

Women and the Roman Catholic Church with special focus on Zimbabwe

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Abstract

The Synod of Bishops (Rome 1994) acknowledged that women in Africa are the backbone of church and society; and yet, in a patriarchal church and society, women are marginalised in both subtle and overt ways. The article interrogates engagement since the African Bishops Synods (Rome 1994 and 2009) with inclusion of women in all sectors of church life and, in particular, the unity and disparity between deliberations and implementation concerning the Roman Catholic Church in Zimbabwe. Pertinent issues include common claims that women are equal to and yet different to men, that women and men play complementary roles, about harnessing the feminine genius, about the exclusion of women from ordained ministry and the accompanying impasses, about a patriarchal church and Shona culture's impact on women, and about empowerment of women to become proactive agents of their own "her-story". The agenda is to passionately appropriate the creation and baptismal dignity of women and men in the *imago Dei/Christi* and also the baptismal vocation of sharing in the mission of Christ *ad gentes*.

Introduction

This article explores how women in the Roman Catholic Church (RCC) experience faith and give expression to their creation and baptism status and vocation. Special focus is on women's presence and participation in all aspects of church life. The point of departure is deliberations by the Synods of African Bishops (Rome 1994, 2009) seen in the backdrop of a creative dialogue of culture (Shona of Zimbabwe) and the Gospel. According to Frederick Chiromba (1994:7) the model of the church in Africa as family has its basis in the *Trinitarian koinonia* (fellowship). This article explores how this model of the church positions both women and men in the life of the church. Furthermore, there is the concern about African bishops "walking their talk", two decades and four years, respectively, since the two synods. Acknowledging the importance of women's education (knowledge as power), advocacy will centre on consciousness raising of women to passionately appropriate their creation and baptismal dignity and vocation as proactive agents of their own "her-story".

African Synods of Bishops and the dignity and vocation of women

The African Synods of Bishops are part of the effort to implement the Vatican II (1963-1965) deliberations. The latter promulgated that the church and theology be sensitive to the signs of the times so as to be meaningful and relevant to believers and society. The main themes and messages of the Synods of African Bishops were that, in an atmosphere of celebrating the faith in the resurrection of Christ, the RCC in Africa should give hope and joy in meeting the challenges of evangelisation, inculturation, justice and peace (*Ecclesia in Africa [EA]* 1995: paras 1, 5, 8, 12-14; *Africae Munus [AM]* 2011: paras 1-6). Precisely, the African Synods of Bishops are post-conciliar efforts at providing meaning and relevance to the church in its locality today.

Pope John XXIII (*Pacem in Terris* 1963) championed *aggiornamento* (Italian for "updating"). Here, and as expounded in post-Synodal exhortation, *EA*, evangelisation, Incarnation and inculturation are mutually inclusive processes. The central task of evangelisation is preaching the Good News – Christ the Word made flesh (*EA*, para 60; cf Jn 1:14). It is a Christian mandate to proclaim the Gospel to all people (*Missio Ad Gentes [MG]*, n 1; cf Mk 16:16). Thus, Incarnation is not a once-off thing, but also a lived reality of enfleshing the Gospel message in place and time.

Inculturation is essentially the "insertion of the Gospel message into cultures". In the Gospel- culture dialectic, Christ encounters culture and the latter is "transformed by Gospel values. In the light of the "Paschal Mystery" (death, resurrection and redemption) and kenosis (self-emptying) (*EA*, para 61; cf Jn 12:24,32; Phil 2:6-9), some cultural elements have to die in order to rise in new splendour, and other cultural elements are rejected, corrected, elaborated and refined (Charles Nyamiti 1973:29-30). Here culture is acknowledged as having seeds or roots for evangelisation, that is the people of a culture are not a *tabula rasa* (like a blank sheet of paper) concerning knowledge and orientation to God. John Pobee (1992:34-41), in *Kenosis-Skenosis*, shows that the latter two processes of inculturation are aimed at reaching a *tertium quid* (meaning a third position) in which believers feel at home in their own culture and church. The pertinent question is this one: Do African

women feel at home in their own culture and the RCC in Zimbabwe? In other words, it can be asked, is the Gospel what it says – Good News for RCC African women Christian believers?

The African Synod of Bishops (Rome 1994), in postulating the model of the church in Africa as family, used familial images to acknowledge essential values of African cultures – “love and respect for life”, and the African love for children “who are joyfully welcomed as gifts of God” (*EA*, para 43) through the ancestors (my addition and emphasis). Furthermore, the image of the church in Africa as family of God is an acknowledgement that God/Christ is not a stranger in Africa. This image of the church of God’s nature is particularly appropriate for Africa in that it “emphasizes care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationships, acceptance, dialogue and trust” (*AM*, para 63).

Vatican II and the two African Synods of Bishops, as shown in *Lineamenta* (outline touching on issues of the church in Africa as expressed by bishops from various parts of the continent) and the post-Synodal exhortations *EA* and *AM*, respectively, identified women’s situation in church and society as a challenge to the RCC. At Vatican II Pope John XXIII, in his encyclical *Pacem in Terris (Peace on Earth)* of 1963, pointed out that the issue of the liberation of women is one of the signs of the times to be taken seriously by the church. Striking the same note, Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Mulieris Dignitatem (MD)* (on the dignity of women) accentuated the kairos (opportune time) as follows:

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 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 (1988: paras 3-4).

Pope John Paul II, in his *Letter to Women (LW – 1995, n 1)*, acknowledged that these sentiments had already been expressed in Vatican II’s “teaching, specifically in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes (GS)* and in the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity *Apostolicam Actuositatem*” (*AA*) also as expressed by his predecessors – Pope Pius XII in his Discourses. John XXIII (*Pacem in Terris*) and Paul VI in particular went further when

[h]e conferred the title “Doctor of the Church” upon Saint Teresa of Jesus and Saint Catherine of Siena, and likewise when, at the request of the 1971 Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, he set up a special Commission for the study of contemporary problems concerning the “effective promotion of the dignity and the responsibility of women”.

In both *MD* (1988, n 1) and the *LW* (1995, n 1), John Paul identifies the dignity and vocation of women as creation and baptismal givens and as patterned on Mary the *Theotokos* (Mother of God). He explains the baptismal vocation of women as both “biological” and “spiritual” motherhood that finds full expression in the divine commandment of love that is life affirming.

In *Christifideles laici* (1994, para 51), John Paul II stipulates:

Without discrimination, women should be participants in the life of the church and also in consultation and the decision-making process ... [women] ought to be associated in the preparation of pastoral and missionary documents and ought to be recognized as co-workers in the mission of the church in the family, in professional life and in civil communities.

In the *LW* (paras 9-12), Pope John Paul II advocated harnessing the talent of women that he called the feminine genius as a special contribution of women in their mission in the church. However, it remains to be seen where this feminine genius and the image of the church in Africa as family of God take women concerning participation in every aspect of church life.

The first African Synod of Bishops (Rome 1994) *Lineamenta* expressed the signs of the times concerning women by acknowledging that “it is obvious” today “that women are now taking a part in public life” and cautioned:

Since women are becoming ever more conscious of their human dignity, they will not tolerate being treated as mere material instruments, but demand rights befitting a human person both in domestic and in public life (Bishop de Jong, in Njue 1995:4).

Bishop Paul Bhasera (the then Bishop of Gokwe and now Bishop of Masvingo diocese in Zimbabwe), noted:

The gospel demands both the spiritual salvation as well as human promotion. Integral evangelization is the handing on of the complete love of God (cf. Titus 4:3). There is need to integrate human promotion and concerns of Justice and Peace into the theology of the Church. Rural women living in great hardship are the mainstay of their families. It is they who teach Christian values. They are the backbone of their parishes and communities. Without them the Church would surely fail in its evangelizing mission (cf. Njue 1995:4).

Bishop L Agboka concurs when he says: “The church is worth what woman is” [emphasis added] (Njue 1995:4). He echoes the Shona proverb – “*Musha mukadzi*” (Behind a successful home is a woman).

According to John Njue (1995:3) the Synod of African Bishops (1994) made the following recommendations about interventions for women:

- a) Women should always be fully consulted before decisions are made in matters concerning them and their interests.
- b) All African governments should be urged to draw up and pass legislation to foster and protect the rights of women.
- c) Appropriate lay ministries should be established in which women may participate and provision should be made for their formation and preparation for these ministries. Women should be allowed to lead Sunday services which take place where there is no priest.
- d) The involvement of competent and mature women in the formation of future priests ... as teachers, members of advisory committees, etc, should be encouraged.
- e) Because the education of priests to celibacy necessarily includes a balanced attitude towards women, it is extremely important that seminarians should be educated to respect women. A policy of pure isolation does not seem appropriate and often leads to embarrassing surprises after ordination.
- f) Religious women should be given opportunities, according to their capacities for human, scientific and professional development, especially in Catholic universities and institutions so that they may become well qualified.

When all is said and done, it remains to be seen how deeply or how far these interventions by the popes and bishops position women in the life of the RCC in Zimbabwe. On closer examination, it can be said that these pronouncements contain understatements that exhibit both overt and subtle marginalisation of women. For example, following the Conciliar and Synodal exhortations, no women are present in the Papal Magisterium. Thus, Pope John Paul’s postulate of the “feminine genius” is expressed in no more than the presence of a few women as auditors or observers; few women are present in some papal dicasteries, for example the Council of Culture, but here headship is a preserve of cardinals; women (mainly religious) collaborate in priestly ministry as Ministers of the Eucharist. It appears that male clericalism has usurped the common priesthood of believers (cf Ex 19:1-5; 1 Peter 2:9). Furthermore, where male laypersons have succeeded in reclaiming the diaconate, women have not.

In a creative dialogue of African culture and the Gospel, the implications of this are important for a church that is understood as “family”. In postulating the historical patriarchalisation of Shona culture and the church, it will be argued that the “is” is not what “ought” to be concerning the dignity and vocation of women and is not according to God’s salvific will. The corollary is that patriarchal structures can be transformed. Pertinent issues include the understanding of women and men as equal but different, the laity (the category to which all women belong), theological language, and collaboration in priestly ministry and ordination of women. At this juncture, it is important to examine similarities and differences as regards the dignity and vocation of women in the RCC and society.

Patriarchal circumscription of women

Central to our topic is the observation that at the root of the problem inhibiting women’s participation in all sectors of church life is that both African (Shona) culture and the RCC are patriarchal structures. Thus women are caught between the two texts – of culture and church.

Patriarchalisation of RCC and Shona culture structures

In patriarchal marginalisation, women are frozen by both culture and the church when both texts are treated as sacrosanct – meaning sacred and not to be questioned. In this context, the RCC in Zimbabwe, then, is at times seen to reinforce patriarchal marginalisation of women and at other instances lags behind culture when it comes

to recognising and advocating the equality of women and men as children of God and brothers and sisters in Christ (Gal 3:28).

On one hand, the patriarchal RCC exhibits pyramidal structure in which at the apex of the pyramid God and those in authority have the same face – they are male. The RCC's Magisterium is totally male in nature – made up of the Pope, cardinals and bishops. It is these cardinals and bishops who head pontifical dicasteries. As a result we get skewed theologies in which women feel much excluded, particularly in quintessential doctrines of faith and in worship. There is a twist of irony since in both Shona culture and the RCC the central places of prayer are women's spaces. The RCC is understood as feminine – the "bride of Christ". We also see that in Shona traditional religion the hut kitchen (place for cooking, eating and recreation) is the family altar (*huva*, a place where cooking utensils and food storage clay pots are kept) and is the woman's space.

On the other hand most African cultures, in particular Shona culture, operate on a *pater familias* and *patria potestas* foundation (father as head of the family and guardian of the children). The doyen of African theology John S Mbiti (1991:59) appeals to the Ghanaian proverb "African women are flowers in the garden and their men are the fence around it", to show how women in patriarchal society are autonomous individuals and yet are circumscribed, valued and devalued, but have invaluable influence and yet are often denied presence and/or voice in public spaces. The RCC, the Bible (with a patriarchal stamp) and African Shona culture, then, can be seen as double-edged swords that both value and devalue, empower and disempower, liberate and oppress women. According to Jeremy Punt (1999:313), these texts are dual in nature since they "always seem to be dynamic and accommodating, liberating and oppressing, socialising and alienating, useful and irrelevant". Kanyoro (2002:13) hits the same note as follows:

In some instances culture is like a creed for the community identity. In some instances culture is the main justification for difference, oppression and injustices – especially to those whom culture defines as "the other", "the outsider".

Women and children are considered minors and yet there are many African proverbs that show how women were valued and also treated as autonomous beings. For example the Shona proverb "*Nhaka ndeye mombe yemunhu inozvionera*" (Only cattle are automatically inherited, but a person must make a choice) shows respect for autonomy of the human person (a woman in this case). Another important observation is that a woman can be a minor to her own son when she gives ritual water to her son as choice in levirate marriage. But this is only symbolic of the fact that the widow chooses to remain in the marital group and look after her children. In practice the son remains a minor to the mother (respects and takes orders from her).

Naming the deity

In the RCC, although there is acknowledgement that we use human analogy (images and experiences drawn from both male and female), theological language remains sexist even following the recent revision of the Lectionary. Language is power – it can either close or open doors in human communications and relationships. In patriarchal binary logic, male nouns and pronouns are used as the generic language. Women then are shadows of men. On the contrary, most African languages, in particular Shona, are gender-neutral. For example, in the Article of the Creed that says "The Word became man like us", the Shona rendition is "*Izwi wakava munhu sesu*" (The Word became human like us). Shona also uses terms like *hazvanzi* in referring to a sibling of the opposite sex. And so in the African model of the church as family, in Christ Jesus, Christians are called to a relationship of siblingship in which they are *hazvanzi ne hazvanzi* – children of the same father and mother (cf Gal 3:28). Here the church is seen to lag behind culture.

The use of inclusive language and ways of being in the church is in line with the Gospel – the practice of Jesus Christ, the egalitarian kenotic and iconoclastic teacher. For example, in the parables of the growth of the Kingdom of God (Lk 15:4-7,8-10; Mt 13:31-32,33), Jesus uses both male and female images; in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus prescribes "symmetry of responsibility" (Erickson 1991:584-585) to men and women for the sins of adultery; Jesus had both men and women disciples that formed a community of equal disciples by choice.

Chimhanda (2011a:32-33) notes that in the Shona Mwari myths the Shona acknowledge that the highest principle is "neither male, nor female". Daneel (1970:15-16) accentuates this point by showing that in the Mwari cult of Matonjeni (Matopo), the voice of Mwari is a woman and that in analogical naming of the deity, Mwari is given androgynous images. Mwari is given designates of Musikavanhu (Creator of Human Beings), Muvambapasi (Creator of the Earth), Chidzachepe (Eternal Being). Here female designates include Zendere (The First Emanation of Mwari) and Dzivaguru (The Greatest Pool). Male designates denoting headship include Sororezhou (Elephant Head) and Nyadenga (Lord of the Skies). Shelly Thorpe (1991:53) shows that Mwari the God of the Shona is understood as a universal God so that wild fruits, mushrooms, honey, and so on, must be picked sparingly and made available to all; Mwari the God of Agriculture is also understood to be responsible for the fertility of both humankind and the land.

Mwari the God of the Shona is acknowledged as a dynamic presence in theophoric names of both men and women alike, Tinashe (God is With Us), Simbarashe (God's Strength/Power), *Kudakwashe* (The Will of God), *Ngonidzashe* (Mercy of God), Tadiwa(nashe) (We have been Loved by God) and Tawananyasha(dzashe) (We have Experienced the Mercy of God). It is important to note that both male and female experiences and images are used. In the Shona religious worldview, and when looking at data memory of an oral/aural tradition (myths, symbols of life, proverbs, songs), it is possible to postulate the patriarchalisation of culture.

Women and men equal but different

Biblical references often cited to affirm equal dignity of men and women include Genesis 1:27 and Galatians 3:28. The former affirms the creation dignity of the *imago Dei* – men and women as created in the image and likeness of God where the latter, as explained by Leonardo Doohan (1992:168-177), accentuates the equality of believers and the baptismal vocation of women as well as men. Again, the Bible (1 Cor 12:12-13) and also the organic model of the church show that difference does not mean “inferior other” and exhorts a welcoming difference for the richness it brings to the whole church and society.

The understanding of “men and women are equal but different” is implied by Bishop Michael Bhasera's (1995:4) intervention:

Lack of respect for women impedes human promotion. While maintaining the specific roles of the sexes, the rights and dignity of women must be respected and promoted. Women must take part in making decisions.

The above statement is heavily loaded. There are underlying factors for RCC denigration around the issue of women's ordination to priesthood. These include concepts of biological reductionism – that women because of their biological limitations can play different and complementary roles. Concerning the bifurcation into male and female vocations in the church, the pertinent question is this one: Does gender so define us that one type of experience excludes the other?

In situations where the RCC complains of the “shortage of priests”, women can collaborate in priestly ministry, for example as Ministers of the Eucharist. Collaboration here is reduced to a filling of gaps. It appears Pope John Paul II's postulate of the feminine genius borders on biological reductionism. In human experience, motherhood and mothering are synonymous with parenting, which is equally binding for both men and women. It is also a failure to acknowledge that before women are mothers, they are autonomous individuals.

Ordination of women

In the Shona worldview that shows unity between the mundane and extra-mundane worlds and the living dead and their descendants, Mwari is understood to be accessible at the apex of the ancestral mediation ladder. Women and men are acknowledged on this ancestral mediation ladder as spiritual leaders – *mhondoro* (lion spirits), *mhondoro masvikiro* (mediators) or *makombwe* (singular: *gombwe*) and family spirits (*vadzimu*; singular: *mudzimu*). There are both women and men spiritual leaders as *n'angas* (traditional healers). It is acceptable for women to ascend to chieftainship and headship of the villages although they are often patriarchally denied these positions. But women of childbearing age are considered ritually unclean (because of menstruation and being sexually active) and are thus forbidden to brew ritual beer. There is an echoing of Old Testament purification prescriptions that reduced women to impurity during pregnancy and birthing (Lev 12:1-2). Women become a father figure as confidante to their brother's children. And again, they can take on the father role of marking the grave of a niece or nephew.

In the RCC the question of women's ordination is critical for women's presence and participation in all aspects of church life. As Ida Ramming (1980:10) notes, this is particularly true in that important church offices (jurisdiction, teaching, decision-making and administrative bodies) are attached to the priesthood. The issue of male priesthood only guarantees the status quo insofar as it remains a closed issue (Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Ordination Sacerdotalis* [1994], n 1-2; cf Paul VI, in Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith Declaration *Inter Insigniores* [1976]). Therefore, women find themselves operating according to the echelons of the church. It follows that we have lopsided relationships between men and women in which theological monologues give us at best doctrinal half-truths when the experience of half the human race is not heard, and at worst we get distorted truths of faith (by way of patriarchal marginalisation of women).

The Popes and therefore the RCC Magisterium pose a triple argument for the exclusion of women from priesthood that is authorisation by Christ, apostolic succession and church tradition. Theologians, for example Raymond Brown (1975:4), argue that there is no theological justification for the exclusion of women from

ordained ministry. Concerning authorisation to priesthood, it can be argued that in the Gospels we do not find the institution of ordination to priesthood by Christ as it is practised today.

It can also be argued that reservation of priestly ministry to men only is a misinterpretation of the notion of representation of Christ. This is because in the categories of creation and Christian baptism, both men and women reflect, reveal and remind the *imago Dei/Christi* (Joan Chittister 1998:6). The corollary is that no human being, male or female, can claim to represent God/Christ to the exclusion and negation of the other (Chimhanda 2011b:1). Priestly ministry can be understood as **service**. Mother Theresa of Kolkata¹ accentuates this view in claiming that Mary the *Theotokos* (God bearer) was the first priest who, while carrying Christ in her womb, went out to minister to her cousin Elizabeth, who was pregnant in her old age (Lk 1:38).

Advocacy for affirmation of human dignity and vocation in church and society

Advocacy for the affirmation of the dignity and vocation of women and men is aimed at *metanoia* (conversion). Here it is important to note that the sin of patriarchy tarnishes both men and women and also that God has salvific will for both the oppressor and the oppressed. It can be said that both women and men in the RCC and society in general are at various stages of awareness of the both subtle and overt ways in which the dignity and vocation of women are trampled upon. Here the six stages of awareness raising of Christine C Gaylor and Annelle Fitzpatrick (1998:365-372) are insightful. These are the “no big deal”, “eye-opening”, “on the fence”, “coming home”, “passion” and “acceptance/appropriation/incorporation” stages.

In the “no big deal” stage, there is denial and trivialisation of the problem of patriarchal marginalisation of women in both church and society. Synod fathers are seen to scratch the surface as regards inclusion and engagement of women in the centre of church life. Women themselves are seen to have internalised patriarchal definitions. Some say there is “no big deal” about the use of generic terms since they are understood to refer to both men and women. Women sing with gusto hymns like “Lift up your hearts to all men” and “Thank you Lord for all men that live”. One religious sister said to me, “Do you realise that in our church we sing ‘hims’ and not ‘hers’?”.

In the “no big deal” stage women often compromise their own personhood by colluding with patriarchy. This is true, as Rudo Mbuwayesango (1997:27) notes of Shona culture that it is women who socialise young girls (and boys) to patriarchal obligations. In the RCC, and concerning violence against women, women are also seen to be in complicity with the culture and conspiracy of silence (sex scandals reported in the worldwide RCC being also not uncommon in Zimbabwe). Where church offices like chairperson of the parish council can be held by either a man or woman, women often choose men rather than equally competent women. I have also noticed that religious sisters prefer priests to other religious women as spiritual directors and retreat givers.

In our case, the “eye-opening” stage refers to believers becoming aware of the both subtle and overt ways in which women’s dignity and vocation are trampled upon and compromised. In a church-culture creative dialogue, “eye-opening” occurs when believers become aware of the historical and cultural conditioning of revelation. They awake to the dual nature of the Bible, church tradition and culture – to liberate and oppress. In this context, there is awakening to the fact that in a Paschal Mystery motif, these important texts can act as prototypes for dismantling patriarchy in the RCC and for structuring of emancipatory Christian praxis.

“Eye opening” can also happen when the RCC interacts with the ecumenical church. Here it is important to note that, since ordination of women to priesthood is happening in some Christian denominations (Anglican, Methodist, Lutheran), women in the RCC who feel excluded from the dialogue that happens at the centre of church life can be described as “women looking on from afar” – they stand in the river, and yet thirst (Regina Bechtel 1998:33; cf Anne Thurstone, citing Lk 15:40). However, such experience can make RCC adherents uncomfortable with their own church’s prohibition of women ordination. By the same token, believers in the RCC compare church praxis with women’s empowerment or marginalisation for leadership positions within culture and the state.

In Zimbabwe, the Beijing Conferences and the ascendance of Joyce Mujuru as second Deputy President (2004) are major spinoffs to derailing patriarchy. Shona women (Chimhanda 2011a:294) are often heard to defy patriarchal oppression, saying “*ino inguva yamai Mujuru*” (this is a time of Mrs Mujuru – a *kairos*). The two factors have become clichés as points of reference for women defying patriarchal oppression and asserting their dignity and rights. The Zimbabwe state also has a quota for women’s representation in parliament and has laws protecting women, especially concerning inheritance, access to means of livelihood and against violence. These laws reinforce or shake the foundations of culture.

Bob Shantz (1995:6-7) raises an important point of awareness that when men talk for, about and without women as in the case of the Papal Magisterium (Marie-Henri Keane 1988:3-13), they make presuppositions. Here the Shona adage *Kuyera nyoka negavi iyo iripo* (To measure a snake with a bark string when it is present)

¹ Mother Theresa of Kolkata, in her address given at the 43rd Eucharistic Congress (Nairobi, Kenya, 1985) which I attended.

is quite revealing. The pertinent question is this one: Why are men afraid to engage women in public space or positions of power? Shantz says men enjoy the monopoly of power. He thus proposes the dismantling of patriarchy so that men and women can share the joys and burden of responsibility.

A Shona woman interviewee defied the patriarchal denial of women in the public space. She more or less accused her husband of plagiarism: "I am adviser to my husband, but when he speaks in public he articulates my ideas as his own." Another interviewee, the late Chief Serima, said: "My wife is my chief advisor so that when I adjourn the Dare (chief's court), it is just to allow space and time to consult her."

Reading the Bible through women's lens and from a Shona cultural perspective raises awareness of the fact that the Bible as God's word in human words has a patriarchal stamp. I find the story of Rachael giving birth (Gen 36:18) has a far-reaching impact on Shona women. They can easily identify with this biblical matriarchy. In Shona, with women's power to name (Chimhanda 2011b:165) their experience, they say the equivalent of Rachael's Benoni (Son of my Sorrow) would be Marufu (The One who Brought Death [to the Mother/Family]).

The "on the fence" stage accounts for the discrepancy between Council and Synodal deliberations and implementation, theory and praxis, and knowing and doing. Here one can use Mercy Amba Oduyoye's negative critique of African theology – that it is a smoke screen that dissipates on closer examination (cf Maluleke 1997:39-65). In other words RCC leadership, in as far as women are denied ordination, amounts to merely scratching the surface and interventions admit to tokenism. The RCC in Zimbabwe shows a discrepancy between what is said at Church Councils like Vatican II and the Synods of Africa, and passionate implementation. In particular, the dioceses in Zimbabwe show different practices in implementing synodal exhortations such as having women altar servers, acolytes, Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist, and engaging of women in the dialogue of study (teaching and learning theology, involvement in the education of priests, etc). Insofar as implementation was left to the discretion, creativity and sensitivity of local bishops, this begged of praxis bordering on tokenism and inaction.

Backtracking as a feature of this stage was observed in some dioceses. For example, the Gweru diocese was more advanced than the Harare Archdiocese in its having the laity, both women and men, read and expound the first reading from the Old Testament or the New Testament (Acts and Epistles), since reading and expounding the Gospel is the preserve of ordained priests and deacons. This was an appropriate move since lay preachers used images, stories and concrete lived experiences when it came to weddings or funerals for example. In this way, they showed that women, like men, have what it takes to minister in every aspect of church life. But there were complaints that lay preachers lacked theological depth; regrettably this practice was stopped in all dioceses, as a ruling from above.

I will treat the "coming home", "passion" and "acceptance/appropriation/incorporation" stages together since there is no smooth transition from one stage to another. The "coming home" is when people begin to see and become uncomfortable with patriarchal oppression of women in both subtle and overt ways. In passionate appropriation of the dignity and vocation of women, the RCC is challenged to agonise – problematise -- about the situation of women in the church. Men and women are challenged to become passionately aware of the both subtle and overt ways of compromising women's dignity and vocation in the church. In other words, believers in the RCC are challenged to prophetic vision and engagement.

According to Elsa Tamez (2001:37-38), a prophetic vision shows dissatisfaction with the status quo and dreams of better things to come. According to Kanyoro (1992:24), women need to subvert patriarchy so that they become part of the vision that decides which vehicle to take rather than jump onto an already moving patriarchal bandwagon. It is true that women are quite a force to reckon with – they have what it takes to self-actualise and take leadership positions in public spaces. This is particularly true of women in the RCC in Zimbabwe. Women and men have shown that they are "border-crossing agents" (Dharmaraj 2000:55-65) in education, health care, sociopolitical and economic development. In Zimbabwe, religious women and men have established well-known schools, hospitals and orphanages, for example.

For women in the RCC, the passionate reclaiming of their dignity and vocation is aimed at reaching a level in conscious becoming that Oduyoye (1995:11) claims for herself – that she refuses to be caught up in a patriarchal web without finding a way to crawl out. The "passionate" stage is when people use their heart, head and gut to express discontentment with the status quo. This is when the issue of women's marginalisation in the RCC is named for what it is and the problem becomes part of the agenda, for example of the Synods of Bishops and General Congregations of religious men and women. At the Vatican II and the first Synod of African Bishops, for example, passionate appropriation was seen in the interventions of Jean Danielou (cf Mitchell 1991:534) and Bishop Harold de Jong, respectively. Jean Danielou said:

I am partisan to the idea that the Council authorise the ordination of women without delay, indeed before the end of the Council. As for the eventual female priesthood, there is no theological objection to it.

Harold de Jong (cf Njue 1995:4) regretted that in the RCC we have apartheid of gender:

Social change has benefited men at the expense of women. This has contributed to the emergence of “the apartheid of gender” in which the status of women has become inferior to that of men.

For Tinyiko Maluleke (1997:39-65), citing Oduyoye’s critique of African theology as a “smoke screen that dissipates on closer examination”, the “passion” stage challenges men and women to agonise about the inclusion of women in all sectors of church and societal life. Maluleke (40-41) notes that the challenge of African women theologians cannot be ignored today since a study of their works shows that sooner or later women will either demand recognition or walk out. Acknowledging that women are unhappy in the African churches (in our case – the RCC) and in church organisations, Maluleke asks incisive questions – Have black and African theologies heard them? Will black and African theologies hear them? Here we can add: Will the RCC hear them?

In the RCC, I agree with Mitchell (1995:547) that nowhere has the pain and frustration of women been more intensely felt than in worship through the use of language and images that deny the common dignity of all the baptised and through denial of priestly ministry to women. My personal experience as a religious woman and theologian is that exclusive language makes me stammer when I read from the Bible and Lectionary. I had personal experience of an unhappy “groaning” in a church led by men when I attended the Maundy Thursday Eucharist celebration at my home church (in 2012). I became angry about the abuse of women by the RCC. The congregation waited more than an hour for the service to start, after which we were told by the presiding priest that he was waiting to find twelve men for the washing of feet ritual. Some women around me whispered, “Shall we go back home and drag the men [away] from [their] beer drink[ing]”? Eventually a full complement was reached by the addition of young boys. This was also a clear example of skewed theologies concerning the practice of Christ in the Gospel.

It appears that what Christ stressed by the washing of his disciple’s feet was service and in an age of gender inclusivity, and a culture in which men and women greet each other by the shaking of hands, such a ritual could be demonstrated in the washing of feet or hands of both sexes.

Another example centres on the church where I go to for daily Mass. There is often a handful of women and no men, except for the presiding priest, singing hymns. One day I got upset about how women were singing hymns that exclude them or treat them as nonentities (shadows of men). When the Thanksgiving hymn came to the stanza “Thank you for all men that live” and since this was at the end of the Mass, I abruptly closed the hymn book in anger and walked out. But when the song was sung next time at the beginning of Mass, I found I could not walk out. I thus was challenged to talk openly with the lead woman. She tried to rationalise by saying that “man” is the generic term for “man and woman”. I then pointed out the absurdity of three to four women singing such hymns when there was not a single man in the congregation. I explained that generic language is no longer acceptable today because of feminist theology.

Furthermore, you find that the RCC Lectionary takes its readings from the Jerusalem Bible, where gender-exclusive terms like “sons of Israel” are replaced with “children of Israel” in other versions like the Revised Standard Version (RSV). But in the Easter Vigil, you find that both men and women who take the readings read about Israel’s exodus from oppression in Egypt without blinking an eye. To make matters worse, recent translations of lectionaries still subscribe to gender-exclusive language.

Passionate appropriation is also seen when, in a church where the study of theology has been the preserve of priests, some religious sisters have undertaken the study of theology as a second profession. Moreover, they tend to pursue contextual rather than armchair theology in an attempt to mediate women’s perspectives (see Chimhanda 2011a & 2011b).

Other practical examples exist in the opening of theological centres (e.g. Arrupe Jesuit College of Philosophy and Holy Trinity College in Harare) to women, and in particular, to religious sisters. The latter also function as lecturers in their areas of expertise, including theology. But the response to this from religious women has been poor. It appears this is because women depend on paid professions for their livelihood and apostolates. In these church institutions remuneration is poor and church collections also benefit priests only.

In addition, the affirmation of women’s dignity and vocation has received attention at General Congregation, in particular that of the Jesuits (GC 34; cf Paula Terroni 1998:120-129) and Congregation of Jesus (GC1992 and GC2011).² The challenge remains to mainstream gender issues into ministerial and theological formation. Furthermore, men and women religious superiors in Zimbabwe should form a joint committee so that teamwork and sharing of personnel in the training of members can work towards resolving national issues like alleviation of poverty, education of youths and eradication of diseases like HIV.

² I was delegate of the Zimbabwe Region in Loyola, Spain – October 2011.

Conclusion

It has been shown that the issue of reclaiming the dignity of women and vocation of women in the RCC is one of the signs of the times that received attention in Vatican II, the two African Synods of Bishops and post-conciliar and post-synodal exhortations. The dignity and vocation of women and men have been acknowledged as creation and baptismal categories. Concerning women and men sharing in the mission of Christ *ad gentes*, Christian evangelisation, the Incarnation and inculturation have been treated as mutually inclusive processes in the creative dialogue of the Bible, culture and church. Acknowledging the model of the church in Africa as family, which in turn finds its foundation in the trinitarian koinonia, it was shown that neither church nor culture finds credibility if it relegates women to the margins. Future prospects for integrating women into all sectors of church life call for prophetic dismantling of patriarchal structures in both church and society. In this agenda, women themselves are challenged to be proactive agents of their own “her-story”.

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