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# **The Religious Women's Contribution to Peace, Justice and Reconciliation in Africa**

## *Introduction*

**E**VANGELIZATION in Africa owes a lot to consecrated women. Their great works in education, healthcare, witness, social services and the promotion of the rights of women, children and the marginalized of society, are commendable.

The weakness of the first evangelization (14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> century) in sub-Saharan Africa was partly attributed to the lack of women religious missionaries on the scene, who alone could have reached the homes of the people, converting them into training centres of Christian faith and life. Due to this, and the conviction that a successful education of the African family and culture could only come through the education of girls and women, the contribution of religious women is considered indispensable for the success of the mission of the Church and the development of Africa.

Despite several challenges facing consecrated life in Africa, the latter continues to grow from strength to strength, making significant contribution to the growth of the local Church. The religious women's role in fighting illiteracy, injustices, diseases, poverty and oppression among other vices, has led authors like John Baur to affirm: "Christian

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Africa will be what African sisters will make it.”<sup>1</sup> In fact, African consecrated women who are living their evangelical counsels and modelling their lives after the life of Christ their spouse, are an indispensable evangelical sign among their people.

### *African religious women and human development*

The immense services rendered by various women religious institutes in education, counselling, social work and health, and their prompt response to victims of war, conflicts and natural disasters affirm the religious women's indispensable role in evangelization, development and the construction of peace, justice and reconciliation in contemporary Africa.<sup>2</sup>

These apostolates do not only engage religious women of active congregations, but also those of contemplative Orders. The example of the early monasteries should be a motivating factor of what African nuns can do. Early monasteries in Europe were far more than mere centres of prayer. They were indeed places where the principles of a new society were looked for and put into effect. Many people found in them inspiration and courage; they were great centres of evangelization in every way. History shows that monks and nuns took the lead in proclaiming the Gospel; Methodius and Cyril are good examples and pioneers of the evangelization of Europe. In effect, during this era, many monks and nuns gave the Gospel an incarnated face with particular attention to all the dimensions of human life. There is no area of humanity, where these religious people failed to render effective and concrete love of God. In this way, they became custodians of the ancient wisdom and their monasteries were centres of a new culture.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Baur, J. *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa: An African Church History*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1994, p. 421.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Moretti, F. and Pierli, F. *Religious Life and Social Ministry*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2002, p. 55.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Aubry, J. and Bisognano, S. *Vita Consecrata: Un dono del Signore alla Sua Chiesa*, p. 94.

In a continent like Africa, which often seems void of hope, plunged in endless conflicts, diseases and inevitable deaths, consecrated women with their motherly qualities are challenged to be signs of hope through authentic witness to the Gospel values. They are supposed to constantly give a message of hope, to sustain life at every level by giving it dignity as the most important gift of God to humanity. Through their various apostolates of hope giving, African religious women are continually propagate the mission of Christ who healed the sick and raised the dead. By sharing in the pains and sufferings of their people, religious women equally participate in the redemptive mission of Christ for the salvation of humanity. By caring for the sick and the dying, religious sisters seek to enlighten, through their evangelical values, the way of living and sustaining life at every level, giving it the dignity of suffering and dying.

The African religious women's presence is evident in many public and private institutions in Africa, as service providers and receivers. In some cases, they are both administrators and owners of these institutions. Through their consecration, a peculiar experience of the charismatic gift, the fervent dedication to the Word of God and the profound knowledge of the spiritual truth, religious women possess efficient and particular educational facilities.<sup>4</sup>

Learning institutions are avenues for the transmission of culture, faith and life. In fact, religious women in Africa have become spiritual companions to the youths, elderly and children. The growth of the Church in Africa today owes a lot to consecrated life. Through their various 'apostolates, religious women strive to demonstrate that the Church in her missionary activities does not judge the human values, but rather elevates them to the altar of sanctification and thanksgiving through faith in Jesus Christ. From this perspective, John Paul II invited all religious people who are devoted to education to let the preferential love of the poor prevail. He also emphasized the fundamental aim of

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Consecrated Life *Vita Consecrata*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1996, no. 96.

education as freedom from the lack of cultural and religious training. According to the Supreme Pontiff, this is a grave form of poverty<sup>5</sup> from which our contemporary society continues to suffer, despite the radical advancements in technology, psychology and science.

*Religious women and the promotion of peace,  
justice and reconciliation in conflict prone Africa*

The *Lineamenta* of the Second Synod for Africa invites the African religious women to conscientiously assume their task of building a peaceful, just and reconciled society in the following words:

Consecrated persons are called to work for the advent of reconciliation, justice and peace in Africa, by living their charisms and fully embracing the evangelical counsels in their own communities and the world. In fact, through the witness of a life of service, the acceptance of diversity, forgiveness and reconciliation, they will be “sign” and “instrument” in the world of the Kingdom to come.<sup>6</sup>

In sub-Saharan Africa, the promotion of peace, justice and reconciliation is given priority in the plan of evangelization and development. Therefore, this theme of the Second Synod for Africa, keenly reflects the aspirations and sensibilities of every African person today.

Strengthened by the living witness and in ways consistent with their choice of life, and maintaining their independence vis-à-vis political ideologies, consecrated persons will be able to denounce the injustices committed against so many sons

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, no. 97.

<sup>6</sup> Synod of Bishops: II Special Assembly for Africa, *Lineamenta: The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2006, no. 59.

and daughters of God, and commit themselves to the promotion of justice in the society where they work.<sup>7</sup>

Through their scholastic institutions, communication media, multiple religious and educational projects, African religious women are actively contributing to the formation of young people as advocates of peace, justice and reconciliation. On the other hand, this commitment ought to manifest itself vividly among the persecuted and voiceless persons who suffer untold injustices. In fact, while some social groups are able to form vigorous structures of protest and support, we see, on the other hand, deep suffering and injustices which have little resonance in the hearts of so many people; the plight of refugees, those persecuted for political views or profession of faith, constant violations of human rights, unjust curtailment of human and religious liberty, lack of social assistance, etc.<sup>8</sup>

The commitment of religious women in this field demands a constant review of their own lives to see how they themselves are instruments of peace, justice and reconciliation. Their communities must become schools of peace, reconciliation and justice where people can learn to live and love each other, regardless of one's race, social status, tribe or nationality.

Today, religious women in Africa constantly hear resounding words of Christ: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice . . . Blessed are the peacemakers . . ." (*Mk* 5:6.9). Religious women are confronted by various situations and crisis to stand at the forefront in the fight for justice, promotion of peace and reconciliation; a challenge to witness the search of human and evangelical values. Through the proclamation of the evangelical values, we opt for the choice of transparency, truth, peace and justice. We are obliged each day to renew

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<sup>7</sup> John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation the Consecrated Life *Vita Consecrata*, no. 82.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes of Apostolic Life, *Religious and Human Promotion*, Vatican City, 1978, no. 4 (d).

our preferential option for the sake of the poor, defenceless, oppressed and the voiceless. As Semporé puts it: "To be all for everybody, is the attitude that the poor and the victims of the society await from religious who labour by their side."<sup>9</sup>

### *Transforming the African culture*

The incarnation of the gospel into the African culture demands a change of some socio-cultural structures that encourage injustice, oppression, exploitation, dehumanization and lack of respect for persons. This regards fundamentally the underlining factors like worldviews, value systems, vision of the human person, of the world and of reality as a whole. Cultural transformation is one of the areas which touches profoundly on religious life. African religious women whether active or contemplative, insert themselves in the midst of cultural forces like education, arts, media, etc. which then become a challenge as well as an encouragement for cultural change. Against the culture of globalization, modernity, materialism and secularism which is spreading widely in Africa, today communities of religious life are challenged to witness to the real essence of human life.<sup>10</sup>

In a society where craving for materialism and individualism is rampant, the living of evangelical counsels by religious women becomes a counter-cultural witness which points to the proper use of material things, the essential needs of the human person and authentic freedom, solidarity and self-giving.

Today, African religious women are invited to assume an important mission in the formation of a new African culture which does not call for a retrospective journey to traditional culture or its complete abandonment, but rather for a critical reading and assessment

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<sup>9</sup> Semporé, S. "Les Défis de la Vie Religieuse en Afrique: Eclairage Historique," in *Annales de l'Ecole Théologique Saint – Cyprien*, Yaounde (Cameroon), 10 (2005), pp. 248-249.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Amaladoss, M. "The Religious in Mission," in *Consecrated Life Today*, pp. 136-137.

of the past, an objective analysis of the present and an optimistic projection into the future in the light of the Gospel as the message of life, love and hope. These women are, in effect, exhorted to be pioneers full of audacity and courage in the mission of incarnating the Gospel into the critical situation of their society, to be women of dialogue between their culture and the Gospel, to promote a new Christian culture born from this dialogue, to be privileged advocates of evangelization and development which demands a solid personality, capable of evangelizing with the passion and vigour of the prophets.<sup>11</sup>

In this way, community life as a place of multicultural and intercultural encounter, becomes an evangelizing medium of a culture that is not based on blood affinities, clinical solidarity and communion which often lead to tribalism, alienation and violence. This cross-cultural sharing and lived experience rather, helps religious women in Africa to spearhead reconciliation among themselves and then their people, who tend to isolate each other on the basis of tribes, and nations. Through this intercultural dialogue, lived experience and exchange, African religious women become prophetic signs and instruments of an integral and a liberated evangelization. The experience of the Gospel leads them to create an alternative culture with new prospects of looking at God, the world reality, life and the human person as a whole. Their lifestyle and apostolate become a testimony of a culture transformed by the Gospel and a means for the realization of a cultural change that fosters justice, peace and reconciliation.<sup>12</sup> This cross-cultural embrace is a value and testimony for African religious women who become signs and instruments of authentic and universal communion, in a culture where solidarity is in reality “my tribe, nation and status/class” – division and/or open discrimination, to say the least.

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Saraiva, J.M. “Vita Consecrata e Inculturazione secondo il Sinodo sulla Vita Consecrata,” in *Studia Missionalia*, 44 (1995), p. 205.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Kiaziku, V.C. *L’Inculturazione come una Sfida alla Vita Consecrata in Africa Bantu*, p. 72.

### *The religious women's option for the poor in Africa*

Many women religious institutes in Africa have been founded with the aim of addressing the needs of the poor and the marginalized of society. The option for the poor is inherent in the very nature of religious consecration. It is in line with the example of Christ who declared that He had been consecrated by the spirit to preach the Good News to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, to give sight to the blind, to set the down-trodden free, declare a year of favour from the Lord (cf. *Lk* 4:16-19). Those therefore, consecrated by the Father share in the same mission. Serving Christ in the poor is an act of deep evangelization, development and at the same time, a seal of the gospel's authenticity and a catalyst for permanent conversion in consecrated life.<sup>13</sup> The prophetic mission of Christ finds resonance and challenges in what the African religious woman faces today in her apostolate where situations of hunger, disease, abuse of human rights and senseless wars and conflicts are rife. Confronted with this bitter reality, the African religious woman feels the urgency of her option for the poor, who expects her to be everything for all, *être tout pour tous*.<sup>14</sup>

Sharing with the poor takes many forms depending on the needs and the available resources and services. Besides, material assistance, personal presence or availability to the poor is very important. This availability can take the form of empathetic listening and identification with the suffering. Being with those in need of such services is necessary and appreciated by our people who believe that the worst form of poverty is loneliness. This listening equally becomes a form of self-evangelization. In their simplicity and material poverty, the poor have a lot to teach us about religious life. Thus, the option for the poor is not just that priority attention towards them, but it also includes our acceptance of the message which they carry. They pedagogically help us to perceive the emptiness of a faith that is not the transforming and

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Consecrated Life *Vita Consecrata*, no. 82.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Semporè, S. "Les Défis de la Vie Religieuse en Afrique: Eclairage Historique," in *Annales de l'École Théologique Saint-Cyprien*, p. 249.



constructive force of a just society; they question the authenticity of our evangelical poverty. Today, African religious women are practically challenged by the poor they serve, to bear a renewed and vigorous evangelical witness of self-denial and restraint, in a form of fraternal life inspired by simplicity, solidarity and hospitality.

### *The prophetic witness of religious women in Africa*

Prophetic witness results from the nature of following Christ and the dedication to the mission of evangelization. This requires a constant and passionate search for God's will, self-giving, unending communion with the Church, spiritual discernment and love for the truth. It also calls for the search for new ways of incarnating the Gospel message into human realities and cultures.<sup>15</sup> In a society like ours, where the struggle for human survival amidst a myriad of crises and challenges and where the sign of God's presence and love seem constantly obscured by the craving for material goods, authentic prophetic witness becomes an eminent necessity. Religious women in this continent are urgently called upon to bear witness with the boldness of a prophet who is not afraid of risking his/her life for his/her people.<sup>16</sup> African religious women are called upon to stand on the forefront to witness the Gospel of Christ as the message of life and love. In effect, Africa today needs prophets who do not only denounce the social, economic, cultural and political ills of society, but who equally demonstrate with their very lives that they indeed, live the Gospel values without fear of contradiction.

Prophetic witness does not consist fundamentally in proclamation, but derives from a "persuasive power, from consistency between proclamation and life."<sup>17</sup> Thus, it is not based principally on doing something, but rather on being for Jesus and the willingness to reveal Him to a society that is constantly blind or alienates itself from Him. Jesus recovered the prophetic dimension. He pointed out the errors

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Consecrated Life *Vita Consecrata*, no. 84.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, no. 85.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

of His society and denounced the contradictions of the ritualism and pharisaism that had invaded the religion of His time (cf. *Mt* 12:1-39). Jesus made visible the lack of consistency between discourse and life. Indeed, His message was a source of liberation and internal consistency. He was above all, the truthful one who restored the primacy of God (cf. *Mt* 11:25-27).

To incarnate the Gospel message into their socio-cultural reality, African religious women must rediscover their prophetic mission in the African Church and in the reality of their modern society. This is a challenge to rediscover the prophetic role of their founders, i.e. rediscovering the activity of the Holy Spirit which animated them and which continues to be at work today. This entails going back to the roots; of the Gospel vocation of the Church. It equally means relating the socio-cultural conditions of our contemporary society with our charism<sup>18</sup> which is a dynamic force to be interpreted according to various situations, time and space.

With the feminine sensibility and patience, they are invited to help their people to be aware of the need for God, for an effort of liberation from sin and death. They should become reliable and dependable witnesses through their deep existential faith, personal contact with Christ, experience of God in virtue of whom they live this new life, in the search of love, truth and justice. The rediscovery of the Gospel roots of religious life is for all women religious in Africa, a fundamental, urgent and an unavoidable task. Without authenticity of life, the religious identity is lost and the mission is thus transformed into a counter-witness. To echo John Paul II's statement, in fact, "the credible form of evangelization today is *witness*. Because people put more trust in witnesses than in teachers, in experience than in teaching, and in life and action than in theories."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Azevello, M. *Vocation for Mission*, p. 142.

<sup>19</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical Letter on the Mission of the Church *Redemptoris Missio*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1991, no. 42; Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelization in the Modern World *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Nairobi: Paulines Africa, 1986, no. 41.

### ***African religious women's new horizons***

The discussion of the African religious woman transcends the desire to obtain major responsibilities or roles in their local church. It opens wider and amplifies the horizons touching primarily on the recognition of their feminine reality in the divine design and the valorization of their vocation and mission in the Church.

New horizons for African religious women in the Church are founded on the ardent desire and determination to become who they are called to be; their vocation and mission consists in this being. For this to be realized, they must question and in fact do self-evaluation with regards to the gift and call to follow Christ more closely in this modern society, bogged down by innumerable challenges. It is on this basis that the Synod on Consecrated Life called on religious women to give a living testimony in total self-giving of a life lived in joy:

By virtue of their dedication lived in fullness and in joy, consecrated women are called in a very special way to be signs of God's tender love towards the human race and to be special witnesses to the mystery of the Church, Virgin, Bride and Mother.<sup>20</sup>

In fact, this witness is the most important contribution that consecrated persons in Africa and elsewhere in the world are called upon to offer to the mission of evangelization, development and the construction of peace, justice and reconciliation among God's people.

Each consecrated person is called upon to experience the joy of being a woman/man; created in God's Image and Likeness for the mission of communion with Him, called and consecrated to be an evangelical sign of God's presence among His people. In effect, religious women are to shine out as people who understand the challenges of suffering, the joy of self-giving and the hardships of communion, but

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<sup>20</sup> John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic on the Consecrated Life *Vita Consecrata*, no. 57.

who at the same time, have their eyes focussed on the horizons of hope. Religious women should at all times wherever they are and in whatever they do, be conscious of their vocation as women consecrated and sent to incarnate the Gospel as the message of life and hope to a desperate people.

### **Conclusion**

A keen evaluation of the history and reality of the Church in Africa today demonstrates that missionary activity would not fully achieve its goal without the contribution and involvement of religious women. John Paul II in his Post-Synodal Exhortation affirmed:

The Church depends a great deal on consecrated women for new efforts in fostering Christian doctrine and morals, family and social life, and especially in everything that affects the dignity of women and respect for human life. In fact, "women occupy a place in thought and action which is unique and decisive."<sup>21</sup>

African religious women have a fundamental role to play in the mission of the construction of *Peace*, in the fight for *Justice* and in the process of *Reconciliation*. Basing on this, the *Lineamenta* of the Second Synod for Africa dedicates a special place to consecrated women stating:

In the same way, consecrated persons are called to work for reconciliation, justice and peace by living their charisms and fully embracing the evangelical counsels in their own communities and the world. In fact, through the witness of a life of service, the acceptance of diversity, forgiveness and reconciliation, they will be a "sign" and "instrument" in the Kingdom to come. Through their simple and chaste life, a visible sign of their total self-giving to Christ and His

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 58.

Church – their evangelical spirit of detachment and honesty in the use of the goods of this world and their obedience to their superiors, religious women give witness to “the marvels wrought by God in the frail humanity of those who are called to follow in a uniquely special manner.” The commitment to reconciliation, justice and peace is intrinsic to their vocation. As a matter of fact, consecrated persons ought to be in some way the living memory of the conviction that every Christian does not have “a stable, definitive city” on earth (cf. *Heb* 13:14), or better, that he/she does not belong to any tribe, race or people on earth. As a result, consecrated persons are simply citizens who seek the definitive realization of the Kingdom of God, for which they pray constantly, “Thy Kingdom Come.”<sup>22</sup>

This article challenges African religious women in their various apostolates to be vessels of peace, justice and reconciliation through personal and communal witness. ☒

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<sup>22</sup> Synod of Bishops: II Special Assembly for Africa, *Lineamenta: The Church in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace*, Vatican City, 2006, no. 59.

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