

WOMEN AND DISCIPLESHIP IN AFRICA TODAY

Dear Holy Father,
Distinguished Synod Members
Dear Sisters and Brothers

Guided by several paragraphs in the *Instrumentum Laboris*, especially Paragraph #s 59, 114 and 117, I wish to ask this Synod of Bishops to pay special attention to dignity of women that still needs to be fostered in both Church and Society. Speaking as an African and a Zambian in particular, I feel women have no real voice when it comes to their places and rights and their contributions to the task of evangelisation.

As we have already heard several times here in this Hall of the Synod, this important issue of women must be dealt with by our Church if our consideration of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace is to be grounded in the reality of our African Continent. We know well that women are burdened with heavy responsibilities in today's difficult economic situations, especially at grassroots' level, and have to cope with a lot of abuses and violence both in their homes and society at large.

Paragraph #59 clearly states: "Everywhere on the continent, women continue to be subjected to many forms of injustice, domestic violence, and acts of domination by their husbands, polygamy which deforms the sacred character of marriage and family and creates a rivalry between spouses and the Children they bear, lack of respect for the dignity and rights of widows". Moreover, women have been especially affected by the HIV and AIDS pandemic; they nurse the patients in their homes and many of them die as AIDS martyrs.

What can we learn from the example of Our Lord Jesus Christ in responding today to the challenge of justice for women in Africa? Recall that Jesus grew up and proclaimed the message of the Kingdom in a male dominated culture and society. But how did women fare in the company of Jesus? Listen to the words of Luke 8: 1-3:

"Soon afterwards Jesus went through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing good news of the Kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, Johanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna and many others, who provided for him out of their own resources."

The Good News this passage provides is that a group of women followed Jesus constantly on his travels since the beginning of his public ministry. They set out with him, leaving home, family, relations, their everyday life, and stayed with him, listening, speaking, traveling, and offering goods and services, and in the end following him to the cross, the faithful witnesses who saw him die.

Considering the status of women in his time, what Our Lord Jesus did was absolutely revolutionary. Contrary to the strong religious and cultural norms of the day, Jesus wanted the restricted and privileged circles that lived with him as he went from village to village to include women. Indeed, when dealing with women, Jesus clearly revealed aversion to discrimination against women. He challenged the restrictions that were intended to exclude women.

Cannot our Church of today in Africa, and in the wider world, follow this revolutionary example of our Founder, the Lord Jesus Christ? Surely, the Church as Family must live this Justice within herself, and Justice demands that all persons are owed respect. We need to look seriously at the places and treatment of women in the Church, and how women could be more part of the decision-making process, especially as women pastoral agents. Unfortunately, we know that in the matter of collaboration women are often given an inferior role.

As this Synod moves in the next few days into our discussion groups that will help shape the final outcomes of our deliberations, I strongly urge us to keep in mind the clear challenge of Paragraph #117 of the *Instrumentum Laboris*: “The witness of many Christians in situations of conflict well illustrates that the feminine “genius”, used according to the Spirit of Christ, helps generate a culture of peace and not violence, life and not death, humaneness and not brutality. The role of women will be more effective, if the Church-Family enlists them in her mission in a more visible, straightforward manner. In this way, they can give a more humane tone to African societies.”

Women religious and women laity in Africa will judge the outcome of our Synod on Reconciliation, Justice and Peace by how practically and boldly we respond to this challenge. May Our Lady of Africa pray for us!

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PRECIS:

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This important issue of women must be dealt with by our Church if our consideration of Reconciliation, Justice and Peace is to be grounded in the reality of our African Continent. We know well that women are burdened with heavy responsibilities in today's difficult economic situations, especially at grassroots' level, and have to cope with a lot of abuses and violence both in their homes and society at large.

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Considering the status of women in his time, what Our Lord Jesus did was absolutely revolutionary. Contrary to the strong religious and cultural norms of the day, Jesus wanted the restricted and privileged circles that lived with him as he went from village to village to include women. Cannot our Church of today in Africa, and in the wider world, follow this revolutionary example of Jesus?

Surely, the Church as Family must live this Justice within herself, and Justice demands that we look seriously at the places and treatment of women in the Church, and how women could be more part of the decision-making process, especially as women pastoral agents. As Paragraph #117 states: “The role of women will be more effective, if the Church-Family enlists them in her mission in a more visible, straightforward manner.”

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