

WOMEN: THE DRIVING FORCE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

KEY NOTE SPEECH

DELIVERED AT

THE IGBO CATHOLIC COMMUNITY (ICCUSA)

DURING THE 2018 ANNUAL CONVENTION
IN
BALTIMORE, MARYLAND-USA

BY

MARCELLINA ULUNMA OFFOHA (NEE OKEHIE), Ph.D.
(ICCUSA PRESIDENT, 2011-2013)
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF SOCIOLOGY
(AND IMMEDIATE PAST DEAN OF STUDENT AFFAIRS)
FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OTUOKE
BAYELSA-NIGERIA

INTRODUCTION:

In Genesis chapter 2: 7, “the Lord God formed man out of the dust of the ground” and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being. It is hard for society to understand that man was the first human creation. Man was the first occupant of the earth. God gave everything he created to him and even gave him the authority to name them. Genesis chapter 2 verse 20 says: “Adam gave names to all cattle, to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field.” At this time, Adam had total control and no one to help him and no one to compete with him. Yet God saw it necessary to give him a helper. After creating Eve by using Adams’ rib, He brought her to the man and Adam said:

“This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh;
She shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.”
Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and
Be joined to his wife and they shall become one flesh”
(Genesis, 2:23-24).

Question: If Adam in his total control of the world was able to handle the wishes of the almighty, why do you think God found it necessary to give him a helper?

(Question for the audience)

Gender issues have always been contested, debated, challenged, questioned, opposed, queried and argued upon in contemporary debates on theological, socio-economic and political topics. The disparity on the equality of the sexes around the globe is a major reason for the heated debates.

Religion according to Emile Durkheim is “*a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.*” (Durkheim, 1912/1965). While Durkheim is looking at religion as relative to sacred things, Karl Mark sees religion as the “Opium of the people and the sigh of the oppressed creature”(Marx, 1959). It is necessary to understand Marx’s standpoint especially as one is focusing on gender, and groups feeling of oppression. With religion, individuals who feel oppressed tend to start a revolution but never end up revolting in the real sense of it. Religion “prevents a real revolutionary action against the status quo” (Cipriani, 2015:25). This translates to humility, obedience, love, support and trust. These qualities you find in devout religious individuals and groups. They will never revolt against their leader under any circumstance. With the beliefs that unite people into one moral community, members then are expected to embrace religion with total submission. No wonder, Karl Marx saw religion as the opium of the people. Religion is a universal concept with many branches such as: Christianity, Moslem, Judaism, Buddhism and many more. This organization (ICCUSA) belongs to the religious umbrella sheltering all that believe in Christ Jesus-thus Christianity is that umbrella and Catholicism is one of the denominations.

Members of this organization are first religious people (those that believe in the supreme being called God) second, Christians (followers of Jesus Christ of Nazareth) and then Catholics. It is also important to explain to our young ones that

Nigeria has over 350 ethnic groups, though the major ones are Hausa, Yoruba and Ibo. Members of this organization for which we are gathered here are all from the Ibo speaking ethnic group in Nigeria, hence their name: Igbo Catholic Community-USA (ICCUSA).

This research study on gender and religion will focus on the role men and women play in Catholic Church. Also, the role some women played before, during and after the birth of Christ as documented in the bible will be expressed.

Below are some research questions:

1. Why did God decide to create Eve (female) after creating Adam (male)?
2. Why are men at the head of the family and major institutions and women are not?
3. Who is the driving force in Catholic Church? (The man or the woman?)

HYPOTHESIS:

Sociologists do not have a yes or no answer to questions. Rather they make hypothetical statements and then try to prove it theoretically or through empirical research.

Hypothesis 1

Women are more likely to be the driving force behind the success of major institutions more than the men who are at the head of such institutions.

Hypothesis 2

Catholic women organizations (CWO) are more functional in Catholic Church than Catholic men organizations (CMO) in Nigeria.

Hypothesis 3

Catholic women organizations (CWO) in USA are more functional in Catholic Church than Catholic men organizations (CMO) in USA.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

“Three relevant and universal documents declare the fundamental equality of the human beings: The Bible, The Vatican II and The Universal declaration of the human rights” In the Bible for example, Galatians, Chapter 3 Verses 28 says: **"All baptized in Christ, you have all clothed yourselves in Christ and there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus."** **"And you are all brothers and sisters"** (Matt. 23:8)

There is a great deal of confusion today as to woman's role both in the home and in the church. This uncertainty provides a good opportunity to study afresh what the Bible teaches on the subject. As the church is the pillar and ground of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15), it is most important that the church reflect Biblical truth about women's role. Recently in the words of Pope Francis:

“There are so many women who, in their daily commitments with dedication and conscience, with courage that is at times heroic, have developed and put their genius to use, their precious traits in the most varied, specific and qualified skills combined with the real experience of being mothers and teachers” (Elise, 2017).

Article 1 in the Universal declaration of the human rights (1948) states:

"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood."

PATRIARCHALISATION OF ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH:

What is patriarchy? Conceptual understanding may help to understand the

“Patriarchalisation” of Roman Catholic Church. Patriarchy is almost a universal term. According to a sociologist, Macionis (2011), patriarchy is a form of social organization in which males dominate females. Linda Napikoski (2017) defines, patriarchy as “consisting of a society with a male-dominated power structure throughout organized society and in individual relationships.”

Patriarchy, neither recognizes nor advocates for the equality of women and men as children of God and brothers and sisters in Christ as we read in Galatians (3:28). Rather, it exhibits pyramidal structure with God at the apex of the pyramid, and for Catholics the “Magisterium is totally male in nature – made up of the Pope, cardinals and bishops.” “It is these cardinals and bishops who head pontifical dicasteries.” “The priests and deacons come last on the pyramid followed by women and children at the bottom of the ladder. As a result we get skewed theologies in which women feel much excluded, particularly in quintessential doctrines of faith and in worship” (Chimhanda, 2013). This hierarchical nature of our society flourished during the Medieval Age. A famous Australian, Geoffrey Blainey (2011) wrote that women were very prominent in the life of the church during this time irrespective of the flourishing patriarchal nature of our society. Below are few examples:

- **Saint Juliana of Liege** (1193-1252) was one of those women that dedicated herself to both God and humanity. She proposed the feast of Corpus Christi that today is a major feast in Catholic Church (Mershman, 2013).
- **Saint Brigid of Ireland** is an early Irish Christian nun, Abbess and founder of monasteries. The rank of Abbess has as much influence as that of male Bishops and she was able to attain this height during Medieval Age. (en.m.wikipedia)
- **Saint Catherine of Siena** (1347-1380) was proclaimed “a Doctor of the

Church.” She was instrumental in convincing Pope Gregory XI to leave Avignon and restore the Holy See to Rome (Catholic Online, 2018).

- **The Venerable mother Catherine Elizabeth McAuley** was an Irish religious sister who founded women’s congregation called “Sisters of Mercy” in 1831. They established “hospitals and Schools across the world (en.m.wikipedia.org)

Patriarchal nature surrounding all the various institutions in our society including

Roman Catholic Church continued to grow to the extent that it has become

institutionalized. It will take a major revolution to dismantle a major institution. In

Nigeria, patriarchy is not only institutionalized, it became the culture of the land. It is a male dominated society.

Despite the fact that Catholic Church has such pyramidal patriarchal set-up that

would not allow her to make gender specific changes favorable to females, the later

have not relented in carrying out their sacred duties. The following are examples:

- **Mary Slessor**, a Christian missionary to Calabar-Nigeria in 1875 helped to cut down on Human Sacrifice, Murder of twins, treatment of women as property with less value than that of cattle (Mary Slessor-Wikipedia).
- **Saint Teresa of Calcutta**, known as Mother Teresa, an Albanian Indian Roman Catholic Nun who devoted herself to the care of the sick and destitute (CNN, 2016).

A woman's role in the church is with the early ministry of Jesus. We understand, of course, the church did not begin while Jesus was on earth (Matthew 16:18), but after he ascended into Heaven (Mark 9:1; Acts 1:8; Acts 2:1-4). Nevertheless, we can learn something about women's role in the church by studying how Jesus considered them during his earthly ministry.

We know that none of the apostles was a woman and on this basis the Catholic Church is of the opinion that women should not be considered for priesthood (Matt. 10:2-4). However, some of the closest disciples of Jesus were women. Luke 8:2-3 mentions Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, and "many others" who helped provide financial support for Jesus and the apostles as they went about preaching. When Jesus was being hung on the cross, the apostles fled the crucifixion scene in fear, but the faithful and sorrowing women remained to watch his death on the cross (Matt. 27:55-56). Women were the first ones to discover his resurrection.

From these and other references in the Gospels one learns that Jesus in no way dealt with women as being inferior to men. In selecting men rather than women to be His apostles, He did make some distinction in the roles men and women should fill.

Two basic principles are as follows:

1. Equality of worth in Christ's sight, and
2. Difference in role assignments for men and women, were clearly taught in the early church, and should, of course, be reflected in the church today.

Catherine Kroeger (2011), in digging deep into the neglected history of women in Catholic Church found out that a "lot of prominent leaders, scholars and benefactors of the early church were women. Examples of such women were:

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582):

is known for her simplicity, humility, vision, and dedication and hard work. She joined the Carmelites and committed her life to serving the Church. She opened convents and monasteries across Spain. She is known as an organizer, spiritual person and most important an action lady.

<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/teresa>.

Saint Brigid of Kildare (451-525):

Is “an early Irish Christian nun, abbess, and founder of several monasteries of nuns including that of Kildare in Ireland, which was famous and revered”

<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brigid>.

WOMAN'S ROLE IN THE CHURCH

When the church began on the Day of Pentecost, women, as well as men, came in great numbers (Acts 5:14). There were no distinctions made in conditions of membership between the sexes. Furthermore, the importance of women to the whole church is reflected by the concern that the early church had for widows who needed care and help (Acts 6:1-6).

The good works of women are frequently mentioned in Scripture. For example, Henderson (2004) documented the following in his research:

- **Dorcias** is cited as an example of one of the faithful who was engaged in humanitarian ideals and loving service (Acts 9:36-39).
- **Lydia** is revealed as being a woman of great hospitality, "constraining" Paul and his company to abide in her house (Acts 16:1-15).
- **Phoebe** is described as a "servant of the church that is in Cenchrea" (Romans 16:1).

The many good works of women in the church is further reflected as Paul describes the qualifications for women who were to devote full time to Christian work and to be supported by the church. In 1 Timothy 5:9-10 these qualifications included widowhood, being sixty or more years of age, having no kin of their own to support them, and being "well reported of for good works." These good works were then stated as:

- bringing up children,
- showing hospitality to strangers,
- washing the saints' feet,
- relieving the afflicted, and
- diligently following every good work.

Woman's role in the private teaching of God's Word is also referenced in Scripture.

In Acts 18:26 **Priscilla**, with her husband, **Aquila**, privately taught a good, but misinformed preacher (Apollos) "the way of God more accurately." In Titus (2:4), older women were encouraged to train younger women in Christian living.

A key verse in understanding the importance of women in the eyes of God is Galatians 3:28, "There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither bond nor free, there can be no male and female, for ye all are one man in Christ Jesus." In the world of Jesus' there were sharp distinctions among people by which they looked upon each other as inferior or superior and, because of these differences, separated themselves from each other. These differences included:

- religious background (Jew and Greek),
- special status (slave or slave owner),
- or sex (male and female).

Paul wrote that none of these distinctions was valid as far as worth is concerned. He did not mean, certainly, that when one became a Christian he or she ceased to be a man or a woman, a slave or a free man, a Jew or a Gentile. None of these, however, should cause separation, because all are of equal preciousness in Christ Jesus.

Today, our catholic women have not relented in execution of the following services:

- Contribution to Reverend Father's upkeep
- Maintenance of visiting seminarian
- Entertainment of visiting Reverend father
- Lay ministry, Choir ministry, Eucharistic ministry
- Children's events
- Planning of Fund Raising events, Capital Campaign
- Thanksgiving and Burial Events
- Membership in different Committees
- Church Warden, cleaning and decoration of the Church including alter.

DIFFERING ROLES FOR MEN AND WOMEN

Although the church is to hold answerably to the view that women and men are equally valuable in the eyes of God, it must also reflect the New Testament teaching that men and women are to fill different roles in the church. For instance, in the Lord's plan for church government each congregation is to be led by elders and deacons (Philippians 1:1). In listing the qualifications for elders (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9) and for deacons (1 Tim. 3:12) being the "husband of one wife" is mentioned. This obviously excludes women from these roles; only men are to be elders and deacons. Although women can teach privately, as we learned from the example of Priscilla, women are forbidden to teach men publicly (1 Tim. 2:12).

The great emphasis today on the rights of women should not cause Christians to question the division of labor for men and women in the church. In order to have the greatest amount of happiness in the home, God has established different roles for men and women in the home. This difference is likewise to be reflected in the church.

RESEARCH DESIGN:

A Questionnaire was designed for distribution during CWO meetings and CMO meeting in three Nigerian states in the Southern part of Nigeria (Imo, Bayelsa, and Anambara States. These states were chosen for the sake of convenience. The researcher has relatives who are members of CMO and CWO in Anambara. She is from Imo State and works in Bayelsa. This same instrument is to be administered also to CWO and CMO members of Igbo Catholic Community USA (ICCUSA). This organization was chosen because members come from several cities across United States of America. Questions are related to men and women participations in programs in the Catholic Church, differences in gender financial contributions, building funds, maintenance of religious buildings and other structures, participation in retreat, bible studies and membership in religious organizations. Interviews have already been conducted using Reverend fathers, deacons and laity.

PILOT STUDY RESULTS

Results show that women are the driving force in Catholic Church making Hypothesis 1 to be significant. Also, women more than men are likely to be in religious organizations. However, men are more likely than women to be leaders of the groups. The percentages of men in the villages, compared to men in large cities who participate in church activities are higher. This result is the same about the females. But in terms of population, more are in the large cities than in the villages.

In relation to church attendance, women more than men attend church services on Sundays. Further results will be published as more data are collected and analyzed.

SUMMARY

In summation, the following are obvious:

- Christ accepted women as his followers on the same basis as men, although, he appointed no women apostles.
- Women were among the earliest important members of the church.
- Women are outstanding in their abilities to extend hospitality, to help provide for the needy and to express serving love, which is to characterize the church as the family of God.
- In God's sight, men and women are to accept each other as being of equal value because God respects both equally.
- Whatever additional role God expects the women to play, He (God) will remove all impediments/ obstructions that will prevent them (women) from fulfilling the role. He will remove the system and culture of patriarchy from our society.

No human should take credit for the way things are in our society. They are the way God want them to be. The church must uphold what God has set forth in this and all other matters.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the forgoing, the importance of women and their activities cannot be overemphasized. They are the driving force of the Catholic Church. They have succeeded eminently in their supportive role in Catholic Church affairs. So, one can easily conclude that we are all equal in the sight of God. If we are looking for who is above us, we should be looking for our mother- Mary. **Virgin Mary** was chosen by God to be the mother of his son. God could have sent his son directly from heaven.

But He chose a woman--Virgin Mary. Today, majority of people in the world recognizes that Virgin Mary is the mother of Jesus, the Son of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit (not by man). She is the Queen of Heaven.

Joseph, who is betrothed to her, is the 'man God made in His own image.' He gave man control over everything he created. Today's Man took advantage, of Adam being the first to occupy the earth, to take the control of the church and also the head of household. Men should not forget that who much is given, much is expected." The role comes with expectations: Being at the head means you must LOVE. You must love your wife, your children, your family, and your neighbors as yourself. You will need to toughen up to face the challenges.

The head tolerates, the head loves unconditionally, the head forgives, the head accommodates. Men being the head, means that they (men) are the Umbrella that others have to hold unto when it is raining. Men are the pillars that others will hold unto so they will not fall.

It is recommended that the laity receive Christ and His Spirit. God may use you (the laity) to deliver lost souls like he used **Esther** to deliver his people (Esther 2:1-8), and **Joan of Arc** to restore the rightful king of France (Acts 13:3). So, open your heart and your door for Him, like the Shunamite woman (2nd Kings 4:16). All should pray always, like Monica of Hippo whose continuous prayer helped St Augustine of Hippo to give up his decadent behavior (<https://en.m.wikipedia.org>). When you do, you shake off yesterday and begin with today. Commit your love to Him; Commit your talent to Him. Work as if you are working directly for Him.

Blessing will become abundant and you will end up thanking God for all He has accomplished for you or through you. THANKS AND GOD BLESS.

REFERENCES

Catholic Online (2018). St. Catherine of Siena - Saints & Angels - Catholic Online, retrieved from: https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=9

Chimhanda, F. (2013). Women and the Roman Catholic Church with special focus on Zimbabwe. Retrieved from, <http://hdl.handle.net/10500/9971>

Cipriani, R. (2015). *Sociology of Religion: An Historical Introduction*, New Brunswick, NJ, p. 24.

CNN (2016). Mother Teresa Declared a Saint Before Huge Crowds in the Vatican, Retrieved from: <https://www.cnn.com/2016/09/04/europe/mother-teresa-canonization/index.html>

Durkheim, Emile (1965). *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, New York: Free Press. Originally published 1912.

Elise Harris (6/9/2017). "Women Play a Key Role in Interfaith Dialogue" (CAN/EWTN), <https://www.catholic.org>, Published in Living Faith.

Gallup Poll (2010). "Very Religious Americans Lead Healthier Lives." Princeton, N.J.: Gallup Organization, December 23.

Gillum, R.F. (2005). "Frequency of Attendance at Religious Services and Smoking: The Third National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey." *Preventive Medicine*, 41, 607-613.

Henderson, R. (2004). "Tradition and the Status of Women in the Catholic Church," *Australian eJournal of Theology*, 2 (February).

Daniel, K. (2010). "The Role of Women in the Church in Africa." *International Journal of Sociology and Anthropology*, Vol. 2(6), pp. 126-139, June 2010. Retrieved from: <http://www.academicjournals.org/ijasa>

Kildare, B. Retrieved from: <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brigid>

Kroeger, C. (2011). "Women in the Early Church: The Neglected History of Women in the Early Church." *Christianity Today*, Issue 17, Retrieved from: <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/.../neglected-history-of-women-in-early-church...>

Marx, K. (1964). "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right." In Karl Marx: *Early Writings*, T.B. Bottomore, Ed New York: McGraw-Hill, P. 45. Originally published 1844.

Marx, K. (1959). "Towards the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right." 'In *Marx and Engels: Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy*. L.S. Feuer, ed. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Macionis, J. J. (2016). *Sociology*, 16th Ed. New Jersey, Pearson.

Mershman, F. (2013). St. Juliana of Liege, *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 8, New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910, Newadvent.org. 1910-10-01, Retrieved 01-23-2014.

Napikoski, L. (2017). with contributions by Jone Johnson Lewis End: "Patriarchal Society:

Feminist Theories of Patriarchy” retrieved from: www.thoughtco.com, Updated December 01, 2017.

New Spirit-Filled Life Bible for Women (2007), New King James Version, Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, Inc.

-----Acts, 2: 1-4; 5: 14; 6:1-6; 9: 36-39; 16: 1-5

-----Ephesians, 5:22, 25, 33

-----Galatians, 3: 28

-----Luke, 8:2-3

-----Matthew, 10: 2-4; 23: 8

-----Mark, 9:1

-----Romans, 16:10

-----Timothy, (First) 2:13; 15; 5: 9-10

-----Titus, 2:4

Sisters of Mercy, Catherine Elizabeth McAuley, retrieved from www.wikisource.com

Slessor, Mary (2012), Mother of all the People, New Rochelle, NY: Holy Trinity, archived from the original on 2 December 2012.

Teresa of Avila: Retrieved from: <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Teresa>