaking with fear as I don't want her troubles or reports, my response is: please, teach me. Of course... I pretend I don't know and she teaches me what to do and I start doing it but she screams again and say that I am a hopeless case. So = how would I not feel constrain dealing with such a sister but my hope is that after final profession some of these encounters will be over ... you see, these are some of the situations one contends with.*

In this extract, the lived experience is that of “fear” in contrast to communion with the other. The use of the word “fear” portrays the horror of the lived reality which typically emerged from experiences of being positioned as “temporary professed”. The term “temporary professed” is a synonym for subordinate. The contest is between a senior sister who is superior with power to write or give reports and a temporary professed sister who is a

subordinate, therefore, subservient. The fact that she is a temporary professed sister makes her vulnerable to the superior's cantankerousness. She faces the dilemma of "shaking with fear" in contrast to being self-confident. The mere fact that she is shaking with fear as well as "feel[s] constrain[ed]" increases the pressure mounted on her; she has been conditioned to obedience that undermines her sense of personhood. This vividly portrays the ambivalence between the lived realities of oppressive obedience under the pretext of religious obedience through which her work of identity is negotiated. She opts to submit momentarily using pretence as strategy, hoping to redefine her humanity (identity) after final profession.

Another manifestation of the issue of power was expressed by some participants who presented situations in which they felt demeaned, repressed or treated as "outcast". The use of the word "outcast" suggests an instance of being treated as an outsider, indicating a sense of rootlessness. For instance, one participant from the diocesan congregation indicated that her superior did accuse her of belonging to a cult which made her feel degraded and treated as an outcast. Interestingly, some young participants resisted vehemently refusing to submit to such ill-treatment from any superior, despite the expectation of them to do so. This group of participants describe that it has always been a struggle, as one young professed participant from the international congregation articulates in the following extract:

*... one day after school ... <sup>o</sup>at a community meeting it was like you know how they need more hands; see if you can go and help out <sup>o</sup>I said me, sister (superior) I'm not going back there ... then she tried to explain-I said sister both of us are here ... you saw what happened ... I was there first and I was making them go late ... and I left. I mean they were going earlier before I got there and I got there they were closing late ... I was not productive so there was no point ... you even moved me I didn't just go out, I didn't even request to go-you got fed-up and you sent me away ... so >asking me to go back now; does not make sense to me< and then we were still talking when she said to me >what if she commands me to go there< I said, well sister if that happens I will only go there out of obedience but >know it that ... I am not going because I would want to go ... I am only going because I am*

*being forced to - I am being compelled to go there< in fact I got very angry and it was clear to her that I was angry - I had to raise my voice - I think it was glaring to her that I was angry, in fact we never had that conversation again ... it ended there.*

In this extract, the participant's lived reality is that of intimidation into a subservient obedience by the sister superior. The superior's stand is clear; "you go and help out as I have asked you" or else "I 'command' you to do so". The use of the word "command" means to dominate which by extension subjugates the ideal of a religious obedience which should emerge from a happy response to doing God's will. Also commanding her is in opposition to the ideal of communion with one another where respect and active participation in decision-making is the norm. In response, she expressed that the command would only "force" or "compel" her into such obedience. The word "force" or "compel" are synonyms within a discourse of power which conveys absolute control induced from outside, and it points to the contradiction entrenched between the lived reality and the ideal. She had to fight back with her "anger" in order to resist the superior's push.

It is interesting to note that the experience of the lived reality of religious life about status and power was reported by all the participants except one. This provides overwhelming evidence of the importance of the issue of status and power for religious identity. Many of the participants reported that during their initial formation they lived under the surveillance of others, which they described as ranging from "formators" to other sisters in the community including superiors/senior sisters, finally and temporary professed. They described their experiences at this stage as confusing, which they articulated as embedded in being positioned as having "no initiative". Some of the participants noted that formation caused them to continually "look over their shoulders" to see who was watching them. However, in general, what did emerge was that there is a remarkable variation in the way temporary professed sisters perceive instances of power and status. For the temporarily professed

(young) sisters, status and power were weapons in the hands of superiors which are used to determine their future in terms of being admitted to final profession. On the other hand, finally professed sisters presented it as situations of being subjugated, undermined, and humiliated. Another difference is between the temporary professed of the diocesan and international congregations. Within the international congregation virtually all temporary professed reported that they would vehemently oppose the superior's subjugation. By contrast, diocesan sisters accept temporary submission but hope to redefine themselves in terms of resisting the superior's subjugation after final profession at the end of six years. This means that for these diocesan sisters the upward growth of their identity work will remain in the limbo for six good years.

### *6.3.2 The Religious as Subjugated Worker*

The majority of the participants described their lived experience of religious life as subjugated workers. In their narratives many of them emphasised that religious life is principally organised around work which presents them with a dilemma. These dilemmas, they presented as embedded in being "exploited worker" versus "happy workers" for God. A good number of the participants highlighted that working for God is rightly the ideal of religious life but on the other hand to be positioned predominately as workers is in opposition to their commitment to God. In support of this argument many of them presented their experience of being positioned as subservient workers as embedded in the experiences of "having no adequate time for God" and "self care". They described a picture of people who are overwhelmed with work in the sense that they feel exhausted and have no energy to pray, even to eat their meals or take a rest. Aptly, this extract of a participant from the diocesan congregation gives us some insight:

*I said somebody going to work as early as seven and you are coming back to the house around six or after six. How do the person? You don't do your*

*Bible reading or spiritual reading ... you don't have exercise; see some people they eat and eat because of stress and keep growing un-necessarily fat and you see that stress is rowing over this person. The person is not growing fat because she enjoys growing fat ... because of eating at odd time and odd meals ... even myself I have ulcer because of irregular meals not because I'm tensed but ... the stress of= ... you will hardly find time to go and eat ... one day I was telling somebody ... that-you will struggle to pray; you rush the prayer; you struggle to go to mass; you rush to mass; you struggle to eat ... you rush the breakfast from there you struggle to work; you will be working-working you come back you are tired; you rush to prayer-the evening prayer, rush food even while you are sleeping you are rushing the sleep.*

In this extract, this participant's lived experience of "work" is constructed as overwhelming. She described the kind of busy (work) life that religious life presents for her. The words she used to describe the lived experience of work are remarkable: "stress", "struggle" and "rush"; and each of these words are suggestive of possibly having too many commitments. For instance, the verb "rush" is chaotic and may also foreshadow a state of confusion. This presents some kind of ambiguity concerning work in the ideal of religious life as a happy response to doing God's will. The mere fact that the participant has to struggle with virtually every single thing she has to do, ranging from prayers, attending Mass and eating, in response to her lived experience of work is a source of a dilemma fixed between work as a joyful response to God's call versus work as oppressive or exploitative. In their discourse about the subjugation embedded in their lived experiences, some participants constructed "apostolate" as the major interest of their congregation which has led them to sideline God in their lives. The extract below of a finally professed sister from the diocesan congregation gives a vivid picture:

*actually here the things I imagine that are not well taken care of ... the apostolate I see myself working-working, is very strenuous and it saps e::m it saps so much energy from me that I hardly find time to pray or to concentrate in some other things that my heart longs to do. So it's so worn-wearisome and I'm wondering where God is in the whole of all these ... the*

*congregation is to my own understanding ... still struggling to survive...  
(sighs) I don't find so much happiness in such job.*

In this extract, the participant's lived experience of work is characterised by the predicament of being aware that her commitment to God is opposed to her commitment to work, placing her in an extreme dilemma. Yet this commitment to work is congruent with commitment to the congregation. On the one hand, the congregation is struggling to survive; therefore, it needs sisters to be productive workers. On the other hand, the work is in conflict with commitment to prayer and other things the heart longs to do. In this way, there is confusion about where God fits in; God is sidelined and this presents her with a dilemma. The experience of work is constructed as exploitation espoused in the use of words "sap", "strenuous", and "wearisome" at the expense of commitment and happiness; and all these may have implications for religious identity construction.

Interestingly, this perception of lived reality of religious as subjugated workers is a common phenomenon among all the participants though the younger sisters seem to describe situations that suggest the superiors/older sisters subjugate them further. Some of the temporary professed participants echoed that they are the ones who fill in the gap of doing the various house chores after the heavy day's job. In this sense, young participants expressed that some superiors keep sending them from one errand to another such as "washing extra dishes", and "re-arranging store rooms", or attending to "house repairs". In addition, some young participants described that they are the ones "who do all the house chores" including "cooking, laundry, and cleaning".

### *6.3.3 Religious Life as Oppressive Family*

A number of the participants used the discourse of oppressive family to present their lived experience of religious life. According to them, the lived experience of religious life as family is "harsh", "exploitive", and "spiteful". In this sense, some participants describe

experiences where they have not been allowed to actively participate in community decision-making or accorded respect as members of the community. They expressed that superiors and senior sisters who act as mothers, who care and love in the ideal religious life as happy family, often turn them into “puppets” with “no voice” and “feeling” in their lived experience. Thus, there is an ambivalence surrounding their family relationships; on the one hand, superiors/senior sisters mother them with love and care but on the other hand the superiors/senior sisters control them completely. As a result, these participants indicated that they are “positioned” between these two poles of love versus control which are incompatible; and therefore they are always battling to make sense of who they are. Some participants expressed that their experiences elicit a mixed response from them which has led them on the one hand to be “less holy”, “cautious” and on the other hand “hurtful”. A participant from the diocesan congregation articulates her experience as follows:

*I always tell myself that I am holier at home than here ... you understand because certain things then ... I know in my house >Ah< you are happy ... nobody talks to me with a harsh voice or this or that or scolding me anyhow but then you find out in communities (religious) though we say we are family you see people (superior) who will shout on me like that and I hate it↑. >I always ask myself, oh how can somebody be shouting on me like this< is it this little thing that I kept here ... that you are shouting at me which I know at home maybe my mother will tell me ha:a “D” carry this thing and keep here or my siblings you know they will always know how to tell me that ...*

In this extract, the participant’s lived experience of religious life is expressed as unpleasant based on the superior’s “shouting” and “scolding”. The repetitive use of the word “shouting” is abusive and in contrast to cordial family relationship either between mother and child or sibling versus sibling. This experience has led her to define herself as “holier” in her family-of-origin than in religious life as family. The act of presenting herself as holier in her family-

of-origin is in opposition to the ideal of religious life which is depicted as a life of holiness, and this predicts the relational impact on her religious identity construction.

A similar extract from a finally professed sister from the international congregation also gives an example of what kind of situations sisters face in their day-to-day relationships with one another in religious life experienced as oppressive family:

*... if you are not grown regardless of your chronological age one could have the problem of not being able to decide for herself and so you dance to whatever music that is being played no matter who is playing and at the end of the day u::uh one is not careful you get torn apart, because A is going to come and say do it in a particular e::h standing tone-you dance to that ... B comes along plays a different one and at the end of the day you are not sure what music you are listening to= and what sound steps you are taking.*

Once again, this participant presents a picture of how some sisters can become puppets in the hands of others. She emphasised that in order not to float around in response to other sisters' control the sister must sieve what she hears. Symbolically, she uses dance and music to capture her story, and mixing or missing steps of a dance may indicate confusion. Hence sisters could be "torn apart" when they are not sure what others want. The words "torn apart" are pejorative and depict self-destruction. However, it is not just the young sisters who presented this kind of situation though it seems to be a common experience of theirs. The finally professed sisters also have similar experiences where they have been sidelined especially when they are not in the superior's good book. These experiences leave sisters feeling marginalised, and often they accept such oppressive treatment because of the vow of "obedience".

Another way in which the participants presented religious life as an oppressive family is a family that neglects to take care of its members in moments of dire need, such as in times of sickness. The data shows ample evidence of situations in which the participants indicated that religious life has disappointed them in times when they needed help. A typical example is



presented in moments of sickness with regard to providing support and care. The participants observed that religious life quickly absorbs individual's giftedness but easily abandons the individual to fend for herself in the face of crisis. This is contradictory to the ideal of a happy family where everybody works for the common good. For example, this extract from a young participant in the international congregation explains it further:

*... for instance these issues of HIV/AIDS, yes we are here in this community if one person have this sickness how the other sisters will treat her? ↑Definitely if you know it is your family member they wouldn't reject you ...>they don't have any option than to keep you till you die< if at all you will die ... <sup>o</sup>in a small range of time<sup>o</sup> but u::uh let anything happen to any sister in the community in a negative way ... especially if it is deadly disease like HIV/AIDS. I am just using that as an example you will see the way people will start reacting to you ...Why? Because we are not from the same blood though we say we're family ... that's when you know we are not family. Like now if anything happens to me and you send me away from this convent-I am still going back to my family. They can't reject me but the:e religious life will reject you ... so where is our home?*

Vividly this participant captures the picture; explicitly she emphasises that religious life experienced as oppressive family “rejects” its members in the face of sickness. The use of the word “reject” evokes the experience of being discarded or thrown away which is in contrast to acceptance received from families-of-origin. By using the words “same blood” to explain family-of-origin, she portrays the ambiguity embedded in the ideal of religious life as happy family by virtue of their union with each other in respect of a common commitment to God. However, this lived reality of religious life as oppressive family is not totally shared as there are some participants who felt that religious life is not oppressive: that it has given them all they needed, particularly in the face of sickness. Some participants describe how their community has taken care of them when they were sick so that they do not need to rely on their family-of-origin.

Generally, the results regarding participants' lived reality shows that the experience of status and power has impacted on their relationships with one another. Participants live with this division of either being superior or the subject and as a result it has been difficult to mutually reach out to the other, which presents them with dilemmas of identity construction.

Based on the findings as presented above, it is clear that the participants' understanding of religious life is multi-dimensional and includes both the ideal and the lived reality. The ideal reveals the orientation the participants had regarding the norms and values of religious life, which are basically grounded on their personal opinion and lessons taught to them during initial formation. From the participants' interview data some of their ideal understanding of religious life is in congruence with the lived reality, while on the other hand a far greater part of the lived reality is in opposition to the ideal. In this way many of the participants talk about the conflicts they face while living religious life. Some of these conflicts are sources of dilemmas through which the participants' work of identity is negotiated as was presented by numerous participants. Some of the major conflicts presented by the participants are manifested between commitment versus work; love, care and support versus lack of love, care and support; and struggles around power and status. Significantly, many of the participants' understanding of religious life as space for power and status are overwhelming and it foreshadows the circumstances of how religious identity would be constructed.

#### 6.4 Question 2: What Are the Available Positions through which Religious Identity is Constructed?

The findings reveal that the participants have multiple positions through which their identity is constructed. From the participants' interview data these available positions emerged as a result of self-positioning on one hand and on the other hand are as a result of self as positioned by others. The findings show that the participants' self-positioning arises from the

different ways the participants define themselves in relation to significant others. These significant others as presented by the participants include God, formators/superiors, older/senior sisters, other sisters including colleagues, spiritual directors, members of their family-of-origin, priests, bishops, Church members and friends. On the one hand, the results show that participants' self-positioning is in agreement with self as positioned by others. But on the other hand, results also show that there is often conflict between the participants' self-positioning and self as positioned by others. In this sense some participants revealed that some formators/superiors, senior/older sisters, and priests frequently use the discourse of the vow of religious obedience to position them as subordinate or as subservient, which is in opposition to their own self-positioning.

In addition the results show that the participants' self-position fluctuates within time and space. That means the participants' positioning shows evidence of change depending on circumstances and the person they encounter. In other words, the positioning has shifting characteristics considering relationships across different time frameworks and the persons they encounter. This multiplicity of positions presented by participants in the interview data has been coded into themes for easier analysis. The different themes used to present the findings are based on positions of age, learners, giftedness, dependence on and/or commitment to God, love/loving, workers, disappointment, obedience, anger, self-determination, and the special position of the fear of the future of religious life.

#### *6.4.1 Position of age*

One common position which many participants used in constructing identity is age. Numerous participants started their interview narratives with reference to how old they were, either chronologically or in religious life. Some of the participants used chronological age to describe how old they were when they entered religious life in comparison to their present

age. In this manner some of them define themselves with phrases such as “I-as 20/21 years old when I entered religious” and “I-as having lived religious life for 15, 18, 20, 25, or 34 years”. Some participants even expressed that they were pioneer members of their congregation’s foundation. For these participants, age indicates how long they have lived in religious life. Thus age is employed as a privileged position through which they construct their religious identity. In this sense the number of years spent in religious life is used by some of the participants to present themselves as seniors or elders who have gained enough experience which has shaped who they are and are becoming. In other words, their preferred self presentation is “I-as senior”; “I-as elder”; “I-as experienced religious”, and “I-as matured religious” in relation to other sisters who are either younger or seniors like them. In this manner some of the participants used age to portray the “maturity” and “growth” process that has taken place within. The extract below from a participant in the diocesan congregation gives insight into how age has become a relevant position through which religious identity is constructed:

*Actually ... I came into religious life-in fact I was an aspirant right from the age of 14. I finished from convent school ... I went to the postulancy and I was professed at the age of 26 so I am now 34 years in religious life and in as much as I have not really found it funny but I’m really happy. There is a kind of joy I derive in it that has been keeping me going ... whatever experiences I have gathered has really shaped me up and made me a mature human being and have really made me a focused religious ...*

In this extract, the participant asserts that she has spent 34 years in religious life which qualifies her as an experienced religious. It is these experiences across time (34 years’ experience) that she presents as having shaped her. The long duration of time spent in religious life positions her as a senior and matured religious. However, some participants go so far as to compare the number of years they have lived religious life in relation to some priests who, while they are newly ordained, position themselves as superior based on the fact

that they (priests) are clerics and males. By comparison, sisters using the discourse of age position themselves as superior to those priests, revealing a constant contest. For example, one participant from the diocesan congregation noted that her experiences as a personnel officer at the Catholic secretariat has been that newly-ordained priests resist taking instruction from anyone apart from fellow priests. In her narratives she says:

*... they (priests) still want to show that their superiority even if ... the person is ordained today and you are professed twenty years ago ... he is a priest and would not take instructions ... once he is a priest he is a priest ... and like they do it here (Catholic secretariat) too no matter the office you are holding or whatever all the priest that come here they will buy new cars for them but they don't buy new cars for sisters no matter your level.*

This extract shows the conflict between this sister's self-positioning as senior, by reason of her age and length of time spent in religious life, and her being positioned as inferior by a young priest because of her gender and because she is not a cleric. The age comparison is focused on having spent 20 years in religious life in relation to a priest who is ordained today. In this regard, despite the fact that a priest is younger his gender and his position as cleric afford him the opportunity to be treated as a dignitary in the sense that new cars are bought for them when they come to work at the Catholic secretariat but not for the sister.

Furthermore, the findings show that some participants are positioned as "young or youngest" in the community which is employed as part of the discourse of subservience. As a result some of the participants explain that their experiences of being defined as young cause them to have "no initiative". They claim that this is so because formators/superiors or older/senior sisters expect them to abide by whatever they are told. Therefore, being considered young they wait for the formator/superior to give instructions about what they have to do. Some participants go to the extent of emphasising that they experience situations where they are not permitted to ask questions because of their age or because of the length of time spent in

religious life. In other words, this group of participants reported that they are deprived of their voice in relation to some superiors/formators, by reason of their age. In such situations the narratives of a number of the participants who defined themselves as “I-as young” expressed that because of their age, they relate more cautiously to formators/superiors or senior/older sisters in contrast to the freer relationship with their colleagues. For example, this participant from the international congregation says:

*From my candidacy days I would say relation with the sisters in the community differs because ... you (I) and the formator (including other sisters) are not in same category ... what I'm trying to say in essence is that with my mates I am more free when I was in formation than with the others because of the rank (status) even though religious life we-we try-try to=especially in our congregation, we are urged to be free ... to be yourself and let that self be what God wants it to be but you find out that you cannot >avoid the fact that the superior is always the superior, that gap must be there, no matter what-it can't be removed<.*

This participant recalls that within the space of being a religious there is status positioning which reveals the discrimination between different groups, such as superiors versus other sisters. The argument she presents is that religious superiors have a privileged position which makes communal relationship uneven; thus others are positioned as subordinates. However, there are some participants who resisted being positioned as subservient and voiceless by reason of their age. They positioned themselves as assertive even in the presence of superiors/formators. For example, in this extract a young participant from the international congregation who was positioned by a superior as a young sister observes that:

*You know my superior kept on saying I was the youngest and a temporarily professed, does that mean that I cannot have a mind of my own. No! I think I can always tell at least to some extent what is good to do and what is not good.*

In this extract, the participant clearly takes up assertive position, and resists being positioned by the superior as having no initiative (no mind of her own) because she is the youngest in

the community. On the whole, the findings show that there is a remarkable difference in the way young participants use age as an available position to construct identity. The majority of young sisters use age to indicate their subservient position *vis-à-vis* formators/superiors or senior/older sisters. On the other hand, senior sisters use age to attain a privileged position and validate their experience and understanding of religious life.

There was a noticeable difference in the use of age to construct identity by young participants from both the diocesan and international congregations. Most of the young participants from the international congregation maintain that they respect formators/superiors and senior sisters but they do not fear them, despite their age. According to their narratives, a majority of the participants from the international congregation indicated that they “speak up”, and sometimes go so far as to challenge the superior/formator when they are not convinced about what the superior/formator says. On the contrary, the findings reveal that the young participants from the diocesan congregation take up a more inferior position based on age and “shy” away from formators/superiors. Numerous young participants from the diocesan congregation expressed that they cannot easily “speak up” before superiors but they withdraw and mostly “abide” by what the superior says. In other words, they are submissive in relation to superiors/formators and sometimes to the senior/older sisters.

#### *6.4.2 Position of Learners*

Several participants reported that they have learnt a lot in religious life including Church doctrine, the spirituality of their various congregations, spiritual exercises of prayers, courses in human development and African cultures, which helped and is helping them to live religious life. For example, this participant from the international congregation says:

*We did ... series of courses: religious studies, human development ... Africa Traditional Religion (ATR) and many other courses, especially that of the*

*history of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus ... the life of e::m our mother foundress. So all that even helped me to actually begin my religious life very-very well ...*

This participant states that the series of courses she has been exposed to laid the solid foundation on which she began her journey into religious life. Another participant from the diocesan congregation stated:

*... when we entered we were taught ways of practical charity, which we really embark on at that time ... when somebody steps out of her cell you just rush, fetch water for her, iron her clothes and she wouldn't know who did it.*

This participant positioned herself and others in her congregation as having learnt the practice of charity during initial formation. In a similar way there are some participants who said they were taught to see others as their siblings and to make religious life their new home.

#### *6.4.3 Position of giftedness*

Many of the participants use “I-as gifted” as an available position to construct identity. Participants commonly referred to their call to religious life as giftedness. Several participants expressed that God called them to religious life which call is presented as a gift God has given to his “favourites” and “loved ones”. Some participants went to the extent of expressing that the call to religious life is a gift for “holiness”, living “saintly lives”, and being “angels”, although on the contrary, some of them illustrate that the call to religious life has not and does not stop them from being human beings like every other person. In other words, these participants report that the call to religious life nominates them to be “truly human”. In this sense a number of participants describe their giftedness as instances of being “friendly”, “relational”, “charitable” “sharers of God’s love”, and “witnesses to the gospel”, and in this way they reach out to people. In other words, some participants emphasised that the gift of religious life opens a space for them to have a multiplicity of relationships with



people they encounter both within the religious community and in the apostolate. Aptly this extract from a finally professed participant in the diocesan congregation vividly captures the picture:

*... for me personally my vocation is a gift: is something that I should spread the-the love of God with people. It may not mean for me to come and start telling you ... Jesus died for you but with my experience with you-you will know that God lives and he is a loving God—that was just how I feel I should live out my life ... I was working at the bookshop ... people will expect that my joy was that I was making profit, I was more happy that I was in contact with the people. I don't know-most of the time ... the bookshop will be filled, it is not that all the people came to buy books-some will just come and sit down and chat. Some will come and sit down, sister, look at what happened to me today (.5) the little children they were there ... some people that were working there in the Church ... the cleaners, the gardeners and sometimes their children will come. If they have any assignment from school or homework they will bring it ...*

In this extract the participant articulates that her vocation is a gift which creates a space to encounter diverse groups of people ranging from “children, cleaners, and gardeners”. The group of people she encounters are not prominent people in society but the people with whom she shares God’s love. The primary objective is to share God’s love.

Another common means through which many of the participants construct “I-as gifted” is with regard to the discourse of the vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience. The participants describe the vows as gifts which bring them to love broadly, share worldly possessions in common with others, and give up the will to be in charge of their own lives. However, some participants describe the vow as “stressful” because it challenges what they call the “norm or natural” but they indicate that in spite of the challenge or stress it is still a gift and a choice they have made. In other words, they position themselves as gifted in making the choice to vow chastity, poverty and obedience. A good number of the participants positioned themselves as using the vows as means toward self-transcendence. In this way, some

participants expressed that the vows create space for them to live radically in direct imitation of Jesus Christ. The vows bring them to share and identify in Jesus' life of "joy, suffering, pain, and victory".

Another distinct way in which some of the participants construct identity using "I-as gifted" is in connection to talent, attribute and professional skills. A good number of the participants position themselves as gifted with regard to the natural abilities God has given them. Some of the participants expressed that God has blessed them with abilities like singing, music, cheerfulness, competence and endurance. They use these gifts to witness and spread God's love to others both in the religious community, the Church, and wider Nigerian society. Some participants even emphasised that their professional skills are gifts God has blessed them with. For instance, one participant from the international congregation positioned herself as a medical doctor who uses this position to "co-create with God and help the sick".

On the whole there is commonality among the participants' use of "I-as gifted", in the sense that a great majority of them present their giftedness as God's blessings. Their giftedness is viewed as a call that privileges a favourite one to share God's love, and is invited to take the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience in direct imitation of Jesus Christ.

#### *6.4.4 Position of Dependence on God*

The findings reveal that several participants use the discourse of dependence on God to construct identity. Mostly, participants presented their experience of dependence on God by expressing that when they started religious life they knew God was the only companion they had; therefore, they started learning/finding ways of attaching self to God through prayers and other spiritual exercises. In so doing, some participants positioned themselves as totally dependent on God to the exclusion of others. In other words, some of the participants indicated that they have a strong alliance with God. As a result, God becomes the most

significant other through whom their work of identity is negotiated. For example, one participant from the international congregation expressed her position of dependence on God as follows:

*When I started as a candidate I-I REALized that religious life is a life where it has to be my personal journey with GOD ... I through experiences have come to realize that if I started relying on any human person ugh I wasn't really going to find true fulfilment in the life. So I started finding it, you know; a way of getting closer to God.*

In this extract, this participant presents herself as solely dependent on God and this dependence on God is based on her experiences with others. On the one hand God is the ultimate reality in her life but on the other hand others are excluded. Indeed there are some participants who claim that God has never failed them but others have (field notes). In other words, their experiences have proved to them that God is faithful; therefore, they totally depend on God. Another way some of the participants positioned themselves toward God was by creating a bond of friendship through which they offered themselves totally to God. These participants report that God is their ally, and emphasised that everything they do only has meaning when God is part of it. For instance, this extract from a participant in the international congregation gives us a vivid picture:

*... what I find very-very encouraging is being very close to God because at times (.2) I find out that if I am not ready and willing to give my total life to God; life is always very hard but if I do things become lighter. Things become lighter when I attach myself to God; to God not to any persons; not to things or what: but just totally on self-giving to God – not to any person, place or what but total self-giving to God.*

In this extract the participant allies herself to God completely which she describes as being close or total self-giving to God. This act of being close to God or totally giving of self to God is an experience that makes things bearable; therefore, she positions herself toward God in opposition not only to others but also as to place. The move to add “place” as one of the

list of things where she does not attach self to, by extension suggests that her dependence on God is unrelated to the environment in which she finds herself. Thus the act of total self-giving to God is one that supersedes physical locations. In other words, place is not a relevant factor that determines her friendship with God. In similar ways, a number of participants present their dependence on God as the lens through which they see and interpret everything that happens. They express that they achieve this through using the scriptures, and this is a behaviour they learned in religious life.

A good number of the participants present their dependence on God as being primarily achieved through prayer. A common way many of the participants present the experience of prayer as a connection to individual and shared community prayer life. Some of the participants indicate that community life creates for them the opportunity to share prayer life with others. In this manner these participants experience community prayer as an experience of social participation. Typically, some participants frame their construction of “I-as prayerful” as being based on prayer as the key to religious life. In line with this many of the participants speculate that they carry with them a prayerful attitude to everything: praying while they work, praying while they encounter the other, and praying by sitting still as some participants describe, before the Lord during quiet moments. In addition some of the participants experience prayer as part of attending daily masses and what some of them call “adoration of the Blessed Sacrament”. The activity, “adoration of the Blessed Sacrament” means visiting and sitting with the Lord, who is present in the tabernacle. All these activities are a manifestation of dependence on God, which has also helped them to understand God better and love others more. There are some participants who expressed that “I-as prayerful” creates the space for them to manage challenges which would otherwise be unbearable. For example, a participant from the international congregation gives us some details as follows:

*When ... my prayer life is shaking it is really difficult for me to bear certain things. But when I am rooted in God, I see things differently; you know, things are more meaningful to me and I understand better.*

This participant constructs the experience of prayer as her main resource for managing life. She expressed that the experience of prayer helps her to find meaning in life.

#### *6.4.5 Position of Worker*

Many of the participants use the discourse of work to describe their experiences of commitment to doing God's will, though they also reported that they are also positioned as subservient workers by others. These others who position them as subservient workers include formators/superiors, senior/older sisters and priests. According to the results of the study, some of the participants present themselves as happy workers who enjoy doing God's work. A good number of the participants told stories of experiencing work as doing God's will where they meet God's people and share God's love. In this sense many of the participants expressed that sharing God's love is the essence of work; as a result they emphasise that every activity they engage in has an aspect of ministry (work) embedded in it. In this several participants argue that there are a myriad of ways of doing God's work which include "visiting the sick", "assisting the sick to access medical care", "sharing life stories with others", "loving people", "developing and appreciating individual talents", "respecting individual differences", "teaching catechism, organising pious groups in the Church", "mourning with those who mourn", and also physically working hard in discharging the various apostolate duties assigned to them in either teaching in schools, working in hospitals or doing other social work. Some participants even claim that prayer is an aspect of doing God's work. In this way they draw on the discourse of prayer to express their experience of work. In line with this some participants emphasised that it is in prayer that they discern

God's will and derive strength to carry on, enabling them to further share God's love with others.

On the other hand, many of the participants described themselves as being positioned by others as subservient workers especially by formators/superiors and senior/older sisters or sometimes the priests in the Church. The majority of the participants told stories of being dominated or stressed with work which gives them no space or time to live out the ideals associated with "I-as committed worker doing God's will", as discussed above. A typical example presented by some participants is that some superiors/formators position them as workers who are allowed no time for other things, such as taking care of themselves, including relaxation. In subtle ways this impacts on the participants' self-organisation. For instance, one participant says: "In religious life we thought we don't have time for anything apart from apostolate and that's not my style." In line with several participants expressed that the apostolate takes up all their time allowing them no time to pray which, by extension, is an aspect of working for God.

Some participants claimed that they are positioned as housemaids who must do all the house chores such as washing plates, cleaning the house, and doing the laundry. In the same way a number of participants emphasised that their experiences in the Church have been that of subservient workers in the sense that the Church does not recognise what they do. In this manner some participants report that they are positioned as "background/underground workers" in the Church. For example, this extract from a participant from the diocesan congregation gives some insight:

*In fact religious women are just ... on your (their) own, the Church sees you as non-entities, workers at the background ... So-o even the work we do in the Church, the Church ... will never-the members, the congregation do*

*not recognise us and it is because the priest is more important and the priests themselves do not recognise sisters ...*

In this extract the participant emphasises that the Church positions sisters not only as background workers but also as ‘non-entities’. The use of the word “non-entities” speaks volumes of how sisters are positioned as nobodies; in other words, they are a group of people that is not worthy of recognition. The extract also touches on the fact that the priests are more important than the sisters, and do not accord sisters the appropriate acknowledgment or recognition.

#### *6.4.6 Position of Commitment*

Numerous participants position themselves as committed. The participants’ construction of ‘I-as committed’ varies; for some participants ‘I-as committed’ is primarily in relation to God. In this light some of the participants expressed that they are faithful to reading the scriptures or other spiritual readings, and some of them described what they called “annual retreat” as part of their renewal to commitment. Quite a number of participants used the discourse of faithfulness to position themselves as turning every day into a retreat. In this manner, they positioned themselves as totally committed to God. In other words they are not distracted or do not lose focus. Some of the participants even emphasise that they are “always seeking ways of renewing their spiritual life” and being in constant “union with God”. Thus, they position their commitment as a way of “seeing God in everything”, honouring, loving and praising God in everything they do. Some participants experience their commitment as being imitators of Jesus Christ. These participants expressed that this commitment means living the life that Jesus lived in the gospel. In this way they attempt to replicate Jesus’ life in its suffering and victory. Some of the participants postulate that it is the way they handle matters that delineates them as committed religious. For example, this extract from a diocesan participant expresses:

*I think the great thing is the way we handle situation ... I think for Christ it wasn't smooth ... he was humbled; he was trashed, he received all sort of treatment but the way he handled these things were the things that lifted him today. He was exonerated; he was lifted up so our life is also like that.*

In this extract the participant presents the religious as replicating the life of Christ. She uses the collective pronoun “we” to establish the fact that all religious as a group of people do and ought to handle each “situation” as Christ did. The word “situation” points to the list of ill-treatments that Christ received but was able to triumph over, likewise are the lives of all religious (so our life is also like that). In other words, she uses the Christian discourse of a triumphant suffering servant to explain the life of Christ which the committed religious is expected to reproduce. Thus all religious are committed to imitating Christ’s suffering which creates the space for experiences of victory, although it is not just I but “we”.

Some participants used the discourse of faithfulness to congregational spirituality to explain their experience of commitment. They expressed that they live faithfully to the congregational norms and values. In this manner some participants constantly present themselves as follows: “I-as a daughter” (DDL sister) who is called to share divine love in the world; “I-as a daughter” who practises practical charity; and “I-as Holy Child sister” who lives by mother founder’s saying “be yourself and let that self be what God wants it to be”, “I-as Holy Child sister” who was taught that obedience goes with responsibility, therefore I dialogue with superiors over instructions given. In addition some participants use the collective positions of “we-as daughters founded to love” and “we-as Holy Child sisters who treat each other as a princess”.

#### *6.4.7 Position of Love/Loving*

The findings show that a number of the participants used “I-as loved” as an available position to construct identity. In the narratives some of the participants constantly expressed that they



have experienced love in relation to God and many others, which includes some formators/superiors, sisters in the community, spiritual directors, members of their families-of-origin, and the people of God that they encounter in the apostolate. According to the participants' narratives "God's love" is multifold and has been experienced in different relationships with others. A typical way in which many of the participants present their experience of love is embedded in the discourses of 'good relationships' which they described as supportive, encouraging, caring and affirmative. A number of participants reported that they have experienced supportive relationships in which they have been encouraged to be the best of who they are; in this way, these participants cite examples of having been affirmed by others who acknowledge them for having different abilities such as "I-as musical", "I-as hard working", "I-as charitable", "I-as loving others", "I-as friendly", "I-as sociable", "I-as happy even in the face of a difficult task". There are some participants who even express that the love they experience from others has facilitated growth within them. In this manner some of the participants indicate that they have been helped to overcome some of their weaknesses. For example, some participants talk about having been helped to "stop crying too much", "be assertive", "be less hot-tempered", and "listen" more. Some participants elaborate in the narratives that loving relationships experienced in the community are steeped in the trust that they receive and share with others. In other words, the participants emphasise that the experience of love is a transformative experience. This extract from a participant from the international congregation gives us some details:

*I encountered a sister ... whom I saw to be very simple, welcoming and a woman who is full of love and interested in other people. She journeyed with me and part of what also helped me ... is the encouragement that she gave to me ... I am a hot tempered person u::m very hot tempered and sometimes I am very impatient when things are not you know straight but with time now that is actually ... reducing-let me say it that way. So now I can listen more to people. I can see you know their ... point of view, not*

*holding-on that this is the way I am seeing it and that's how it is ... with my experience now I give people time, that is what I have seen happening ... that I do a lot of listening not just coming out you know very hard. So I find that very-very healthy because more sisters are drawn to me ...*

In this extract, the participant positions herself as someone who has been transformed by the experience of a loving relationship with another. She described the sister she encountered as “simple, welcoming, and full of love”; and significantly this sister has helped and encouraged her to tone down her hot temperament. The experience of love has modulated the move toward being patient. It has also created the space for her to experience herself as a listener in comparison to the old self that was domineering (coming out ... very hard). She emphasises that “with time” her hot temperament and impatient self is “reducing”. The expression “with time” gives insight to the temporal dimension of the change experienced while the word “reducing” and the phrase “not holding-on” in connection to the experiences of love are indicators of the space that has opened up in her.

In addition, there are some participants who used the discourse of empathy to present their experiences of having loved others and having received love from others. In this way, they reported that they have received and have equally shared with others the pain of mourning the death of loved ones. Some participants told stories of how they travelled to far and distant places to be with other sisters or friends who are mourning and they describe the zeal impelling them to act in such manner as love. A number of participants claimed that the services they render in community are examples of experiences of love. In this light some participants expressed that their experience of shared life results in them helping one another with laundry, cooking and cleaning, and they describe all these activities as acts of shared love and charity. Also, there are some participants who told stories of how they experienced love when others take time to find out how they are faring.

However, there is another side to the coin; some participants emphasised that their experiences have been that of lack of love and care. Thus, they present themselves with “I-as not loved” and “I-as uncared for”; these sisters told stories of how they experience neglect, envy, jealousy and unhealthy competition; further discussion on these aspects will be addressed under positions of disappointment. Another common rendition of participants as “I-as not loved” flows from their experiences of lack of trust and segregation which they describe, that sometimes manifest themselves in the existence of cliques present among sisters. Hence, some participants have experienced exclusion in their relationships with some sisters.

#### *6.4.8 Position of Disappointment*

Numerous participants used the experiences of disappointment to describe the pain, humiliation, rejection, segregation, abandonment and the hurt they encounter in their relationship with others, especially with superiors/formators, senior/older sisters and the priests. A majority of participants describe these experiences as a common feature of their lived reality of religious life. In this sense some participants told different stories of their interactions which abound with examples of humiliation; for example, a participant from the diocesan congregation recounted how her superior makes her kneel down and beats her. Some participants claim that what they have discovered is that in religious life people are not living “saintly lives” as they thought before they entered. They compare the experiences within the space of religious life to that of their families-of-origin, emphasising that relationships in religious life make them “suspicious of one another”, and presented themselves as not relaxed. Some participants present experiences of religious life which are in opposition to the ethics of human care, love, understanding and support. A typical example is that of their cultural values of “oneness” and “hospitality” which they maintain is often

smothered by religious practices. In line with this some participants told stories of how they were not allowed permission to visit and console families or friends who are mourning. This extract from a participant from the international congregation gives us a detailed explanation:

*I have not forgotten it ... it is so difficult that I couldn't attend funeral of a friend and is because my superior said this is it and never listened to me ... She said you are not going-we are starting our triduum. So if we are serving God ... and a sister or a friend is bereaved, I cannot go and say to my friend that is bereaved sorry we are praying with you-take heart! So what sort of prayer is that? ... I was very sad and disappointed that I never said anything again after that. I just stopped at that first reaction because I said >what is the point< the funeral was over. I wanted to be there for the funeral and I couldn't go, so I didn't ask for any permission again e::m I just left it at that point. So by the time I went to see the woman it was more than five months later-that I never needed any permission-permission. I went for shopping in Enugu so from there I went to the woman's house to greet her but I didn't say anything I just, you know prayed with the family and came back.*

The participant in this extract experiences moments of sadness and disappointment which emerged in her relationship with the superior who prevented her from enacting her human care. This superior denied her the opportunity to attend the funeral of a friend's son. The participant felt hurt by this experience and describes it as unforgettable, which by extension depicts the amount of pain and meaning this experience holds for her. To put it in other words, she is pained by it which depicts how significantly it has impacted on her sense of self.

#### *6.4.9 Position of Obedience*

The findings reveal that the majority of participants draw on the discourse of religious obedience to express their joyful response to listening and doing God's will. Both from the interview data and field notes, participants claim that their obedience is in relation to God, whose will they seek to do at all times. To this effect a number of participants describe

obedience to God as a discernment process in which they dialogue with God over whatever God is asking them to do. Alongside this self-positioning as obedient, a number of participants articulate that some formators/superiors, senior/older sisters and priests use this very same discourse of religious obedience to position them as subordinate or subservient. In other words, some of the participants highlight that the discourse of obedience to God is used to coerce them into obeying orders, especially unreasonable orders, from formators/superiors and/or senior/older sisters. Some of participants lament that this religious obedience smothers their sense of humanity. In this regard, many participants told stories of experiences where superiors/formators or senior/older sisters have used obedience to relegate their voices to the background. To a large extent many participants emphasise that such positions of silencing and subordination in the guise of obedience has been their common experience, an experience in which they are not allowed to speak or contribute an opinion in matters concerning them. For example, this extract from a participant from the international congregation explicates further how a religious community has been positioned by the superior as subordinate:

*... in this house it is only fish we will be eating, no meat and if you are going to eat meat it must be only on Sundays ... it's a health issue but YOU (superior) because you want it: fish others must eat. So it must be eaten the time you want it to be eaten and the money budget is ... meant for the whole community and not for you alone but the fact that you feel that you are the head or the local leader, so that must come from you. So whether we like it or not, this is what I have said and in many instances >she came across like this is how I want it and that's how it should be<.*

In this extract the participant deliberates on how the superior (head or the local leader) has positioned the whole community as subordinate in dictating what must happen. The superior declares that the community must eat fish except on Sundays, and no space is given to the community to contribute their own opinion. In other words, the superior is drawing on the discourse of obedience to subject the community to instances of subordination. The

participant portrays this saying that the superior positions herself as having power (because ‘you feel that you are the head’) consequently she (superior) positions the community to “this is how I want it and that’s how it should be”. In this way the community’s voice is smothered and submerged. This is a shared experience of the community as many participants have reported that often superiors/formators behave this way, particularly when the members of the community are temporarily professed sisters. However, some participants stressed that they have refused to cooperate with such commands and respond by resisting and being confrontational. On the contrary, there are some participants who have opted to strategically cooperate with this submissive positioning whilst on a temporary basis, waiting to become finally professed to begin asserting themselves. For instance, this extract from a participant from the diocesan congregation shows how temporarily professed sisters are conditioned to multiple experiences of being subservient, submissive and pretenders:

*... take for example that this cup is to be used by two people okay. This cup is to be used by two people and you find out that ... it will only do for one not two people okay! If you ... decide to go in and bring one more cup and give it to the other person so that it will be enough for two people. Then questions must follow it, the way people (superiors) will interpret it. They will involve u::hm your obedience there, they will involve everything there and woe betide you if you’re a temporarily professed sister. So it will make you tomorrow even if there is anything they say that you should do; even if you know it is not good, you will do that one, let them not say I do-oh! No I will do that one they said-oh! So it is just the way people think and are treated that is causing all these things.*

In this extract the participant notes how she and other temporary professed sisters have been socialised into submission. They are treated as people who should have no initiative and should consequently never take any independent action. Whatever they do whether good or otherwise attracts the superior’s interrogation (question), therefore, they (particularly temporary professed) learn to abide by what the superior says even if they disagree. Clearly she emphasised that this kind of situation has “obedience” as an underlying factor. In this

way obedience is presented as a double-edged sword stretched between commitments to God versus control by superiors. A number of participants shared similar stories of their struggles with this kind of obedience.

On the whole a great majority of participants highlighted that they have encountered such obedience, in which they felt controlled by formators/superiors, and have been humiliated, demeaned and suppressed. This is contradictory from the ideals of obedience as an expression of commitment to God. However, there is a significant difference with regards to participants' response to such obedience. Among the participants from the international congregation there is a notable resistance to obedience from subordinates, which is different from responses from participants from the diocesan congregation. A number of participants from the diocesan congregation describe that they collaborate with any kind of obedience, seeing submission to all demands of obedience as obeying God. In this manner numerous participants among the diocesan congregation maintained that even when they feel and think that the superior has made a wrong decision they would still obey it because "the superior has the grace of office" which enables her to interpret God's message.

Despite this fact, the temporary professed sisters in the diocesan congregation observed that their response to such "obedience" is different is that as soon as they become finally professed, at which point they would resist some forms of obedience. On the contrary, most participants from the international congregation emphasise the fact that obedience goes with discernment and responsibility. In this way, the majority of participants from the international congregation claimed that they would engage obedience through "dialogue" in which case both parties are expected to hear each other out, and make an effort to see what God is really asking for in the situation. In other words, some participants from the international

congregation claim that they would resist obedience that makes them irresponsible or that positions them as unaccountable.

#### *6.4.10 Position of Anger*

A number of participants used the discourse of anger to describe their experience of being positioned as subordinate. Some of the participants present themselves as angry in relation to formators/superiors and/or senior/older sisters who subordinate, oppress or subjugate them. They become angry when others take advantage of them, treat them as puppets and pawns or manipulate and undermine them. One of the typical ways some of the participants experienced being taken advantage of is when superiors/formators or even senior/older sisters deny them (participants) the opportunity to express themselves, particularly regarding issues that involve them personally. Some participants reported that in such situations they are treated as ‘nobodies’ without a voice and with disrespect for their human person. In this manner these participants express that some important decisions have been made concerning them without any consideration being given to their own opinion. For instance, this extract from an older participant from the diocesan congregation gives us some details:

*I was ... ordered to leave that office and drop the key immediately, and get ready for my reassignment ... I was so angry ... that I was, you know, not given opportunity to be heard ... but rather was pushed out.*

In this extract the participant presents herself as angry on being forcefully removed from the office. She indicates that she was not consulted but was simply ordered to leave the office and leave the key. She was angry because she was not given an opportunity for her voice to be heard and expected to be docile and compliant. She maintains that she was overwhelmed with anger. Generally, the position of anger is a common experience that appears in most of the participants’ narratives. A number of participants, whether young, older or even some formators/superiors, have use the discourse of anger to share stories about their lived



experiences of religious life, and in some situations some participants claim that they are not just angry but bitter. In this way, they present themselves as agonising over the experiences of their lived reality of religious life, experiences which have led many participants to positions of disappointment as already discussed.

#### *6.4.11 Position of Self-determination*

A number of participants assume the discourse of self-determination to report that they are never going to give up trying to be the best they can be. In this manner, many participants present themselves as having a good sense of purpose, filled with courage and fortitude to persevere in achieving their goal of being faithful religious. Some participants even position themselves as conscientious and reliable religious. As a result, they are assiduously working towards making the best of every situation as they strive to be and give their best. One of the typical ways some participants position themselves within the discourse of determination is based on taking care of themselves through self-appreciating and working toward achieving their own happiness. For instance, one young participant from the international congregation elaborates that she has learnt that nobody makes her happy or sad:

*I already believe that nobody makes me happy. This is what my directress has been telling me; that it is me, that if I want to be happy= I will be happy. >That nobody makes me happy and if I want to be angry, then I will be angry<. So I have already learnt this and I am still learning to grow in it—nobody makes me angry or happy; all of that depends on my choice. So most of the times when things happen I always ask myself why I am getting angry with this, must I-I?*

In this extract the participant positions herself as not relying on anybody for happiness. She resorts to self for her happiness or sadness. Vividly, she claims that she is the one that controls her own emotional state although at times there are situations where she comes close

to being angry based on what others have done. In this way, she positions herself as taking care of herself in exclusion to her relationship with others in the community.

#### *6.4.12 Position of Fear of the Future of Religious Life*

There is a special position which is expressed as fear of the future of religious life, particularly in Africa. Some participants present themselves as afraid of what the future of religious life in Africa will be in the next 10 to 15 years. These participants feel strongly that some new entrants into religious life are losing their focus. Indeed, they maintain that there are many sources of distraction in society that are causing new members to lose focus but also interfering with the whole structure of religious life. This extract from an older participant from the diocesan congregation tells us more about this theme:

*You know sometimes especially at this point in time where the world has gone ... the younger ones don't even understand us any longer. Even those who have come to be with us in the religious life, you discover that they have ... set up their own kind of what do I call it now ... their own context, a whole set up of new agenda so that we don't even speak the same language. You understand, yah, we don't speak the same language ... you listen to them speaking and doing their own things you discover that there is a generation gap and they are certain things we normally value like in my own time they tell you sister forget about it ... So I hope there is going to be a bridge sort of intervention in this life.*

In this extract the participant articulates that there is a gap between the older and younger religious and she proffers that this generation gap needs to be addressed. There are some participants who reported that some religious are distracting themselves by engaging in private business enterprises such as buying shares or furnishing their rooms with private possessions, like fridges and televisions, which is contrary to religious life as a shared life of owning property together. In addition, some participants used the discourse of globalisation and its influence to portray their fear *vis-à-vis* the future of religious life. In this sense, these

participants uphold that post-modernity facilities like cell phones are a source of distraction for the religious.

In conclusion the participants' narratives have shown evidence of multiple available positions that the participants engage with in constructing religious identity. Some of these positions are in relation to significant others whom the participants encounter in their day-to-day lived experiences of religious life. These significant others include God, superior/formators, senior/older sisters, other members of the community including the participants' colleagues at work places, priests in the Church and wider Nigerian society. Based on the participants' narratives these available positions sometimes arise from the participants' own self-positioning and at other times are due to how these significant others position them. On the whole there are some congruencies between self-positioning and self-as positioned by others. However there are some contradictions between some participants' self-positioning and self-as positioned by others.

#### 6.5 Question 3: What Are the Available Gender Related Positions and How Do They Impact on Construction of Religious Identity?

The participants' narratives indicate that they have multiple gender-related positions which impact on religious identity construction. The participants claim that their gendered positions are based on the Church's patriarchal concepts which position men as higher in worth than women. Some participants report that the Church's gendered construct is also informed by Nigerian cultural worldview, which positions women as inferior to men. They argue that women in the Church and religious life are positioned as "second class" in comparison to priests who are considered superior on the basis of gender. In other words, the Church's gender constructs position Catholic religious sisters as subordinate to men and the participants report that they feel suppressed and oppressed. The participants' claims of being

suppressed and oppressed are based them being denied opportunities for full participation in the Church's leadership. In fact, some of the participants report that they are treated as unmerited workers whose contributions are not recognised, and most of the time they are excluded from the Church's decision-making processes. As a result many participants report that they struggle with the gendered position in which they are placed.

However, a great majority of participants position themselves as working slavishly in opposition to the Church's gendered construction of them as background/underground workers. Unfortunately, some of the participants lament that though women (sisters) are victims of the Church's gendered construct, they also postulate that some sisters are to some extent perpetrators of their own adversities. Based on the participants' multiple gender-related positions the findings are presented using the following positional themes of inferiority, exclusion, background/exploited workers, independent/hard workers and victims/perpetrators.

#### *6.5.1 Position of Inferiority*

A fair number of participants claim that the Church's gender construct positions them as inferior in comparison to the priests who are positioned as superior and they observed that this undermines their sense of self. Many of the participants report that the Church's hierarchical structure privileges priests because as men they are placed in positions of authority. In this way the participants claim that they are positioned as subordinate and are often considered subordinate to priests. In this regard some participants using the discourse of priest as clergy, report that some priests because they are clerics in the Church take advantage of their position to deride sisters, particularly when a sister is placed above the priest in the office (ministry). For instance, this participant from the diocesan congregation in this extract emphasises that priests do not like to take instruction from sisters:

*At times it is not too easy to work with <sup>o</sup>some priest<sup>o</sup> and more so if your office is such that maybe ... there're some priest that are supposed to be under you ... somehow because of the work you are doing not really that they are under you but your position. At times it is not very easy because like men they are meant to head or be leaders or whatever they call themselves and so ... that was the challenges I think I actually have working ... here in this-this secretariat (Catholic National secretariat). Hum-m it is not easy working with some of the priest ... because if you want to just do your work they feel that you are showing superiority and they don't want to accept it and the tendency is just to press you down (knocks on the tables to demonstrate) ... whatever that will make you feel that you are above them—they try all they could to make sure they suppress you.*

In this extract the participant articulates that some priests position themselves as superior simply because they are men, who in terms of gender stereotype are meant to be the head. In other words, this participant emphasises that sisters in particular are meant to be subordinate to the priest. Therefore, sisters whose office is on a par with some priests, encounter some opposition from some of these priests who resist taking any instructions from a sister/woman. They assume that as priests/men they have the Church's mandate to supervise and control others, especially women, and refuse to accept any form of supervision by any other person, particularly women. Therefore, these sisters find themselves in a position of major conflict. They face the experience of being positioned as inferior by priests/men who are appointed to lead, simply on the grounds of gender.

Some of the participants even claim that some priests position sisters as non-entities or as domestic workers in the parish house, although some participants refuse to take up this position. This participant from the diocesan congregation recalls how a priest has positioned sisters as domestic parish workers:

*Religious women are regarded as nothing that even a priest told us that our funct-ION↑ should be ... our function is to be working in the parish house (.4) cooking for him, mopping his rooms, you know, just like house help, you know. That is what we-e are supposed to do ...*

This participant report vividly portrays that some priests position sisters as domestic workers simply on the basis of gender. In some sense it mirrors how the women's body has been used to define the kind of job they should do; they are constructed as designated to doing household chores.

### 6.5.2 *Position of Exclusion*

The participants reported that their experience of exclusion from the Church's activity is multiple. Some participants reported being excluded from the Church's leadership and decision-making on the grounds of gender. Accordingly, they claim that they have been relegated to the background when it comes to decision-making. As a result they feel cut-off or positioned as unimportant members in the Church, who only have a hidden presence in the Church. For instance, this participant from the international congregation says:

*I think if you look at the Church and religious women, I think they put us aside a bit ... they really don't carry us along with the priest. I think they see us as a second class ... the priest first and after the sisters can be considered ... they don't involve the sisters at all like the diocese where I'm working presently. They (priests and the parishioners) don't know if the sisters exist, if there is meeting, you will not hear-if the meeting is tomorrow they just call us today to say there is meeting tomorrow.*

In this extract the participant details briefly how sisters are excluded from full participation in the Church on the basis of gender, which makes them feel sidelined. Some participants also report that they have experienced exclusion in times of celebration when refreshments are made available for only the priests (field notes). In this way the participants feel excluded. These participants experience this exclusion on the basis that the Church ignores them as women but gives privileges and gifts to the priests expecting them in turn to share with the sisters what they receive. For example, this participant from an international congregation emphasises on how sisters are excluded when gifts are given:

*The only thing is that the people (parishioners) don't recognize sisters ... when they are doing things or giving gifts they don't ensure that what they give to the priest also get to the sisters. In that aspects yes, the religious women are not recognized. Often times they think that the priests always share with the sisters what they are given but they don't know that what they give to the priest don't get to the sisters ... So they don't really give things like that to the sisters ... I think it may be due to the fact that men are always taken to be more important than women. It is part of our culture, so even in the Church people still believe that men first before women; so the priest first before the sisters. So they believe that when they give to the priest he in turn will give some to the sisters. It is all about a man's world.*

In this extract the participant states that women religious are not “recognized” when the Church gives gifts to priests. The use of the word “recognized” in this context refers to the fact that sisters are excluded. She identified the reason for overlooking sisters is based on gendered assumption about the greater importance of men in the Church. This is further fuelled by cultural construct that positions men as more important than women.

### *6.5.3 Position of Background Workers*

A number of participants used the concept of background workers to describe their experience of gendered position in the Church. Many of the participants report that they are positioned by the Church's gender construct as background workers which is in direct opposition to their self-positioning as hard workers, who are actively engaged with primary assignments (apostolate), as well as contributing immensely to the Church's pastoral ministry particularly in terms of teaching catechism, organising altar girls, visiting the sick, counselling, organising various pious group meetings and running basic Christian community meetings. In fact the majority of participants maintained that they are at a disadvantage as far as the Church's gendered constructs are concerned because the services they render are not recognised; instead, they are positioned as background as well as underground workers. As a result the participants report that they sometimes feel like workers behind the scenes unlike

the priest who merely says Mass yet takes all the glory for the work done. For example, this participant from the international congregation expresses:

*... you know from growing up and all that; the Catholic Church-there is this high hierarchy in the Church and sometimes I ask myself where is the place of the Religious? I realized that there is no place ... for the religious sisters. We are just there as lay people ... We do a lot of underground work – we teach catechism, marriage courses, visiting homes, some places we run basic Christians community.*

In this extract the participant explains that the basis on which the religious sisters are positioned as background workers stems from the fact that the Catholic Church's structure is hierarchical, and because of their gender, women are not part of this hierarchy. Thus religious sisters as women fall outside the Church's hierarchical status and are instead recognised and recognisable as lay members of the Church. In addition a number of participants indicated that some priests see the work they do in the Church as a form of competition or suspect the sisters want to become priests. To this effect, a number of participants shared stories of how some priests are fond of denigrating sisters by telling them they don't know anything. In response some participants claim that they try to do their work in the Church in the background and take up a position of complacency and cooperate in positioning themselves as background workers. For instance, this extract from a participant from the international congregation addresses this theme:

*Well, I happen to be teaching in a Catholic school and I also work in the Chaplaincy and because of my experience when I was a full time parish worker I try to do my work here at the background. I want to concentrate more on the catechist and leave the running of the chaplaincy to the priest, though not totally but the things I can do-I will do. But leave the major things, decisions, and dates for things to the priest.*

In this extract the participant presents herself as a background worker due to her own self-positioning resulting from her previous experiences as a full-time parish worker. She thus



cooperates in remaining a worker behind the scenes who leaves the priest to make all the major decisions. In a sense the gender-related position has impacted on her sense of self by making her accept the position of background worker.

#### *6.5.4 Position of Exploited Workers*

Some participants used the position of exploited workers to describe their experiences of the inadequate remuneration they receive for the work they do. The participants report that they are the ones who do all the work that the priests don't deem important, such as teaching catechism, organising the youths/altar girls and doing all kinds of sacristan work. Some participants mention that sisters are not even given any specific jobs to do in the Church but rather that they choose to do these categories of work in the Church which constitute the different aspects of working for God. On the other hand, the Church does not even consider providing for the material needs of the sisters who labour with their energy on her behalf. Some participants emphasise that the Church even neglects to provide them with means of transportation. These participants maintained that they have to dig into their meagre resources to pay for transportation which they consider unfair. For example, this participant from the diocesan congregation elaborates further:

*In the church you know the women religious are not given specific work to do; you can only teach catechism which they don't pay you for >the Church don't care about religious women< I mean in Nigeria all together because sharing with others, you see it is the same thing everywhere ... nowhere does the Church take care of women religious ... but if is a priest he will come from here to there they will fuel the car. Okay (.) they are more ... taken care of than religious women – that's what my experience so far have been.*

In this extract the participant positions herself and other women religious as a group that is not taken care of by the Church in comparison to the priest who is adequately provided for. She raised her voice when expressing her point about the Church caring less about religious

sisters than priests. She postulates that this is a common experience for all women religious in Nigeria which she presents as being based on gender-related positions. Consequently, the participant sees self as an exploited worker.

#### 6.5.5 *Position of Independent/hard Workers*

A fair number of participants position themselves as becoming independent of men. They claim that as a social group women are working hard toward self-liberation and empowerment. Some participants used the discourse of self-development to portray how women are equipping themselves with professional skills enabling them break away from dependence on men. In accordance some participants applauded sisters that are studying theology, sciences, medicine, and engineering, something they never did in the past. Thus the participants positioned themselves as women who are redefining themselves. On the other hand, some participants describe how their congregations are beginning to build their own projects which they run by themselves. Consequently, they no longer depend on diocesan projects for work, where priests subject them to second class positions and pay them small salaries. For instance, this extract from a participant from the diocesan congregation gives us further insight:

*... you know in our own set-up here (culture) ... women are always at the background and it is also in the Church. In own my experience ... the priest ... take the precedence of everything. It is ... of recent that you see us (sisters) ... we are beginning to establish ourselves ... because if we allow them (priests) you see they like fathers ... would like to keep us under their control ... in my own congregation now: we try not to depend on them any longer ... they would like us to work for them so that they will give us this and that ... they determine the salary they pay but now↑ we try to open our own so we don't depend on them because it is like in a home the wife is under the husband like this (uses the hand to demonstrate smallness). So, they want to husband us in that way down here but we say No↑. We are trying to, you know; go beyond that which they want us ...*

In this extract this participant explains how sisters as a group are beginning to assert themselves through self-development making them less dependent on the priests who would prefer to control and pay them small salaries. She identified this position as a shared social position within the corporate identity of the congregation. In other words, sisters are rising up to the challenge of redefining who they ought to be. In this way the majority of the participants position themselves not only as independent of men but also hard working and competent. This participant from the international congregation expresses:

*But all I know is that I am working for God and Him alone. You see sisters go to prisons and give retreats though some people still do not recognise us but it has not stopped us from doing our work. We are conscientious workers; so we have to participate fully in the mission of Christ and for me that is what is important.*

This participant argues that religious sisters are working for God and as such give their best service to the people of God, irrespective of whether they are recognised or not. She describes religious sisters as hard workers, who participate fully in the mission of Christ, which she describes as the essential reason for them serving the people.

#### 6.5.6 *Position of Victims/Perpetrators*

A number of participants present themselves as well as other women religious as both victims and perpetrators of their own adversities. In this sense they claim that the Church's gendered order has humiliated them, but on the other hand they have also contributed in a myriad of ways in keeping their victimisation alive. For instance, this participant from the diocesan congregation gives an example of how women religious ascribe a position of leadership to the priest while relegating themselves as subordinate:

*... there was a sister who attended the Association meeting of priest and sisters' in her town and came back to share with me that they were looking ... for somebody to be a president and the person has to be a priest. I asked her if it must be a priest. Can't it be a sister she said >No< That it has to be*

*a priest so that he will be able to organize them. I said for What? can't a woman organize you, so this is our mentality and for me ... it is not because a woman cannot also ... take up that position of organizing the meeting and sometimes even do it better. But we have been socialized into thinking we cannot and we accept it without questioning ... as far as I am concerned whether it is a woman or a man the important thing is that this person can do it ... that is how I look at it.*

In this extract the participant articulates the fact that sometimes women religious undermine their own status as women because they do not believe that their capacity is equal to men's. She proposes that she would rather look at individual abilities when selecting a leader instead of presupposing that a man can do it better, although she argues that the socialisation process in society has contributed to such situation where women see themselves as incapable in comparison to men. By asking the interrogative question "for what?", she expresses surprise that women are compliant in defining themselves as incompetent in comparison to men and she argues that women should not give men undue advantage over them and, if they do, they position themselves as collaborating with the gendered discourses which construct them as subordinates to men. Therefore it can be considered that they are playing the victim as well as the perpetrator game.

Furthermore, some participants expressed that some women religious are perpetrators of their own prejudice due to inadequate education. Some participants argue that there are some women religious who entered religious life with minimum qualifications, such as a school certificate and since their initial formation have not been given opportunities for further studies. These participants maintained that these women religious need to be equipped academically in order to further develop their minds. They argue that in so doing they would be equipped for mission as well as be abreast with world issues, including ethical issues of gender. For instance this participant from the international congregation says:

*... unfortunately some religious particularly women are not well educated ... some just entered with school cert and they profess them after formation and since then no one has sent them to further schooling ... so they act with the little knowledge they have ... as such some of us are ignorant of what is happening in/and around us ... I will encourage the religious women-the superiors to look into the life of their sisters and see how they can up-grade everybody ...*

This participant argues that on the basis of gender religious sisters are not well educated, therefore she advocates that sisters need to receive further education in order to enhance their self-development toward equipping them suitably for the services they render. She proposes that those sisters who have the minimum academic qualification of secondary school certificate (“school cert”) should be given an opportunity to develop themselves further.

Generally, participants seem to share a lot in common with regard to the gender-related positions. There does not seem to be a clear distinction between how temporary professed, finally professed or formators and superiors describe their gender positions. In the narratives participants seem to re-echo with one accord that they have experienced subordination as a result of the Church’s gendered discourse which positions them as subservient, background members and exploited workers. In response the majority of the participants position themselves as independent and hard-working members of the Church whose services need to be acknowledged.

#### 6.6 Question 4: What Are the Available Culture Related Positions and Their Impact on the Construction of Personal/Religious Identity?

The results reveal that participants have multiple cultural I-positions. On the one hand some participants expressed identification with Africa’s worldview of interdependence which has helped them to live religious communal life effectively. They argued that the love and care they shared within the African cultural setting has facilitated their relationships with others

within the context of living religious life. But on the other hand, there are some participants who position themselves as experiencing difficulty identifying with some aspects of Africa's cultural worldview, particularly in areas of hospitality, love and care. These participants positioned themselves as longing to identify with Africa's way of life in terms of hospitality, care and love, which they claim are composite of religious life's ideal characteristics based on the gospel values of communion with one another, embedded in close relationships of mutual love, care, respect, support and hospitality. They reported that religious life in its lived reality is individualistic where the drive for personal autonomy is the norm, which they claim is in congruence with Western culture. As a result the participants encounter the challenge of incorporating Africa's worldview into their lived realities of religious life. Further, some participants pointed out that Africa's gender construct positions women as inferior to men, which they claim impacts on their development and performance of identity. Based on the participants' culture I-positions the theme of communion expressed through love, care/support, and hospitality, and also gender construction of women as subordinates to men are used in presenting the findings.

#### *6.6.1 Participants' Identification with Africa's Culture of Love and Care/Support*

A number of participants used the discourse of communion to describe African culture which they observed is conveyed through love, care and support shared with one another. They claim that these cultural characteristics also mirror the ideal culture of religious life based on the gospel values and the spirituality of their congregations. Some participants' reports reveal that they position themselves in identification with Africa's cultural characteristic of mutual love, care and support which they claim has helped them live the communal aspect of religious life effectively. For example, one participant from the diocesan congregation says:

*I believe that, you know, in Africa we live together and we have all these extended family. We care much about our brothers, our sisters and even if your sister is thirty years-forty years and is not married she is still a member of the family-nobody will push her away. So, the fact that we live together in families I think it is also helping us in living out religious life. It is one of the things that are actually helping us-African sisters to live together...*

This participant positions herself and other African religious sisters as living religious life effectively based on Africa's cultural characteristic of care and love shared in their family-of-origin including the extended family. She argues that Africa's relational characteristic has helped them as African sisters to live religious communal life efficiently. Another participant reiterates:

*I think the identity of oneness we find in our society (Nigerian society) is supposed to feature effectively in our religious life ... and that is what is helping us live our religious life.*

This participant still emphasises that the "identity of oneness" found in society (Nigeria) helps the sisters live religious life effectively. Some participants report that the services they render to one another in the community have both cultural and religious undertones; they argue that on the one hand it is based on the gospel value of extending God's love to others, and at the same time it reflects the cultural values they have been socialised into. For example, this participant from the international congregation says:

*It is part of our culture and also religious responsibility to help one another. Take for example when somebody wash and hang her clothes on the line we mustn't wait for the person to be the one to bring them in. In this way we share the love of Christ with one another.*

This participant's report points to the fact that religious life and Nigerian culture share something in common; they both possess some relational characteristics which are helping sisters share love and care with one another. However, some participants maintain that African culture is silent in religious life. They argue that the ideal discourse of religious life

as communal lifeform has been influenced by other cultural characteristics where their foundation-of-origin was laid. In this case, a number of participants identified Western culture as having influenced the culture of religious life. Thus, these participants report that religious life presents a mixture of traditions including Christianity and the Western culture from where religious life was transmitted to Africa. One participant from the international congregation claims that the traditions which they practise are Western based:

*... when it comes to religious life the culture is Western base. In Africa's culture somebody's uncle or distance relation who dies is taken as a family member ... But in religious life if it is not your father, or your mother or your brother you are ... on your own. So looking at the two, I would say ... there are two different things.*

This participant observes that there is a distinction between the African and Western understanding of familial relations. She argues that Western cultural orientation restricts familial relations to members of the nuclear family, unlike the African worldview where family membership is extended to uncles, aunties etc. According to her the culture of religious life is Western; therefore, by implication the African religious struggles to incorporate her cultural values into lived expression of religious life. Her expression that “you are ... on your own” conveys the position of an African religious who lives with the paradox of subjugating her cultural values or encounters the conflict of mourning the death of extended family members in isolation. Similarly, some participants maintained that because Western culture is the dominant culture of religious life, they encounter individualism as a new cultural orientation which contradicts the ideal of being in communion with one another. In this sense the participants speak of how sisters in the community have appeared too busy and no longer have the space/time to socialise with each other in the evening, an experience which they claim helps them to relax, share stories and encourage each other. One participant from the international congregation says:



*Our community life is changing, people have learned to live on their own; no one cares for the other. We have become so much individualized based on the so called western culture ... We could count the number of times we come to eat together; recreation-people don't come again.*

This participant claims that religious community life has changed based on the influence of Western culture, in which she constructs sisters as becoming individualistic, with each person becoming isolated and aloof from others. She argues that sisters have no time/space to share with each other the communion of doing things together, such as eating together or socialising with one another, which she describes as “recreation”. She points out that such relational perspective is in contradiction to Africa’s cultural values of relatedness. Another participant from the diocesan congregation emphasises that Africa’s cultural value of communion is not reflected in religious life:

*We are lamenting that the Africa’s spirit of communion is lacking in religious life whilst it is very much alive in our culture ... so sad that we just want to be seen as individual cut off from others-aloneness is far becoming part of our life ... just me and that’s all ... sisters are finding it difficult to even tell others (sisters) what they are doing ... they just want to mind their own business.*

This participant argues that the African way of life particularly that of interdependence is often lacking in religious life. She points out that sisters are allowing individual interests to sway them from sharing communion with one another. By using the expression “we are lamenting”, she positioned herself as speaking on behalf of all religious representing the institute of consecrated life. In this case she employed the technique of ventriloquation, which Bakhtin (1981) describes as speaking with the collective voice of the group. In so doing she strengthens her argument emphasising that Africa’s cultural worldview of communion is sidelined in religious life. Another participant from the international congregation explains that there is need to blend Africa’s cultural worldview into religious life and assist African sisters adjust to accepting religious life as their new family:

*In Africa we identify with our families-not only immediate family but extended families ... So in religious life we really need to take time to understand African culture and place it where necessary into religious life. Take for instance our understanding of a brother or sister goes beyond your mother's child and sometimes this is not the same meaning given to it by our Western sisters. I would like to say we are people that love our extended family, we share oneness of life with others and the understanding is slightly different in religious life ... But now the problem we are having is that for some of us, maybe something is happening in our extended family and we want to go there and this is not always possible. There are many considerations in religious life; look at the financial situation or even your commitment in apostolate may not permit you to be present all the time. It might not just be possible to be going for the funerals of my aunty or uncle or all the above. Sisters will just have to learn how to let-go but that does not mean that when possible you cannot go and be with your family. Also, sisters should be made to understand that the congregation have become their new family too. Like some of us would like to go home to celebrate with our family during Christmas but we know that we have to celebrate with our religious family not natural family. So all these things we struggle with; sisters are going through this.*

Here this participant speaks clearly about the struggles surrounding the contradictions experienced as an African who lives religious life. On the one hand, African sisters' understanding of family relationships is different from that of their Western sisters. Therefore, she advocates that effort should be made to bridge this gap by identifying the different values in African culture and when/where possible transmit them into religious life. On the other hand, she urges the African sisters to adjust to the new demand of living in a religious community, particularly by re-orienting themselves to the new understanding that they cannot be with their families-of-origin (which by extension include their extended family) in celebrating all life events. But they should rather insert themselves appropriately into religious communities and accept the religious community as their new family. It is a challenge that can be handled if appropriate steps are taken.

### 6.6.2 *The African Cultural Worldview of Hospitality*

A good number of the participants used the discourse of hospitality to describe their experience of the warmth shown to visitors within African culture. These participants claim that in Africa's worldview hospitality is a value that is treasured, and they report how important it is that people are welcome warmly and cheerfully when they visit. They argued that visitors are blessings and whenever one visits, the visitor is cherished and often people share whatever they have no matter how small. For instance, this participant from the international congregation says:

*In our African culture except now that this phone is everywhere but in those days you (people) just get up and you are going to see your relation; you just carry yourself and go, and you're welcomed warmly. However they are living and they are sleeping there, you will join them and you know you're there to share love and joy.*

This participant argues that within the Africa context people visit their relations anytime they feel the need with or without informing the host about the intended visit. She further argues that both the visitor and the host accommodate each other and adjust to whatever living conditions they meet or have to offer. On the other hand, some participants identify that religious life's culture is not very open to receiving visitors. The participants report that in religious life they are often required to let their visitors notify the community before visiting, which is contrary to what is common within Africa's cultural setting. For example, this participant from the international congregation reports:

*If a family member is coming to the house (religious community) and the person didn't call to say I am coming. It is going to be a problem. You know you have to say that you are coming before hand. So that a room can be made and food prepared.*

This participant points out that hospitality in religious life requires that visitors notify the community about their intended visit, otherwise it will be problematic. In similar ways many

participants report that such situations have led their family members to stop visiting, even under emergency situations. Some of the participants lament such situations and this participant from the international congregation makes a suggestion:

*I would suggest that we in religious life should always make room for emergency ... may be a sister is travelling and ... is stranded somewhere and needs hospitality and remembers that we have a community around there ... would say let me run there ... or a family member remembers that my sister is in this congregation-then can always run there for hospitality. So, let her get the assurance that she ... would be welcomed ... we are Africans so let us make room for travellers who may stop by ... not just the situation where it is, that you have to or must inform the community. I'm not saying we shouldn't give information, you know, not that we shouldn't say it before hand but in case of emergence, I would suggest we be more welcoming to visitors ...*

In this extract the participant addresses the issue of religious community being more receptive towards visitors, particularly in emergencies. The constant use of the pronoun “we” seem like a deliberate intention which suggests the act of collective identification and speaking on behalf of other African religious.

Although the participants have multiple I-positions through which they express their culture identity, there is a dominant position which seemed to show that African's cultural values, especially those of interdependence conveyed through love, care, support and hospitality, have been undermined in religious life. Thus, many participants express the need to review such situations in an attempt to balance the difference.

### 6.6.3 Cultural Basis of Gendered Identity

A fair number of participants report that some of the gender ideology that is prevalent in the Church has cultural undertones; as such they blame some Nigerian gendered cultural constructs as informing the Catholic Church's gender norms and values.

*Nigerian gendered cultural construct of women as inferior to men*

Some participants argue that Nigeria's gender ideology is oppressive toward women. It seems they used the discourse of andocentric to describe how masculine-base-norm has been used to position women as unimportant in comparison to men. They claim that the same value system is what is common in religious life, which by extension reflects in the continual treatment and view of women as subordinate to men, particularly by the priests/bishops. The participants liken the Church's gendered order to the traditional African gender views, especially in the Ibo-Nigerian community, where the priestesses of the deities are subordinates of the priest who is always a man. They argued that such parallel positions have been transmitted into the Catholic Christian's worldview, stating that sisters must be subordinate to the priests. This participant from the diocesan congregation captures it clearly:

*... here in the East (Ibo land) ... the priest of the deities ... are really regarded highly by the people ... most of the time you see that this is what affects us ... the priest of a deity for the people is almost like another deity himself. Whatever he says has to be followed exactly as he says it. So I think that mentality is what we brought into Christianity, so that any time they see a priest whatever he does or whatever he says is the correct thing because this is what we have always had in our own traditional religion ... we are used to men being the priest of the deities and ... the women are just like helpers ... I don't know but I feel it also affects us in the Church too ... because that is the mentality that we carry with us before accepting the Christian religion, so it has affected some of us. It has entered our bodies and it is not easy to flush it out.*

In this extract the participant identifies and affirms that Nigerian cultural gendered order privileges men as being more important than women. Further, she argues that such gendered ordering has been transmitted into the Catholic Christian faith perpetuating the Church's gender positioning of women as subordinate to men. In her views, she describes the gender order of men as superior to women as 'mentality', depicting a particular way of thinking, which emerges as result of cultural socialisation.

Generally there is no significant difference among the participants' report of cultural positioning. The majority of the participants' cultural positions are similar and a number of them voice their concern over relegating their Nigerian cultural value of communion (including love, care and hospitality) to the background. On the other hand, many participants pointed out that religious life as institution complements the cultural patriarchal traditions which subjugate women to inferior positions in comparison to men and as such they are confronted with the constant dilemma of identity construction. As a result they identify with cultural values of communion but challenge the cultural gendered construct.

#### 6.7 Question 5: How Do Religious Sisters Construct Their Identity from Available Positions?

The findings reveal that there is a diversity of ways through which the participants construct identity. The participants predominantly perform identity of dependence on God. That means they position themselves as reliant on God. In this sense God is the most significant other in relation to whom they construct identity. A fair number of participants present their major dilemma of identity construction using the discourse of religious obedience, which is used as vehicle of oppression by superiors/formators, senior/older sisters and priests to position them as subordinates. In response the majority of the participants construct their religious identity by either resisting subordination or submitting to the subservient roles, subjugating their voice/interest to become passive.

The participants also use other means to construct identity, such as taking up different negotiation strategies proposed by Hermans and Hermans-Konokpa (2010) such as forming coalitions, using meta-positions and third-positions to engage with the multiple dilemmas they encounter in their intersubjective experiences of living religious life. By forming coalition the participants collaborate with other voices/characters including God, spiritual

directors, and members of their families-of-origin, who affirm and support them to manage and resolve the dilemmas they encounter. In using meta-positions the participants present themselves as reflecting on the different experiences and in the process come up with insights on how to manage and resolve the dilemmas they encounter. They also used third-positioning as a unifying position by reconciling opposing positions in order to manage their dilemmas of identity construction.

In presenting the different ways that the participants construct identity focus will be directed on their self positions as committed and dependent on God. The participants experience religious life as family, both as supportive and oppressive family. The participants use the discourse of religious obedience to report their experience of power relations and dominance in which they feel their sense of humanity is ridiculed by superiors. As a result the participants present their work of identity as a struggle for survival, and present themselves as angry and disappointed in religious life. In addition, the participants' experience of work in which they construct themselves as happy workers for God as well, is positioned by their religious leaders predominately as workers who should subjugate their commitment as religious to work. The Church's gendered constructions of women as inferior to men positions the participants as background or underground workers, which the participants oppose by strategically constructing themselves as competent and independent workers. Finally, the participants identify that Africa's cultural worldview, particularly the cultural values of hospitality, love and care, is sometimes missing in religious life.

#### *6.7.1 Participants' Construction of Self as Dependent and Committed to God*

The participants construct themselves as committed and dependent on God expressed through relationships of prayer and service. The majority of the participants position themselves as committed to God and they invest their energy into doing what God commands. On the other

hand participants also give account of the dilemma of being positioned by others (particularly superiors/formators and senior/older sisters) as subservient, who must obey and abide by what they are told, which they emphasise is often at variance with their commitment to God. In engaging with such experiences, the participants construct themselves as obedient to God and rooted in doing God's will rather than obeying instructions which subjugate their commitment. As a result the participants privilege their position of commitment as superseding obedience to any other (including all authority figures). Thus they construct commitment to God as their core identity, which invalidates and supersedes all other forms of control from others. This participant from the international congregation presents herself as disobeying a superior, who uses the discourse of religious obedience to detract her from doing what she sees as being God's will:

*A student was very sick ... in the school at about 7.30pm and some other students rushed to the house to call sisters; they were screaming that a student is dying. I ran out to see what the situation is and when I got there. I really saw that truly, that a student was really sick and I said Oh! We really need to do something. So, I rushed back to the house and I picked the car key and I ran out. But, then I remembered that oh! I have not said anything to the superior, so I went back. I went to her and said Sister, a student is very sick and I think she needs medical attention ... and she asked, so where am I going to? I said, I'm taking the girl to hospital but she said NO-O↑- where is the principal ... that I should drop the car key. Well! I stood there and looked at her and I went out and you know; I took the girl to the hospital.*

This participant encounters a conflict between taking the sick student to hospital, a gesture of service and commitment, and obeying the superior's command. By her definition the act of taking the sick student to hospital is charitable work performed as part of doing God's will but she was caught between the dilemma of obeying the superior's order which commands her to drop the car key. In resolving the dilemma she first employed what Hermans and Hermans-Konokpa (2010) describe as the act of self-consultation: that personal dialogue with



self as a way of exploring available options in order to come out with self-set best line of action. Her expression, “I stood there and looked at her”, was an act of self-consultation which embodied aspects of meta-position because it involved the process of assessing the situation. In that brief moment she internally made a resolution of what the best line of action was. Within that space, she resolved to go ahead to take the student to the hospital which was a sign of commitment to doing God’s will in opposition to the external position of obeying the superior’s command. She chooses to disobey the superior in order to obey God. Later in the interview data she noted that the superior defines her as “disobedient” which she did not mind because she is convinced “God will not see it the way she (superior) is seeing it.” The participant was not bothered by the superior’s definition of her as disobedient. In the interview data she reported that she is not worried about the superior’s definition of her as disobedient and here she says, “Yes let her continue to say I am disobedient but I know that I have saved someone’s life (act of perfect charity) and if it happens again I will do exactly just that.” The mere fact that she is resolved to disobey the superior in such matters shows that she is committed to doing God’s will, which for her is the best option in comparison to obeying an earthly superior. In this situation her preferred self-presentation is I-as obedient to God. As far as she was concerned God will not hold her action as an act of disobedience and in this way she aligns herself to God in order to invalidate the superior’s definition of her as disobedient. Thus commitment and dependence on God becomes the decisive motive influencing her self-construction in opposition to obeying the superior’s command.

In one sense her construction of identity was achieved through a multiplicity of positions: she was both disobedient and obedient, which is multi-voiced, reflecting the superior’s voice and her own voice intertwined with God’s voice. In relation to the superior she was disobedient but to God she was committed and obedient. That is to say, she combined the two opposing

positions: disobedient and obedient which reflects what Gregg (1991) describes as identity-in-difference, that process of combining ‘owned’ (belonging to me) and disowned (not belonging to me) positions into constructing a coherent sense of self. In this way she was able to construct a personal/religious identity by negotiating the contradiction and difference embedded in the superior’s positioning of her as disobedient while positioning herself as obedient and committed to God. That means she was able to construct a sense of unity out of mutual and opposing positions: the contradictory voice was allowed to be spoken and heard but through personal agency she constructs some level of continuity (stability) for herself.

#### 6.7.2 *Participants’ Construction of Identity as Belonging to Religious Life as both*

##### *Supportive and Oppressive Family*

A small but significant number of the participants position themselves as having enjoyed family support of love and care in religious life. They constantly talk of the care others (including superiors/formators, senior/older sisters and their mates) have shown them across the space and time of living religious life. They present the love and care they received as parallel to familial concerns they experienced in their families-of-origin. One participant from the international congregation positioned herself as having received love and care while she was recuperating from a car accident:

*I will never stop talking about the support I had when we had that terrible car accident. No member of my family ... I told all of them Nobody should come to-to see me because ... my sisters are taking good care of me and that was true, my sisters took care of me and I was very happy-I was very happy.*

This participant constructs herself as happy based on the experience of support and care she received when she was involved in a car accident. The amount of care and love she received from her sisters in the community was satisfying and she did not feel the need to ask members of her family-of-origin to visit. This experience is different for those of participants,

who construct themselves as having been abandoned by their religious community as family when they were sick or bereaved, which is contradictory to the experiences of love, care and support they receive from their families-of-origin. The experience of lack of care and love from fellow sisters which many participants have reported left them with emerging identity of insecurity (anxiety), making them feel unsure about whether they belong to religious life or to their families-of-origin. Strategically a fair number of participants positioned themselves as members of their families-of-origin rather than their religious community which was supposedly their new family. An older participant from the diocesan congregation captures the dilemma through which she navigates her sense of personhood with regard to her religious congregation that abandoned her in the course of recovering from sickness:

*there are certain things you expect that your people (family: both family-of-origin and religious communities) can do for you but when it comes to religious life it is not done that way ... take for example, here I am on a sick bed and I know my congregation is ... concerned about my health but there are certain times when you need somebody to stay with you they will tell you they can't find anybody and it is sort of they are looking for somebody to send and you ask yourself: are you sure that this is your family? If you look around you can see my sister...she has been here most of the time...spending her energy ... This one has left her work to come and stay with me... But a sister (religious) will be here and she will be asked to go for some other errands...or other meetings and she will tell you now it is her retreat. Oy-o! (Exclamation of surprise) You discover you have nobody you can lay your hands on ...it disturbs me ... If somebody is here with me it is part of healing unlike when you look around you don't see anybody ... You become stranded ... But I don't know because sometimes we don't interfere with= (religious life schedule) so you just take to your family ... So it makes me feel better ... I don't need more depression at this time of sickness. I hope you understand me ... my people are always there for me ... but in religious life they will just be there quite alright, they are sympathetic but they are very busy ha-ha-ha you understand.*

She presents the contradiction between religious life as family and her family-of-origin. She constructs herself as abandoned in religious life. In religious life there is no space for care and support particularly during moments of sickness unlike in her family-of-origin where

there is ample space for support all the time. She is conflicted between positioning herself as a member of her family-of-origin within religious life space but her experience of abandonment in religious life has privileged the former. By identifying with her family-of-origin she subjugates her membership of the religious family, thereby constructing an ‘outsider identity’, an experience that is commonly shared by many of the participants. She identified that it is the predominance of their work identity in religious life which has led many religious to have little or no time to care for each other. Another participant, a temporary professed from the international congregation, claims that she belongs to her family-of-origin not religious life:

*one thing I know is that ... in religious life we are not completely family, it is not accepted by everybody that we are one ... we're not really a family in the true sense ... we are not sisters ... though we call each other sister, everybody is acting on her own >unlike< in the family (of-origin) no matter what, you still know that you are one ... for me I know I belong to my family because they can never reject me but in religious life you are not sure what tomorrow will be.*

This participant constructs religious life as a space of uncertainty (insecurity): religious sisters are not truly sisters to one another. Based on this experience of knowing they are not sisters she traces her sense of belonging to her family-of-origin which presents a contradiction regarding the notion of religious life as family. She performs identity of belonging to her family-of-origin in opposition to belonging to religious life as family.

### *6.7.3 Participants' Construction of Identity Using the Discourse of Religious Obedience Revealing Power-play Relations/Dominance*

The majority of participants in constructing identity used the discourse of religious obedience to present their main challenge, where authority figures (such as superiors/formators, and senior/older sisters) subordinate them to the subservient position of a group of people that

needs to be controlled and directed. As a result the participants construct themselves on the one hand as constantly fighting the battle of warding off the institutional surveillance channelled through these authority figures. But on the other hand a number of participants positioned themselves as accepting the status quo of being subordinates though unhappily. In this section the participants' act of self-construction will be presented in three sub-units: the temporary professed participants' construction of identity through resistance, their construction of identity through submission, and the final professed participants' compliance to the vow of religious obedience in which they privilege the authority figure as having the super-voice to decide what they have to do.

#### *6.7.3.1 Temporary Professed Participants' Construction of Identity through Resistance*

A significant number of the temporary professed participants constructed their identity using the strategy of resistance, in which they presented themselves as confronting and relegating to the background, the voice of authority figures which positioned them as inferior or a group that needs to be controlled. This group of temporary professed is notably from the international congregation. They maintained that in religious life the temporary professed are often taken for granted and treated like nobodies, which ridicules their humanness. In response they present themselves as resisting being treated as non-human. One participant presents the struggles she encounters with a superior who used the discourse of the vow of religious obedience as vehicle to subordinate her into the subservient position of a servant which she said she resisted:

*... both of us will finish eating and she (superior) will wait for me to carry the plates to go and wash-Imagine! She will sit down for me to go and be the one to carry the plate to go and wash for her as her servant or what? ... things that she is supposed to do, she will sit down there and cross her legs waiting for me to do them for her. Sometimes ... I will be in my room and she will call me to come ... and do those things for her. I was just doing it to*

*the extent that my head was full= like bursting and I said if I don't react at least this person will not know that I am a human being ... one day ... I was washing my plates and she decided to bring out ... so many other plates for me to wash. But ... I decided in my mind that, that day I was not going to touch any of those plates she brought out or wash any extra thing ... So I finished washing and left. Later, she ... started telling me hey-hey that she expected me to have washed those other things she brought out ... that after all I have started washing before she brought them out. I told her that I just came back from somewhere and she could see that ... So I decided to wash the ones my mind has accepted ... In my mind I told myself that even if I wash those plates, I am doing it grudgingly so I was not going to do it and >I don't need to do it to please somebody< ... that was why that day I decided not to do it. At least I want her to understand ... that it is not a must that I will do it-that this is not us (SHCJ spirit) ... Let her understand that I am not here to obey and serve her...*

In this extract, the participant presented a strategic approach of resistance achieved through self-persuasion and agreement. In constructing her position of resistance she employed what Hermans and Herman-Konokpa (2010) describe as both self-consultation self-persuasion by encouraging herself to oppose the superior's positioning of her as a servant. Within that space of being a temporary professed the superior positioned her as the servant but she decided to redefine who she is. Once she had made that decision she moved a step further by making internal resolution to put her decisions into action which led her to refuse to wash the plates the superior brought out for her. Across time she had obeyed the superior's order but internally she felt conflicted as she expressed that her "head was full=like bursting". The expression that her head was full depicts metaphorically the nuisance she experienced while being positioned by the superior as the servant. Her expression "if I don't react at least this person will not know that I am a human being ..." captures the dilemma she faces between positioning herself as a human person versus being positioned as a less than human servant. Thus, her resistance was justifiable because it was an attempt to reassert her worth as a human being. It was in resisting the superior's treatment of her as a servant that she asserted her worth as a human being. She used the discourse of congregational spirituality ("this is not

us (SHCJ spirit)') to legitimatise her resistance. She held on to her affiliation with the congregational discourse, in terms of their ethics of human relationship which according to her, she is not in religious life to serve any superior. Therefore, she identifies with this ethos in order to invalidate the superior's unreasonable control over her. This allegiance with the congregational spirituality serves as a third-position (unifying position) through which she resolves the dilemma of being positioned as inferior or subordinate. Based on the collective voice of congregational spirituality she constructs her personal and religious identity of resisting the superior's positioning of her as servant.

Another participant from the international congregation performs her work of identity by resisting a superior, who positions herself as solely deciding what has to be done in the community:

*She (superior) tells the cook to prepare spaghetti for lunch, to make one bag of spaghetti for five people and by the time we come back from apostolate, you just see something small on the table for five people. Sometimes she can tell the cook to prepare soup for three days; we can eat it for Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. She was doing that and one day I said to her, Sister, you know we go to apostolate and we come back, I don't know if we can increase the quantity of food that we eat ... maybe we can eat something heavier because supper is pick-up. She said who am I to tell her what to cook. I said no, I'm not telling you what to cook but I am just suggesting ... if we can increase the quantity a little ... and when I said that she insisted and said who am I to tell her what to do ... because she did that kind of thing I snubbed her. I just didn't mind her any longer and when I come back even if she is there I just go and cook whatever I want. And the rest of us were happy and we will eat and be satisfied ... she told me that I will make final vows: that I will meet her there and I told her that ... I am not in religious life for report writing. They can go to hell with their report- I think I vowed my life to God.*

This participant encounters a superior who positioned her as not worthy (less human) to make suggestions about issues concerning their communal life. The superior relegated her voice to the background. But she resisted cooperating with the superior in subjugating her own voice

and interest. Her resistance was achieved through meta-position, by reflecting upon and evaluating the superior's attitude towards her, which involved not only avoiding addressing her suggestion but also that of telling her that she is a 'nobody' and therefore not worthy to make suggestions. In response the participant said she snubbed the superior, failed to acknowledge her voice/character. She decided (through self-agreement) to cook whatever she wants. Her resistance opened up the space for a contest between her and the superior, and the superior attempted to prove that she has the power, which this participant cannot ignore or counteract. That is the privilege of writing a report on her behalf which will determine if she will be admitted to final profession. By implication the superior's report determines if she will continue to be a religious or be dismissed. Therefore the superior positioned herself as one in whom power is invested, and as such attempted to use the report as a conquering weapon to clamp down on the participant's resistance. But the participant was determined in her resolve not to subjugate her own voice and interest, choosing rather to form a coalition with God, who she presented as the one to whom she vowed her life and the one who has the ultimate power to decide who lives or leaves religious life. By invoking that she vowed her life to God, she invalidates the superior's power over her and not just this particular superior she was dealing with but all religious leaders, who make malicious decisions on her behalf. Her expression that "they can go to hell with their report" is a cynical comment which depicts her displeasure for all authority figures that make illicit decisions based on the misuse of the discourse of religious obedience. She was not going to allow herself be intimidated into accepting the subservient position of being defined as inferior. Her act of resistance is proof that she is in religious life on merit of being called by God, and in identification with God and no other.



### 6.7.3.2 *Temporary Professed Participants' Construction of Identity through Submissiveness*

A number of the temporary professed participants constructed their identity through being submissive to what the person in authority says. They do so based on the fact that they are afraid to challenge the superior/formator and senior/older sisters, thus under the discourse of religious obedience they present themselves as subservient, though temporally, only within that space of being located as temporary professed sisters. However, this group of participants hopes to change this position when they make final profession. One participant from the diocesan congregation, in constructing an identity of submissiveness to whatever the senior sister says, presents her compliance as temporary:

*This sister (senior sister) is my cooking partner and we are washing vegetables and she goes wash that thing very well-oh...and I am washing it. She comes again I have warned you this and this and that. I said okay, sister show me how do I wash this vegetable and she screams, at this age you don't know how to wash vegetables. I look at her and I say in my head oh God help me not to be angry because if I allow myself I may give it back to her also, but you know that, in this our set-up (religious life)...often what rules is final profession...when you have made your final profession nobody talks to you anyhow. You see with final profession you have roots and stands: these days that is what is reigning (she demonstrates by showing the finger that wears the profession ring) nobody will take it away from me, so when I take my final vows no more shouting at me. If you shout I will shout back at you...*

This participant allows the senior sister who is her cooking partner to shout at her because she has not taken her final vows. In this way she shows that in religious life being a temporary professed sister means being a subordinate with no rights. According to her there are two different spaces in religious life, i.e. temporary and final professed spaces, which are levelled with hierarchisation of status and power. Each of these spaces determines who you are. Being temporary professed positions you as a non-human to be controlled by others but being a final professed sister positions you as a human who is respected and assertive. Interestingly

as a temporary professed sister she aligns (coalition) herself to God in order to accommodate her submission; it is God that she prays to in order not to talk back or scream back at the senior sister. But supposedly as a finally professed sister she will have “roots” and “stands”, establishing the fact that she now belongs to and forms part of the religious community, therefore, she will have the privilege that legitimatises screaming back at anyone who screams at her. Symbolically the temporary professed are constructed as outsiders or as the marginal group that is ‘rootless’ and must wait for final profession in order to become insiders and members of religious life.

Another participant from the diocesan congregation constructs herself as submissive to a superior who positioned her as subordinate, and made her kneel down and beat her with a cane. She accounts for her submissiveness in the discourse of religious obedience in which superiors must be obeyed:

*...the superior ↑KNEELS me down as old as I was...was beating me with cane...and so it makes me to feel as nobody...a slave who does all the works in the house. I go to school where I was combining three-two classes in the school. I do all those things with all my hea-r-rtt...with my strength and everything. I come home I can't find peace in the community; I have learned how to live on my own...I couldn't imagine living with a superior, who knelt me down for an hour plus... I was kneeling down in the night...for the things I don't know anything, (she claps her hand to show her feelings and sighs also)... I must obey my superiors...whatever they say. Our superiors are elders and you may not survive if you challenge them...I was just soliciting for-when you say forgiveness ... sister, forgive me but this thing you are asking me about I don't know... she insisted I must kneel there with a heavy cane sounding on my skin-okay! If...it is normal me I would just have fought her that night. It was not real me...I don't know what ...The only thing, you know, if I fight as my father founder would say, if you fight you go ... the vocation is so precious to me.*

This temporary professed participant justified her compliance to kneeling down and being beaten by the superior as an act of religious obedience and did so based on her eagerness to

preserve her vocation to religious life. She was enraged by the treatment she received from the superior to the point of wishing she could fight back, yet she was submissive because her “vocation is so precious” and if she challenged the superior she would not survive, coupled with father founder’s saying “if you fight you go”. All these issues mounted pressure on her, making her submission ‘multi-voiced’, composed of the fear of losing her vocation embedded in the consequence of dismissal. Since her vocation is of great value she presents herself as malleable to any kind of humiliation in order to succeed. In other words, the fear of being forced out of religious life led her to be submissive although she feels like ‘nobody’ and a ‘slave’, which are descriptive of the feelings of dejection which she experiences. This has resulted in the identity of a loner she constructed: “I have learned how to live on my own.” She is a loner in religious life though she lives a communal life with others. She has been conditioned by the demands of religious obedience to be docile and in this way she constructs herself as doing whatever the superior commands, which is a dominant self-presentation among temporarily professed from the diocesan congregation.

#### *6.7.3.3 Final Professed Participants’ Construction of Identity through Submission*

The temporary professed participants were not the only ones who constructed their sense of self using submission; there are also a number of final professed participants whose self-presentation was fixed on doing whatever the superior said. They cooperate in silencing their own voice and interest based on the discourse of religious obedience. In this way they express that superiors have the grace of office, and must therefore be obeyed. By grace of office, this group of participants explains that the superior is representing God’s interest and voice. As a result they construct themselves as obeying God when they subject themselves in obedience to superiors. This final professed participant from the diocesan congregation was submissive

to a superior who subjected her to teach Christian Religious Studies (CRS) instead of Music, a subject in which she is knowledgeable:

*...there in the community I was sent to teach music ...But when I came there, you know ...it was a different thing all together I met...she (superior/principal) refused the teaching of music. She said bluntly that she hates music...she said that I should teach CRS (Christian Religious Studies) ...I took it...that was the first time I'm teaching the course; a subject that is not mine. When I met with my spiritual director she said okay since you have accepted it...accept it with love and try to do it the way you would have even teach the music and that advice I took. I now took this particular course...I dramatized it...I put it to music so that the students begin to enjoy the subject. The first time that the students begin to do very well in the subject in external exams... I mean my beginning to teach CRS I got my first A student... >Now the CRS is gaining greater grounds< ...she (principal) had to come to me: started pleading that please, the students requested that I will be taking...CRS from JS1-SS3...I accept with all pleasure but I know... it's pain and suffering on me...eventually...I won the incentive for producing the best result in the school and external exams... it is just that God really wanted to compensate me I think for the way I was treated, I thank him, it is also by his grace that I handled the matter the way I did because I think for Christ it wasn't smooth but he endured so I too...*

This participant used the discourse of religious obedience to construct herself as submissive to a superior, who subjected her to teach CRS instead of music in which she was proficient. This placed her in a conflicted position of teaching an entirely new subject that she had no skill in. Her submission was based on the awareness that Christ is her model: Christ did not find things easy but he endured, so as a religious she performs identity by following in Christ's footsteps. This construction of a Christ-like identity acts as a meta-position through identification with the person of Christ, which she arrived at by deliberate act of self-reflection. Another strategy which she presented as facilitating her submissiveness was coalition (consultation) with the spiritual director, who encouraged her to accept the teaching of CRS with love. The spiritual director was a resource channel that affirmed her willingness to be submissive. In this way the spiritual director formed an allegiance with her – a

conglomeration (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010) of positions affirming and supporting her submission. Also the musical skills provided her with resources, acting as a third-position that unified and facilitated the process of teaching the new subject. The musical skills facilitated her teaching of CRS that across time and space she was brilliant to produce the best results both internally and at external examination. This earned her recognition in the school and particularly recognition from the principal/superior. Her submissiveness has won her great honour but not without pain and discomfort. In other words she became triumphant though she endured pain and humiliation, which was evident in her narrative where she combined mutually but opposing voices and positions to construct a coherent sense of self. In this case she is able to integrate her knowledge of music into teaching a new subject and thus became triumphant.

Another participant from the international congregation presented herself as experiencing pain and discomfort over frequent transfers yet she submitted willingly to it, based on the argument that it is God's will for her at that particular space/time:

*I have also experienced pains in terms of...transfers. I could remember when I came back from studies I was asked to take my leave – for three weeks. I called home to inform my mother that I am coming home. But that very night our Provincial (superior) landed in Jos to say get ready tomorrow you are going to a community. There is a sister who will be going for studies and she...will hand over to you tomorrow. So you get ready; for me...it was just not funny= I thought sister was joking and I went back to her to say: Are you saying that I am going to a community tomorrow not going home again. She said yes, you got it correctly. I know it was painful but at the end I just said God let your will be done.*

She presents herself as willingly obeying God's will by submitting to the painful experiences of constant transfers, particularly in this case where her plans were changed abruptly. The superior only informed her that evening that she was going to a new community which closed the space for her to go home for annual holidays as initially planned. She stood with pain at

this new development but never voiced any objection; rather she submitted on the grounds of letting God's will be done. That means her submission was an act of obedience which was indirectly offered to the superior but directly to God. It is an act of meta-position, in which obedience was conveyed as act of loyalty offered to God in accordance with religious obligation of the vows. In this situation whatever the superior says is constitutive of God's will and she is willing to go along with it.

#### *6.7.4 Participants' Report of Work: the Construction of Self as Happy Workers for God versus Being Constructed as Subservient Workers by Leaders of Religious Life*

In the interview data the majority of the participants continuously presented themselves as happy workers for God which they express is irreconcilable with their experience of being positioned as subservient workers by religious life leaders including the priests and bishops. They speak of the experiences in which they have felt themselves positioned predominately as workers who have no space to commit themselves as religious, whose primary aim is to do God's will. They also pointed out that there are other concerns including having the space and time for self-care and to be in communion with one another. In this section the participants' construction of identity will be presented in three different sub-units: the construction of self as happy workers, construction of self as productive and hard working, and construction of self as subjugated workers.

##### *6.7.4.1 Participants' Construction of Self as Happy Workers*

A number of the participants construct themselves as happy workers who are in religious life to do God's will by sharing God's love with the people in the Church and Nigerian society at large. In one sense this group of participants talks about bearing witness for and on behalf of God by sharing their time with others in a variety of activities including teaching, nursing, and other pastoral services. In this way they find happiness in serving and reaching out to

others. One participant from the diocesan congregation positions herself as a happy worker for God, because she is using the musical talent God has endowed her with to evangelise and motivate people:

*I am a singer ... I have produced so many cassettes ... I go to parishes and I have been able to share my gift with the people of God ... I promote health through my smiles and my music. I try to beautify other people's faces you know with my smiles because one smile begets another ... and as a singer I'm joyful ... and a joyful heart you know exact itself in cheerfulness ... So that's the area of that music ... which has also helped me to really uplift souls.*

She positions herself as a cheerful worker, who is using her musical talent to bring others to that space where they also find happiness. Another participant from the international congregation, talks of herself as winning souls for God and the Church:

*I met a man in February of 2008 at the car park...we talked a lot-ask questions about Catholics...we talked at great deal, at the end of that talk we exchanged phone numbers and all that...that was all but today that man is a Catholic. What happened? When we finished I said I am a Holy Child Sister... he went to the website and started reading...he kept calling me to say oh sister this is what I learnt and...last year (2009) he was baptized-received into the Church. So for me that was witnessing-I didn't go to=and I didn't preach-I didn't say oh come to Church or anything=that's a testimony-that touched the man's life.*

This participant's self-presentation portrays the interaction she had with a man which directly or indirectly influenced the man's initiation into the Church. In essence her intersubjective exchange with this man has yielded fruit for God and by extension for the Church also, and she constructs herself as happy in carrying out this service, which she describes as 'witnessing'. But the experience is not always the same for the participants; there are some participants who vacillate between positioning themselves as happy workers and being positioned as subjugated workers by the authorities of their religious institute. This group of participants talks about not finding happiness in doing such work. Much detail on this aspect

will be addressed later in the section on the participants' experience of self as subservient worker.

#### 6.7.4.2 *Participants' Construction of Self as Productive and Hard Workers*

Unanimously the participants present themselves as hard working and productive workers for God and the Church although they indicated that the latter recognises them as background and underground workers, particularly the priests, who construct them as their subordinates. That notwithstanding the majority of the participants presents themselves as hard working, productive and competent workers, who carry out all manner of service in the Church and for the entire Nigerian society. One participant from the international congregation constructs herself as a hard-working and efficient pastoral worker:

*I have been in two apostolates: teaching and pastoral. Pastoral in another country...I enjoyed it because I had the language-French and by nature I can easily be friendly...I can easily mix and I'm so down to earth with people. I was like one of them I was in charge of everything and so I really had to work very closely with the people...in the French system they call it "Assistante Paroissiale"...it's someone who assists, who does the work in the parish on full time...but you are not the assistant parish priest but somehow you are in charge...I wasn't a secretary but I did all the work—everything, catechist, secretariat, counselling and all that...*

She positions herself as a hard-working and competent worker. The dominant self-presentation is based on her resourcefulness which opens a space for her to be efficient, and she places these resources at the service of the people who appreciate her. Another participant who is a medical doctor constructs herself as not just productive but co-creating with God:

*As a sister and a doctor I know that I'm fully grounded in doing humanitarian work, that is my happiness to help people...I see it as cooperating with God in co-creation and to help human beings. So I am just happy though I spend long hours in the hospital but I love to bring back joy to people's lives through assisting them find solutions to their ailment.*



This participant presents herself as a happy worker who puts in long hours of work, which yield the productive result of bringing joy to people's life. One participant from the diocesan congregation constructs herself and other sisters in her congregation as hard working:

*As a postulant I worked at the Daughters of Divine Love Retreat & Conference Centre (DRACC) community with-with so many sisters and as of that time, it was just run by the sisters...everything was done by the sisters, starting from the cleaning, the cooking, the-e refectory work. Everything was done by the sisters and (she sighs) they really touched me. I really felt good with them because even-even though the-the work was very hard but you could see...the joy with which we did it.*

She presents the sisters as collectively working hard in discharging their duties in running a retreat and conference centre. It is an experience which she had been introduced to across time and space of being a religious from her postulancy (early stage of initial formation). She constructed the sisters as productive workers, who single handedly run the centre without help from the outside, but there is an undertone which seems to introduce some kind of ambivalence, suggesting that they have a lot of work to do; in other words, the sisters are over-worked. This was conveyed with the expression "even-even though the-the work was very hard", she stretched some of these words which may suggest some kind of hesitation in trying to put across all she wanted to, and it can also be affirmed by her sigh in the previous line. The sigh seemed like an expression of moaning, which by extension is reflective of some other feelings she did not clearly communicate. In some way, her voice may be seen as introducing the mixed experience which many of the participants present as they talk about their experience of work that dominates their space and time for commitment as religious, in which case they constantly talk about the struggles they encounter in being positioned predominantly as workers. This will be given due attention in the next section.

#### 6.7.4.3 Participants' Construction of Self as Subjugated Workers

Although the majority of the participants on the one hand present themselves as joyful and happy workers who are hard working and productive, on the other hand they also speak of themselves as subjugated workers, who are utterly dominated by the experience of work. They talk about letting work take precedence over everything, leaving them with no time or space for other things of importance such as prayer or spiritual practices, and self-care. According to the interview data work experience confronts them with three-fold dilemmas. First, work challenges their perception and understanding of themselves as primarily focused on commitment to God. Second, the participants position themselves as humiliated and oppressed, and express that the enormous amount of work saps all their energy. Third, it brings them into conflict with authority figures of religious life. This conflict with authority figures varies: for some participants it focuses on experiences of feeling insulted because they are moved from one work domain to another with little or no consideration given to their dignity as human beings. This participant from the international congregation constructs herself as disrespected when she was being moved from one section of her congregational ministry to another:

*The provincial had told me on the phone you are going to work in a school but when I got to the community I was sent to the clinic-I have no problem...I worked at different session at the clinic finally I settled...I was working at different session of the pharmacy and all of that...and they said oh that they needed more hands at the cashier office...I went in to help them there but the administrator (senior sister in charge) started complaining...she said they were closing earlier; now they are closing very late...it became a rhythm everyday you hear that-she kept on...the co-ordinator (superior) asked what she really want...you said you needed more hands ... now that we have given you more hands what is it? She said she doesn't know so for me my interpretation of that was you are not working hard enough or whatever... That went on-on-on and ...I was sent elsewhere and shortly after that she started complaining again that they needed me back, me I pretended that I didn't hear that until one day after*

*school the coordinator said <sup>o</sup>to me, see if you can go and help out <sup>o</sup>I said me! Sister I'm not going back there...as a person I really-really would do any work but...I hate been pushed to the wall-that is the one thing I wouldn't take...I hate being taken for granted. I hate people making me think I can't reason that one I would resist and I think that was what happened= Up till that time-okay I was missioned to the clinic...I had no problem with that I just worked-from the clinic go back to the school...and then you're asking me to come back ha::ha I think I have had enough of the disgrace.*

This participant encountered the dilemma of being pushed around different ministries which made her feel insulted or disgraced, as she put it. It was not just that she had a lot of work to do or even about the kind of work she was expected to perform; the main source of her dilemma was about being positioned as a malleable worker to be shifted around. There was conflict between her and the superior because she felt dishonoured which she expressed with the word “disgrace” and other expressions such as being “taken for granted” and “pushed to the wall”, which can be classified as metaphoric expressions describing her sense of frustration as well as belittlement in the experience of being positioned as a subjugated worker. In this space she disassociated herself from the sisters through the use of personal pronouns as portrayed in these expressions: “they said ... they needed more hands at the cashier office ... I went in to help them there”, and “they said they needed me back” which she pretended that she didn't hear. The rhetoric describes in a sense how she took up an outsider's space and became a stranger, who was there to help them. As a result she resisted the superior's request for her to go back to work in the clinic. She constructed herself as a person who would love to do any kind of work but only if her humanness is respected. Being positioned as a subjugated worker offers a different experience for some participants who claim that others (including superiors/formators and senior/older sisters) subject them further to the subordinate position of doing all the household chores after they have laboured tirelessly in their apostolate (ministry). In this sense they feel demeaned as the servants of

others in the community and what is worse is that their efforts are not appreciated. A final professed participant from the diocesan congregation presents how work dominated her life:

*It was not easy for me as of that time...I was teaching in the school and after school I was working with the bursar ...and back in the community I have the cleaning and cooking to do...you know as the only temporary professed sister I do most of the chores... most of the time I don't even go out-if I'm going out it is for Mass...I hardly had any contact with the people around...all my time was taken up by work...I wasn't feeling too happy about it because...I didn't feel that-that was what I came to do and besides the sisters do not even appreciate what I do...for me personally my vocation is something that I should spread the-the love of God with people...I wasn't in contact with the people...but now I'm happy even though that sometimes I am still busy but I reach out to people more than I did before...I think I'm doing what I am called to do as a religious now...*

This participant's self-presentation was that of an unhappy person within the context of being a temporary professed sister because she had no space to live out her personal religious vocation, which is to spread the love of God among the people. In the space of being a temporary professed sister, she argued that her personal identity as sharer of God's love was subjugated but across time and space as a final professed sister she is happy because she is able to spread the love of God by being in contact with the people. In one sense, she presents that the busy schedule of work within temporary professed space limits her contact with people whilst the experience is different within the space of being a final professed. Within the space of being a finally professed sister she constructs herself as having the space to live out her commitment as a religious.

#### *6.7.5 Participants' Construction of Self as Angry and Disappointed in/with Religious Life*

A fair number of participants presented themselves as angry as well as disappointed in/with religious life. The major source of their anger and disappointment emerges from their intersubjective experiences with others (particularly with superiors/formators, senior/older sisters and the priests), who they speak of as maltreating them, especially in using the

discourse of religious obedience to construct them as subordinates and passive members of the congregation. In response to these experiences the participants present themselves as angry and disappointed. In addition the results indicated that the experience of being constructed as subjugated workers by authority figures such as superiors, formators and priests, is part of the situation that makes them angry. A final professed participant from the diocesan congregation constructs identity through anger which she experienced when she was forcefully removed from office:

*I was in my office in the school when the phone rang and that was my superior calling... she commanded me to leave the office immediately and get ready for my reposting that another sister is on her way to take over from me. I was angry...what? ... I took it that way... but I was really angry and I avoided the superior...*

This participant presents herself as angry when she was commanded to leave the office. The superior gave her instructions over the telephone and that was a humiliating experience which made her angry. Her exclamatory question “what?” captures her displeasure but under the obligation of religious obedience she complied with the instruction given by the superior. She used avoidance as a strategy to negotiate her anger. The avoidance acted as a third-positioning, coalescing with her expression of anger. However, the use of avoidance may be paradoxical: on the one hand, it demonstrates the level of anger and yet it may also serve as a way of self-subjugation, cutting herself off, ensuring she did not confront the superior to express her anger. However, there are some participants who expressed anger openly because they felt that some of their intersubjective exchanges were defamatory, which explicitly or implicitly threatened to destroy their entire sense of person. In response they displayed their anger as they fought the battle not to give in. For example, this final professed participant from the international congregation constructs an identity of anger because she felt alienated by the community (represented by superior):

*I could remember when I was asked to move from the community to the hostel. Not that I was up-set because I was to move to the hostel but...would I say the circumstances surrounding that moving. The way it came to me: I was really very angry because the first time I was asked to move I said I'm moving. But later what I heard was that I said I was not moving and when I got that message; my provincial (superior) saying I heard you said you are not moving. I was really upset, angry and disappointed because I have started making arrangement...and also when I moved a big problem again. That I moved without telling people I was moving. So it was really very-very sad...I felt that I was psychologically damaged, if I will use that word... All of these made me feel not wanted or say wasting away but I had to hold on to my guts and trust that God knows about me and would see me through and thank God I managed through it.*

This participant presented herself as angry and disappointed based on the treatment she received from the community (superior). Within this space she constructed an identity of a person who is not just angry but also alienated, which is conveyed in the use of expressions such as “not wanted”, “wasting away” because the community treated her as less than human. To account for her anger she argues that she felt “psychologically damaged”, which expresses the extent to which her sense of self was dented but through the use of meta-position she held on to God as the only support system she has. Another participant, from the diocesan congregation, speaks of herself as angry because a sister talks to her in a manner that she feels as if a dagger has pierced her heart:

*I could remember...there is one of us (sighs) the way she talks to people, you know there is someone who will talk to you and you feel that a dagger has pierced your heart and for me I don't like those insulting voice...it pains me and makes me angry. When you try to reason with the person she feels like 'you want to prove that you're always right' ...I had that experience with her...and it makes me very angry...deep within me I hid out (avoid) before her so that I can have peace...*

This participant presents herself as angry because a sister has insulted her and she equates the insult with being stabbed in the heart, which is emotionally debasing. Interestingly she brought in a new dimension to the participants' experience of anger. It is not only

superior/formator or senior/older sister who generate the intersubjective experience that angers participants but also their own colleagues (field notes), which means there are different encounters that make participants angry. Nonetheless, there are some participants who speak of their collective experience of anger when the superior treats the whole community as subordinates. One participant, from the international congregation, constructs her community as angry toward a superior who positions them as inferiors:

*When we are to buy lap tops... she (superior) told the man (supplier) the type of lap top to bring though we have made a choice of...the quality of lap top we wanted to buy...we told the man to bring a smaller printer we can move about but the man brought a different thing and he said, that was what he was asked to bring...when we asked who told you? He said this sister (superior) that's what she wants...and he must bring that one. So we were angry... and we insisted that the man must take it back and bring what we asked for...*

This participant presents the community as collectively angry based on the behaviour of the superior who positions the entire community as having no right to make a contribution regarding that which concerns them. As a group they fought back by insisting on getting what they asked for. They were not going to subjugate their voice or interest. In this way they were able to assert their right, although it does not negate the fact that they were angry.

On the whole the results reveal that the discourse of religious obedience offers the participants the most challenging dilemma through which they negotiate their work of identity. This is based on the fact that the discourse of religious obedience has been used as means of oppression by authority figures who position others as subordinates, which has led many of the participants to fight the battle of redefining who they are and ought to be.

#### *6.7.6 The identity of Women as Subordinates Based on Catholic Church's Gendered Order*

The interview data showed that the participants in constructing their personal/religious identity challenge the Church's gender-based construction of women as inferior, which

positions them as subservient to men, and by extension positions the participants as subordinates to priest. Within the Church's gender-base construction the participants report that they are recognised as background or underground workers, with limited space to be seen or heard, a position which a sizeable number of them resisted. Although some participants seem powerless in the face of such construction by presenting themselves as neither wholly docile nor resistant, still a fair number take up the responsibility to define themselves as competent and independent workers. They construct an identity of themselves as worthy servants of the Church on the basis that they are called by God to serve. One participant from the international congregation, positions herself as a competent worker who would not accept to be relegated to the background by the parish priest she works with:

*I did all the work—everything, catechist, secretariat...counselling and all that...then one Sunday-apparently he (priest) had fixed something on that day...we had scrutiny (meeting) but I wasn't aware. As we were doing it they said...a family was having requiem Mass for their deceased...and we should leave but I said we have been here and how can? So he didn't like it, but we did not move until we finish our function...after we left they did their own... Then on Sunday his homily was... "Sister who thinks she is-that she knows it all...she is a parish priest and so on..." So that day...after Mass I went to my office and packed All the documents—registers, the files, everything and drop them on his table and I told him to start doing all those things-and I told him... Father...the Catholic Church has not started ordaining women so I am not a priest. Now everything you think I am doing I am sorry you can continue-do your work. So for one week I didn't go to >work<. I said let him carry on since he thinks I was taking job from him... he should do everything...then he now called some of our friends to come and talk to me...*

This participant cited above was positioned by the priest as a female religious to be controlled which positioning she resisted. Instead, she positioned herself as a competent worker who not only knows what she is doing but also knows her rights, and therefore would not stop a religious activity that has already begun. By refusing to comply with the priest's order to stop the meeting she positions herself as having a right to public space as much as the priest does.



Her action attracted the priest's displeasure, who in return attempted to run her down by using the privilege of the pulpit to remind her of her status in the Church. This opened the space for a dilemma between a non-cleric who competes with the cleric over who is in charge. She challenged the priest attempt to run her down by boycotting work. She acted this way in order to assert her position as a worthy worker who does not need to compete with anyone (particularly the priest). She wants to be recognised for her own merit and be given the opportunity to operate both in the private and public space of the Church. Another participant from the diocesan congregation constructs the sisters as gaining independence from the male-dominated Church by building their own projects (hospitals) in order to stop being compliant as subordinates to the bishops and priests, who decide what position sisters should hold as well as the salary they should be paid:

*There is one of their (Catholic diocese of Enugu) hospital that we are managing-Ntasi-obi, (name of the hospital), just...about three weeks ago they told the matron...that she will no longer be the matron-just like that. The matron was asked to withdraw, then the sister administrator was asked to become the matron in order for the reverend father to become the administrator... 'he did not go to school'... He was not trained for any hospital management= Well, they would not come near our own project-let them come and be in Annunciation-no they can't. You know things like that-because you work for the diocese so you may get such treatment... You know that's why some people (sisters) will always say that the Church could behave in funny ways at times and who blames them. The issue is that as we continue to build our own projects we will eventually break away from their whip of control...*

In this extract, she presents the dilemmas sisters encounter in their experiences of working for the diocese, where they are dismissed from office on the grounds of gender, and are replaced by priests based on their gender as males irrespective of who is qualified to hold such office. This participant identifies that the difference between genders favours the male as superior but at the same time she recognises that such privileges are only obtainable in organisations run by the diocese, and thus sisters are powerless in the face of such situations. On the other

hand, she constructed sisters as strategically engaging with this experience of powerlessness by establishing their own ministry where they are empowered to take control of their own lives and no longer dependent on the male-Church. She foregrounds the argument which constructs sisters as diligently building their own projects which liberates them from male-dominated Church control. In this way she presents sisters as not accepting the construction of themselves as background or subservient workers.

#### *6.7.7 Participants' Construction of Identity through Self-Identification with African Cultural Worldview*

A number of participants position themselves in identification with the African cultural characteristic of hospitality, love and care which they say is compatible with religious life based on the Gospel value of communion, which flows from the example of the three persons in one God. In this way they construct identity as persons advocating for inculturation of Africa's (Nigerian) cultural worldview into religious life, which they argue is silent. For instance one participant from the international congregation enunciates that the dominating culture in religious life is the traditions of their foundation-of-origin but she constructs herself as advocating for cultural adaptation of religious life to the context where it is lived:

*Holy Child is an international congregation and what I have realized is that the culture that we maintain upmost tends to be that...which has come down to us...there are couple of things that we are-e saying is our tradition...its our tradition because of our root; its our tradition because of where it is coming from...but ask me about contextualization - yes I would prefer contextualization...*

This participant stresses the fact that religious life has traditions which are influenced by the culture of its initial beginnings but she recommends that attempts be made to integrate religious life into the context of its surrounding environment where it is lived. In this case Africa's cultural worldviews need to be given the space to be transmitted into the lived reality

of religious life, rather than have it sidelined by other cultures. Another participant, from the international congregation, specifically states that there is need to incorporate Africa's cultural orientation of hospitality into the lived context of religious life:

*In the African way of life; there is hospitality and care for one another which seemingly is lacking in religious life. Particularly in terms of welcoming visitors: when people come you give them all the respect, you give them the best things. But in religious life we don't have that. A family member coming to us is not accepted; we have this Western kind of life when it comes to religious life...Even though we are Africans in religious life but I think that the western way of life we have embraced have taken more of us than our African culture...I would suggest that we in religious life should identify with our African culture...*

In this extract, this participant constructs herself as advocating for the inculturation of Africa's culture of hospitality into the lived reality of religious life. She contrasts the difference between religious life's lived expression of hospitality and Africa's cultural practice of hospitality and acknowledges that visitors are not warmly welcomed in religious life, which is in opposition to the African way of life. She argues that the cultural value of the West has permeated religious life and as such has influenced the way it is lived, where Western cultural values dominate Africa's cultural value of welcoming visitors warmly anytime they come. She points to the fact that they, who are Africans, are living religious life in a cultural way that is at variance with the values and norms of their culture-of-origin. She cautions that African religious should endeavour to incorporate Africa's way of life into religious life. Another participant from the diocesan congregation constructs an identity of a critic who condemns the lack of hospitality African sisters show one another:

*I told you before what my experience on my first day of arrival was...it does not make sense to me to be asked to go and cook on my first day of arrival after I have sat outside waiting for you people (the sisters). I didn't think that resemble the Africa's sisterly treatment we give to people when they*

*arrive from a long journey...and to think of it that we are from the same culture that is noted for its hospitality to people...*

Here this participant expresses that the kind of welcome she receives upon her arrival in her new religious community was unfriendly, which lacks the warmth of African sisterly love. In one sense she argues that Africans do not subject travellers to the experience of cooking food for themselves or others after making a long journey; instead, they should be taken care of particularly on the day of their arrival. She criticises African religious sisters for not living out their cultural values of warmth and care shared with one another. Her criticism is conveyed in this expression: “to think of it that we are from the same culture that is noted for its hospitality to people.” In this way she explicitly argues that Nigeria’s cultural worldview of hospitality should be accommodated in religious life particularly when the sisters in question share the same cultural background.

Many of the participants argued that in affiliation with Africa’s cultural characteristic of love and care they should be able to live the communal life of religious life effectively, but for the fact that the individualist culture of the West dominates their lived experience. In the interview data the majority of the participants talk of experiences where they have been treated as outcast, unworthy and less than human, which by extension indicate aspects of lack of love and care for one another. Much of these experiences are directly or indirectly related to issue of power-play relations or dominance associated with the authoritarian structure and discourse of religious obedience in which authority figures (including senior/older sisters) tend to control and direct others. Yet the participants argue that inculturation of Africa’s cultural worldview of love and care will enable them to better live religious life. For instance one participant from the international congregation says:

*As African... in religious life we need each other... Like our servant song says we are here to help one another; we are here to walk with one*

*another-we are here to bear one another's load. Because if I come back from work with so many loads ... in my head and I don't have anybody to say sister let me help you to relieve that load. You know it will also affect me because it will be like I am bearing it alone-you know nobody is helping me to bear the burdens of the day; yes, God is there but we need one another also. So that is why the individualistic life is not really encouraging in religious community. It doesn't help us to grow...*

This participant's position-taking is based on the fact that Africa's relational practice is fixed on interdependence on one another which resonates with the ideal religious culture but contradicts with individualism, where the person strives alone. She links this African relational value to a certain Christian spirituality; she describes it as the 'servant song' portraying that collective collaboration of love and care is an intrinsic value of religious life, which reflects Africa's cultural values of love and care. Thus the religious need one another, which is part of their identity as people who live communal life.

## 6.8 Conclusion

Vividly the results show that the participants have multiple positions through which they construct identity. This multiplicity of I-positions presented by the participants answered the research question: how do Catholic religious sisters construct their self identity in the context of living religious life in their congregation and the Church in Nigeria? The range of I-positions that the participants presented varies: including their understanding of religious life, the significant others in relation to whom they construct identity as well as gender available positions and culture I-positions. These positions emerged as result of self-positioning and self as positioned by others. This made the participants' performance of identity multi-voiced, portraying the conflicts, contradictions and oppositions embedded in the internal and external self-positions which the participants negotiated in order to construct who they are and who they are becoming. In the next chapter we discuss the results.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

#### 7.0 Introduction

This chapter will focus on the major findings regarding how the participants living within the context of religious life located in the Church and wider Nigerian society construct identity. It will endeavour to interpret the meaning the participants derive from everyday relationships, paying attention to their self-positioning and self as positioned by others. In other words the discussion will focus on how the participants appropriate and reject positions, or even oppose positions, including the strategies and discourses they use to argue their position taking. In this way emphasis is placed on understanding the participants' performance of identity as a negotiation process, where there is a move toward, away or against a particular position in the face of contradictions, oppositions and differences (Hermans, 2008). Hence, the discussion is tied to both the aim and the research question of the study with the purpose of presenting the participants' identity as a multiplicity of I-positions that is narratively constructed.

The participants in their interview data as shown in the analysis in Chapter 6, identified many significant others in relation to whom they construct identity. These significant others include God, authority figures (such as superiors/formators, senior/older sisters, bishops/priests), spiritual directors, colleagues, friends, members of their families-of-origin and the people of God in the Church. God is presented as the ultimate significant other in relation to whom their identity is constructed both within the context of living religious life and in their families-of-origin. But in relation to authority figures the participants encountered a mixture of experiences. On the one hand they position themselves as experiencing love, care and support/encouragement which led them to develop a positive sense of personhood. On the

other hand they report that some of their authority figures control and oppress them, leading the majority of the participants to present their work of identity as a struggle for survival, in negotiating the various tensions of resisting being oppressed and subjugating their voices.

Six major findings will be discussed. First, is the participants' identity of relationship with God; second, is the identity of religious life as family. Third, is the 'oppressed identity' of the participants based on the discourse of religious obedience used by religious authority figures as means to dominate them. Fourth, is the participants' 'work identity' which they present in an ambivalent way: on the one hand they are happy workers who do God's will; but on the other hand, they are subjugated workers who are institutionally and personally controlled by authority figures to view themselves predominantly as workers whose humanness is undermined by work. Fifth, is the participants' 'gender identity' which emerges from the Catholic Church's gendered discourse of men as superior to women. This gendered discourse is strengthened by a Nigerian cultural worldview that positions men as more important than women. The final theme is the participants' 'cultural identity' embedded in their identification with Africa's cultural characteristics of hospitality, love and care and the call for appropriate inculturation.

In general this chapter will attempt to address the participants' dilemmas of identity construction. On entering religious life most participants have a primary identity of relationship to and with God expressed through religious commitment (including prayer, service (work), and obedience) and communion with others. But they soon discover according to the present research that religious life presents multiple contradictions: wherein on the one hand, commitment to God requires obedience which is constructed as a joyful response; but on the other hand, obedience is used by authority figures as a means of control and oppression, creating a dilemma for the religious. In the same way the work they render

through their congregation in the name of God presents a dilemma: on the one hand, they position themselves as God's servants who perform an identity of commitment to God through the work they render to and for God's people and to one another; but on the other hand, they are positioned by their authority figures as primarily religious workers who are exploited and denied opportunity to live out their commitment to God. Therefore work is experienced as a form of slavery which hinders their commitment as religious.

In a similar manner religious life, which they anticipate as a caring family, becomes a means of constraint which limits free participation. Thus the participants define religious life as an oppressive family, in which they position themselves as an 'oppressed', 'abandoned' and treated as 'outcast' which compels them to perform an 'outsider identity' as non-members of religious life. Consequently, within the context of religious life the participants construct identity in a field of tension based on the mutual and uneven relationships they encounter in religious communities and in the Church (Hermans, 2001, 2003). Equally the Church's gendered discourse positions women as unworthy and unequal partners in relation to priests, who are positioned as superiors. Also the participants' identification with Africa's culture of hospitality is a source of tension, particularly within the lived realities of religious life which they claim is influenced by Western cultural value of individualism. In responding to the different dilemmas, the participants' performance of identity reveals and confirms that the act of self construction is a negotiation process in which the self's I-positions fluctuate between and around different positions and voices (Hermans, 2001, 2003; Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010; Hermans & Kempen, 1993). This means that participants have multiple ways of positioning and re-positioning themselves according to situations and persons they encounter.



## 7.1 Participants' Identity of Relationship to/with God

The findings predominantly show that the participants positioned themselves in an intimate relationship with God in which they present themselves as committed to God. In this context their dominant self-presentations reflect I-as related to God, as well as, I-as committed to God. This is the initial motivation which evoked the desire to become religious including the wish to be holy (LG #44). In the process of living religious life a fair number of participants expressed that participation in a religious community has deepened their relationship with God, which affirms the Church's discourse that religious formation programmes aim at forming the religious to live lives dedicated to God (CC #646, 652:1–4; CICLSAL, 2007; ES #2; PC #1; Villaume, 1975). In this way their self-positioning of I-as related/committed to God is enhanced by the context (Hermans, 2001a) of living religious life. Nevertheless, the context of living religious life has not always facilitated the development of this identity of I-as related/committed. Within the context of living religious life the majority of participants faced rigorous challenges which inhibited the performance of their identity of relationship and commitment to God, an aspect which will be discussed extensively in later sections. In this section the discussion will feature the participants' identity of relationship with God through participation in religious community via prayer and commitment.

### *7.1.1 Participants' Identity of Relationship with God through Participation in Religious Community*

The participants positioned themselves as having a close relationship with God as the primary source of identity with which they entered religious life. For the majority of participants the dominant I-position is I-as wanting to be holy. This desire for holiness is the religious core identity. The documents of Vatican II position the religious as a person who binds herself "to the Lord in a special way" (PC #1) which includes living a life of closer union with God

(CICLSAL, 2007, 2008; VC #46). Thus the religious who lives religious life is recognised and is recognisable as a person related to God. In this relationship prayer is portrayed as one of the key means of fostering this personal and religious identity. It is through participation in community prayer as well as personal prayer including the reading of scripture and spiritual readings, doing an annual retreat, and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament etc (cf. Analysis of understanding of religious life and available positions) that the participants deepen their relationship with God. These activities are a means of fostering strong ties with God leading to the participants' on-going development as well as performance of identity as religious. In one sense their initial orientation as persons desiring to have a close relationship with God has been enhanced within the context of living religious life. In this context their internal I-position of relationship with God forms a coalition with the external positioning of the religious as persons living lives of closer union with God (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). This is affirmed by Hermans and Gieser (2011) who argue that "people with a religious or spiritual background ... have daily dialogical contact with an image of divinity" through which they enact personal and religious identity (p.17).

This is parallel to Mangion's (2007) argument that formation in a religious community lays 'good strong foundations' which among other things instils the spiritual discipline of prayer into the sisters. It means that participation in religious community including initial and on-going formation has led the participants to attain the solid foundation of virtues such as steadfastness in prayer and charity which they need in order to live an authentic religious identity. Further, the constitutions of the congregations whose sisters participated in this study indicated that formation programmes initiate their members to focus on God (DDL const. Art #4; SHCJ const. p.xi). Therefore the participants' performance of identity as persons related to God emerged as a result of the initial I-positions of desiring to be holy,

which they held upon entering religious life and which was facilitated by on-going formation in religious life. Thus the participants of this study present themselves as persons who, through participation in religious life, maintained a relationship with God, and also construct themselves as committed to God, whom they present as the ultimate significant other in relation to who they construct identity.

### *7.1.2 Participants' Identity of Commitment to God*

Another dominant I-position with which the majority of the participants describe themselves is "I-as-committed to God". In the interview data the participants position themselves as solely focused on God, using expressions such as 'rooted in God', 'closer to God', 'in union with God', 'attached to God not to any person, place or thing', and 'relying on God and not on any human person' etc (cf. Analysis of available positions). These expressions position God as the ultimate significant other in relation to whom the participants define who they are and who they are becoming. This indicates that interaction with the imaginal other (Watkins, 1992) is an intrinsic aspect of their performance of identity. That means that in the imaginal landscape (Hermans & Kempten, 1993) of their mind space (Lindegger & Alberts, 2011) they have constructed an intersubjective exchange with God through which they live out their personal and religious identity. It also agrees with the Church's discourse that religious life demands full dedication of the whole person to God (PC #5).

The participants' performance of an identity of commitment indicates that they are totally dedicated to God, which is one of the primary aims of religious life (PC #1). But in the context of living religious life there are other related I-positions which complement as well as oppose the position of I-as committed. The position of I-as-community-member offers a mixed experience (CICSAL, 2007; Schneiders, 2001; VC #46). On the one hand, it forms a coalition with I-as-committed to God. In this sense the two positions cooperate in nurturing

the participants' dedication to God, in which every action is geared toward deepening a sense of commitment to God. In this way commitment to God is conveyed through prayer, service and communion with others. However, on the other hand, I-as-community-member requires the participants to be loyal to the congregation. In some cases the position of loyalty leads the participants to subjugate their voice and interest (Mangion, 2005, 2007). That means they tend to speak and act more frequently with the consenting voice in opposition to asserting their point of view objectively. A detailed discussion of how I-as-community member hinders the participants' performance of identity as persons committed to God will be taken up in section 7.4 later.

In general the participants construct an identity of commitment to God, which should be the primary identity of every religious (PC #1). As a consequence every other form of relationship becomes a secondary context through which they construct identity. In their construction of identity God is the ultimate significant other in relation to whom they negotiate all other relationships. Frequently the participants used their relationship with God to invalidate the oppression and control by authority figures, by positioning them as unimportant and of lesser value in relation to God.

## 7.2 The Identity of Religious Life as Family

The participants used family identity to describe religious life, which is parallel to the Church's discourse of religious life "as a family united in Lord's name" (CICLSAL, 2007; cf. PC #15). Nevertheless the participants' description of religious life as family reflects ambivalence: on the one hand they present religious life as a supportive family, but on the other hand also as an oppressive family. They speak of religious life as a supportive family where they have experienced love and care. But this experience is different for some of the participants who narrated stories of being oppressed and abandoned particularly when they

are sick, causing them to construct an ‘outsider’ identity. The discussion in this section will cover these two positions separately.

### *7.2.1 Participants’ Construction of Identity as Persons Belonging to the Supportive Family of Religious Life*

A number of participants in constructing identity used the discourse of family to describe religious life. In this context they positioned themselves as experiencing love and care which is parallel to mutual love and care experienced in a supportive family. In this sense they used the discourse of family relationships to describe sisters as mothers and/or siblings from whom they have received encouragement, care, trust and affirmation, typical of supportive families which have helped them to grow and overcome certain weaknesses. Consequently, the discourse of family becomes a significant aspect of their identity as persons living religious life (CICLSAL, 2007). This discourse of religious life as supportive family is congruent with the Church’s discourse of religious life as “wondrous variety of ... families” (PC #15) that shapes its members’ identity.

In this situation the mutual relationships shared with others in the context of living religious life facilitated the participants’ construction of a variety of I-positions including I-as loved, I-as trusted, I-as affirmed etc. In this sense the participants’ performance of identity has been influenced by social participation within the context of living religious life (Barresi, 2002; Burkitt, 2008; Gergen, 1999; Raggatt, 2006). It is in the process of interaction with the other(s) in religious communities that they perceived and constructed themselves as loved and cared for, affirming the argument that religious life as family flows from the communion of the Trinitarian God based on right relationships of justice, peace, love and care (Okure, 2010; O’Murchu, 1991). Thus, the religious are bound to each other through a bond of discipleship that is identical to familial ties (cf. Mk 3:31–35; Rakoczy, 2004). In this way

they are related and treat each other with loving care and affection. These supportive experiences have led them to see themselves as belonging to families of their different congregations (DDL const. #10, 68; LG #43; SHCJ Chapter proceedings 1992, 1998, 2010), with which they produce a shared family identity.

As a consequence, the religious community has functioned as the determining relational context (Hermans & Kempten, 1993; Schneiders, 2000) through which the participants perform personal and religious identity of I-as loved, affirming the discourse that religious community “is a school of love” (CICLSAL, 2007) that facilitates its members’ construction of identity. This finding is supported by a study carried out by Stuber (2000) which discovered that sisters are bonded to each other through family relationships of love and care which promote individual personal growth. However, this experience is not the same for all participants. There are some participants who constructed themselves as belonging to religious life as an oppressive family that abandons them and treats them as an ‘outcast’, which is discussed in the next section.

### *7.2.2 Participants’ Construction of Identity as Persons Belonging to Oppressive Family of Religious Life*

There are some participants who speak of the harsh experience of being treated as “outcast” and “puppets” which made them feel as if not respected, loved or cared for and such interpersonal relationships have compelled them to describe religious life as an uncaring and oppressive family. These participants describe their intersubjective exchange within religious life as humiliating, particularly in relationships with superiors/formators and senior/older sisters who under the discourse of the vow of religious obedience position them as subservient, voiceless and malleable to act as they are told. Such positioning introduces the notion of power-play relations and dominance which will be extensively discussed in the next

section; in this section the discussion will focus on the participants' description of lack of care, and the impact it has on their construction of identity.

#### *7.2.2.1 Participants' Construction of Identity through Lack of Care*

The participants reported a lack of care in a variety of ways. Some participants talk about their lack of care in terms of sustenance and in this case they expressed that their food is of poor quality. Also there are some participants who talk about lack of care in terms of no-one showing them love and concern. A small but significant number of participants talk about being abandoned when they were sick (by members of their religious community) in comparison to reports of support and care from their families-of-origin. In addition there are some participants who speak of anticipated rejection should any of the sisters contract diseases such as HIV/AIDS; a rejection which would never be the case with their families-of-origin.

The participants used these reports of lack of care and support to position themselves as 'outsiders' who are doubtful that they belong to religious life (Giallanza, 1998; Svoboda 1998). Thus they construct themselves in a paradox of identity: on the one hand they are members of religious life, but on the other hand they are non-members (strangers) who prefer to position themselves as belonging to their families-of-origin. This 'outsider' identity is also reflected in a study conducted by Souci, Kamara, Nyawira and Grebalet (1998) in which young Kenyan religious describe themselves as 'strangers' in their religious communities because (sometimes) no-one cared about what they were doing. The similarity in the findings of these two studies affirms what Schneiders (2011) describes as "*personae non grata*" identity (p.23). This means that based on interpersonal relationship with others, the participants position themselves as persons not accepted in religious life, where they belong.

Hence they project a sense of personhood of people who are lonely and can be classified as “perpetual visitors” (Schneiders, 2011, p.23) in their so-called own religious family.

This challenges the ideal discourse of religious life “as a family united in the Lord” (CICLSAL, 2007; PC #15) where oneness of life shared in Christ facilitates the construction of family identity (cf. Jn. 7:28–29; Mk. 3:35; Mt. 12:50). Musonda (1997) argues that the religious share Christ as their “ancestor *par excellence*” (p.167). If the religious share a family identity in Christ, then their family relationships should reflect loving and caring experiences which ought to facilitate the individual members’ development and performance of personal and religious identity. But the overall trend arising from the present study shows that religious life has failed to provide some of the study participants with the supportive family relationships of love and care as discussed above, and so the participants construct themselves with an ‘outsider’ identity in opposition to their sense of membership of religious life. Consequently, they present themselves as persons who are experiencing disillusionment in that they vacillate between seeing themselves as belonging to their family-of-origin more than to the family of religious life. In the next section their positions (voice) of disillusion are discussed.

#### 7.2.2.2 *Participants’ Voice of Disillusion*

The dominant way in which the participants of this study displayed disillusionment was in the expression of rootlessness which can be classified as an experience of ‘uncertainty’ (Herman & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). In the interview data there is evidence of expression of rootlessness as to where the participants belong. There is an irony in their construction of religious life as a supportive versus an oppressive family. The question is what kind of implication does such construction have on the participants’ performance of identity?



In one sense they have been socialised into a discourse of religious life as family yet they also use the discourse of neglect to describe religious life. The use of these two different discourses is problematic and reveals the paradox embedded in the participants' performance of identity. This paradox the participants displayed in using the discourse of marriage to describe their membership in religious life, where they maintain that they accept religious life as their new family. But in the lived reality of religious life the majority of the participants question their membership in religious life. This is what Gregg (1991) describes as identity-in-difference in the sense that the participants both 'own' and 'disown' religious life as part of them. Thus the participants tend to integrate all these voices as an intrinsic part of who they are and are becoming.

In effect their sense of identity is a mixture of owning and disowning religious life, this trend portrays that there is conflict within the participants' I-positions both at the internal and external domain of the self (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010; Hermans & Kempen, 1993). Within the internal domain they position themselves as belonging to religious life but due to interpersonal relationships with others in the external domain they begin to question and vacillate between belonging and not belonging. Thus their internal I-position is intertwined with doubts and questions regarding where they belong. This notwithstanding, they blend these two positions as an intrinsic aspect of their performance of identity. As such it can be argued that the participants are continuously shifting positions depending on the situation in which they find themselves (Hermans *et al.*, 1992). This affirms the theoretical argument that identity construction is a negotiation process where the self is able to harmonise paradoxical positions as composite parts of self-identity (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010).

The evidence of this shifting position is portrayed in the contradictory positioning which reflects “I-as accepting religious life as my new family” versus “I-as-not sure that religious life is my family”. Directly or indirectly this portrays the participants’ performance of identity as persons who may not be happy in religious life. Such performance of identity is thought provoking, bearing in mind that it emerges as a result of the participants’ social interaction in religious life. This is at variance with the ideal discourse of religious life as Christ’s family (cf. Jn. 13:34, 15:12). To a large extent these discrepancies between the discourses of supportive versus oppressive family to describe religious life prefigures the participants’ report of power relations and dominance which will be discussed in the next section. In addition these discrepancies also reflect in the participants’ identification with Africa’s cultural characteristics of love, care and hospitality which they claim is often missing in the lived reality of religious life.

### 7.3 The Participants’ Oppressed Identity Conveyed through Religious Obedience Used as Means of Power Relations/Dominance

In this study most participants’ major dilemma of identity construction is located within the context of religious obedience. According to the Church’s discourse the religious who vows obedience sacrifices her entire will to God and by faith is expected to subject herself to those who hold God’s place, the authority figures (including formators/superiors, senior/older sisters) (PC #14). The dilemma is that the discourse of religious obedience is ambiguous. On the one hand obedience is focused on doing God’s will which involves collective listening and discernment of what God wills (Can. 509–601; CICLSAL, 2007; DDL const. Art.45–51; PC #4, 14; SHCJ const. #34–39). This collective discernment is interpreted by some participants to mean that each member of the community is consulted with and allowed to express her opinion in matters that concern her as an individual and the community

(O'Murchu 1991; Pitts, 2009; Schneiders, 2011). On the other hand, the same Church documents and the constitutions of the congregations of sisters who participated in this study give the authority figures the veto power to have last word in all decision-making. In this way, authority figures are invested with power that supersedes every other voice.

The implication has been that sometimes the majority of these authority figures are inclined to silence every other voice that is at variance with theirs (Okure, 2009, 2010; Schneiders, 2011). This introduces the dilemma presented by the participants in the interview data, as they position themselves as oppressed, particularly in the context of religious obedience used as a vehicle of oppression by authority figures who dominate and control them. In such situations the participants argue that the obedience demanded from them by these authority figures subjugates obedience to God. They reported that in most cases, what they are asked to do contradicts what they consider God's will; therefore, they are torn between doing God's will and obeying an authority figure. In addition they indicated that their own voices are not allowed to be spoken or heard.

The participants of this study are drawn from the temporary professed, finally professed and formators/superiors representing the different categories of sisters who live religious life. Each one of the participants in these groups reported having across time and space of living religious life encountered oppression with authority figures, who using the discourse of religious obedience to unjustly manipulate them into obeying instructions that are sometimes irrational. They all used the discourse of control and oppression to describe how authority figures are privileged to have the last say in all matters (PC #14; VC #43) concerning the community and their individual lives. As a result, the participants reported that they feel dominated, and in this context some of the dominant I-positions the participants presented is "I-as dominated", "I-as oppressed" and "I-as subservient" etc. In managing these I-positions,

the participants presented themselves as constantly fighting the battle to assert their own voice and to re-define themselves as committed to God, which they presented as their primary aim of living religious life. This is ironic because the participants present themselves as obedient to God and also as obedient to authority figures (PC #14). However, they grapple with this obedience to authority figures that is not in accordance with God's will. As a consequence some participants' performance of identity is a constant contest between obeying God's voice in the way they know and understand versus obeying the authority figure that hinders the performance of obedience to God.

The analysis also reveals that the discourse of religious obedience offers different experiences to the temporary and final professed participants. The final professed participants' chances of being dominated by authority figures under the discourse of religious obedience is minimal because of their permanent membership of religious life, unlike the temporary professed who are constructed as provisional members, expected to be submissive or face the threat of being dismissed. The discussion in this section will be presented in six units: first, the temporary professed participants' construction of 'oppressed identity'; second, the final professed participants' performance of 'oppressed identity'; third and fourth, the participants' identity of anger and disappointment. Finally, the two strategies the participants used to construct identity: resistance and submission.

### *7.3.1 Temporary Professed Participants' Construction of Oppressed Identity through the Use of the Discourse of Religious Obedience*

The results reveal that oppressed identity is an intrinsic aspect through which the temporary professed participants of this study present themselves. This they conveyed using the discourse of religious obedience to describe how religious life authority figures treat them as subordinates who are not given the chance to be heard but instead treat them as 'puppets'. In

this way they express that based on the discourse of obedience authority figures expect them to carry out all instructions given without making clarification or understanding. Thus, they describe that the use of religious obedience in such manner is oppressive in contradistinction to the ideal discourse of obedience as a process of collective listening and discerning God's voice (will) (CICLSAL, 2007, 2008; O'Murchu, 1991; Pitts, 2009; Schneiders, 2011).

All the temporary professed participants told multiple stories of how they have been commanded by formators/superiors or senior/older sisters to carry out an instruction that did not seem reasonable. Indeed some of the participants report that they were treated like children. In interpreting this kind of relational context and treatment, the findings show that there is status difference between being a temporary professed and an authority figure. The authority figures are constructed as superiors, which means power is invested on them. This language of construction is problematic, because, if authority figures are superiors, then the temporary professed fit into the binary opposite position of inferiority (Hermans, 2001, 2003; Sampson, 1993). Therefore, the temporary professed participants can be classified as unimportant members of religious life. Usually binary opposite constructions impact on identity; they foster positive or negative characteristics (Hermans, 2003), which enhance or impede the self's performance of identity. In this case it has led the temporary professed to position themselves as 'oppressed', while on the other hand it positions the authority figures as 'oppressors'.

This kind of self-construction is undeserving for members of religious life who have been described as persons living a communal life (CICLSAL, 2007, 2008; PC #15) where right relationships of equality are an ideal (cf. Heb. 12:22–23; Okure, 2010; O'Murchu, 1991; Schneiders, 2000; Rakoczy, 2004). There are conflicts and tensions embedded in such relationships. First, the participants are enclosed in a mutual but uneven relationship

(Hermans, 2001, 2003). In such situations 'authentic dialogue' becomes a problem (CICLSAL, 2007, 2008; Hermans, 2001, 2003; PC #14). This means the temporary professed participants' participation in the communal relationship is subverted; they have no voice and as such do not share equal freedom of speech. Therefore, they cannot express their ideas from their own point of view and hence are invited to perform identity in a field of tension (Hermans, 2001, 2003; Sampson, 1993) as subordinates (Hermans & Kempten, 1993).

This identity of oppression and domination reported by the participants is comparable to Armstrong's (2005) autobiography in which she reflects how religious formation and the experiences of living religious life demeaned her sense of humanness, leading to her loss of personal integrity regarding contributing her own voice to issues of personal and communal concern. Also, it is parallel to the cruel treatment meted out to Sister Barbara, who in Gross' (2000) report was imprisoned for 21 years in the dungeon by the superior in collaboration with the spiritual director. This shared theme of oppressed identity between these studies and the findings of this research is an indication that participation in religious life, particularly for the temporary professed, can be humiliating which goes a long way towards inhibits the development and performance of personal and religious identity.

Furthermore, one remarkable finding is that formators/superiors and senior/older sisters apparently use the practice of having to use the ritual of report writing to control the temporary professed participants as a malleable group. Often the temporary professed participants talk about having been reminded that a report will be written on their behalf which will determine whether or not they will remain in religious life. In this sense the notion of final profession sharpens the difference between authority figures and temporarily professed (Hermans, 2001, 2003). It prefigures two kinds of conflicts which impact on the participants' performance of identity. On the one hand, it portrays the ideal of a religious as

someone who wants to dedicate her entire life perpetually to God under the auspices of a congregation located in the church (Schneiders, 2000), but on the other hand, it is unsettled by the obedience offered to the congregation through obeying authority figures who demand obedience that hinders commitment to God. The conflict for temporary professed participants is, should they risk dismissal versus commitment to God. As a result they are caught up in a struggle in which they grapple with the contradictions of whether to focus on obedience to God or obedience to authority figures and the possibility of dismissal. Thus the temporary professed participants' invitation to obedience becomes a means of humiliation and subjugation or revolt in which often many of the temporary professed position themselves as obedient to God in opposition to authority figure. But there are some temporary professed who fearfully position themselves as submissive because they fear dismissal from religious life. As a result they shift different I-positions around according to the context in which they find themselves. Also it reveals the discrepancies embedded in describing religious life as supportive versus oppressive family, as discussed above. These conflicts have crucial implications in that they have elicited from the temporarily professed participants a position of fearful compliance (in some cases) as possible ways of performing their personal and religious identity. In the context of compliance, report writing acts as a hegemony positioning of temporary professed as meek and humble (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010) and it also becomes a powerful weapon in the hands of superiors/formators and senior/older sisters who keep the temporary professed participants subjugated. Thus it will not be out of place to argue that the experiences of the temporary professed within the context of living religious life are agonising. Nevertheless, the final professed participants also speak of themselves as having been subordinated in their experiences of religious obedience which directly or indirectly impacts on their work of identity. The next section discusses the final professed participants' report of dominance transmitted through the discourse of obedience.

### *7.3.2 Final Professed Participants' Construction of Oppressed Identity through the Use of the Discourse of Religious Obedience*

As has been mentioned above all the participants reported some instances of power-play relations and dominance hidden in the discourse of religious obedience. In the analysis, the final professed participants speak of themselves as having been coerced into obeying orders that are irrational, particularly from superiors. Kupalo (1997) describes this as blind obedience. Notably the present research shows that a fair number of authority figures of religious life do act as dictators, which has been described as misuse of religious obedience as a means to intimidate and suppress all other voices, particularly voices that are at variance with theirs (Crosby, 2005; Metz, 1978; McDonough, 1991; Schneiders, 2011). This kind of attitude has led participants of this study, both temporary and final professed, to construct an oppressed identity, conveyed through their expression of having no space to assert themselves, out of which emerge multiple dilemmas of identity construction.

Part of the dilemma is that final professed participants expressed that some authority figures within the context of religious obedience position them as subservient and expect them to carry out all instructions given without allowing them to ask questions or express their opinions. This is in opposition to their understanding of religious obedience which ideally requires that the voices of both parties are allowed to be spoken and heard, although the final decision lies with the authority figure(s) (PC #14). Thus the final professed participants interpret the experience of silencing their voices and interests as instances of oppression which they describe as treating them as 'non-human' and insignificant members of religious life. In this context there is conflict of identity construction in which participants position themselves as 'worthy' versus 'unworthy' and 'human' versus 'non-human'. This conflict of identity construction is embedded in the internal and external I-positions which portray the



participants' identity as a multi-voiced construction. The multi-voicedness emerges from the internal and external positioning in which the participants position themselves as valued, worthy and human but also positioned by their leaders as unworthy, non-valued and non-human members of religious life. Clearly, such positioning portrays the active and passive use of the verb: on the one hand, the participants actively positioned themselves as valued and worthy; but on the other hand, they are passively positioned as 'unworthy' and 'non-valued' by religious leaders in their communities. Although these voices are contradictory the participants in their performance of their personal and religious identity, dialogue with these conflicting voices (Raggatt, 2006), confirming that contradictions and oppositions are intrinsic features of a healthy functioning self (Hermans 1999). In this context, the construction of identity portrays how the participants integrate voices that are confrontational as composite part of 'who they are'. However, a number of final professed participants in positioning themselves as oppressed portray instances of moving away from these opposing voices and positions and reject or refuse to be positioned as minor members of religious life. But there are some who integrate the two positions and in this way move towards harmonising the two positions in their self-presentation of 'who they are'.

That notwithstanding both final and temporary professed participants of this study indicated that authority figures used religious obedience as a means of control, which position them to struggle to redefine who they are, and in some instances a number of participants expressed that they felt 'psychologically damaged'. This 'psychologically damaged' identity is parallel to Dunn's (1993) findings, in which all the participants in the study reported a high rate of sadness and depression in community life. But the participants of this study, in an attempt to redefine who they are, positioned themselves as sharing in the identity of the covenant relationship with God through Christ (Okure, 1988; Oduyoye, 2001; Rakoczy, 2004). In this

way they invoke the identity that all Christians share in the concept of 'imago Dei' (cf. Jn. 1:18; Col 1:15) to claim that they share the identity of equality with authority figures. As a consequence they constantly perform their work of identity as worthy, valued and human based on the argument that God has called them to religious life in the same way leaders were called. They were thus able to invalidate the dissonant voices (Hermans, 2001) of the authority figures which construct them as subservient and minor. Hence it can be argued that their performance of identity is a constant negotiation process, in which they are engaged in a process of appropriation or conciliation of voices and positions in order to confront the constant contradictions, oppositions and differences they encounter in their everyday interpersonal relationships both within the religious community and in the Church (Hermans, 2006, 2008; Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). Consequently, they are able to construct some coherent sense of self achieving unity-in-multiplicity.

However, it is important to note that this phenomenon of superiors acting as controllers of others was reflected in Gallivan's (1994) and Meiring's (1985) studies in which their participants are docile to whatever the authority figures say. Okure (2010) explains that such situations abound because the hierarchical structure of the Catholic Church has permeated religious institutes, and influenced authority figures in these religious communities to uphold pyramidal structures of leadership. As a consequence, authority figures take up power which is similar to leadership styles obtainable in patriarchal structures, where men control others and use power to their own advantage (Brock, 2007). In this case, patriarchy has changed form; it is no longer men but leaders of religious life who are women, and they are subjecting other members (fellow women) of their religious institutes into positions of subservience. This, Olisah (2006) points out is a problem in most women's religious communities in Nigeria which has led sisters to develop psychological problems. Similar power relations and

dominance are evident in the participants' gender identity, as will be discussed later. This kind of situation calls for attention and needs to be addressed. The discourse of religious leadership emphasises that authority is 'spiritual' and flows from the example of Christ who led by according everyone respect (Can, 619; CICLSAL, 2007, 2008), which facilitates the on-going performance of identity of I-as worthy and valued. Thus religious authority figures have to return to following in the footsteps of Christ in order to provide experiences that will facilitate the on-going construction of personal and religious identity for all its members. In the next section we look at the participants' voices of anger which emerge as a result of their experiences of power-play relations and dominance couched under the discourse of religious obedience.

### *7.3.3 Participants' Performance of Identity through Anger*

The findings show that a large number of the participants are angry because religious obedience is used as means of control and subjugation by superiors/formators and senior/older sisters to make them passive. The participants are angry because they feel treated as minors with no voice including the experience of being positioned predominantly as workers, an issue which will be discussed later. In relation to authority figures, the majority of the participants report that they feel and/or are powerless which makes them angry and confronts them with challenges of how to respond to and cope with the demands of being submissive or resentful. More often than not they capitulate to the status quo due to the hierarchical structure of religious life which empowers authority figures to control others (Okure, 2010). There is tension between the two positions of being submissive or resistant. This tension has forced the participants to perform their identity as a struggle for survival. On the one hand, the participants who present themselves as submissive express that they are committed to the vow of religious obedience yet they feel aggrieved at being positioned as

voiceless subordinates. On the other hand, those participants who position themselves as resistant argue that they are committed religious, whose obedience entails accountability for their actions yet they are defined by authority figures as disobedient and deviant. In this way the participants' I-positions fluctuate between voices and positions according to situations and the authority figure they encounter (Hermans & Kempen, 1993).

This finding is at variance with Malone's (1991a) findings which reported that sisters who participated in her study in the USA subjugate their voice of anger as well as deny the existence of interpersonal conflict based on the notion that anger is inappropriate behaviour for sisters. On the contrary the participants of this study explicitly express their identity of anger in relation to authority figures who attempt to take advantage of them by using the discourse of religious obedience to make them passive. This research argues that the notion of using religious obedience as a means of control by authority figures is a misconception of the ideal religious obedience based on the discourse that obedience is fixed on doing God's will which is collectively discerned (PC #1, 14). The authority figures are not given power to control others. Unfortunately, the act of obedience has become a double-edge sword from which emerges the identity conflict between obeying God versus authority figures. The participants of this study are torn between discerning God's will and the will of authority figures which upsets them leading to their performance of identity through anger. According to the results of the present study there is a constant dissonance between what the participants consider to be God's will versus the will of authority figures. Then the question to be asked is: how do the participants respond and cope within the context of such obedience?

Some of the participants of this study have used anger as one means through which they engage in their experiences of being dominated by religious obedience used by authority figures to control them. These participants used multiple strategies to manage their identity of

anger. These strategies can be understood in Dialogical Self Theory terms such as meta-position and a coalition of positions (Herman & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). The anger of a number of the participants acts as a meta-position. In this sense, they used instances of being angry to appraise their experiences of oppression by authority figures. In other words, they used the position of being angry to review and evaluate the different situation(s) they encounter. In the process they identify alternative positions such as a resolution to focus on their commitment as religious by which they opt to do what they consider God's will in a given situation. Within this context they totally rely on God by forming a coalition of positions (cooperation) with God. To put it another way, they team up with God, whom they claim understands, values and defends them. In such a situation anger provides an alternative position from which they invalidate the opposing voices and characters. In one sense the participants' act of forming a coalition with God confirms the theoretical conception that dialogue with an imaginal figure (Hermans & Kempen, 1993; Watkins, 1992) constitutes part of the relational context through which identities are constructed.

Another strategy which the participants employed to manage anger was in a coalition of positions with others, particularly spiritual directors. In this situation the spiritual directors provide support through affirming and acknowledging the anger thereby legitimising the participants' voice and position. That means the participants' voice of anger becomes a shared position with the spiritual directors. In other words, the spiritual directors' voices collaborate with the participants' voices of anger, which helps the participants cope and negotiate the experiences of domination that are transmitted through the use of religious obedience. However, there is difference in the way the participants present their voice of anger. Some participants vacillate between subjugating their voice of anger and expressing it which is parallel to Malone's (1991a) findings as mentioned above. This was a common self-

presentation among a small but significant number of temporarily professed participants from the diocesan congregation, who speak of themselves as afraid of the outcome of expressing anger. They report that they are afraid of expressing their anger to superiors/formators and senior/older sisters, who will in turn, describe them as rebellious; such a description carries the penalty of dismissal from religious life. Thus they subjugate their own voice of anger because they fear being punished, thereby taking up a position of forced compliance. It is the fear of being punished that keeps this group of temporary professed participants from expressing anger which establishes the fact that religious life acts like a social institution, and like any social institution has the power to control the behaviour of its members (Burr, 2006; Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010).

In this situation the difference between being temporary and final professed participants determine how identity is performed. The temporary professed participants subjugate their voice of anger waiting for final profession in order to begin to assert themselves. That means the difference between being temporary and final professed acts as polar opposites and it is associated with power and dominance (supremacy) (Hermans, 2001, 2003; Sampson, 1993). Effectively, the temporary professed who are constructed as provisional members of religious life have no power to assert themselves. In the position (state) of being temporary professed they are powerless; in contradistinction, as final professed sisters, they will become full members of religious life and they will then have the power to speak out and be heard without running the risk of dismissal. This means that the temporary professed position is devaluing and constrains the participants to a fixed position of constructing their identity as subordinates (Hermans, 2001, 2003; Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010; Herman & Kempen, 1993). Also, it reveals how individuals in a narrative construction of self present different voices/positions according to situations in which they find themselves and persons

they encounter (Ewing, 1990; Hermans & Hermans-Jansen, 2004; Honos-Webb et.al 1999). In this sense the participants shift positions around by expressing that they are submissive only within the space of being temporary professed which will change once they become finally professed, confirming that the process of identity construction is flexible and on-going (Bakhtin, 1981). But the irony is that while some participants (the temporary professed) tried to endure subjugation waiting for final profession, a time in which they hope they would be able to assert themselves, the present study shows that even with final profession not all participants are able to assert themselves. In this context, it means that many religious will continue to suffer the crisis of subjugation and being sidelined by their superiors in the course of their religious life.

Unfortunately, the theological foundation of religious life is silent regarding the issue of anger and its expression by religious. The Church's discourse positions religious as happy and joyful workers (CICLSAL, 2002), but this might have partially flowed from the assumption that expression of anger is socially unacceptable for women (Piran & Cormier, 2005; Ussher, 2003). It could also be related to gendered discourse in which a patriarchal lens has been used to define who women ought to be (more details will be taken up in the section under gender).

#### *7.3.4 Participants' Identities of Disappointment*

Notably some of the participants did not only use the voice of anger in reporting their experiences of domination; they also employed the voice of disappointment in telling their stories of intersubjective exchange in religious communities. In the analysis the participants' voices of disappointment revealed dissatisfaction regarding their experiences of humiliation, rejection, segregation and abandonment. The participants presented their identities of disappointment in a diversity of ways. This discussion will focus on two common ways the

participants constructed their identities of disappointment: first based on the unkind treatment they receive from others and also the construction of identity as persons living less holy lives in religious life.

A number of the participants expressed displeasure with religious life. They reported that the unkind treatment they receive from others, particularly superiors/formators and senior/older sisters, is the major source of their dissatisfaction. Indeed some of the participants are disappointed because their ideal expectation was that the religious are living holy lives, by which they express that the religious are meant to focus on establishing the 'reign of God' (O'Murchu, 1991). This 'reign of God' they described as having right relationships of love, justice and peace (Okure, 2010) which facilitate on-going development and performance of personal/religious identity. But the interview data revealed that some of the participants' lived reality is different. They reported that within the context of living religious life there is often lack of right relationships of love and care. In this case the internal I-position with which they entered religious life is challenged by the contradictions of realising that the context of living a religious life does not always provide the needed care and support that facilitate the process of identity construction. This is parallel to Meiring's (1985) findings, in which 73% of the sisters who participated in his study identified "rigidity in others" within the religious community as a source of stress which makes them unhappy. Although the terminology used by Meiring is slightly different, expressions like unhappy relate directly to the idea of discontentment which the participants in his study report as their experience of living religious life. The similarity between Meiring's finding and this study tends to suggest that religious life has not provided its members with experiences that facilitate their performance of personal and/or religious identity. But rather the experiences of living



religious life have hindered their on-going performance of identity as persons who are committed to living holy lives.

Although the participants reported that they are disappointed with others, particularly superiors, formators, senior/older sisters whom they describe as not living holy lives, there is evidence in the interview data indicating that the majority of the participants are disappointed with themselves because they also define themselves as not living holy lives. A good number of participants position themselves as experiencing a diminishing sense of self. This group presents themselves as having lost who they are in terms of holiness. Conspicuously, this group of participants compares their level of holiness in their families-of-origin before they entered religious life and within the space of living religious life. In this comparison they claim that they were more holy in their families-of-origin than they are in religious life. They measured this amount of holiness by their eagerness to retaliate, particularly to repay all harsh treatment with the same lens of harshness. In such situations they constantly present themselves as having lost focus of who they are as religious. This is parallel to Dunn's (1993) findings, which reported that sisters who participated in his study defined themselves as 'failures' with 'loss self-identity'. The similarity between the findings of Dunn's study and this research points to the possibility of causal assumption that religious life has contributed to these sisters' reports of failure and loss of self-identity. It is within the act of participation and social interaction in religious life that the participants have constructed themselves as losing self-identity. Thus, their construction of identity is a product of social interaction in which the self in relationship with itself and its extension to the environment constructs identity (Hermans, 1996; Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). The implication is that participation in religious life has influenced the stories the participants of this study narrated about self-retardation in terms of 'loss of holiness.' Therefore it is not an exaggeration to

conclude that the construction of self as less holy by the participants of this study was contextually structured by experiences of living religious life.

### *7.3.5 Participant' Construction of Identity through Resistance: Challenging the Oppressive Nature of Religious Obedience*

A significant number of participants reported that they resisted being controlled by superiors/formators and senior/older sisters who under the discourse of religious obedience attempt to control them. This identity of resistance emerges as a result of conflict between the participants' self positioning and self as positioned by authority figures. As was already discussed in the section of the participants' construction of oppressed identity above, both the temporary and final professed participants reported that there is conflict between them (the sisters) and authority figures who position them as subordinates. This conflict some participants engaged with by being defiant and confrontational particularly when they were convinced that what was requested of them was not only unreasonable but also at variance with their commitment to God (Can. 212; Berchmans, 2005;). In such a situation the participants' central voice/position is I-as resistant to voices/positions (Hermans, 2001) that hinder my commitment as a religious particularly in relation to God from whom all authority proceeds. As a result their construction of resistant identity is based on commitment to God, whom the Catholic Church positions as the giver of all authority, therefore no earthly authority can ever properly subjugate God's position (Can. 212). As a consequence this group of participants forms a coalition with God which overshadows obedience to authority figures, and so doing invalidates all attempts by authority figures to unnecessarily control or dominate them, as was discussed in the section above regarding the expression of anger. In other words, their resistance is constructed as an extension of their relationship with the imaginal other (Herman & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010; Watkins, 1992), in which they position

themselves as obedient to God in opposition to any earthly authority figure who will hinder them from doing God's will.

Thus the dominant I-position for this group of participants is "I-as obedient to God" in opposition to obedience to earthly authority figure(s), who will dissuade them from doing God's will. Aptly they are convinced that obedience to God supersedes obedience to authority figures (Erikson, 1958). This confirms that the act of self construction, although influenced by intersubjective exchange, is also a negotiation process which involves personal agency, by which individual take up the positions they agree with or reject the positions they disagree with (James, 1890; Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010; Hermans & Kempen, 1993). Hence the participants made the choice to resist the superior's control.

The participants' construction of resistance identity differs. There are some participants whose construction of resistance is multi-voiced in that they harmonise the spirituality (charism) of their religious congregation, particularly the teaching that obedience goes with responsibility and accountability, into their performance of resistance identity (Bakhtin, 1973, 1980; Hermans & Kempen, 1993). In this sense this group employed what Bakhtin (1981) describes as 'ventriloquation', in that they used the collective voice of their religious congregation to construct themselves as responsible and accountable for their actions. This mode of identification enabled them to validate their resistance identity as well as justify them as persons faithful to their religious calling and membership.

Interestingly, all the participants who reported using resistance strategy to negotiate their experience of power relations and dominance were from the international congregation (cf. Analysis of understanding of religious life, available positions and its use for constructing identity). It is puzzling and hard to explain why participants from the diocesan congregation construct themselves as submissive to whatever the authority figure says. Part of the answer

could be the fear of being dismissed. Another possible explanation could be the cultural demands of respect for one's elders and authority figures which is a priority. But this may or may not be the issue and is beyond the scope of this present research study. Almost certainly it is a good interest area for further research work.

However, their non-resistance tendency agrees with the self-presentations of some of the sisters who participated in Malone's (1991a, b) study and operated from the religious discourse that authority figures must be obeyed at all cost; therefore, they subjugate their voice in order to avoid conflict with persons in authority. The similarity between Malone's participants and the participants in this study in taking up a subservient position in terms of subjugation of their own voices; shows that religious life's hierarchical structure allows authority figures and seniors to control others. This is a problem that needs to be addressed since religious life is constructed as a life form that flows from the communion of the Trinitarian God (CICLSAL, 2007; Okure, 2010). Based on this communion the religious are called to treat each other with dignity of the first born, where everyone has the right to mutual respect, love, care and responsibility and to participate actively in decision-making regarding personal and communal matters (cf. Heb. 12:22–23; Okure, 2010; O'Murchu, 1991). As a consequence no one who lives religious life should dominate the other; instead an atmosphere that encourages everyone to speak and be heard should prevail. In this way sisters will have a free space to construct and perform their personal and religious identity.

### *7.3.6 Participant' Construction of Identity through Submission: Compliance with the Oppressive Nature of Religious Obedience*

Some of the participants construct identity through submission, by which they present themselves as compliant with the control of authority figures who, under the discourse of religious obedience, dictate to them what they must do. According to the interview data this

group of participants maintains that they are submissive because they are convinced that obedience rendered to authority figures is directed toward God. But on the other hand they indicated that they often encounter pain and distress because in many instances authority figures treat them as people who are unworthy of being members of religious life. They described instances where authority figures have simply failed to recognise their views and interests but instead position them as recipients who have to obey all instructions, from which emerge conflicts of identity construction such as respected versus disrespected, human versus non-human, and humiliated versus honoured (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). In this context their submission is intertwined with dilemmas of identity construction, and they struggle to integrate these different I-positions into a composite of who they are (McAdams, 1988, 2001; Raggatt, 2006).

This group of participants' I-positions fluctuates among mutual and opposing voices as they perform identity through submission. In this way they position themselves as human and worthy members of religious life who are committed (loyal) yet belittled based on the treatment they receive from authority figures, which is a source of pain; this impacts on their performance of identity as people compelled to be submissive. But above all they present themselves as compliant and obeying whatever orders that are given as a free choice they have made on the grounds that religious obedience requires total submission to God's will (PC #14; VC #43). This performance of identity through submission is in agreement with Mangion's (2007) argument that a 'good nun' is meant to be compliant with whatever the person in authority says.

Further conflicts of identity construction for this group of participants are embedded in the instance of realising that sometimes what the leaders ask is in opposition to God's will. In that context they are stuck, because obeying authority figures means disobeying God; yet

disobeying authority figures means resisting obedience to the congregation which directly or indirectly is channelled toward God. This kind of conflict is multifaceted and indicates that their performance of identity is achieved through conflicts of I-positions, which further reflect how the self acts as a 'society of mind' (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010) by which it constructs identity through agreement/disagreement including contradictions/oppositions as is obtainable in the wider society.

A small but significant number of participants construct submissive identity by forming a coalition with spiritual directors who encourage them to be obedient to whatever the person in authority says. In that context the discourse of obedience to whatever the authority figure says is intensified by affirmations coming from spiritual directors. Thus coalition of positions takes different forms; participants who positioned themselves as resisting obedience which dominates also used coalition of positions with God and spiritual directors to defend their identity of resistance; likewise this group of participants who present themselves as submissive also use coalition of positions to justify their construction of identity.

Furthermore, the results show that the temporary professed participants' construction of identity through submission is strategic. On the one hand, they position themselves as totally submissive but it is apparent that they use submission as a strategy to gain final profession, particularly in the case of temporary professed participants from the diocesan congregation. They expressed that they are compliant with the authority figure because they do not want to be described as deviant, which might lead to their dismissal from religious life. Conversely after final profession they will revolt and resist control by any authority figure. This portrays how different spaces within the context of living religious impact on the participants' development and performance of identity.

## 7.4 Participants' Work Identity

*Let religious see well to it that the Church truly show [sic] forth Christ through them... Christ in contemplation on the mountain, or proclaiming the kingdom of God to the multitudes, or healing the sick and maimed and converting sinners to a good life, or blessing children and doing good to all...in obedience to the will of the Father who sent him (LG #46a).*

In this statement the Church positions religious as set apart for doing God's work in direct imitation of Christ whose public ministry combined prayer and work as a sign of doing God's will. In accordance with this perspective the participants of this study positioned themselves and are also positioned by others (particularly superiors, formators, senior/older sisters, bishops/priests and people of God in the Church) as predominately workers for God under the auspices of the Church and their congregations. The participants construct ministry which they presented as work (which is intertwined with prayer) as an intrinsic aspect of their identity. On the one hand, they position themselves as happy workers for God. But on the other hand, they are positioned by authority figures of religious life as subservient workers, who are required to sacrifice their professional skills, their self-care, even their sense of humanity and their very commitment as religious in order to become subservient workers. In this section the discussion will focus on both the multiplicity of I-positions the participants used to perform their work identity and their subjugation by authority figures of religious life.

### *7.4.1 Participants' Performance of Work Identity through Multiplicity of I-Positions*

The participants of this study used different I-positions such as I-as happy, I-as productive and I-as hard working to perform their work identity. In this way they constructed an identity of active workers in direct imitation of Christ (Mangion, 2005, 2008; PC #1). That means the participants position themselves as God's workers (LG #46a; PC #1, 5) who are happy participating in God's evangelical action (CICLSAL, 2002). This identity of active workers is

in line with Mangion's (2005, 2008) findings which reported that the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Catholic religious sisters developed and performed identity through work. In Mangion's study the sisters are defined as having an 'identity of active labourers', which was common among many of the apostolic congregations founded in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (McNamara, 1996; Schneiders, 2000), with the primary focus on service rendered for the good of God's people, and among such congregations is the Society of the Holy Child Jesus whose members participated in this study. The findings of Mangion and this study are unanimous in suggesting that the work the sisters render is a composite part of who they are as religious. This identity of active workers was recently reiterated by Fox (2012) who described African religious sisters as active workers, whose lives are marked by "effective and uncharacteristic generosity to the wider society" (p.1).

This identity of active workers reflects the understanding of religious life as God's call (PC #1; Stuber, 2000; Rulla, 1986). This is a call to love and service which the Church describes as living lives of 'perfect charity', requiring full dedication of self to service of God and humanity (PC #1), a call which enriches the Church's salvific mission (cf. Can. 573; ET #1; 2 Tim. 3:17; PC #1, 5; LG #44) and is marked as a special consecration of sharing in Christ's self-emptying (cf. Rom. 9:1-13; PC #5). In this view the participants' self-positioning resonates with the self positioning of the religious as persons called to the service of God and humanity. Thus the participants construct themselves as devoting their entire life to the service of God and others. In the interview data the participants define themselves as being gifted with religious life, which for them is a privilege that enables them to spread the love of God through service.

In a study conducted by Van Deusen (2009) in the United States it was also discovered that Catholic religious sisters reported a sense of happiness based on their engagement with work.



Van Deusen argues that work was a source of happiness for the sisters. This confirms the findings of this study that involvement with work for the religious is a core aspect of their identity. In this regard, the description of religious life as ‘mission’ referring to work and service (VC #81), has a direct bearing on the sisters’ performance of identity (CICLSAL,2007, 2008; ChL #32). It is partly through mission that the religious are able to perform their identity as persons committed to God through serving others. Pope John Paul II (1986) affirms work identity as a core aspect of performance of identity for the religious when he emphasises that the religious is a person devoted to work. In many instances the participants of this study define themselves not only as happy workers but also hardworking and productive workers. This identity of productive and hardworking persons is enacted through their engagement in different ministries, ranging from pastoral to social services, nursing and educational management and teaching. But is important to note that for the participants of this study, it is not all kinds of work that is conducive to their performance of work identity: they resist being exploited or demeaned at work.

In this context many of the participants integrated a multiplicity of professional I-positions (such as medical doctors, and teachers etc) as an integral part of their performance of work identity. These professional I-positions exist as a coalition with and an expression of their religious work identity. Significantly the participants used their professional knowledge to facilitate their performance of work identity, where they position themselves as using specialised knowledge to increase their productivity. Further some participants positioned themselves as using their professional skills in collaboration with God to heal, uplift and evangelise humanity. Interestingly, Chandler’s (2002) study discovered that sisters’ professional identity was also a source of self-fulfilment, suggesting that the enactment of their identity as professional and committed workers can also be a source of personal

satisfaction. This performance of identity through professionalism is contrary to Fahey's (1982) thesis which defines Catholic religious sisters as 'unskilled' labourers of the Church. Based on the findings of Mangion (2005, 2008), Van Deusen (2009), Chandler (2002) and this study, it would not be out of place to define the sisters as having an identity of active workers conveyed through a multiplicity of I-positions such as happy, committed, productive, hard working and professional workers of God in the Church through their various congregations. Thus, it points to the importance of developing the sisters' professional skills in order to boost their performance of identity.

#### *7.4.2 The Identity of Subjugated Workers*

Although many participants presented work as a central part of their personal and religious identity, it is also a source of great tension and conflict. This tension and conflict arises from the way they are positioned as subjugated workers by authority figures (superiors, formators, senior/older sisters, priests and bishops) of religious life. This positioning by others constitutes one of their major dilemmas of identity construction, portraying how work identity is constructed as the central position that dominates all other positions/voices. According to the participants, work is privileged above all other aspects of religious identity (CICLSAL, 2007, 2002), in which they reported that they are positioned by authority figures as predominantly workers who have no space/time to perform their identity as committed religious, particularly in terms of prayer, and also self-fulfilment especially in the area of self-care and job-satisfaction. In this context the participants' performance of work conflicts with other I-positions that are central (as was discussed in the first section under relationship with God) to their performance of personal/religious identity.

Some of these conflicts of identity construction are embedded in the struggles between I-as a happy worker versus I-as as dominated by work. On the one hand, the participants position

themselves as workers who are happily committed, but on the other hand, they are demeaned by the position of working all the time, in which case work becomes a form of slavery and domination. In such instances work is experienced as means of exploitation and a channel through which authority figures control the behaviour of the members of religious life (Burr, 2006; Hermans, 2001, 2003). The participants grapple with this experience leading to the emerging identity of I-as angry as was discussed in the section above.

Consequently, there is conflict between religious authority figures and the religious. Some of these conflicts are embedded in the expression of having too much work to do, where the participants report that authority figures overwhelm them with work. Also some participants report that they have no skill for the assignment given and in such situations, they are perplexed by not knowing how to manage the work. There are still some participants whose source of conflict emerges from the subjugation of their professional skills. In this sense they are positioned as unskilled workers reflecting Fahey's (1982) description of Catholic religious sisters, which has been critiqued as using a gender-based lens to position women as incompetent workers (Ruether, 1995).

In response, a majority of the participants resolve the conflict by capitulating to the status quo. In this way they are compliant with the position of being subjugated workers by performing any kind of assignment given despite the fact that they are pained and dehumanised, according to the interview data. Thus, this group of participants' performance of identity portrays a multiplicity of I-positions, where their personal I-position (I-as happy worker) incorporates the external I-position (I-as subjugated worker) to form a composite part of self. There is tension in this kind of construction where the participants present the external positioning of I-as subjugated worker as an ambiguous position which they describe as humiliating yet part of their identity as religious. In some cases they both reject and accept it;

thus it is presented at an ambiguous border-zone between self and non-self (Gregg, 1991; Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010). But the paradox of their identity construction is that they incorporate these conflicting voices and positions into a composite part of who they are. In this way they are able to construct continuity in the face of oppositions and contradictions confirming that unity and multiplicity do not exclude each but are composite parts of the self (Hermans, 2001, 2004). Thus, their construction of identity in such ways affirms that the self is a 'unitas multiplex' that combines both contradictions oppositions and difference into a composite part of who one is (Hermans & Salgado, 2010).

On the other hand there are some participants who negotiated the position of subjugated workers through resistance. In this context some participants position themselves as refusing to commit themselves to assignments they consider meaningless, particularly when they are convinced that it is contrary to their commitment as religious (some aspects of this have been discussed under the section on resistance identity in the above section). In such situations these participants are constantly engaged in the process of negotiating and re-negotiating their performance of work identity.

Generally, some participants positioned themselves as experiencing conflict regarding the identity of subjugated workers. The major part of this conflict arises from the I-positions of commitment, happy, productive and hard worker versus the position of workers who are dehumanised by work. As such these participants expressed that they are pained and that they also struggle to find a balance between work and commitment as religious because work tends to dominate the I-positions of commitment. Some participants' I-position of commitment includes the multiplicity of spiritual exercises such as prayer (personal/communal), and reading scripture/spiritual text. This I-position of commitment is dominant though presented as peripheral which makes the participants unsettled in their

performance of identity. Within this context the participants move backwards and forwards in their struggles to balance these central positions of their identity as committed religious versus subjugated worker. The identity conflict here is focused on how to harmoniously integrate the different I-positions to form an integral part for their performance of a religious identity (CICLSAL, 2007).

The opposition between these multiplicities of I-positions has led some participants to position themselves as fighting the battle of redefining their work identity including the tension of not allowing their identity of commitment to dominate other I-positions. In some situations some participants position themselves as determined to take care of themselves by creating time to relax, attend and participate in social functions such as attending sisters' area meetings and profession ceremonies etc. These activities enable them to recreate and balance their performance of work identity as persons not solely focused on work. Thus these activities can be defined as acts of using third-positioning to resolve the identity conflict emerging from being positioned as subjugated worker. In this way the participants' performance of work identity is a constant negotiation process, which focuses on managing the contradictions and oppositions between the different work I-positions (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010).

### 7.5 Gender Identity

There is a multiplicity of I-positions through which the participants express their gender identity. These I-positions emerged from the participants' self-positioning and self as positioned by others, particularly by priests/bishops. The majority of the participants positioned themselves as worthy servants of the Church but they also reported that priests/bishops position them as unworthy based on the Church's gender discourse, which privileges men over women. Thus there is conflict of I-positions from which emerge multiple

dilemmas of identity construction for the participants. In this section the discussion will focus on the multiple conflicts of I-positions and the negotiation strategy employed by participants, specifically the use of resistance and submission.

#### *7.5.1 The Participants' Multiple Gender Conflicts of I-Positions*

Unanimously, the participants in their performance of gender identity presented conflicts of I-positions. These conflicts arise as a result of a discrepancy between self-positioning and self as positioned by others, specifically by priests/bishops. On the one hand, participants positioned themselves as worthy servants of the Church called by God (PC #1), who are hard working and committed workers of God within the service of the Church and their congregation. Therefore, participants perform identity through hard work and commitment (which has already been discussed extensively in the section of work identity). Nevertheless, participants reported that on the basis of gender they are constructed by priests and bishops as relatively unimportant workers by positioning them as background, underground and inferior workers. Thus participants are locked in this tension of constructing themselves as worthy versus unworthy based on their self-construction by others. This reflects the similar power relations and dominance which participants encounter in their interpersonal relationships with authority figures of religious life. The priests/bishops as men are the superiors, who have power to control sisters, who as women are positioned as inferior (Brock, 2007). Thus, participants move back and forth in an attempt to redefine who they are, which portrays the conflict they are embedded, and also reflects the conflict within society in which they are located. In this context gender becomes a determining factor that regulates the sisters' performance of identity (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006; Butler, 1990; Elliott, 2008; Oduyoye, 2007; Reuther, 1983).

This identity of background workers is further manifested in the limited participation space ascribed to women in the Church particularly in leadership positions and in councils that make decisions for the Church (Küng, 2001). Similar findings were reported by Reid's (2002) study indicating that Catholic religious sisters have been denied opportunities for active service in the Church, particularly in ministries they are qualified for, because of gender. The identity of background workers is a product of the Church's gender discourse which many have argued is based on Biblical and cultural patriarchy that marginalises women (Ciermick, 1995; Okure, 2010; Küng, 2001). The early Church fathers notably positioned women as workers behind the scenes (Fiorenza, 1983). Hence within the context of the Church, the participants of this study expressed that they are required to discharge their duties from behind the scenes causing them to grapple with the challenge of having minimal access to the Church's public space. The implication is that some of the participants vacillate between the different I-positions of constructing themselves as committed/hard-working and also background/underground workers. For this group of participants their act of self-enactment can be described as what Gregg (1991) calls 'identity-in-difference' in the sense that they incorporate both the internal gender I-positions/voices and the external I-positions/voices which ordinarily they reject as part of their self-construction. Thus their act of self constructing is presented as a cacophony of voices/positions that are central, consonant, and dissonant (Hermans, 2001). It also reflects how the act of self-construction is multi-voiced as different positions/voices in the external domain penetrate and occupy position in the self of the individual. This finding is parallel to Leung and Wittberg's (2004) study which reported that Catholic religious sisters in China are submissive to being positioned as powerless domestic workers of the diocese by bishops/priests.

On the contrary, there are some participants who have resisted being positioned as unworthy servants. This group of participants goes beyond the Church discourse to construct themselves as worthy, competent, hard-working and productive workers. In their performance of identity they strategically positioned themselves as valued workers, claiming that their service is for God in whose image they were created, thus drawing attention to the shared identity of oneness (*imago Dei*) in Christ (Okure, 1988; Oduyoye, 2001; Rakoczy, 2004). In this way they oppose the gender construction of them as inferior workers by enacting the identity all believers shared in Christ (cf. 1:18; Col 1:15). This act of self-construction is parallel to the participants' performance of resistance as was evident in the section of religious obedience versus power relations and dominance. In addition this group of participants construct themselves as having the qualifications to discharge their duties efficiently through their performance of identity as competent workers.

In addition to from defining themselves as competent, some of these participants position themselves as moving away from dependence on priests/bishops who assign their work and decide the salary they are to earn. They construct themselves as independent workers who are building and managing their own projects. Obviously this group of participants is identifiable as taking personal responsibility toward reconstructing who they are and could be (Chukwu, 2011; Mbuy-Beya; Patrick, 1998; Njoroge, 2000; Oduyoye, 1995). They are not constrained by the Church's gender construct in defining who they are or who they ought to be.

Essentially, this finding agrees with the resistance theme in Brock's (2007, 2010) study in which 43 sister participants speak of themselves as resisting being controlled by the Church's hierarchy (male) as self-sacrificing workers. Brock's study reported that although the participants present themselves as workers for the Church, they also present themselves as no longer being compliant in doing whatever (even if demeaning) the bishops/priests ask of



them; they are driven by personal motivation and professionalism to provide services to the poor and the needy. Similarly, Padgett (2010) reported that in recent years a group of Catholic women, including sisters in Europe and the United States, were ordained Catholic priests. Thus, they felt could go beyond the Church's designated apostolate as sisters to upgrade themselves to the status of being priest. They formed an association known as *Catholic Church Womenpriests*, although they have not been given recognition by the Vatican. Padgett describes these women's action as an attempt to resist the Church's exclusion of women from full participation in the Church's leadership positions.

#### 7.6 The Participants' Cultural I-Positions: Calling for Cultural Adaption of Religious Life to African Worldview

The results of the present study again reveal that the participants position themselves in identification with Africa's cultural characteristic, specifically in the areas of hospitality, care and love. According to the interview data the participants enter religious life with the culture based I-positions of hospitality, love and care which emerge from participation in their various families-of-origin and the wider Nigerian society. These cultural I-positions (hospitality, love and care) should ideally blend with religious life's culture of communion (CICLSAL, 2007) in which the attainment of *koinonia* (an embodiment of love, justice, respect for all) is a prerequisite (Kanyoro, 1996b; Oduyoye, 2001; Rakoczy, 2004). But on the one hand the majority of the participants told stories indicating that some relational characteristics such as welcoming visitors, showing love and care to one another are often lacking in religious life. This aspect of a lack of love and care has intersectional relationship with aspects of religious life as family and the use of the discourse of religious obedience as a means of controlling others, which many of the participants express, dehumanise their sense of person. (This has been discussed previously). Many of the participants argue that the

relational nature of religious life has been influenced by a Western cultural perspective which they describe as individualistic (Menkiti, 1984). Consequently, many of the participants express that they encounter multiple conflicts regarding cultural identification with Nigeria's worldview of hospitality, love and care. One side of the conflict is embedded in the struggle to resolve the dissonance between the lived reality of religious life against the ideal versus the desire and demand to live out their religious commitment as Africans. Thus the participants vacillate around this conflict and one of their major tensions of identity construction focused on how to harmoniously incorporate the Nigerian worldview of hospitality, love and care into lived expression of who they are as religious. The discussion will focus on the participants' culture I-positions and the need for inculturation of Africa's worldview, particularly the cultural characteristics of hospitality, love and care into religious life's lived reality, specifically in Nigeria.

#### *7.6.1 The Participants' Culture Based I-Positions of Love, Care and Hospitality*

Virtually all the participants positioned themselves as entering religious life with the culture I-positions of love, care and hospitality. These I-positions the participants reported reflect some of religious life's ideal characteristics based on gospel values. According to the interview data the expression of love, care and hospitality is shared by both religious life and Africa's worldview, which can easily be captured by Mbiti's statement: "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am" (1991, p.106). This expression portrays the interrelatedness with which the participants of this study describe Africa's worldview and religious life's relational characteristics. But within the lived reality of religious life the participants reported that they encounter challenges emerging from the discrepancies between the ideal and the lived reality of religious life. They argue that in the lived reality of religious life there is a lack of love and care (this has been extensively discussed under the sub-sections

of religious as family and power relations and dominance), and hospitality whereby they pointed out that the Western culture of individualism has penetrated and influenced the lived expression of religious life (Onyejekwe, 2001; Udoka, 1992). As a result the participants in their performance of culture identity tend to argue that the process of living religious life offers different culture I-positions, comprising Africa's cultural worldviews (specifically Nigeria), and religious life's culture (tradition), particularly the ideals based on communion with others expressed in love and shared warmth, and also the lived reality of individualism, which sometimes positions them in conflict as autonomous individuals minding their own personal affairs.

In this view, a great number of participants reported that the sisterly love shared among them is inadequate, and that visitors are not warmly welcomed when the religious community was not notified beforehand about the impending visit. This kind of situation is in contradiction to Africa's worldview (including the ideal tradition of religious life) where the concept of mutual love and interdependence is an integral part of one's identity (Erikson, 1958; Flower, 1981; Mbiti, 1991; Mkhize, 2003; Ogbonnaya, 1994; ter Avert, 2008; Zittoun, 2006). The situation of not warmly welcoming visitors opposes one value of Africa's ethos in that a warm reception must be offered to visitors anytime they call as a visitor is considered a blessing (Nwagwu, 1997). Thus the participants are confronted with the conflicting positions of claiming to enter religious life with the culture I-position of love, care and hospitality, which is consonant with religious life traditions of shared mutual warmth, but encounter the opposite through the lived reality of individualism.

In this context the participants' conflict of identity construction is focused on the struggles of how to harmoniously incorporate Africa's cultural worldview of love, care and hospitality into the lived realities of religious life in Africa. This conflict reflects the contradictions

between the various I-positions, such as I-as an African religious who identifies with my cultural orientation of love, care and hospitality, which is compatible with the ideal traditions of religious life but is compelled by the lived reality of religious life to mind my own affairs with little care and concern for and from others and also the lack of warmth shown to visitors when they call. Hence, there is a trajectory from being an African religious with the multiple I-positions of love, care and hospitality to a religious who is called to share warmth and love with others but must regulate and adjust to instances of lack of mutual love, care and hospitality. This is a complex situation in which many of the participants move back and forth in an attempt to define who they are as African religious sisters. Thus in the process of identity construction some participants position themselves as committed religious who value their membership in religious life but on the other hand they also value their identity with various aspects of Africa's culture that are consistent with the essentials of religious life. The issue becomes, how do they incorporate these two positions to form an integral part of their identity?

Souci *et al* (1998) reported similar findings with young Kenyan religious who indicated that visitors are not warmly welcomed, and that they also felt like strangers in their various religious communities because no one cared about them. The similarity between Souci *et al*'s (1998) findings and this study poses the question regarding how the common worldview of love, care and hospitality found in both Africa's way of life and religious life's traditions can be reconciled in order to help sisters live their communal life more effectively (Nwagwu, 1997; Musonda, 2007; Onyejekwe, 2001; Udoka, 1992; Uzukwu, 2006). Vatican II is very vocal in calling for inculturation of the local culture(s) into the Christian faith (CM 59; PC #4; McElwee, 2011). There should be mutual respect for the different cultures that the sisters bring to enrich their expression of faith, which will make them, feel at ease to express the

faith in familiar ways (CMW #58) and hence, facilitate their development and performance of identity. Therefore religious life as lived in Africa needs to redefine its stand in terms of inculturation.

### *7.6.2 The Participants' Voice: Calling for Inculturation of African Culture into Religious Life*

Many participants positioned themselves as calling for inculturation of African worldview of love, care and hospitality into religious life (specifically within the lived context in Nigeria). They argue that inculturation will enable them to effectively live religious life. Interestingly some of the participants' call for inculturation also includes the notion of accepting religious life as their new family. This group of participants in the performance of their identity moved against the ethos of Africa's interdependence, which requires African religious to attend most functions held in their families-of-origin. They argue that because of the demands flowing from their membership in religious life as family, the African religious is not free to attend every function held by her family-of-origin; thus, a blending of the two is necessary. They position themselves as seeking ways of integrating expectations from their families-of-origin and religious life into a composite part of who they are.

Interestingly, many participants critiqued the gender-based discrimination found in African culture which has helped to perpetuate patriarchal structure in the Church. In this light they argue that inculturation of African culture into religious life should be critical and they challenge concepts that are not life-giving (Oduyoye, 1995; Uzukwu, 2006). These participants in the process of identity construction presented opposing views and contradictions embedded in cultural adaptation of religious life to Africa's way of life and vice versa. Thereby they reiterate the caution that inculturation must ensure that the basic principles of the faith and its way of life is maintained (L'Oss Romano #4). This call for

inculturation resonates with the clarion call which constantly expresses that every culture enriches the Church and religious life (Mugambi, 2002; McElwee, 2011; Pope Pius XII, 1944). Therefore, there exists the need for the African religious to seek ways of incorporating her African culture into religious life and at the same time challenge cultural traditions that are not life-giving such as gender discrimination which is grounded in both African culture and Church traditions. In other words inculturation need is critical in order to ensure that the essential aspects of human right and dignity are not relegated to the background. The religious need to seek a balance where the two cultures are adequately represented so that the religious' performance of identity is facilitated. This task may seem demanding but it is not too difficult to achieve, particularly for the two congregations whose members participated in this study as they have almost 99% African membership in Nigeria.

## 7.7 Conclusion

The discussion of this study's findings is an attempt to interpret the meaning the participants' make of their intersubjective exchange of living religious life within the Catholic Church and wider Nigerian society, portraying how they position themselves and are positioned by others. Participation in religious life, in the Church and in wider Nigerian society has provided the socialisation (formation) process and experiences which the participants interpret and engage with, as they make sense of 'who they are' and 'are becoming'. Within the contextual relationship of living religious life the participants have encountered significant others in relation to whom they construct identity including God, superiors/formators, senior/older sisters, priests and members of their-families-of origin. In addition, their engagement with work acts as an essential position through which they enact their personal and religious identity. The Catholic Church's gendered discourse and construction which positions women as inferior to men also influences the participants'

performance of identity. The participants' cultural identification as African (Nigerians) is an additional position that constitutes an aspect of their performance of identity.

In all of these relationships the major source of identity dilemmas that the participants reported comes from their encounter with the vow of religious obedience that has been used as a vehicle of oppression by some authority figures, which position them as subservient and requiring direction and guidance on what to do. As a result the participants position themselves as constantly fighting the battle of re-defining their humanity. The participants engage with each of these positions either by subjugating their own voice and interest or asserting who they think they are by resisting subordination. As a consequence they have proved that their performance of identity is often a negotiation process through which they identify the position they agree and/or disagree with, and sometimes oppose positions (Hermans, 2001, 2003; Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010; Hermans & Kempen, 1993). In this way they were able to construct and manage oppositions, contradictions and differences into a coherent sense of self. This they achieved by engaging with the different positions and sometimes taking a counter-position as they negotiated and re-negotiated their work of identity construction. Hence the participants through negotiation are managing the dilemmas, conflicts, oppositions and differences they encounter within the context of living religious life leading them to construct unity-in-multiplicity (Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010).

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

#### 8.0 Introduction

The aim of this study was to examine how Catholic religious sisters in the context of living religious life within the Catholic Church in Nigeria construct their religious identity. Religious life is a form of consecrated life of the Catholic Church. Roman Catholic religious sisters are a group of women who feel called by God and they respond by dedicating their entire life to the service of God and humanity. In doing so, they live in a religious community which provides the basic context of socialisation that facilitates or impedes the development and performance of personal and religious identity. Thus religious sisters through interpersonal relationships within the context of religious community life, the Catholic Church and wider Nigerian society, develop and perform their identity as religious.

This study used an interdisciplinary theoretical approach. It drew from the Catholic Church's theology of religious life, especially the epistemological understanding of religious life as a life of holiness in response to God's call, which requires full dedication of self, through life in a religious community (LG #44; PC #1, 15). To this effect, the religious community provides the relational context within which the sisters develop and perform their personal and religious identity. The religious community does this through the process of initial and on-going formation. Dialogical Self Theory was the conceptual framework used to explore and understand how participants negotiate the multiplicity of I-positions in their day-to-day relationship with one another. According to Dialogical Self Theory, self or identity emerges from the dialogue of a multiplicity of I-positions. The emerging self or identity involves a coherent sense of self based on these multiple I-positions (Bhatia, 2002; Esgalhado, 2002; Hermans & Hermans-Konokpa, 2010; Sfard & Prusak, 2005). Religious life and formation



involves multiple positions and relationships within the religious community such as relationships with God, authority figures (superiors/formators, senior/older sisters) in the context of the Church's gendered order and culture that impact on the participants' development and performance of identity.

The study posed the following key research question: How do Roman Catholic religious sisters construct their self-identity in the context of religious life within Nigerian Catholic Church and society?

### 8.1 Summary of Findings

The findings of the study reveal that there is a large discrepancy between the ideal and lived reality of religious life. This dissonance between the ideal and the lived reality of religious life highlights a major dilemma in identity construction which the participants presented in the interview data. On the one hand, their understanding of religious life is based on the ideal which is conveyed as primarily God's call to a life of commitment in which they positioned themselves as gifted and privileged because they are called to live a life of closer union with God (PC #1). They argue that 'this call' is the root of their core identity which is driven from doing God's will. Therefore, they presented God as the ultimate significant other in relation to whom they construct their identity. In doing this, they construct an identity of relationship with God where they position themselves as doing God's will. The findings indicated that doing God's will include serving one another and the community which the participants understood as a predominant aspect of their performance of identity (DDL const. Art 2, Mangion, 2005, 2007; PC #5; SHCJ const. p.10).

But within the context of lived reality of religious life, the findings revealed that there are multiple contradictions which confront the participants with dilemmas of identity construction. The major dilemma emphasised by participants is focused on the discourse of

religious obedience. On one level, the participants indicated that the discourse of religious obedience involves an ultimate and total commitment to God (Can. 573–746; PC #14). But on another level, they noted that the discourse of obedience often functions as a vehicle of power and dominance, through which some authority figures attempt to control and oppress them. Hence the results of the study portray an element of conflict between I-positions such as: I-as obedient to God versus I-as obedient to the superior; I-as worthy versus I-as unworthy; I-as human versus I-as inhuman; and I-as cooperative versus I-as rebellious. The conflicts between these I-positions according to the participants reflect the mutual and uneven relationship with members of the religious community and their authority figures (Hermans, 2001, 2003, Sampson, 1993). While religious superiors ought to be seen as agents of God, some were often seen as projecting their own personal agenda which subjugates God's interest. In such situations the participants perceived themselves or were perceived by the superiors as uncooperative or resentful. Thus the participants in this study showed that when faced with superiors who subjugate God's interest by projecting their own agenda, they find themselves confronted with situations in which the dilemma is a choice between obeying God or the religious authority figures who present themselves as God's representatives within the community. In this way, the conflicts between these two poles reveal the central tension that confronts participants in the development and performance of their religious identity. Consequently, the participants revealed the idea of being constrained to perform their identity as a contest in which they fight the battle to redefine who they are as committed religious or to capitulate to the vagaries of opinionated religious superiors.

The findings also reveal another conflict, namely, the one that reflects in the participants' definition of religious community as both a caring and an oppressive family. Here, on the one hand, they gave the impression that religious community is a caring family based on the

quality of love and care they received from members such as superiors/formators, senior/older sisters, and other colleagues within and outside the community etc. Thus perceived, they come to position themselves as loved and cared for, which in turn facilitated their performance of identity as people who love and care for others (CICLSAL, 2007; Okure, 2010; O'Murchu, 1991; Schneiders, 2000). However, on the other hand, the participants also presented religious life as an oppressive family in which members are forced to position themselves or are positioned as oppressed, treated as 'outcast' and often abandoned, particularly when sick. This, according to the participants, tends to lead a good number of the religious to construct an 'outsider identity' in which they privileged membership of their families-of-origin over their membership of their religious community. In addition, the participants showed evidence in their interview reports of being disappointed in and with religious life because within the context of living out their religious life, they perceive some loss of self-identity. In different ways, the majority of participants presented the image of losing the identity of 'who they are' and 'who they are called to be' as religious. In this sense they construct themselves as tending to be 'less holy' in religious life in comparison to the identity with which they are known in their families-of-origin. Thus they present themselves as encountering a rupture of their ideal-self in religious life.

Furthermore, the findings of the study reveal that there is a contradiction in the participants' understanding of ministry in terms of the ideal of what religious ministry (service) entails and the reality of their participation in the ministry. The participants constructed the ideal of ministry as joyful expression of bearing witness to God in the service of others. While on the other hand, they presented the lived reality as revealing the image of ministry as an avenue through which they have been positioned by authority figures (including superiors/formators, senior/older sisters and priests/bishops) as subjugated and exploited workers who must

subjugate all other I-positions to the identity of I-as obedient workers. In this sense, the idea of ministry as a means of exploitation dominates their sense of identity construction, thereby causing them to construe their involvement in religious life as constituting a form of slavery. The above indication reflects another dilemma of identity construction noted by the participants, and this is with regard to the one in which the participants' I-positions are constantly fluctuating between I-as happy, committed, hardworking, and competent religious versus I-as subservient, unworthy, unskilled and subjugated religious. As a result their performance of identity continuously reveal instances of struggle for survival, in which they are constantly fighting the battle not to lose focus of 'who they are' as religious. The participants struggle to find ways of harmonising the dissonance between religious life as a happy response to God's call and religious life as a mere means of turning them into religious slave workers.

In addition, the findings showed that the Church's gendered discourse tends to be more advantageous to men, who are positioned as superior to women. As a result, participants reported that they are positioned by priests/bishops as inferior and background religious in opposition to their (participants') self-positioning as competent, hardworking and productive religious deserving recognition. The dissonance between the participants' self-positioning and self as positioned by priests and bishops portrays the conflicts the participants encounter in their self-constructions. These conflicted I-positions include I-as competent versus I-as incompetent, I-as human versus I as-inhuman, and I-as worthy versus I as-unworthy religious etc. On one level, this has a correlation with the participants' self as positioned by their superiors as subjugated religious, which indicates that power relations within religious communities tend to duplicate patriarchal structures characteristic of wider society (Okure, 2010). This implies that authority figures of religious life are using the same patriarchal lens

as societal authority figures to marginalise the participants into subservient positions as powerless members of religious life who need to perform according to directives (Okure, 2010; O'Murchu, 1991). In other words, the women religious authority figures appear to have internalised the same kind of oppressive power they experience from priests and bishops to control members of their religious community.

Finally, the findings of the study revealed that the participants' identification with African family values of hospitality, love and care are challenged in religious life. The participants reported that the culture they live out in their religious life can be depicted as largely Western, which they described as individualistic, conflicting with Africa's cultural worldview that is essentially communitarian (Souci et al., 1998). Hence, they defined themselves as being positioned by religious life to move away from their African (Nigerian) cultural worldview toward identification with the Western culture of religious life (Nwagwu, 2007; Onyejekwe, 2001). Consequently, participants observed that they find themselves struggling to incorporate their African cultural position into their religious identity. Ironically, along this line, the participants critiqued what they see as African gender construction which position women as less important to men. This suggests that important as the process of inculturation might be in this regard, there is need to cautiously harness it so that equitable gender ordering within the religious life is made possible (Oduyoye, 2007).

## 8.2 Challenges, Implications and Recommendations

In this section some of the challenges arising from the study and their implications are highlighted and some recommendations are made to address the major issues. In this regard, the principal challenge of the present study is the recognition that emerges from it that there tends to be a chasm between the notion of the ideal religious life and the lived reality of religious life as experienced by the participants. This crisis arises from the tendency of the

majority of the religious (including the leaders and members) to misread or misinterpret the core demands of the ideal religious life. It could indeed be speculated that this crisis might have arisen as a product of absence of uniform guidelines across the various religious congregations regarding what to include as an acceptable curriculum for initial and on-going formation of religious in Nigeria. And the problem with this omission is that it gives opportunity for each formator to come up with her own subjective impression of how to orientate a religious; hence the complaint of emergence of multiple I-positions among the religious, that are often in conflict rather than supportive, which the study participants presented. Furthermore, this emerging lack of common understanding about what constitutes the core ideal of religious life graduates into the phenomenon of perpetual tension between religious superiors/formators (sometimes including senior/older sisters) and the ordinary members of religious life on what the appropriate behaviour is that religious should exhibit. To prevent this, there is a need for concerted effort to be made to ensure that this error of misinterpretation of ideal religious identity is removed to pave way for appropriate understanding of what it means to be a religious that will provide a guide to leaders and members. This could be achieved by ensuring that during initial and on-going formation, every religious is well exposed to Church doctrine regarding religious life, particularly the documents of Vatican Council II and in specific terms the *Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life*, including all the Post Conciliar Documents and the Constitutions and renewal documents of their various congregations.

In addition, concrete forum should be created within the structure of religious life for opportunities for religious conferences, seminars, and workshops within which to dialogue about existing differences among participants regarding the appropriate way to understand religious life.

Another important finding that emerged from this study is the crucial role of spiritual directors in helping to clarify and resolve problems arising from emergence of multiple I-positions of the religious that often conflict with one another. This being the case it is recommended that the ministry of spiritual direction in religious life be further developed, by appointing people with exceptional maturity and wisdom to take up this role. This means that spiritual directors should be persons who are leveled headed, abreast with the ideals of religious life, who are empowered to help others to dialogue with the different voices/positions they interact with in religious life.

Successful implementation of the above recommendation has enormous implication(s) for constant review and use of the content and sources drawn from for initial and ongoing formation of the religious. The appropriate understanding must be used in developing the curriculum and resources made available to formators and leaders.

The second challenge emanating from the study regards the difficulty expressed by participants *vis-à-vis* the constant misinterpretation by religious leaders and superiors concerning the role of the vow of obedience in religious life. In this regard, the key problem arises from the tendency of superiors to misuse the vow of religious obedience by making rash demands that members of their community often interpret as grossly opinionated, misguided and subjugating those affected. To correct this scandal, it is recommended that people elected or appointed to the office of religious superiors must be those with clear-sighted understanding of the vision of Vatican II's interpretation of religious life and clarifications of the demands of the evangelical counsels. In addition, it is recommended that religious superiors must work hard to remain abreast of the inspiration of their founders, enshrined in their various constitutions and updates on renewal of religious life. Furthermore, the structure of leadership in religious life could be reviewed to allow temporary professed

the space to take up leadership position, thus, there will be a mix of generation of leaders. With this each generation of sisters (the young and the elderly) will have opportunity of their views being sought for and aired in the determination of policies to guide the life of the religious.

The third challenge arising from this study is in reference to the state of the temporary professed religious whom the participants present as living in perpetual fear of losing membership in their religious community should they have any reason to contest the authority of leaders, whether positively or negatively. In this context, according to the participants, the tense situation that arises compels the temporarily professed to live falsely, subjugating their own voice/position by doing whatever they are told to do until they become finally professed and are able to discover their voice to challenge and confront these leaders. To ameliorate this situation, the criteria of progressing from temporarily professed to finally professed religious should be reviewed to ensure independence from superiors' report or veto power.

The fourth challenge emerging from the study relates to the role of ministerial identity in the life of the religious. In this regard, the key concern is the tendency by superiors and priests/bishops, and at times even some older sisters; to treat some members of the religious like recruited religious slave workers. To correct this imbalance, the leaders of religious communities must be reminded to review their actions by returning to the original source of religious identity in imitation of Christ who combined both ministry and other commitments such as prayer, rest and sharing meals in the total configuration of His life.

A related issue to the above is the tendency of religious superiors, including priests and bishops, to ignore the professional skills of the religious in assigning them ministerial tasks. In this regard, it is recommended that assignment of the religious to their ministry is made



compatible and in conformity with their professional training and skills. Thus, the example given by some of the study participants that a sister who had studied music was asked to go and teach Christian Religious Knowledge should be discontinued since such practice ignores or denies them the chance for proper placement. Similarly, opportunity for appropriate professional training must be extended to all religious to prepare them for engagement in the ministry which they will be happy to identify with.

The fifth challenge is the problem of the effects of the gendered order of religious life. Here the emphasis is on the need for promotion of gender equality within the Catholic Church in general and religious life in particular. In this context, what is recommended is that the Church seriously address the gender injustices perpetuated in its own institution and that priests and bishops accord women religious their due respect and recognition as people like themselves equally called by God to serve in the Church. In their own case, women themselves must be enjoined to acclaim their respect by diligent application of their service in God's Kingdom.

The last challenge arising from the study is in the area of inculturation. In this regard, the key issue is the complaint expressed by some participants about the increasing absence of the African family values of hospitality, love and care in the religious communities, which they (participants) recognise is incompatible with religious life's communal values. In the light of this finding, the religious leaders and superiors should reaffirm their identification within these African values. This, they can do by constant organisation of conferences, seminars and workshops through which members will have the opportunity to be part of decision-making of the African-centered values in religious lives. The researcher presumes that the above recommendation will not be a difficult task to achieve since the two congregations that were focused on in the present study are predominantly Africans.

To sum up, these challenges, implications and recommendations reflect an urgent need for religious life as lived in Africa to re-assess its initial and on-going formation programmes. Formation programmes should be designed toward facilitating the development of the ideal religious identity such as, I-as committed to God, I-as obedient to God, I-as relating with God through relationship with others, including superiors/formators, senior/older sisters, colleagues, priests, bishops and the people of God in the Church and wider Nigerian society. It is anticipated that once the appropriate formation process is used, religious sisters will move towards constructing the ideal identity that is centered on producing Christ-like identity. However, it is important to note that the use of appropriate formation programmes does not necessarily erase contradictions, oppositions, conflicts and differences but can only help change its nature to reflect diversity not dissonance. In this way, religious sisters, particularly in Nigeria and for the two congregations whose sisters participated in the present study, will appreciate and celebrate their differences which will facilitate their performance of religious identity.

### 8.3 Limitations and future research

This study aimed at examining how sisters within the context of living religious life located in the Church and wider Nigeria society construct identity. It drew samples from two religious congregations and in the presentation of its findings, could not generalise for all sisters in Nigeria. The target sample was limited to sisters in apostolic congregations in Nigeria whose members engage actively with broader society through active service. The study was unable to extend its exploration to other congregations of sisters both in Nigeria and world-wide particularly the enclosed contemplative orders. Further research drawing samples from these other congregations and religious orders are therefore recommended,

particularly to examine how they develop and perform identity based on the interpersonal relationships in the religious community, the Church and wider Nigerian society.

In addition the representations of 18 sisters from two congregations might seem small considering Nigeria's vocation boom (Pope John Paul II, 1998; Lefevere, 2011), where over 10,000 sisters are spread across the ecclesiastical provinces of the country. To close the gap further research is recommended to draw a sample from a wider spectrum of religious congregations in Nigeria and other African countries for comparative purposes.

Similarly, since the present study was conducted by a religious sister it is recommended that another study by a lay scholar be carried out for the sake of comparison. In such a study an attempt could also be made to go beyond the religious sisters in composing its sample frame to include people to whom the sisters minister to, in order to explore the image they have about the sisters and the identity they accord them.

#### 8.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that the participants' performance of identity is a multiplicity of I-positions that emerge as a result of self-positioning and self as positioned by others, including the superiors/formators, senior/older sisters, priests and bishops. These I-positions are filled with oppositions, contradictions and differences which the participants dialogue with in order to construct a coherent sense of 'who they are'. As a consequence, the participants' construction of identity is a negotiation process, in which their I-positions shift around positions/voices they agreed with, disagreed with or sometimes opposed. In this way, they are able to construct unity-in-multiplicity by integrating the different positions/voices into an intrinsic aspect of 'who they are' and who 'they are becoming'.

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## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTION GUIDE

### Interview Questionnaire

Key things to remember:

Questions will be based on the following areas

- a. Religious formation programme and how helpful it has been in focusing sisters' attention to model their life after to Jesus
- b. Relationship in community
- c. Relationship with leaders in community
- d. Opportunity for self improvement
- e. Religious adaptation to Nigerian/South African cultural values
- f. Gender polarity in the Church and how impacts on the sisters' sense of self making contact

You could write a "form letter" which explains the research project to sisters who are interested in participating.

- a. Set up appointment with each participant and decide convenient location to meet
- b. Topic: Interested in sisters' identity construction based on their shared relationship in community, Church and Nigerian society.

Introducing the interview

- a. I am a PhD student, conducting this research for my doctoral dissertation
- b. Explain to the participants the interest of the research (see topic above)
- c. Cover ethical issues (informed consent)
  - (i) Voluntariness
  - (ii) Permission for recording the interview session
  - (iii) Note that data will be used for academic work and publication
  - (iv) Confidentiality will be maintained

The Questions

1. How long have you been a religious sister?
2. How would you describe your experience as a religious so far looking at the past, present and future:
  - a. What has sustained you?
  - b. What are some of the challenges you have encountered?
3. Can you recall the motivation(s) you had before joining the religious life and has this motivation sustained you or has it changed over the years? You could use instances in your life to tell the story.

4. What is your own personal understanding of religious life and how has this understanding been a reality for you?
5. What kind of support have you received from your sisters in community that has helped you live truly religious life to your own understanding particularly that of becoming more like Christ?
6. Who are the significant others who have helped you live your religious life:
  - a. What is it that they did that you found helpful?
  - b. What were some of the things you found unhelpful?
7. How would you assess your relationship with leaders and other sisters in your community? Has it been helpful? (Please you could tell stories to illustrate your experience/s).
8. To what extent is your relationship in religious community comparable to that of family:
  - a. Would you say is much of family ties that bind you sisters together?
  - b. Has it been helpful or are there some aspects you wish to see changed or improved?
9. Have you had opportunity for self improvement since you joined religious life and are you content with what you have in this regard? Did you find the experience helpful?
10. Would you like more opportunity to educational improve yourself?
11. Are there some challenges you or other sisters experience while you negotiate opportunity for self improvement? How do you handle such?
12. What do you like best in community leaders?
13. What is it that you would love to see improved in relationship to community leadership?
14. What do you think is religious sisters' position in the Church, particularly considering Church hierarchy? What do you perceive too as the Church's attitude towards women? (or, the Church's attitudes towards women)
15. Are there any concerns you have considering religious sisters' participation in the Church?
16. Do you think most of the sisters are aware of their participatory role in the Church or Church organizations?
17. Would you say that religious life in Nigerian/South Africa context has adapted itself to the cultural values such as oneness of life in community, true sisters, acceptance African culture in terms of welcoming its members' family relations as their own, and how has this helped you as a sisters to live out your Christ –like identity.
18. Are there issues from your own live experience that you think religious life in Nigeria must adapt into its life style? And who do you think should make the necessary changes?

## APPENDIX B: LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

School of Psychology  
P/Bag X01 Scottsville  
PIETERMARITZBURG  
3209



Date: 26<sup>th</sup> August, 2009

### **RE: Consent to participate in the research study**

Dear Sister,

I am a registered student at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. I am conducting research as part of my doctoral studies. The purpose of the research is to understand how Catholic religious sisters in Africa (particularly in Nigeria and South Africa) are constructing their identity based on the context in which they live. Participants will be requested to tell stories revolving around relationships and how they are making sense of who they are based on these experiences. The interviewer will then ask you questions to clarify aspects of your story. My supervisors for this study are Professors Graham Lindegger and Susan Rakoczy.

You are presented with this letter because you are invited to participate in this study. Participants are Catholic Religious Sisters of Nigerian or South African background. Participation in this study will require you to take part in an interview with the researcher. The interview will last for approximately one hour. With your permission, it will be recorded so that it can be accurately transcribed verbatim for the purpose of analysis. Upon the completion of the study the findings will be made available to you and will be written and presented as a research study.

Participation in this study is voluntary. Appointments for interviews will be held at a time that suits you and every care will be taken to ensure that the study inflicts no harm to you and your identity will remain confidential throughout the study. Should you change your mind or feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview, you are very free to withdraw. The researcher respects your right to do so. You will not incur any negative consequences by doing so. If you have any questions about anything that has been said about the study or written in this letter please ask us. It is extremely important that you understand everything you have been told before you decide whether to participate in the study.

If you would like (or require) further information about any aspect (part of) the research study please do not hesitate to contact either the researcher Sr. Chika Eze or the supervisors: Professors. G. Lindegger and S. Rakoczy.

<p>Sr. Chika Eze</p> <p>Cell: +27 79223 7777</p> <p>E-mail: chikashcj@gmail.com</p>	<p>Supervisor: Professor                      Graham Lindegger</p> <p>Cell: +27 82718 4054</p> <p>E-mail: lindegger@uknz.ac.za</p>	<p>Supervisor: Professor Susan Rakoczy</p> <p>Cell: +27 76960 4298</p> <p>E-mail: srakoczy@futurenet.co.za</p>
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In addition, to the above persons whom you can contact, if you have any further questions or need for clarification, you can also contact Sr. Sophia Chizo Onuora, SHCJ.

Contact details:

Sr. Sophia Chizo Onuora, SHCJ

School Administrator

Holy Child College

P. O. Box 7961- S. W. Ikoyi

Lagos - Nigeria.

Phone nos: Office: +234 1-812-8558

Cell: +234- 803-325-1555

E-mail: chizon@juno.com

Thank you kindly for your time if you do wish to participate in the study please read and sign the document below.

Informed consent:

-If you do not wish to participate in the study please do not sign this form.

-If you do wish to participate in the study please sign the form but note that signing the form does not mean that you have to do anything you do not wish to do and that you can leave the study whenever you want to, if you want to.



Name of participant: \_\_\_\_\_

I (the participant) understand the information given to me and agree to participate in an interview. I am aware that my identity will remain confidential throughout the study. I also agree to the interview being audio recorded for the purpose of obtaining precise transcription of the discussions and to ensure an accurate analysis of the discussion.

Signature of participant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX C: LETTER OF INTRODUCTION TO DAUGHTERS OF DIVINE LOVE  
SUPERIOR GENERAL**

**14 Keffi Street, S.W Ikoyi  
P. O. Box 52465,  
Ikoyi, Lagos**

26<sup>th</sup> January, 2010.

**Mother General  
Daughters of Divine Love Generate  
Enugu.**

*Dear Mother Superior,*

Sisterly greetings!

I am Sister Chika Eucharika Eze, SHCJ, a sister in the congregation of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. I belong to the African Province of the Society and presently a PhD student of the School of Psychology, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. I am home at the moment to collect data towards my thesis. My thesis topic is “Identity Construction of Catholic Religious Sisters in the Church in Nigeria”, and your congregation among others happens to randomly fall among my sample population.

Therefore, I am using this opportunity to request for access to interview some of your sisters. If granted the opportunity I will be delighted to interview nine sisters; requiring them to tell stories of their life experiences so far as religious – how in the past, present and into the future they are making sense of who they are and are becoming. The sisters that will participant may fall within three categories as follow: three temporarily professed, three finally professed and three leaders. You could nominate for me those you want to participate or allow me to source for participants from among your sisters. By the virtue of this participation, it will also require that I look closely at your constitutions with regards to identity construction.

I have attached to this letter the Society of the Holy Child Jesus’ letter written to Ethics Committee of the University of KwaZulu-Natal consenting me to carrying out this study. Attached too, is a sample letter of consent to be signed by all participants in the study. Sincerely, all participation in the study is voluntary. A photocopy of my identity card from Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria is attached also.

I promise that if permitted to interview your sisters I will make the findings of this study available to you.

Thank you in anticipation of your sisterly assistance.

Yours in the service of God,

## APPENDIX D: PROVINCIAL LETTER



### SOCIETY OF THE HOLY CHILD JESUS



14, Keffi Street. S.W Ikoyi  
P.O Box 52465. Ikoyi. Lagos- Nigeria.

AFRICAN PROVINCE  
234-1-270-7302  
0806-010-5399  
Fax 234-1-270-7302

26<sup>th</sup> August, 2009

Ethics Body,  
University of Kwa-Zulu Natal,  
Private bag X01 Scottsville,  
Pietermaritzburg, 3209  
KXN S.A.

#### LETTER OF CONSENT. Ref. SR. CHIKA EZE'S STUDIES

Sr. Chika belongs to the Society of Holy Child Jesus, an international congregation in the Catholic Church. She belongs to the African Province of the Society of Holy Child Jesus, whose provincial house is situated in Lagos, Nigeria.

She has had my permission to do her PhD in the School of Psychology, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal. She also has my permission as part of her studies to do some research work on the Identity Construction of Catholic Religious Sisters in Nigeria and South Africa.

I would appreciate it if you could give all the necessary assistance of which she stands in need.

Sincerely in the Lord,

Sr. Rose Uchenna Nwosu, SHCJ  
African Province Leader.

## APPENDIX E: Jefferson Transcription Notation

Symbol	Example	Meaning
(.)	Yes I (.) saw it coming	Speaker's noticeable pause
(0.3) (2.3)	I was doing it (0.2) until	Examples of exactly timed pauses, in seconds.
lo:ng	No wa:y	Stretching of the preceding sound.
.hh	I stood there .hh I looked at her	Speaker's in-breath and out-breath respectively.
Wo(h)rd	Nothing is so out(h)rageous	'Laughter' within words
end.	I will do the same if it happens again.	Full stop (period) denotes falling, ending intonation; punctuation marks are generally for intonation rather than grammar.
Word?	As her servant?	Question mark depicts rising, questioning intonation.
Cu-	Women are-not considered important	A sharp cut-off of a prior word or sound.
(word)	The sister (superior) said	Transcriber's guess at an unclear part of the tape.
Run= (=on)	I was doing that=until	Material that runs on.
°soft°	I always °hide° away from her	Speech noticeably quicker than the surrounding talk.
>fast<	>Imagine her calling from my room to wash the plate<	Talk noticeably quicker than the surrounding talk.
↑ word	↑drop the keys	The onset of a noticeable pitch
↓word	Looking for her as diamond↓	The onset of a noticeable pitch

## APPENDIX F: METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

There are many stories about doctoral dissertations both positive and negative – a good number of them negative. Whether positive or negative, each story needs to be told because of its uniqueness. I believe some of them are based on real experiences, while others are embellishments of stories heard elsewhere, which eventually become part of the repertoire of dissertation stories or myths.

My story starts with the search for a dissertation topic: it took me awhile to settle on a particular topic. For me finding a topic was a long and windy task. My initial inspiration was to focus on issues of power-play relationships among Catholic religious sisters based on my experiences as a religious sister. But through interaction with my supervisors I was assisted in narrowing down my search to issues of identity construction which directly and/or indirectly reflect concepts of relationships including power relations and dominance. Having chosen a topic there were a number of practical issues I needed to attend to. My knowledge of research methods is obsolete based on the fact that I had my masters in 1991, so I had to polish up on my research skills. In the first and second semester of 2009 I audited research method courses, both qualitative and quantitative, in order to keep abreast with current practices. In addition I audited courses in Religion and Gender in Africa to widen my scope of understanding of social practices and how they impact on men and women's lives and identities. These courses made it possible for me to settle in to the real task of doing an academic research.

### *Choosing the Methodology*

From the refresher courses I took in research methods, I was able to understand more clearly the distinction between qualitative and quantitative research approaches. Initially I wanted to do a quantitative research but after the courses I was drawn to a qualitative research based on

the need, because if I wanted to understand how the experience of living religious life impacts on the sisters' development and performance of identity, then I needed to hear their stories. This decision to do a qualitative research was also facilitated by my supervisors who advised me to consider doing an in-depth study on a small sample in comparison to having a larger sample. With the help of my supervisors I chose to do an interpretative qualitative research using narrative method. The interpretative approach offered me the opportunity to explore from the participants' understanding how they develop and perform identity based on their experience of living religious life. This choice was also theoretically informed as dialogical self theory conceives the self as narratively configured in the stories we tell about 'who we are' (Hermans & Kempen, 1993). Though my position as a Catholic religious sister offered me the opportunity of knowing what it means to be a religious sister my knowledge was subjective; I needed to hear from the participants what their own experiences are. Therefore, what I set out to do was to delve into the participants' experiences, something that can only emanate from the stories they tell about their experiences of being religious sisters. Listening to the participants' stories gave me the opportunity to understand their actions and the reason why they do what they do (Schram, 2006).

### *Writing the Proposal*

The process of writing the proposal was challenging but my two supervisors were of great help in the suggestions they proffered. There were a numerous practical things to deal with, such as, deciding on what questions this research intended to tackle and what contributions it would make to the field of knowledge. My supervisors were patient with me; I remember my first attempt at writing the proposal was just to write a paragraph. At that stage I never believed I would see end of this research. After my proposal was accepted the School of Humanities' Ethical Committee required an independent contact person to whom the

participants could make contact if they needed further clarification. For me this was an eye-opener as I realised the serious nature of research involving human participants.

### *Collection of data*

Deciding on the number of participants caused me to scratch my head more than a few times. In general qualitative research interest is not about largeness of number but in-depth study of cases, therefore in consultation with my supervisors I settled for 18 participants drawn from two religious congregations in Nigeria, across three different categories of sisters who live religious life: temporary professed, final professed and leaders. Initially we were interested in doing a comparative study between Nigeria and South Africa but this idea was eventually dropped in order to focus directly on Nigeria based on the rationale that variability was not the primary interest driving this study. The interest was to identify how Nigerian religious sisters are interpreting their everyday relationships and the impact they have on their sense of personhood.

In spite of the fact that I am a religious sister gaining access to the participants was strenuous, particularly with regard to the diocesan congregation, Daughters of Divine Love. I made several trips to the mother house seeking official permission from the Mother General (superior) to invite the sisters to participate. I was asked to prove the authenticity of my identity as a religious sister so I used the official letter my provincial wrote to the Ethics Committee of the University to assert that I was given permission to carry out this research (Appendix D) and I backed it up with a photocopy of my identity card issued by the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria. After this I was given access to invite any sister who might want to participate to do so. It was much easier with my own congregation, Society of the Holy Child Jesus, because the sisters know me as one of them. On the whole I contacted 21 sisters before I was able to get the 18 participants I needed. Three sisters refused to participate on the

grounds that they didn't want to share their personal stories which concerned me as to the possible reasons why they turned down the offer. Was it because their experiences were negative or was it because they didn't trust me or the research?

In the process of conducting the interviews I kept to the guideline propounded in most qualitative research of establishing a rapport: the participants and I familiarised ourselves with what was the centre of focus of this study, reading and signing the letter of consent, using open-ended questions to invite participants to tell their stories and also using a question guide to probe further explanations when what they said was not clear (Riessman, 2008; Silverman, 2005). In this way I was able to monitor the interview process to ensure that I balanced both my insider and outsider perspective, which has both positive and negative impact in this research. On the positive side, it gave me the opportunity to gain access to the participants and shared their stories, thus I was not just listening but actively participating in creating the narrative (Patton, 2002; Riessman, 2008). But on the negative side, there was a tendency for me to assume that I knew what was being said, in this way I might have taken things for granted, resulting in a shutdown in the interview process. Therefore I needed to critically follow the systematic process of data collection. To achieve this, I monitored my actions which I dutifully recorded in my field journal taken during and after the interview sessions (Pillow, 2003). I shared what was recorded in the journal with my supervisors and also integrated it as an interactive resource during the process of transcription of narratives into data text and analysis.

Conducting the interview was an experience for me. I needed to be critical at every step to ensure that I did not fall into the stereotype of assuming that I knew what it means to be a sister. However, this was not always as easy as I thought. There were some questions which, when I asked them, the sisters looked at me with surprise because they expected me to know



the answers. For instance, one participant talked about being made to kneel down by the superior and the internal struggles she experienced and when I asked why she had to do that which she felt uncomfortable with, she was surprised that I posed that question since I know the complex nature of religious obedience regarding membership, power and loyalty. So I had to be critical and ask the obvious in order to get down to the basis of the story which enriched the data I collected.

### *Data Analysis*

Transcribing the narrative into data text was an awesome and tedious task although it helped me to familiarise myself with the data. In a special way it gave me the opportunity to relate the data to my field journal notes in order to represent what was said and also check against my personal bias by constantly sounding this back and forth with my supervisors. Writing up the analysis was overwhelming: I wrote it more than eight times before I was able to get it right. The biggest challenge I had here was that I was sometimes interpreting some of the narratives on the basis of my previous knowledge. I was constantly challenged to keep to what the data said. Furthermore, my choice of interfacing thematic analysis with discourse analysis was exciting but taxing in the sense that I had to constantly ask myself why I was interested in using discourse analysis. As the process of analysis went on I discovered that I was using discourse analysis to understand clearly and interpret the participants' words and ideas, and what argument these words and ideas provided (Wetherell & Potter, 1998). In this way I was able to harmonise the themes though there was the constant challenge to focus on what the participants said.

However, during analysis I was able to identify with some of the participants' arguments, particularly the power-play relationships within the religious community and in the Church, with reference to gender discourses. For instance, I felt a sense of anger when I read some of

the participants' stories as background workers in the Church based on their gender as women. But I had to learn to deal with my anger by sharing it with my two supervisors which acted as a process of reflection and reflectivity to keep my insider perspective under control.

### *Literature Review*

Writing the literature review was an awesome task based on the fact that there is a scarcity of studies done with Catholic religious sisters, specifically in Africa. Most of the previous studies were conducted in the USA and Europe, and it was not easy to access these studies even from URLs or scholarly databases because some of the studies were presented as archival materials, which only gave me the title. I struggled to find some of the studies I reviewed. This establishes the importance of this study and the need for further studies among Catholic religious sisters, specifically in Nigeria and in Africa as whole. In addition understanding dialogical self theory and identity construction was a complex task but I eventually managed to grasp this concept after numerous readings and consultations with my supervisors. On the other hand, the literature on theology and history of religious was educative; sincerely I learnt a lot studying the Church's documents on religious life.

### *Conclusion*

Writing a dissertation is not an easy journey to embark on. There were occasions during this tortuous journey, when I wondered whether I had embarked on self-inflicted hardship in the name of research. But I thank God I did not give up. Reading through the final draft of the work filled me with joy and a sense of responsibility and contribution. The support and encouragement from several people kept me going, particularly from my two supervisors. There are three participants who are forever grateful that I am undertaking this study. One of them said to me, "Thank you for bothering to look at some of the issues that impact on our

lives as religious, and I hope the result of your findings will challenge us to review some of our current practices.” I look forward to making the findings available to the two congregations whose sisters participated in this study. I believe that the findings will ignite the leaders of religious life to consider addressing some of the issues particularly the notion of power-play relationships among religious sisters.

## APPENDIX G: ETHICS APPROVAL



RESEARCH OFFICE (GOVAN MBEKI CENTRE)  
WESTVILLE CAMPUS  
TELEPHONE NO.: 031 – 2603587  
EMAIL : sshrec@ukzn.ac.za

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9 DECEMBER 2009

REVEREND SISTER CE EZE (209523538)  
SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY

Dear Reverend Sister Eze

PROTOCOL REFERENCE NUMBER: HSS/0732/09D  
PROJECT TITLE: "Identity construction of Roman Catholic Religious Sisters in the Church in Nigeria".

**EXPEDITED APPROVAL**

This letter serves to notify you that your application in connection with the above has been granted full approval through an expedited review process.

Any alteration s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study must be reviewed and approved through the amendment /modification prior to its implementation. Please quote the above reference number for all queries relating to this study.

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the school/department for a period of 5 years

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research protocol.

Yours faithfully

PROFESSOR STEVEN COLLINGS (CHAIR)  
SOCIAL SCIENCES & HUMANITIES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

cc. Supervisor (Prof. Graham Lindegger)  
cc. Prof. Sr. Susan Rakoczy  
cc. Mrs. B Jacobsen