



The

CHURCH WE WANT

AFRICAN CATHOLICS LOOK TO VATICAN III

Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, editor



MILESTONES IN ACHIEVING A MORE INCISIVE FEMININE PRESENCE IN THE CHURCH OF POPE FRANCIS

Josée Ngalula

The apostolic exhortation of Pope Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium* includes several assertions that have generated much joy and hope in the Catholic Church. One is:

But we need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church. . . . The presence of women must also be guaranteed in the workplace and in the various other settings where important decisions are made, both in the Church and in social structures. (no. 103)

What can this mean in Christian communities today, especially in Africa? In my experience, I found that this expansion of opportunities must take urgent priority in the minds, attitudes, and hearts of males and females alike in our Christian communities. This happens at least at three levels: in relation to cultural prejudices, the relationship within the meaning of *fidelium*, and in relationship to the wounded hearts in the church.

Making Progress by Not Projecting Cultural Biases into the Biblical and Magisterial Texts

The texts affirming the equal dignity of men and women in the church are not rare but many.¹ But in pastoral practice, things happen as if these

¹ At least ten theological documents of the Catholic Church affirm the dignity of the woman, including Pope Paul VI's *The Place of Women in Society Today* (1975),

texts did not exist, either because they are little known or because they are interpreted in the light of cultural patterns. There is a lack of women in positions in the church where, in theory, they are actually supposed to be. This is primarily attributable to a certain illiteracy.

I often find myself in theological milieus and have been teaching theology to future priests for the past twenty years. I have found that in Catholic circles, a fairly large number of men and women are ignorant of the major biblical and magisterial texts that affirm the dignity of women. By contrast, they have internalized the texts of some of the fathers and doctors of the church who have instilled into Western religious culture ideas that imply that women by nature are "inferior," "deficient," and "tempting" and therefore dangerous to men. Those who are theologically illiterate about this and in positions of responsibility do not imagine women can do anything other than be sacristans, make flower bouquets, take on household jobs, and be receptionists.

As soon as women theologians² speak of the dignity of women and assert that women can occupy other positions in the church apart from these, we automatically tag them as feminists. But when Pope John Paul II wrote an encyclical on the dignity of women, nobody considered his action an act of feminism. When *Christifideles Laici*, no. 51, and *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 103, speak of making more room for women in the decision-making bodies in the church, nobody mentions feminism.

When the major texts of Pope John Paul II and of some synods on the dignity of women and the higher places they could occupy in the church are put before some members of the church, they are likely to blurt out, "The fact that women cannot be priests in the Catholic Church says a lot about the difference between men and women in the mind of Christ, who chose only men as apostles."

The Status of Women (1977), and *The Call to Women* (1977). From Pope John Paul II: *Familiaris Consortio* (1981, in some passages); *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988); *Christifideles Laici* (1988 in certain passages); *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (1994 in certain passages); *Letter to Women* (1995); *The Importance of Women in the Life of the Priest* (1995). Of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Man and Woman in the Church and in the World* (2004).

² See, for example, Clement of Alexandria, for whom the woman must feel "shame" in thinking about her nature of being a woman (*Paedagogus* II, 33.2); Thomas Aquinas, for whom the nature of the woman is the second purpose of nature, in the same way as putrefaction, deformity, and decrepitude (*Summa Theologiae* q 52a 1 ad 2), etc.

Beyond this apparent theological illiteracy is a serious but hidden attempt to interpret and understand the biblical and magisterial texts not according to their internal logic but under the guidance of certain cultural biases. A classic example is the case of some fathers and doctors of the church who dared to declare the woman as a “deformed man”³ by reading Genesis 2–3, Sirach 25:24, 1 Corinthians 11:7–11, and Ephesians 5:22 in the light of the philosophical bias permeating Western culture according to which the woman is “an underdeveloped man.” A good number of African pastoral agents (men and women) advise women never to argue with their husbands because “Eve was drawn from the side of Adam.” Is this a transmission of biblical anthropology or rather the projection of a certain African traditional mentality into the biblical texts?

In a recent debate in an assembly of theologians on the question of girl altar servers, some referred to Old Testament texts and argued that in the Catholic Church, due to the impurity of menstruation, a woman cannot receive the sacrament of Holy Orders. Is this Catholic doctrine or the projection of certain cultural beliefs into the Catholic doctrine (in Africa as well as elsewhere) relating to menstruation? Fortunately,⁴ this is not Catholic doctrine; no magisterial document giving the reasons for this restriction evokes the issue of menstruation.⁵

If these fathers or doctors of the church and these current pastoral agents had interpreted these Bible verses in the light of God’s love for all of

³ See especially Albert the Great (*Quaestiones super de animalibus* XV, q11), where the woman is less qualified compared to the man in terms of moral rights, and is a “defective man” because she has a defective and imperfect nature.

⁴ On the contrary, the liturgical norms in force in the Catholic Church encourage the presence of women readers, proclaimers of the Word, and extraordinary ministers of communion; similarly, “Girls or women may be admitted to this service of the altar, in the judgment of the diocesan Bishop; in this case, we must follow the standards established in this respect” (*Redemptionis Sacramentum*, no. 47).

⁵ The reasons advanced officially in the texts of the magisterium for the nonordination of women are not anthropological but rather ecclesiological and christological. The point here is not the woman, who would be unworthy in herself, but rather Christ and his free choice. In effect, from the behavior of Jesus, the magisterium has retained that he chose only men by free option and not at all due to contempt for women: “By only calling men to be his Apostles, Christ acted in a totally free and sovereign manner. Christ did this, in the same freedom with which he valued the dignity and vocation of women by all his behavior, without complying with the usages, which prevailed, or the traditions that sanctioned the legislation of his time” (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, no. 26).