

THEOLOGICAL ECHOES VIS-A-VIS THE SUFFERING OF WOMEN IN AFRICA

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Abstract

This study discusses the major points in Christian theology that highlight the human dignity, and thus, the dignity of the women folk. The purpose of this research is to develop theological points for the evaluation of the issues that arise in the socio-economic and religio-cultural experience of women in Africa. This would bring us in contact with the teachings of the Church on human dignity and the Christian anthropology embedded in the Christian Scripture. Based on the evidence of Genesis, this work traces man's inhumanity to the woman to the event of the fall of man. The research method employed was the hermeneutical method of inquiry.

Keywords: Africa, theology, women, echoes, scripture, suffering.

Introduction

An extensive library research reveals that quite a lot has been written on women in general, and particularly on their experiences of discrimination and violence in the society. However, since the advent of women's liberation movements in ecclesiastical circle and the beginning of the clamour for women's ordination to the priesthood, Biblical exegetes and theologians, especially from the women folk, have plunged themselves into a critical study of the Scriptures, with particular interest in the creation accounts of Genesis and the Pauline epistles in order to explore Biblical evidences that uphold the dignity of womanhood. Consequently, many of these scholars have written myriad of books and articles on the women impasse. In this work, the researcher focused on discussing the major points in Christian theology that highlight the human dignity, and thus, the dignity of the women folk. The purpose of this research is to develop theological points for the evaluation of the issues that arise in the socio-economic and religio-cultural experience of women in Africa. This would bring us in contact with the teachings of the Church on human dignity and the Christian anthropology embedded in the Christian Scripture.

Women in the 1994 African Synod

Part of the reflections of the Fathers of the Church in Africa was the alienations that weigh upon women. Considering that women have also come from the unjust structures of the present world, the Synod Fathers asked that women be given quality formation to prepare them for their responsibilities as wives and mothers, and very significant, to give them the adequate exposure for all the social careers from which traditional and modern society tend to exclude them without

reason. This is very important because as the Synod Fathers put it “to educate a woman is to educate a people”¹.

The Bishops of Africa did not only intend to play on words, they also pledged their determination to take every measure to see that the dignity of the woman is restored and respected. As a start measure, during the Synod, the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, as a way of enhancing the dignity of the African woman beatified two mothers from Africa: Elisabetta Canori Mora and Gianna Beretta Molla. On the occasion of beatification, the Holy Father said,

We desire to render homage to all courageous mothers who consecrate themselves without reserve to their families, who suffer in giving birth to their children and who are ready after that to endure every fatigue and to face every sacrifice in order to transmit to their children the best that is in them... how extraordinary at this time is their sharing in the solicitude of the Good Shepherd².

The African Synod of 1994 also believed that the quality of the Church-As-Family depended on the women-folk, whether married or consecrated, it is in this regard that women were encouraged to persevere in their holy vocation and to assume joyfully the grace of spiritual motherhood that Christ offers to them in the church³. This becomes more significant at this time when the continent is going through variegated crisis⁴.

Women in *Ecclesia in Africa*, 1995

The Papal document *Ecclesia in Africa* is a compendium of the “reflections, prayers, discussions and exchanges”⁵ that were delivered at the historic synod for Africa, which took place in Rome 1994, and was celebrated later in Yaoundé Cameroun, on 14th September 1995. The inclusion of this as sub-section of this study, is informed by the fact that it contains among other issues a discussion on the dignity of the African woman. Pope John Paul II in recognition of the growing awareness of women’s dignity which has become a characteristic sign of the time tried to address the dignity of the African woman in this document. He first emphasized their God given dignity from the book of the beginnings, “So God created man in his own image and likeness, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27). This calls for the complementarity that should exist between a man and a woman and the equality in dignity, signs of emerging inequality are therefore not the designs of God⁶. The rights and duties of women in Africa in building up the family and in taking part in the development of the Church and society were strongly affirmed. As regards their place in the Church, the Roman Pontiff asked that they should be properly trained so that they can participate in appropriate levels of the church’s apostolic activity⁷. The document also expressed the position of the Church, which deplores and

¹ The Church in Africa and her Evangelizing Mission towards the Year 2000, Vatican City 1994, no.67.

² Homily of the Holy Father for the Beatification of Isidore Bakanja and Elisabetta Canori Mora and Gianna Beretta Molla, 25th April, 1994.

³ The Church in Africa and Her Evangelizing Mission Towards the Year 2000, Op.Cit, no.68.

⁴ Ibid, no.69.

⁵ Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 1995, Nairobi: Pauline Publications, no.1.

⁶ Ibid, no.121

⁷ Ibid

condemns those customs and practices which deprive women of their rights and respect. Consequently, the document recommended that the Episcopal Conference try to establish a special commission that would further study the conditions of women, if possible this should be carried out with the aid of government agencies⁸.

The Documents of the C.B.C.N

Here, two documents issued by the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria are considered. These documents are, *The Church in Nigeria: Family of God on Mission* and *Restoring the dignity of the Nigerian Woman: A Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Bishop's Conference of Nigeria*. In speaking about the dignity of the African woman, the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria went back to the cultural heritage of the Nigerian people which has a privileged place for the woman, where although "...men may be chiefs or kings, but the transmission of power lies with the woman. Women play an important role in reconciliation, maintaining justice and peace, upholding acceptable customs and rituals in their locality, and maintaining the ideals of morality"⁹. These notwithstanding, they made it clear that our traditional society also had its injustices against women like, "denial of inheritance rights, child marriage, widowhood rituals, and pariah status of a childless woman"¹⁰, these are not in accord with the gospel (cf Luke 8:3; Acts 9:36-40) values and as such should not be encouraged.

In the document *Restoring the dignity of the Nigerian Woman*, the Nigerian Catholic Bishop's deemed it fit to respond to "an altogether sinister dimension of the commercialization of sexuality that has emerged: women trafficking; it comes in the form of enticement of women, mostly young, from their homelands in Africa, Asia, Latin America and Eastern Europe with false promises of better living conditions and their shipment to Western Europe, where they are forced into prostitution"¹¹. This is one of the horrible experiences that women go through in Nigeria. The Fathers of the Nigerian Church strongly believe that this situation is the product of poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, corruption, criminal network, greed, abdication of parental responsibility, peer group pressure and oral degeneracy. The document showed how the Church has upheld the dignity of women and womanhood, a position anchored quite naturally on the teachings of Scripture and Sacred Tradition¹². As a way out of this menace, the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria strongly urged that certain lines of action be taken at various levels of the society. This would comprise preventive and rehabilitative measures, such as, providing medical, psychological and spiritual rehabilitation for victims when they return to Nigeria. The Church would also continue to speak to the consciences of those who are behind the business of women trafficking, home and abroad¹³. The Catholic Bishops pledged their ever renewed commitment to

⁸ Ibid

⁹*The Church in Nigeria: Family of God on Mission*, Lagos: Publication of the Catholic Secretariate, 2004. No. 323.

¹⁰ Ibid, No.323

¹¹*Restoring the dignity of the Nigerian Woman: A Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Bishop's Conference of Nigeria*, Lagos: Publication of the Catholic SecretariatNigeri, pp.1-2

¹² Ibid, p.4

¹³ Ibid, pp.14 -19

protecting the dignity of women and womanhood, in accordance to the teachings of Holy Scripture and the Magisterium¹⁴.

In the document, *The Church in Nigeria: Family of God on Mission*, the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria stressed that women's struggle in the church and society to uplift the dignity of womanhood requires our support. And all the works carried out by women in the homes as mothers and educators are to be seen as work. More so, women are to be carefully trained so that they can fully participate at all appropriate levels in the family of God¹⁵.

The Witness of the Old Testament

Here, the problem of the dignity of women from the perspective of the testimony of the Old Testament is addressed. This would involve understanding the woman as a divine image, through which she shares equal dignity with man. Discussed is how this image is tarnished in Adam and restored in Christ.

Woman as the Divine Image¹⁶

The notion of the woman as an image of God could be correctly regarded as a “puzzle resolver” to the argument of women subordination and exploitation. It can be seen as a concept that is a *vade me cum* in discussing the dignity of womanhood. This is even more significant because the creation of the human person in the image and likeness of God is the center of gravity of the universe¹⁷. Gen 1:26-27 is one of the verses that should be given due attention in the consideration of the human person as the image of God, for this is the passage where God speaks of the human person as his image and likeness, “Then God said, ‘and now we will make human beings, and they would be like us and resemble us. They will have power over the fish, the birds, and all animals, domestic and wild, large and small’. So God created human beings making them to be like himself”.

In the scriptural translations, where the word ‘man’ is used instead of human beings, the word ‘man’ is clearly generic. It means woman as well as man. And the meaning is that God created human beings, both female and male, in his image, the divine image. Only in this understanding does the word ‘them’ of “male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27) make sense. Moreover, from this perspective, it is clear that the creation story does not make any distinction between male and female as persons because it immediately continues by saying, “God blessed them, saying ‘be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it’” (Gen 1:28)¹⁸.

¹⁴ Ibid, p.21

¹⁵ *The Church in Nigeria: Family of God on Mission*, Lagos: Publication of the Catholic Secretariate, 2004. Nos. 234-237.

¹⁶ Bishop Victor Balk and Raymond Lucker, *Male and Female God Created Them*, A Pastoral Letter, Ocyober 21, 1981.

¹⁷ Martin Egbuogu, *Human Suffering and the Resurrection Faith: Wit Special Reference to the Work of Don Juan Luis Ruiz De La Pena*, Enugu: Snaap Press, 2006, p.45.

¹⁸ Bishop Victor Balk and Raymond Lucker, *Male and Female God Created Them*, A Pastoral Letter, Ocyober 21, 1981.

In Gen 1:26-27 the distinctiveness of the human creatures, different from animals and other creatures, is indicated by their creation in God's image and likeness. Hence what distinguishes human beings from other creatures of God is this likeness to God, this breathing into his nostrils the breath of life. The idea of 'image' (*selem*) used here denotes an exact reproduction, a duplicate and therefore some sort of copy of God. While 'likeness' (*demut*) means resemblance, which consists in the spiritual nature of the human person, the intellect and will, which separate him/her from other animals and make him/her analogous to God. It is in this regard that the Psalmist in talking about the human person said, "He made them little less than a god; you crowned them with glory and honour. You appointed them rulers over everything that you have made" (Psalm 6:5-6). This calls for respect in the way humans treat one another, whether male or female, we are made in the image and likeness of God. This explains why Jesus tells us in the scriptures, "whatsoever you do to the least of my brethren, that you do unto me" (Mt 25:40).

The Woman's 'Equalness' To Man

In the second account of creation in Genesis 2:4-7, God having created all other things¹⁹, now created man from the dust of the ground. God further provided a garden for man and placed it in his charge with an instruction not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. However, with all the beauty and grandeur of creation, for "God saw that it was good" (Gen 1:25), there was something not right. In the contention of ChudiMbanusi, "the aloneness of man was not very good... the creation of this man implies incompleteness, aloneness, and a yearning for completeness of human community, at least from the logic of Gen 2:18"²⁰. Out of the necessity for God to resolve the puzzle of man's aloneness God decides to create a helper who would correspond to man (*zerkenegdo*). Man recognizes the woman as his helper when he shouted joyfully the "bone of my bones and the flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23), because he sees in the woman one who can give him a companionship the animals cannot give. The word *zer* which means 'corresponding to' or 'equal to', is modified by *kenegdo* which means 'helper'. As such, the helper that God made for man is one that corresponds to and is equal to man, and not inferior or superior to man²¹.

At the creation of the woman, the man recognizes her as the "bone of my bones and the flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23). Pointing to the reality of a relationship; when he speaks of her as "bone of my bones and the flesh of my flesh" he recognizes in her an ally and not simply a creature created from his rib. Creating the woman from his side, and not from his foot, is pregnant with meaning, most important is the idea of side where the rib is found. That she was created from his side is a mark of equality in dignity, complementarity and support. In the contention of ChudiMbanusi, the "bone of my bones and the flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23) is a covenant formula that speaks about communality of concern, loyalty and responsibility²². The fact that the scripture tells us that "God blessed them, saying 'be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it'" (Gen 1:28), it means that dominion belongs to men and women alike and equally

¹⁹ The heaven and earth

²⁰ ChudiMbanusi, "Understanding Gender Inequality (Gen 2:23-24) as Rooted in God's Will", in *The Aquinas Journal*, Vol 1, No. 1, 2008, p.25.

²¹ ChudiMbanusi, Op.Cit, pp.26-27.

²² Ibid, p.36

too²³. Very significant in the story of creation is the naming of other creatures by man. This does not in any way imply man's authority or dominion over the woman. According to ChudiMbanusi, there is a distinction between giving a name to a place and giving a name to a fellow specie. In the former, the giver of the name establishes authority over the named, but in the latter, giving a name to a specie which shares the same nature with the man as in the case of Adam naming Eve. In calling her woman Adam was not establishing power over her, but rejoicing in their one essence and mutuality²⁴. Moreover, as Okure points out, the naming of a person or thing in Old Testament Studies was a product of an event or circumstance²⁵ rather than a conscious attempt to dominate.

From the foregoing, the scripture emphasizes the man's need of the woman and not the woman's inferiority, and from this understanding, it is difficult to understand how men in history have assumed so much superiority and domination over and above the women folk. However, the researcher will go on to discuss the deformation of the divine image in the human person through sin, and to see how it affected the divine image in man and also human relationship.

The Witness of the New Testament

In discussing this section, the attitude of Jesus with respect to women would be considered, also examined is the role they played in the early church. Before discussing the attitude of Jesus towards women, it is good to say something about the condition of women in Palestine at the time Jesus came. Women had a very inferior status- a status based on the assumption that they were inferior as persons. "Praised be God that he had not made me a woman"²⁶ was part of the daily prayer of male Jews. Women were restricted in public life and prayer. They were limited to one outer part of the temple and were not permitted to read publicly or to assume any leading role in Jewish liturgy. Women were not to be spoken to in public nor were they to testify in court of law. They could be easily divorced, but they were not allowed to divorce their husbands. For some Jewish leaders, women were not to leave their homes unless they came out for temple worship or programme. For the most part, their role is to bear and rear children²⁷.

The attitude of Jesus towards women was remarkable and accommodating. His relationship with women indicate that he embraced the notion that women are full human persons created in the image of God, equal with men and having no less dignity than men. The four gospels witness to the fact that women were part of the assembly of the kingdom called by Jesus, and they were not simply accidental components, but active participants and beneficiaries of his love and works of

²³ Bishop Victor Balk and Raymond Lucker, *Op.Cit.*

²⁴ ChudiMbanusi, *Op.Cit.*, p.29.

²⁵ Okure, "Biblical Perspective on Women: Eve the Mother of all the Living", *Voices from the Third World*. 8 (2), 19, 1985; see also Von Rad, G, *Genesis: A Commentary* Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972, p.83

²⁶ "Jesus was a Feminist" Leonard Swidler, in *Catholic World*. January 1971, p.179.

²⁷ Victor Balke and Raymond Lucker, *Op.Cit.*

power²⁸. This is evident from the number of women that featured in his ministry²⁹. In the gospel Mary and Martha were his disciples (Lk 10:38-42). This passage shows us how Jesus took his time to teach Mary the sister of Martha, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his word, this might look an insignificant example, but when seen from the perspective of Eliezer, a first Century Rabbi who taught that "Rather should the words of the torah be burnt than entrusted to a woman"³⁰ it carries a bulk of meaning. In Luke 8:1-3, we are told that Jesus went on his preaching mission, not only with the twelve apostles but also in the company of some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary called Magdalene from whom he cast out seven demons, and Joana, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others who provide for them out of their means. Luke tells us that some women followed him from Galilee (24:39). The same Luke tells us that he allowed a sinful woman to approach him in the house of Simon the Pharisee (7:37)³¹. To the surprise of his disciples, Jesus conversed publicly with a Samaritan woman at the well of Jacob (Jn 4:27), not only does he speak with her thus breaking one of the rules denigrating women, but he reveals himself to her as the Messiah, "I who speak to you am he" (Jn 4:26), Jesus goes far beyond entrusting the Torah to her, he also entrusted himself to her as the anointed one of God, and by this Jesus showed that women are worthy to be called to the truth by which they would be saved; Jesus took no notice of the impurity of the woman who suffered from hemorrhage (Mt 9:20-22). Jesus, in one of the touching scenes of the gospels, compassionately pardoned the woman caught in adultery, showing that one must not be more severe toward the fault of a woman than toward that of a man (Jn 8:11). Those who brought her treated her as a mere object of their selfish purposes. They wanted to use her to show that Jesus was either opposing the Mosaic Law or was not the man of mercy he appeared to be. But Jesus outwitted them, reminding them of their own sinfulness; he saw the woman as an image of God deserving compassion and love. It is from this perspective that Rosemary Edet asserts that wherever there was need or prejudice, Jesus broke through the categories, rejected taboos and declared himself the Lord of the Sabbath and offered freedom of spirit as the weapon against oppressive rules and limiting roles³². He departed from the Mosaic law and Jewish custom, and affirmed the equality of the rights and duties of men and women with regard to the marriage bond (Mk 10:2-11; Mt 19:3-9)³³. It was a woman that had the privilege of first seeing the risen Lord and who was first charged with the paschal message to the apostles (Mk 28:7-10)³⁴.

The Apostolic Era

²⁸ Rosemary Edet, "Women and Evangelization: A New Testament Perspective", in *Evangelization in Africa in the Third Millenium: Challenges and Prospects*, Ed Justin Ukpong et al, Port-Harcourt: CIWA Press, 1992, p.129.

²⁹ Joseph Mamman, Op.Cit, p.22.

³⁰ "Jesus Was a Feminist", p.178.

³¹ Joseph Mamman, Op.Cit, p.22.

³² Rosemary Edet, p.129.

³³ Joseph Mamman, Op.Cit, p. 23.

³⁴ Redmacher, W. J, *Lay Minstry: A Theological, Spiritual and Pastoral Handbook*, New York: Crossland, 1992, p.150.

The apostles carried on the example set by Jesus in involving women in his public ministry. In Acts of the Apostles, mentioned is made of Apollo whom St John Chrysostom writes “was an eloquent man, well versed in scripture, but he knows only the baptism of John, this woman (Priscilla), took him, instructed him the way of God, and made him an accomplished teacher”³⁵. Here a woman is not just a disciple or an apostle, but a teacher of the teachers of the gospel. Tabitha is also mentioned as a disciple in Joppa (9:36)³⁶. In the Pauline Epistles, Joseph Mamman argues that ministerial responsibilities for women were acclaimed and acknowledged. In his letter to the Romans, we read that some women were prominent among the apostles (16:7). In Acts of the Apostles, it is evident that some women exercised the prophetic ministry (21:9)³⁷, there were also women prophets in 1 Cor 11:5. In Revelation 2:20, Jezebel, a prophetess was in-charge of the church of Thyatira. St Paul acknowledged Prisca as his fellow apostle (Rom 16:3). Phoebe was a deaconess, Mary, Tryphaena, Tryphosa and Persis were missionaries, and their homes were domestic churches (Acts 16:14). From the foregoing, it will be noted that the action of Jesus and those of the Apostles to women amounted to a radical treatment of women as equals in the new light of redemption and their behaviour contravened the deepest seated forms of subordination of women in his time. This promotion of women by Jesus and the apostles has a double theological meaning for the faithful today: that the good news was proclaimed to outcasts, the down-trodden and the poor freed by Jesus among whom were women, and that Jesus treated women as real persons³⁸. Women and men from our study of scriptures are equally the objects of God’s love. They experience the love of God to the extent that their personal inclinations allow. The variety of gifts described by St Paul have no gender limitations³⁹.

Conclusion

The human person has been looked upon as the image of God, born from the grandiose opening of the book of Genesis. However, in spite of the wonderful place which man occupies as the image of God, with his worth and dignity elevated above those of other creatures, it is acknowledged that the concept of the image, with all its implications, has proved to be in disparity with all the experiences individual human beings have had of themselves and their fellow human beings, especially in the area of the relation of man with the woman. That is, the divergence of what man should be as the image of God and what he is in concrete reality⁴⁰. The question that now arises is, why the disparity? This question could be addressed from the theology of hamartiology⁴¹ and soteriology⁴².

³⁵ John Chrysostom, quoted in Gryson, *The Ministry of Women in the Early Church*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, p.1976, p.81.

³⁶ Joseph Mamman, Op.Cit, p.24.

³⁷ Ibid, p.24.

³⁸ Rosemary Edet, p.129.

³⁹ Mercy Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Africa*, New York: Orbis Books 1986, p. 136.

⁴⁰ Martin Egbuogu, Op.Cit, p.55.

⁴¹ A Study of the history of the fall of man

⁴² A Study of the history of salvation.

Something significant dashed out in the third chapter of the book of Genesis: the fall of man. The Old Testament testifies to a constant in the religious attitude of the human person, which is his proclivity to sin. What makes the situation more dramatic is the fact that the human person could avoid sin and do good (Gen 4:4-7), but evil appeared to be the dominant tendency in his/her interior, to the extent that God appeared to show himself resigned in the face of the whole situation, and proposed not to, any more, curse the earth because of the human person, having seen that the inclination of the human person is evil from youth⁴³. The sinfulness talked of here does not only consist in the commission of acts morally illicit, it has got to do with the psychological disposition of the human person, almost connatural, that is deeply rooted in his/her medulla oblongata. This was the confession of the Psalmist, “O see in guilt I was born, a sinner was I conceived”⁴⁴. With the fall of the human person in the book of Genesis, there occurred a rupture vertically and horizontally in the relationships of the human person, in his/her relationship with God and with fellow human persons⁴⁵. There occurred an incompatibility between God and the human person, which is more disconcerting given that the human person was created in the image and likeness of God. There occurred an alienation of the human person, a perversion of the quality of his/her being, having missed his/her objective mark and broken the communion with God, the source and summit of our being⁴⁶.

After creation, man accepted the woman as the “bone of his bone, and the flesh of his flesh”. He accepted her as a helper, a companion, an equal and one who corresponded to his essence, who is like him the image of God. Man accepted the woman as one who came from him. However, the consequence of the fall is seen in what the man says of the woman after they fell prey to the wiles of the devil. When God came into the garden and asked the man: ‘who told you that you were naked, have you eaten of the fruit of the tree I forbade you from eating’ (Gen 3:11), the man answered in a way that puts into question his former acclamation about the woman, “the woman you put here with me gave me the fruit and I ate” (Gen 3:12), instead of the woman that is the “bone of his bone and the flesh of his flesh”, he now spoke of her as “the woman you gave” or “put here with me”, as in some translations. Could it be that the evil one is the disruptor of relationships, as the scripture tells us, he has come to steal, to kill and to destroy (John 10:10). The relationship between man and woman that was one of equality in dignity, of love, companionship, partnership has now become one of subordination, hatred, exploitation and oppression. Patriarchy is the outcome of the fall of God’s good creation.

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⁴³ Ibid, p.57.

⁴⁴Ps 51:5; Is 48:6; Prov 22:15; Jer 3:17;

⁴⁵ Martin Egbuogu, Op.Cit, p.58.

⁴⁶ Martin Egbuogu, Op.Cit, p. 59.

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