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# **The Role of Women in Peacebuilding and Reconciliation in the AMECEA Countries**

## ***Biblical background***

An attentive study of the Bible shows that women have an important place in the divine perspective in the world. This can be discovered in an attentive study of the Bible.

### **OLD TESTAMENT**

The Genesis account, at the very beginning of the Bible, in recording that God created the human race male and female, indicates briefly, but significantly, the complementarity of the two sexes: that is to say, the resemblance, their difference and their collaboration in every human activity and, therefore, in evangelization and human promotion.

The Old Testament offers a whole series of female figures who played major roles in the history and destiny of the chosen people. Examples are Judith and Esther and their role at particularly difficult and delicate times in the history of their people.

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## THE NEW TESTAMENT

All these figures of the Old Testament find their highest embodiment in the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, as closely as associated as was possible with the work of salvation and the spread of the revelation of Jesus Christ, from the Annunciation to the first Pentecost, when Mary having received the gift of the Holy Spirit, become the Queen of the Apostles, a title which we give her and is in accord with her nature.<sup>1</sup>

During the lifetime of the Saviour, women took a full part in the work of evangelization, not only in good times, but – in this showing greater faithfulness than the men – in the darkest hours of the passion, death and burial of the Saviour. This was but a prelude and a foretaste of many occasions when women would often manifest greater faithfulness.

It was to the women that the Risen Christ committed the task of announcing his resurrection to his brethren: A foretaste of their apostolic role (*Luke 24:1-2.22-24*).

Saint Paul – and the same was certainly true of the other apostles – several times spoke of the help given by women, such as Priscilla, for example, in keeping with their gifts, to preachers of the Gospel and in the actual preaching of the Gospel.

It would take too long to record how women continued to exercise that rule through the centuries, even if at times there was a reduction of involvement or there were restrictions. Coming to modern times, one thinks with joy of the women religious who from the second half of the nineteenth century began to appear in large numbers. One thinks of Frances Cabrini, Mother Mary of the Passion and recently Mother Theresa of Calcutta. And there were also those laywomen who founded the first enterprises of missionary cooperation such as Pauline Jaricot and Jeanne Bigard.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. "The Role of Women in Evangelization," in Flannery, Austin, OP (General Editor), *Vatican II Council, More Postconciliar Documents*, Vol. II, Bandra, Bombay: St. Pauls, 1995, p. 320.

These apostles are among the first models of that female initiative and responsibility which are so widely welcomed in our time.

The moral and spiritual strength of a woman is joined to her awareness that God entrusts the human being to her in a special way.<sup>2</sup> Of course, God entrusts every human being to each and every other human being. But this entrusting concerns women in a special way precisely by reason of their femininity<sup>3</sup> and this in a particular way determines their vocation.

A woman is strong because of her awareness of this entrusting, strong because of the fact that God “entrusts the human being to her,” always and in every way, even in the situation of social discrimination in which she may find herself. This awareness and this fundamental vocation speak to women of the dignity which they receive from God himself, and this makes them “strong” and strengthens their vocation.

In *Proverbs* 31:10-17 we read:

The woman of character, where is she to be found? She is more precious than any jewel. Her husband has complete confidence in her; she will be of great benefit to him. She brings him only good and not evil, all the days of her life. She has obtained wool and flax and works them with skilful hands. She is like the merchant ships which bring provisions from afar. She gets up while it is still dark, feeds her household and allots tasks to the servants. If she sets her heart on a field, she buys it and plants a vineyard with her own hands. She is full of energy and her arms show her strength...

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<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1988, no. 30.

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

### ***The real situation***

#### **SOCIO-POLITICAL ASPECT**

In many African countries, AMECEA region included, many persistent social tensions impede progress and give rise to political disturbances and armed conflicts. Tribalism, religious tensions and wars, border disputes and attempts to expansion lead to armed struggles which take a heavy toll on human life and deplete financial resources. Some African countries witness continuous violations of fundamental human rights as well as the related consequences.

Peace is often confused with a kind of unanimity or tranquillity imposed by force and keeping power in the hands of a single group to the detriment of the people. In such situations, citizens are unable to take part in public life and popular opinion cannot make a difference. As a result, people tend to withdraw and become disinterested.<sup>4</sup>

#### **SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASPECT**

In most African countries despite the recently achieved progress, the rate of literacy continues to be among the lowest in the world. In many places, the educational system is constantly deteriorating, the health system is in shambles, and social welfare is almost non-existent. With the lack of order, the weak are always the people who are most threatened. Likewise, in the area of demographics, one can not be silent at the imbalance between a population which is witnessing a record rate of annual growth and resources which remain unutilized, if not being totally depleted. Africa's immense resources are in direct contrast to the misery of its poor. The situation becomes even more scandalous if consideration is given to the wealth amassed in the hands of a privileged few.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. Synod of Bishops: Second Special Assembly for Africa, *Lineamenta: The Church in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace*, Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2006, p. 17.

## ***Role of women***

As the above socio-political and socio-economic situation analysis has shown, countries in the AMECEA region are passing through particularly difficult and delicate times. In this situation, women can really play a determining role in peacebuilding and reconciliation.

## ***Conceptual and theoretical framework***

### THE CONCEPT OF PEACE

There is no single definition of the concept of peace. For some people, “peace” has been understood as the absence of war, violence and hostilities but also the enjoyment of economic and social justice, equality and the entire range of human rights and fundamental freedoms within society.<sup>5</sup>

For others, peace is viewed as a condition of tranquillity where there is no disagreement or disputes, where conflicts are banished, and people, individually and collectively live in calm and serenity.<sup>6</sup>

Probably the best definition of what peace is, is the one which is given by the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI when he says: Peace is the ability to live together and to build relationships of justice and solidarity.<sup>7</sup> In this way, peace becomes both a gift and a task. It, therefore, calls for unflinching commitment on you and me and indeed all humanity part, but also, and more so, it is a gift from God.

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. Mutamba, John & Isabilize, Jeanne, *The Role of Women in Reconciliation and Peace Building in Rwanda: Ten Years After the Genocide 1994-2004*, 2005, p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Message of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI for the Celebration of the *World Day of Peace*, 1<sup>st</sup> January 2007, p. 6.

### ***Reconciliation***

Reconciliation is a complex term and there is little agreement on its definition. It is both a goal – something to achieve and a process, means to achieve this goal. The basic definition of reconciliation is a process through which a society moves from a divided past to a shared future.<sup>8</sup> The term does not necessarily include the re-establishment of peace in hearts.

What is important is to re-establish a normal relationship, resume communication and go beyond the dispute. From this vantage point, reconciliation has a pragmatic character; it is a language of learning to live with others, in a pluralistic society, and to manage conflicts peacefully.<sup>9</sup>

### ***What can women do?***

#### **IN THE FAMILY**

Women are less involved in formal discussions and policy making in families than men. Nevertheless, women's role and occupations, in their communities give them unique skills and positions to be active on various levels of peacebuilding and reconciliation. They have great influence in the home, as mothers they have a kind of "moral authority" and are responsible for educating and passing on values. As the first agents of socialization, women are natural teachers for peace education to their children. In playing their roles as parents, service providers, teachers, they are ideal for instilling into their children values such as: Respect for others; the peaceful solution to conflicts and problems; sharing; partnerships; tolerance; sense of justice; equity; etc. all of which are qualities of sustainable peace. A woman is the epitome of peace. It is

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Bloomfield, David, Barnes, Teresa and Huyse, Luc, *Handbook Series Reconciliation after Violent*. Conflict International IDEA Publications, Stockholm, Sweden, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Lineamenta: The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace*, p. 52.

from her that peace flows and radiates to other members of the family. If at home they speak the message of peace and God's love with their children, hopefully these children will speak to other children who will hopefully speak to others, spreading the message of God's love through His Son, and peace and reconciliation through Him.

#### IN THE SMALL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITIES

Women are apt to focus on narratives. While men tend to discuss issues and negotiate positions, women share stories of community life. They feel comfortable in the exchange of personal narrative and experience.

Aside from the capacity to respond effectively by creating safe space, women also have a specific narrative of their own. Women know what it means to be different. This awareness of what it means to be different may be a key resource in reconciliation. Knowing what it means to be different helps when it comes to facing and embracing human differences.

#### IN THE WIDER COMMUNITY

Women have the ability to give grief a public expression. The role of grief, of coping with personal and others' losses, is intrinsic to reconciliation. A sincere understanding of the other only comes with a willingness to understand pain, to accept, to confess and forgive. As one old woman once noted: *"a woman does not belong to any particular family or tribe. She has no boundaries and, therefore, she is there to unite families because she is neutral."*

### **Conclusion**

As concluding remarks, we would like to reiterate what were the AMECEA resolutions already in 2002<sup>10</sup> which were meant to empower women and so really make them play an important role in peacebuilding and reconciliation in the AMECEA region:

- The pastoral department of AMECEA should develop a programme of formation of Catholic women in order to help them assume their rights and responsibilities in the Church and society. As the above discussion has shown, if women are trusted, sensitized, animated and empowered, they can be strong pillars in building sustainable peace and reconciliation in the AMECEA Region.
- The pastoral department of AMECEA should be in contact with the Catholic Women Organizations in the region in order to support their efforts towards the betterment and empowerment of women in society.
- The communications department of AMECEA should keep in mind the issues concerning the rights of women and share the successful experience as well as the challenges in the region. ☐

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<sup>10</sup> AMECEA 14<sup>th</sup> Plenary Assembly, *The AMECEA Vision, Mission, Mandate and Pastoral Resolutions 2002*, p. 21.



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