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Catholic women as communicators of “living water” to a world thirsty for peace: Perspectives from Nigeria

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Abstract

While women are bearing the brunt of various kinds of inhuman treatment around the world, the voices of many feminists are increasingly calling the attention of all to the indefectible role of women in society. Moved by this narrative, the researcher embarked on a qualitative study titled, “Catholic Women as Communicators of ‘Living Water’ to a world thirsty for peace: Perspectives from Nigeria” to determine the place of women as communicators of peace to a troubled-world. Through historical narrative, the study discovered that in both local and global contexts, women and their children suffer verbal, sexual, physical and psychological abuse mostly by men which limits their potential in society. As possible panacea, the researcher suggested strategic communication skills such as initiating prayer at home, raising godly kids, pacifying their family members and learning from women peace-makers and activists. The paper concluded that if the desired peace is to be achieved, Catholic women in Nigeria ought to take the lead by carrying the “Living Water” to a world thirsty for peace.

Keywords: catholic, communicators, Nigeria, peace, women

1. Introduction

The central place women occupy in the society can never be overemphasized (UN Women, 2021a). Mothers, who are often described as the epicenter of civilization, remain the icing on the cake of feminity (Aragon & Miller, 2014) ^[2]. As the paragon of maternity and the prototype of motherhood, women fulfill the divine role of childbearing. That they nurse and educate kids who later become the leaders of tomorrow further reveals their indefectible role in society (Couture, 2014; UN Women, 2021b) ^[11, 29]. Indeed, the sacrifices women make in society cannot be quantified. Oftentimes, they literally go through difficulties to ensure that their children are fed, clothed, sheltered and educated. Perhaps the bond which exists in the womb between a mother and a child is the relic which binds them through life. Despite this bond and the seeming eldorado type of world women try to create around the home, they experience deficits of peace at home and beyond ranging from lack of effective communication, to quarrels and general bridge of peace. This is why the world needs their intervention in ensuring the peace process on the home-front through effective communication (OSCE, 2019, US Department of State, 2021).

The activities of terrorist organisations plus local militias make the world vulnerable (Egielewa & Adejumo, 2021). What is more saddening is the fact that when there is war or crisis, it is women and children who are the most hit. Whether violence is on a domestic scale such as witnessed on the streets in localities or at the global scene such as those carried out by terrorists groups, mass murderers or suicide bombers, its effects are mostly the same—disruption of peace and destruction of lives and property (Omede & Omede, 2015; Speckhard, 2021; Egielewa & Adejumo, 2021) ^[24, 26, 14]. This intends to highlight the role of women as communicators of “living water” in changing the soar narrative in Nigeria. It shall situate Catholic women in Nigeria as catalysts for changing the narrative. It is hoped that everyone across the country can use the story of the woman of Samaria as a prototype or paragon for peace in the world. Since it is believed that children and men depend on their mothers and wives for a sense of direction and encouragement in life, it is desirable for Catholic women to grow bigger shoulders to carry the “living water” to a troubled world.

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2. Clarification of Concepts

Catholic Women

In this study, the phrase “Catholic women” is used to designate baptized women who are 18 years and above, are married according to Catholic rites and are members of the Catholic Women Organisation (CWO) in their parishes. They are mothers who operate under the banner of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVM) and bring the positive aspects of their femininity to bear on the Church in terms of material and spiritual nurturance.

Communicators of “Living Water”

Communicators of “Living Water” represent Catholic women as catalysts for peace in a troubled world. It is also a metaphor for women of faith who use their time, talent and treasure to push the frontiers of effective and efficient communication in their homes, Church and larger society through love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22). To be carriers of “Living Water” is the logical consequence that after meeting Jesus and the family of Nazareth, where he experienced the human family, human love and work, women would be better prepared to carry the seeds of love and peaceful coexistence. Nothing is more normal for a lay Christian than family and work (WUCWO, 2013).

A World Thirsty for Peace

In this study, the phrase “a world thirsty for peace” stands for a world that longs for lasting peace. It symbolizes an urgent global search for peace and tranquility towards social and economic transformation. It also represents a pluralistic society which seeks the advancement of peace and social cohesion.

3. Literature Review and Discussion

3.1 Catholic Women Organisation in Nigeria in View

CWO is the umbrella body of all the Catholic women in Nigeria. Simply known as “Catholic Women Organisation, Nigeria,” (CWON) the body operates under the patronage of “Our Lady of Good Counsel.” The group has as its greeting “Through Mary our Mother, we succeed” (Cwonigeria.org, 2019). The vision of CWO is: “An umbrella organisation where all members are light to the world and reflect love, unity and peace of the Kingdom of God” (Cwonigeria.org, 2019). Regarding its mission, the body “...is to rally and motivate members to utilize and harness their energy and resources for evangelisation and transformation of society by fulfilling their roles in the family, Church and society in the footsteps of Mary the mother of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Cwonigeria.org, 2019).

While the history of CWO in Nigeria predates the civil war, history has it that Onitsha Archdiocese was the first to inaugurate the association on the 5th of May 1964 by late Archbishop Charles Heerey C.S.S.P. By the following year, Rev. Fr. Byrne, the then Secretary of the Catholic Secretariat in Lagos, alongside, Rev. Fr. Funnucane, the Spiritual Director of the association in Enugu Diocese and some lay women in the Church initiated an international conference for women to chart a new course of action for the organization. This led to conferences in Lagos, Kaduna and Enugu and other dioceses across the country (Dccwoportharcourt.org, 2019). It is from there that the organisation blossomed to other Archdioceses and diocese across the country.

The following are the aims and objectives of the CWO in Nigeria:

- To unite all Catholic women of Nigeria in purpose, direction and action in religious, educational, social, cultural and economic fields;
- To unite all Catholic women of Nigeria and direct them for the purposes of love, light, unity, and peace amongst them and all people;
- To give priority to the Christian formation of all members of the Catholic Women Organisation Nigeria, through an emphasis on unity and a deeper understanding and participation in the life of the Church leading to a greater appreciation of the role of a Christian in today’s world;
- To serve as a medium through which the Catholic women of Nigeria may speak and act as a unit for the good of the Organisation, our country and the world at large;
- To render assistance to Catholic women in their efforts to give service in their respective fields;
- To encourage, establish and maintain inter-religious and intra-religious relationships with other religious organisations sharing similar or complimentary aims and objectives in Nigeria and abroad without compromising Catholic morals and values (Cwonigeria.org, 2019).

Being the umbrella body of all catholic women in the world, the organizational structure of the CWO council consists of different levels: World, National, Provincial, Diocesan, Deanery, Parish and Out-station. This structure is in place to enable the organization function efficiently as a tool for the mobilization of women (Dccwoportharcourt.org, 2019).

3.2 Unrests and Wars: An Overview of Global Breaches of Peace

Globally, there are wars and violent conflicts all over the place. These often disrupt peace and social and economic development of society. Globally, there have been several epochal moments in war deaths namely: the First World War (1914-1918), the Second World War (1939-1945), the Korean War (early 1950s), the Vietnam War (around 1970), the Iran-Iraq and Afghanistan Wars (1980s), the American-Afghanistan (2001-2021). The recent past is also marked by increase in battle deaths driven by conflicts in the Middle East especially in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. According to a survey, in 2016, the number of battle-related deaths in conflicts involving at least one state was 87,432 (Roser, 2018) ^[25].

Aside from the Rwandan genocide of 1994 which recorded a high toll of deaths, recent conflicts are basically state-based (Roser, 2018) ^[25]. Apart from conflicts arising from organised state actors, global peace is now threatened by activities of terrorist organisations like Al Qaeda and Al Shabab in the Islamic Megrip (Chinda *et al*, 2018) ^[8]. Aside from the wanton destruction of lives and property that these terror groups engage in, they are now into massive radicalization and recruitment of young people into their ranks with training fields in Yemen and Southern Somalia (Chinda *et al*, 2018) ^[8]. Obviously, no mother would like to see her child become a toy in the hand of terrorists.

The devastating effects of these conflicts are obvious to every onlooker – lack of global peace, destruction of lives and property, fear, migration and refugee crisis, hunger, disease, deaths humanitarian crisis. Global unrests and wars

do no good to anyone. For instance, the refugee crisis in Europe as a result of people who are running from the Middle East wars in search of greener pastures and a safe haven abroad reveal the precarious nature of the world people live in. The proposition “a world thirsty for peace” indicates that the world is in dire need of peace. While efforts are on achieving global peace, it is important to highlight the danger that local insurgencies and crises cause in society and how these affect peace in the world.

3.3 Local Dimensions of Insurgencies and Crises

Boko Haram, Nigeria’s number one public enemy (Gingim, 2011) ^[16] has put the country in the global terror index. With its twin, killer-herders, the two militant groups have made peace a costly commodity not only in the North-East but Nigeria as a whole. Scholars have attributed the daring nature of the Boko Haram sect to its global links with Islamic State, Al Qaeda and Al Shabab (Chinda *et al*, 2018) ^[8]. The group has often identified itself as Islamic State in West Africa (ISWA) (Bauchi Caritas, 2018) ^[3]. In 2014, Boko Haram group burnt over 200 schools (Lichter, 2014) and in as at December 2016, 2,114,000 people were rendered Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), namely: - 537,815 in separate camps, 158,201 at official camps in Maiduguri; 52,311 orphaned, 54,911 widowed and the death of about 100,000 persons (Shettima cited by Tukur, 2017).

It is likely for women in Nigeria to regard the abduction of the Chibok and Dapchi schoolgirls as the worst atrocity of the Boko Haram sect. Perhaps it would be correct to opine that tears have become the bread of mothers of the remaining Chibok girls, Alice Loksha and Leah Sharibu. Nigerians often resort to divine help for the release of these girls and Saifura Khorsa and Hauwa Liman, aid workers with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) who were brutally murdered by the sect (Bauchi Caritas, 2018) ^[3] because of the failure of government to provide security on the one hand and ensure the release of these women from their abductors on the other. The militants have also threatened to slay Alice Loksha and Leah Sharibu who are still in their custody.

On the domestic front, women are either engaged in domestic fights or are used as punching bags by their husbands. The scourge of domestic violence is alarming. For instance, in Sokoto State, the Hisba Commission is said to have recorded 30,160 cases of domestic violence from January 2017 to April 2018 (Agency Report, 2018). The issue of domestic violence on women and children who are often at the receiving end is a spoiler of peace in the home environment. The different forms of violence against women include: Sexual violence, harmful traditional practices, trafficking of girls and ethno-religious violence against women by terrorist groups (Haaga, Elechi & Okoye, 2015) ^[17].

The domestic dimension of lack of peace points to the grim scenario women who suffer verbal, sexual, physical and psychological abuse by men find themselves in. “In Nigeria, violence against women is a prevalent harm to peace and security because it undermines the basic rights, freedoms, health and welfare of women and national development” (Fink *et al.*, 2013; Haaga *et al.*, 2015) ^[16, 17]. At various fora, women are encouraged not to give up at least for the sake of those who have died in these unfortunate circumstances.

4. Women as great communicators on the home-front

Verbal Cues: Women are great communicators. It is known fact that children first learn how to speak from their

mothers. As skilled communicators, women teach their children how to speak by ensuring that the children learn alphabets. **Besides**, studies have indicated that children first learn their mother-tongue from their mothers. This is so because while most fathers are busy with trying to make ends meet, their wives are often preoccupied with nursing the children. By so doing, children grow to imitate the way their mothers speak.

Non-Verbal Cues

It is a known fact that children learn the mannerisms of their parents. In societies where mothers are solely the ones responsible for raising children, the bond between mothers and their children is such that they communicate using non-verbal cues. For instance, in most cultures in Nigeria, when elders are talking and a child interjects, the mother would make a sign to the children to either keep quiet or leave. This is because the culture forbids children from talking when elders are discussing.

Communication with Husbands

The bond of marriage facilitates the communication process between husband and wife. As good communicators, women know the best time to communicate with their husbands. Experience has shown that sometimes when a child wants something from the father, it is the mother that asks on the child’s behalf. The soft and caring nature of women makes them to always intercede on behalf of their children. The essential point here is that since no other person understands a man like his wife, women know when, where and how to communicate with their husbands.

Interacting with Children

The interaction between mothers and their children is a communication that comes at no price. This is because the bond that once existed between mother and child in the womb lasts for a lifetime. In interacting with their children, women are very observant. They seem to know when **their** children are happy and when they are not. Even when they have to scold a child for wrong behaviour, they do that with love and affection. In most communities in Nigeria, children seem to be closer to their mothers than fathers.

Relating with Relations and In-Laws

In most families, women are charge of the home-affairs. This makes them important in either taking decisions to help in-laws or not. Chances are that when in-laws visit a family, it is women who decide what they are to eat or what the father of the house would eventually give them when they are departing. This is why wise in-laws make friends with their daughter in-law. Where this happens, she facilitates communication between the visitors and her husband so that they can be helped. In relating with relations particularly in-laws, women come across as good communicators.

Encounter with Neighbours and Others in Community

In terms of dialogue and peace-building, women often ensure peace in their homes and communities. In situations where there is a fight in the neighborhood, you would find women as active-pacifists who would ensure that there is a ceasefire. This places the encounter between women and their neighbours and other members of the community as an ideal form of human communication which is decked with love and affection.

It is important to note that other women who are suffering in silence need a voice and motivation to come out of their predicament. Conceivably, the biblical example of the woman of Samaria is a metaphor for all those who thirst for peace in the world especially, Catholic women.

5. The samaritan woman as a model for communicating peace

In the story of the woman of Samaria (John 4:4-42), we find the classical example of a woman of faith who asked Jesus for the “living water.” In Jewish culture, it was common place for women to go out in the morning or in the evening to fetch water. However, in the case of the woman of Samaria, she went out in search of water in the afternoon. Maybe she wanted to avoid the gossips of other women because of the many cockroaches in her cupboard. It was at that moment that she met Jesus. At that instance, the discussion went beyond the demand for a drink to asking for the living water which wells up to eternal life. She was able to open up to Jesus about her five marriages which ended because of multiple adulteries that made her distant from God. Expectedly, Jesus who was seeking for a sinner gave her a second chance (Cole, 2013)^[9].

One crucial take-away from this woman is that the “living water” which Jesus promised her is a free gift (John 4:10). Her story teaches that: Jesus “came to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10); no sinner is excluded from this free gift; the “Living water” satisfies the thirsty soul throughout time and eternity; to receive this gift of “Living water,” the faithful ought to know who Jesus is and what He offers even as they ask for it (Cole, 2013)^[9]. The most interesting part of her story (Woman of Samaria) is that she threw away her jar and became a missionary who carried the “living water” to the thirsty villagers.

It is imperative to note that “Water always accompanies the miracles made by Jesus at the presence of Mary, his mother. Mary, who accompanies every path starting from the one to Elizabeth and ending in Jerusalem to follow Jesus, is our best example as carrier of living water. Water is an essential element for life and we need it daily. The “living water” too is necessary every day in our personal and communitarian life” (WUCWO, 2013)^[34]. Accordingly, “Considering conflicts, wars, contrasts, disorder all over this world, it is essential to reflect and put in action patience to contribute to bring “living water” to this world which thirsts for peace” (WUCWO, 2013)^[34]. At this juncture, it is appropriate to specify the role of women in peace initiatives.

6. Recommendations and Conclusion

6.1 Recommendations

By way of recommendation, we shall highlight how members of CWO in Nigeria can further emulate the woman of Samaria by being catalysts for peace through initiating prayer at home, raising godly kids, pacifying their family members, speaking out, leading exemplary lives and learning from women peace-makers and activists:

6.1.1 Initiating Prayer at Home

The importance of prayer in the life of every Christian family can never be overemphasized. This is because of the place it occupies in the life of the Church. A family that prays together stays together (Dyikuk, 2017)^[13]. As a domestic Church (*Lumen Gentium*, 1964, no. 11 & O’Boyle, 2011)^[33, 20], the home is the place where children are trained

in the school of prayer by word and example by parents who become first heralds of the faith with regard to their children (CCC, no. 1656). Parents have the responsibility to teach their children how to pray since “the Christian family is the first place for education in prayer” (CCC no. 2685). The character of a woman starts from home through prayer which shows that she has faith (Charles cited in Olayiwola, 2018)^[22].

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* maintains that: “Parents have the first responsibility for the education of their children. They have to bear witness to this responsibility first by creating a home where tenderness, forgiveness, respect, fidelity, and disinterested service are the rule” (CCC no. 2223). The active spiritual life of mothers as role models and exemplars who initiate prayer on the home front, is able to stir the love of God in their children. This also disposes them to find their foot in the Church through belonging to various Pious Societies such as Altar Server’s Association, Block Rosary Crusade, Legion of Mary, amongst others. Suffice to opine that “Parents have a grave responsibility to give good example to their children” (CCC No. 2223). Since praying the family rosary is very important, (Dyikuk, 2017)^[13] mothers ought to be at the fore front of gathering the family together for prayer even when the “fathers” of the family is unwilling. Mothers must not take this role lightly. So, for mothers to be able to bring about peace in the world, they ought to be prayerful and united (Charles cited in Olayiwola, 2018)^[22].

6.2.2 Raising godly Kids

For parents, raising godly kids is a *sine qua non* (Kundera cited in Dyikuk, 2017)^[13]. The popular saying “if you train a woman you have trained a nation” (Olubanjo, 2015)^[23] presupposes the indefectible role mothers play in the life of their children. It has been established that “the home is well suited for education in the virtues” (CCC no. 2223). Part of raising godly children is ensuring that they receive both civic and religious education as well as moral enlightenment which entail monitoring the kinds of content children surf on the internet (Dyikuk, 2017)^[13]. This is because the internet can be a breeding ground for radicalization and recruitment of young people for terrorist activities. The family is the first place where children experience love. Unfortunately, many families have become places of exploitation, conflicts and distress instead of love. This is where patience and commitment to control one’s wrath replaces resignation (WUCWO, 2013)^[34].

6.3.3 Pacifying their Family Members

Given their god-given capacity, women have all that it takes to influence their husbands and children. In a society which thirsts for peace, it is incumbent on mothers to pacify their husbands and children to create peaceful families which in turn create a peaceful society. If members of the family do not listen to mothers, wives or sisters, it is unlikely that they would listen to anyone. This is because of the place they occupy in the family – they perform domestic chores in the family and are disposed to settle family disputes. It behoves on Catholic women to pacify their family members towards curbing belligerent tendencies in the family.

6.4.4 Speaking Out

Edmund Burke is renowned for saying “the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do

nothing”. (Brainy quote, n.d). The saying challenges women to speak out in the face of evil. It is essential for mothers to be close to their children so as to know when they are being radicalized. It is in the interest of the home and nation for mothers to speak out when they notice belligerent tendencies in their children. In a world which thirsts for peace, women ought to speak out in condemning acts of terror in society and report same to security agencies.

6.5.5 Leading Exemplary Lives

Mothers should understand that children look up to them. As such, they ought to mentor the young by avoiding a conflict-ridden family. “A home where there is no peace is a miniature training ground for rogues – no one would like to raise rascals” (Dyikuk, 2017) ^[13]. Women are role mothers. As such, they must not rest on their oars in leading exemplary lives towards turning their homes into citadels of love and peace. The world would be a haven for peace if women play their role as exemplars and role models who walk the talk in terms of peace-initiatives in their homes, communities and the society at large.

6.6.6 Learning from Women Peace-Makers and Activists

This study would be incomplete if it does not highlight the indefectible role that some women peace-builders and activists have played in Nigeria. Ann-Kio Briggs, Nigerian environmental and human rights activist and founder of the Non-Organisation Agape Birth Rights has always spoken in condemnation of the illegal activities of the Niger Delta Avengers for their attacks on oil and gas installations which resulted in power outages. On her part, Hajiya Hamsatu Allamin **has** been a courageous voice as a peace builder and activist. She was a panelist at the United Nations Conference on Countering Violent Extremism in February 2016 at the UN Headquarters in New York. In the same year, she was selected as an outstanding peacemaker for the Women Peace-Makers Programme at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace and Justice (IPI), University of San Diego (USD) (Nwadinobi, 2017) ^[19]. These are a few out of the numerous women in Nigeria who are peace-builders and activists.

6.2 Conclusion

Globally, women are more than ever coming together as networks to bring about peace (Nwadinobi, 2017) ^[19]. As such, drawing from ecclesial documents, as carriers of “living water,” mothers are called to embrace holiness (*Lumen Gentium*, Chapter 5 (39 – 42), bear fruits (*Evangelii Gaudium* 24), be serious in providing access to quality education for their children (*Gravissimum Educationis* 1 – 4), fully live out the family domestic religious life (*Dignitatis Humanae* 5) and embrace patience in their relationships (*Amoris Laetitia* 89 – 92).

It behoves on women in Nigeria particularly Catholic mothers to debut local peace initiatives in their communities. In addition to the beautiful Ambassador of Mary Decoration, CWO can come up with the Ambassadors of Peace Award to acknowledge women who have distinguished themselves in peace initiatives so as to encourage others to do same. Unless mothers come out and publicly criticize those who unleash acts of terror in society, it is unlikely that they would carry the much needed “Living water” to a world which thirsts for peace. The women need concerted efforts and divine endorsement to provide that

endless supply of living water (Cole, 2013) ^[9] which can quench the thirst of a world in dire need of peace. The world looks up to Catholic women in Nigeria as communicators, to provide that “Living water” to a society which thirsts for global peace.

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