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TERESA OKURE

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# Women Building the Church in Africa: A Focus on Nigerian Catholic Women

**Despite the patriarchal nature of the church, Teresa Okure tells how Christian women in Nigeria are embodying a Trinitarian vision of Church where the members mutually support, honour and nourish one another. In particular she instances the ways in which the ministry of women is crucial in feeding the church, supporting the institution, in prayer, reconciliation and promoting the interests of youth.**

## A Woman's Place?

When we hear of 'the church', especially in relation to women, we generally think of the hierarchy and the debated issue of the exclusion of women from leadership positions, power of governance and decision making. In the Catholic Church, the marginalization of women is summed up in their exclusion from ordained ministries: the diaconate and the priesthood. 'The church' also brings to mind its patriarchal structures and buildings, or raises the question of identity of the different Christian churches and communions. Does 'the church' refer to the Roman Catholic, the Anglican or the Presbyterian Church or the different denominations viewed together? Do the new Christian sects qualify to be called church?

Whatever the reader may understand by church, this church is rooted in a global patriarchal (male-dominated) and androcentric (male-centred) culture. Forged by this culture, the church, like Scripture, has both a divine and a human face. In its human face the church is characterised by its relegating women to the background. This marginalization and exclusion of women in diverse ways may not be lightly dismissed. Women in the Catholic Church, in particular, have a serious problem of identity, especially during liturgical celebrations. They may exercise such important roles as teachers (in seminaries, catholic universities and higher theological institutions), and catechists, yet when it comes to the liturgy and the para-liturgical celebrations they become non persons. Nevertheless to think of the church mainly in terms of its male dominated and power oriented structures, is to greatly impoverish its very significance. Increasingly, there is a call to review the notion and mission of the church in line with the gospel, not of human, patriarchal cultures, however ancient such cultures may be and however traditional the practices based on such cultures.

## **A new vision of church**

The church is the gathering of God's scattered children into communion with God and with one another. It is not so much a completed reality as a reality in the making, till all things are reconciled to God through Christ and God becomes everything to everyone (1 Cor 15: 28). All family in heaven and on earth have their origin from this family of God and exist in function of this one family of God. The African Synod of 1994 viewed the church as God's family. This family is made up of women, children and men redeemed by Jesus on equal footing and called to the same followership through the empowerment of one and the same Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor 12:13). Church as family is about communion (not power), building up and promoting one another's growth (not dominating and ruling), and fostering the welfare and potentialities of each member (not marginalizing, exploiting or classifying members into superior and inferior). When this is done, the entire family is bonded together, joint and ligament, as each member realises itself in the body of Christ and plays its full role till the entire body builds itself up in love (Eph 4:16).

This view of church emphasises its nature as a call to communion and discipleship of equals between women and men. It carries with it the need to reassess the values we assign to the diverse activities of members of this family all of which contribute to the building up of this body. Without such reassessment, the discipleship of equals will function only as a square peg in a round whole. The church will continue to wear its old cloak of patriarchy, but as a concession, will simply spread a part of this cloak over women without itself being evangelized and transformed substantially (in depths and to the roots) by God's gospel, Jesus Christ.

### **Women ministering**

Salient characteristics of the church viewed comprehensively as God's project of gathering to the divine self or bringing into the Trinitarian communion a humanity scattered by its anthropological sins of sexism, classism and racism, include sustained efforts to build bridges that bring people together, a commitment to feed the poor and the hungry, and sustained actions to ensure that the members have what they need to play their diverse roles effectively. Women exercised this life-giving and empowering ministry in the life and ministry of Jesus himself, the head of the church (Col 1:18). As Jesus spent himself for the people ('he went about doing good'; Acts 10:38), the women participated substantially in his mission by ministering to him and his disciples (men and women) 'out of their own resources' (Luke 8:3). These women, like the widow with her mite, are models for Jesus himself. As the widow, for instance, gave all she had to live on into the temple treasury, so did Jesus shortly after give his entire life into the divine treasury to become God's bread of life for the world and God's lamb who takes away the sin of the world. By his death and resurrection he broke down the barriers that separated the holy from the unholy, and destroyed the enmity between those who were reputed to be God's people and those who were considered not a people (cf. Eph 2:11-18). African women today contribute to the same essential ministries, often as unsung heroes behind men's achievements in church and society.

The point of these observations is that the contribution of African women in general and Nigerian Catholic women in particular to building the church, even in its current patriarchal and clerical structure, comes to the fore when we see the church in this gospel light as God's project in Christ to gather together God's scattered children and give them lasting life. To appreciate their contributions fully, we need to look beyond the issues of power, authority and ordained ministry to the essence of church as God's nourished and life-giving agent, where each member is called to break the bread of his/her life so that others may live. When we do this then we will appreciate more fully the contribution of women in building up this church.

Within this context of the church as a living and life-giving body, women's contribution is primary, central and indispensable, not negligible and peripheral. Ironically, while it is held that women cannot image Jesus who was a male by serving as ordained ministers in the Catholic Church, women are by nature his main models in his ministry of giving life in all its fullness and dimensions to God's people. We are not told that when Jesus fed the five thousand, for instance, he discriminated between believers and non-believers. It is likely that people who were not of Jewish origin joined the crowd in listening to him and therefore would have been fed by him. Focusing on women's role of giving and nurturing life in the church in a variety of ways does not nullify the need to include them in the administrative life and leadership functions of the church. Rather it further points to the need to free these roles from preoccupation with authority (conceived in terms of that of 'the kings of the gentiles') so that they may serve the central life-giving mission of Jesus.

## **Feeding the Church and the Nation**

God is life and the giver and author of life. The primary purpose of God's gathering or of Jesus' mission is to give full and enduring life (John 10:10). The Eucharist crowns this act of giving lasting life by giving us a share in God's own life. The Catholic Church rightly sees the Eucharist as the sum and summit of Christian life and worship. Yet to enjoy this lasting life, one needs to have physical life, sustained by physical food. Jesus was preoccupied with food during his lifetime so much so that he was accused of being a glutton who loved to party with tax collectors and sinners (e.g. Zacchaeus and Matthew-Levi). His alpha sign was changing water into wine and his last act before his death was to give his life as bread and wine, food and drink to his disciples of all times. After the resurrection, he asked for food as evidence that he was truly risen from the dead. Finally he personally cooked food for his disciples on the shore of the lake of Galilee as a lesson to Peter, his appointed Church leader, that his mission is about feeding and tending his little sheep and lambs (John 21).

African women contribute to God's project of building the church, understood in its wider sense of God's gathering of humanity to the divine self through Christ, by their commitment to providing food and sustenance for their children and husbands. This is especially true of rural women who spend their entire lives looking for food, cooking food and serving food. This role of feeding may not be limited

to the so-called rural women. The media often projects them with a consistent inhumanity that prevents one who has never been to Africa from seeing anything in the continent beyond starved children dying in the arms of their mothers or people deprived inch by inch of life by diseases of all kinds. This picture, which dies hard, does injustice not only to Africans but also to those abroad who depend solely on such projection for their knowledge of Africa. In the end those who are socialised into this type of lie or false image about Africans suffer the greater casualty. It is not only the church that needs to review its view about women, but the whole world needs to review its own perception of Africa and what constitutes real life if we are to know and live that truth which alone can set us free to become truly the Church of God.

In Nigeria as perhaps in most other parts of the world, women keep the church alive by their very presence and numbers. Often one wonders whether there would be certain celebrations and liturgical gatherings at all if women were absent, especially where in a congregation that celebrates daily mass, the only male in the congregation may be the officiating priest or small boys who serve at the altar. Not only do the women attend the church but they are responsible for keeping it clean (sweep, furnish the altar, take care of the altar linens and vessels). The altar bread itself used for consecration is baked mostly, if not exclusively, by women (especially women religious). The church would hardly be able to fulfil its worship without these contributions that often go unnoticed or are rated as insignificant. One may compare these contributions to that of the little boy who provided the two loaves and small fish for the feeding of the five thousand (John 6:9). God works through and with these ministries of the women to build the church of God on a daily basis. The few examples given below portray, with a few exceptions, the contributions of the 'grassroots' Nigerian Catholic women in the Church.

### **Supporting Church Institutions**

Nigerian Catholic women contribute consistently and substantially for the support and upkeep of dioceses, parishes, seminaries and houses of formation. They levy themselves annually so that they can offer food items to these institutions, especially the seminaries. It is also taken for granted that it is their duty to cook and provide food for all participants during such church functions as the launching of the diocesan and parish chanceries and halls, the anniversaries of the ordination of bishops and priests and celebrations to mark the creation of parishes and dioceses. Whenever the people of God come together to celebrate at ordinations, the funeral of bishops and priests, the Catholic Women Organization (CWO) and the Christian Mothers spend weeks on end sourcing and finally preparing the food that is used on these occasions. One is reminded here of the role which the women in Jesus' company played during his ministry and most likely at the Last Supper. This does not mean that they did not participate in the meal itself, though tradition has left them out in the telling of the story, even as it left out their primary witness in the primitive creed that was handed on to Paul as 'of first importance' (1 Cor 15:3-7).

## **Engaged in the Ministry of Reconciliation**

Catholic and Christian women play an important role in the ministry of reconciliation. An outstanding example is the Zumuta Mata (grassroots) Catholic women in the northern part of Nigeria. This body sprang up on its own almost like the lilies of the field. As a leading ministry, they seek out the lost sheep of God's flock, especially among the women themselves, and bring them back to the practice of the Catholic faith in which they were baptized. In so doing they share in the mission of Jesus who came to seek out and to save what was lost. Their contribution is recognised and sung by the people though it is not rated as official because it is not done from the position of power. Yet official or not, their ministry is at the heart of the church to whom God committed the divine ministry of reconciliation (cf. 2 Cor 5:18-19).

Another major example is the women's effort at peace building through the Women's Centre for Peace & Development (WOPED), founded in 1994 and based in Lagos. This body is part of the 'Women Building Peace Campaign', a global project. WOPED is

a non-governmental, non-profit information and advocacy centre focusing on the rights of women, youth and children to self development, security and freedom from violence in Nigeria and in Africa as a whole. The organization works through social advocacy, mediation, education and special-focus interventions aimed at bringing about improved living conditions, equitable policies and social transformation. (*Women Building Peace Newsletter*, October-December 2000)

The ultimate aim of this body is to enable women 'tell their own story and use their experiences to broker a better deal for all and not a fragile peace which collapses soon after it is executed'. This body has about five hundred members scattered all over the country. They operate peace-building workshops and hold public lectures and conduct outreach programmes, the most outstanding of which is 'Peace and Anti-Violence Education (PAVE) Clubs' aimed at educating the youth (mainly in schools) in different parts of the country. They also encourage the active participation of women in civil and society, and run programmes for women's active participation in democracy.

## **Praying for the Nation**

A great contribution of women to building the church is prayer, for unless the Lord builds the house, they labour in vain who build it. Nigeria holds no exclusive ticket for bribery and corruption in the world, yet it is unrelentingly projected in the world media as a most corrupt country in the world. Nigerian Catholic Women, an alumna group of the Holy Child Past Students Association, true to their moto 'Actions not words', composed a 'Prayer against Bribery and Corruption' in the country and presented it to the Catholic Bishops' conference for dissemination and use throughout the nation. The prayer entreats God, among other things, to touch the hearts of the citizens and their leaders so that they may 'realize the evil of bribery and corruption and work hard to eliminate it'. The prayer is used nationwide and

is recited at every Eucharistic celebration on Weekdays and Sundays. It will surely bear fruit in God's own good time and way as did the one that was prayed nationwide for God to rid the country of the evils of the Abacha regime.

Similarly, the Nigerian Christian women who tag themselves 'The Caring Heart Organization' (CHO) held a prayer session for the nation at Sheraton Hotel and Towers in Abuja, October 2000. The women participants called on all women in the country to pray for the nation in order to stop the recurring ethnic clashes that cause great hardship, economic and otherwise, and general insecurity in the nation. They noted that in such situations of conflict, women and children are the primary victims. Their prayer included a request for the forgiveness of the sins of the people in government and that leaders may think about the good of the nation instead of their own personal interests.<sup>1</sup>

### **Promoting the interests of the youth**

As true mothers covenanted with life, Nigerian Catholic women have a special concern for the youth (both male and female). They take care of young girls with early pregnancies and premature babies and their mothers unobtrusively. They follow up the youth and advise them in a variety of ways for their good. The same issue of the *Guardian* mentioned above (p 48) carried a documentary on the wife of the Edo State Government, Mrs Eki Igbinedion, whose twelve-year-old charity organization, Zenas, is devoted to helping the needy in society 'who by circumstances of birth had nothing but a bleak future before them' through no fault of their own. A major project of Zenas is the establishment of the of the 'Edo Underprivileged Children's Scholarship Trust Fund and Renaissance' in Benin City. Incidentally such projects are never projected in the world media which stigmatizes Edo State as the state which sells young girls into prostitution in Italy. Interestingly, much of that projection by the media says nothing about the Italian men who either patronize the girls or may even be among their pimps.

### **'Women are the Church and the Church is Women'**

We may end this reflection by reporting on how the 'grassroots' Nigerian Catholic women see themselves and their contributions in the Church. Their views on these matters are very instructive.

In the seminars I have conducted in Nigeria and in other parts of the continent, on the role and place of women in the church, the women have no illusions about their place in and the importance of their contribution in the church. They state categorically that they are the church. In their own words, if we 'leave out women, nothing is left of the church, that is nothing good!' They hold that women are the church because they drag their husbands and children to the church; they pray and fast for the growth of the church (as Paul and Jesus did), and they support the church financially and in a variety of other ways as mentioned above. In the first place they take great delight that it was a woman who gave birth to Jesus. In their

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1 See *The Guardian on Sunday*, Lagos, 29 October 2000, p 25.

view God took them into the divine secret when the fulness of time had come. They see God's favour to Mary as a favour to all women. In her all women are blessed. Above all, they believe that Our Lady who gave birth to Jesus was a woman, and without that birth there would be no church today. Interestingly they do not see Mary as rendering null and void the place and contribution of women in the Church as tends to be the case in some of the official and traditional church teachings on Mary.

Though these women are aware of and lament their exclusion from decision making roles in the church and from effective (not nominal) membership in the parish and diocesan councils, they nevertheless see themselves as people who evangelize their children, husbands and neighbours whether these are Catholics, Christians or peoples of other faiths. They believe it is their sacred duty to do this because Jesus first commissioned a woman, Mary Magdalene (John 20:17), 'to proclaim the good news to the church', not just to the apostles, as scholars tend to think! Unlike men who do not come to the church unless they have positions to occupy and are recognized, the women uphold the church by their very presence and by taking care of the upkeep of the church. Often women's societies are taxed more than those of men because the officials know that, given their unlimited generosity, women will do all they can to produce the levies assigned to them. Yet they regret that though men assign heavy work and contributions to women, they reject women's ideas or accept them only when a man later picks up the idea first proposed by a woman.

These few examples give a feel of the kind of contribution which grassroots Catholic and Christian women bring to the church. Women scholars in different professions have their own distinctive contribution. They reflect with other women worldwide on the nature of church and society in order as a participation in God's project of restoring humanity to the divine self. The reader is invited to continue and complement this study by noticing and appreciating the contributions which women in his/her own location are making towards this comprehensive divine project called church in its widest sense, the restoration of all creation to the divine self.

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