

CONSECRATED WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT: A CASE OF THE HANDMAID SISTERS IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH IN ZAMBIA

Tomaida C. Milingo, University of Zambia
Department of Religious Studies
[chimwemwe __milingo@yahoo.com](mailto:chimwemwe__milingo@yahoo.com)/ 260 – 979037179

A paper presented at the Graduate Women Zambia (GWZ) Inaugural Conference, University of Zambia, School of Education Conference Hall, 19th to 20th October, 2017.

Abstract

The study was based on the literature review and personal experiences of the author (the author is former sister/consecrated woman). The study gives an overview of the lives of consecrated women in the Roman Catholic Church. Consecrated women are female religious persons in the Roman Catholic Church who lived religious life, which is a form of Christian living. These persons followed Jesus Christ in a more exacting way recognized by the church. The consecrated women professed simple vows of chastity, poverty and obedience and lived a common life. They have also dedicated their lives to the service of God and humankind.

In Zambia, the consecrated women (nuns and sisters) belong to several religious congregations through which they operate and in turn contribute to the development of Zambia. These women are involved in many developmental projects. The developmental projects could be social or economic. There is no empirical or documented evidence of the contributions of consecrated women to development in Zambia. The study argues that through their contribution in health and education and social services, the consecrated women have been agents of change from time in memorial.

Part of the data was derived from the study, which was conducted in one congregation of consecrated women namely the Handmaid Sisters. The main methods of data collection were document analysis, interviews and knowledge of the author as a former sister or/consecrated woman).

The study revealed that the Handmaid Sisters had contributed to the development of the country in various ways namely in education, health and social services. This is evidenced in the number of educational institutions they are managing (Pre-, primary and secondary schools, home craft and health centers).

Key words: Development, consecrated women, contribution, Handmaid Sisters and Roman Catholic Church

Introduction

The first part of the discussion will provide an overview of the consecrated life in the Roman Catholic Church in Zambia. The discussion will concentrate on one women congregation which was locally established in the early 1960s to provide education to the girl child and women in Zambia. The focus will be the contribution of the Handmaid Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary to people they serve in the areas of health and education and social services through a case study design.

It is important to note that from the establishment of the Handmaid Sisters, their main objective was to bring change to the girl child and women through the education. The Handmaid Sisters by offering education have brought development to girl children and women and have contributed greatly to the development of the country in general. Thus these consecrated women have been agents of change from the time they were founded.

The Roman Catholic Church (RCC) is one of the largest Christian domination in Zambia. Within the RCC there are different groupings of men and women who lived consecrated or religious life. In the Roman Catholic Church, religious life or consecrated life represents a form of Christian living by those men and women who follow Jesus Christ in a more exacting way as recognized by the Church. Consecrated life, a state in which priests, brothers, nuns, and sisters live, has been described by Connolly (1990: 14) as a “life lived by people who have been given a special calling within the general call of God”. It is composed of the religious institutes, as well as the consecrated hermits, virgins and widows/widowers (Canon 573-746 of the Code of Canon Law, 1983).

In Christian tradition, religious or consecrated life has a distinctive meaning referring to sisters, nuns, brothers and priests, who profess public vows or evangelical counsels namely; poverty, chastity and obedience or other sacred bonds whereby the consecrated persons commit themselves, for the love of God. They follow a common rule under the leadership of a superior (this is a person who is in charge of the community/convent). They usually live in community, although some may, for a shorter or longer time, live the religious life as hermits without ceasing to be members of the religious institute (Loudon, 1992).

The evolution of consecrated life in the Roman Catholic Church

From the earliest centuries of Christianity, there had been different forms of religious life in the Catholic tradition, but they were not highly structured as the Church was still in the formative stage. Today, religious life has been developed in different forms such as monastic and apostolic. In the Acts of the Apostles, there was evidence of consecrated life. A good example was of Priscilla, Aquila, Phoebe, Dorcas, Evodia, Joanna and Prisca, (Acts 18:26 and Corinthians 16: 19). These women were dedicated to a life of virginity and lived at home with their families. They did charitable works and gradually, they formed groups separate from their families. These women were given official status in the Church as Deaconess. The work they did was similar to that of deacons; they visited and nursed the sick and gave alms to the poor. The Church and community trusted these women. They were sent far and wide to give service to the community (Ruether, 1987: 212-213). This was clear evidence that from time immemorial women have been agents of change in the community. It were these groups that were the first seeds of religious or consecrated life.

By the 4th century, virgins became a distinct class and they took the vow of chastity for life. At this time, the consecration of virgins was such an important event in the Church that a bishop had to officiate, at a time when marriage had a special Christian ceremony (Armstrong, 1986:6). Priscilla, Dorcas, Evodia and Joanna were the first consecrated virgins that the Church had recognized and institutionalized. Apart from virgins, widows were also given special attention in the early Church. Pope John Paul II speaks in his Apostolic Exhortation Vita Consecrated (section 7) of consecrated widows and widowers as individual, who, through a vow of perpetual chastity are a sign of the kingdom of God, who consecrates their state of life to devote themselves to prayer and the service of the Church.

New forms of Consecrated life

In the 17th century a new form of consecrated life emerged in the Church; a form of life that would be adopted by almost all the female religious institutes. From the 13th century, women were cloistered, but by 1600 things started changing. St. Francis de Sales and St. Jeanne de Chantal founded the Visitation Nuns as an apostolic community in 1610. At the beginning, these nuns did not wear habits (this is dress worn by the nuns and sisters). They had no vows and they were not cloistered but the Church forced them to have a cloister (Brochman, 1990: 40). Before 1600 all the

consecrated women wore the religious dress and were cloistered or enclosed and they did not work among the community. Though the consecrated virgins worked in the community, it was only in the 13th century when they were cloistered.

In 1633 the Daughters of Charity in France were established, these consecrated women were not cloistered and did not wear the religious dress or habit. What was significant with these consecrated women was that they were fully engaged in apostolic action meaning that these women worked among the community, this was a big change for the consecrated women, since in the 13th century they were cloistered by the church.

Mary Ward, a founder of one consecrated women's group established the institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the 17th century. Instead of never leaving the convent, Mary's nuns worked 'in the world', founding schools and colleges. They lived in the community, with vows and under a rule, but no enclosure. The institution was approved by a French bishop. The pattern was to be followed by modern groups of consecrated women.

By the 19th century the female institutes that were established had started working in Africa; they were not cloistered and called themselves 'sisters' not 'nuns'. This form of consecrated life suited the French and Industrial Revolutions in that these upheavals in Europe gave rise to urban poverty and hardships among families. The establishment of these new institutions that were not cloistered thus responded to this human suffering (Broachman, 1990). During the French and industrial revolutions there were untold suffering in Europe, the consecrated women went out and helped and care for those people, the sisters were agents of change as they provided relief to the people who were suffering.

A history of consecrated life in Zambia

The history of consecrated or religious life in Zambia would be traced from the arrival of male missionaries who came to Zambia to preach and spread the Christian message. What followed was the invitation of foreign sisters to come and help in the evangelization of Zambians. The founding of local congregations followed this.

The first Catholic missionaries who came to Zambia were the White Fathers followed by the Society of Jesus (Jesuit Fathers). There were no female missionaries because traditionally

evangelization was done by men; priests, brothers and male catechists. In Catholic mission stations, sisters were invited to join the male missionaries for the purpose of establishing health and educational services.

Gadsden in Chipungu (1992) observes that women missionaries, especially in Catholic mission stations, were invited to open schools and health centers. The point to stress was that international congregations of women were invited to help in the evangelization process through pastoral services such as education, health and social services. Some of the women congregations who came to Zambia and from whom the local congregations emanated were the White Sisters, the Little Servants of Mary Immaculate, Sisters of Charity, and Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. Later, locally instituted congregations or groups of consecrated women such as; Sisters of the Child Jesus, Holy Spirit Sisters, Handmaids of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Daughters of the Redeemer Sisters came on the scene.

The first groups of consecrated women to arrive in Zambia were the Missionary Sisters of our Lady of Africa (MSOLA) commonly known as White Sisters. They arrived at Chilubula Mission in 1902. The White Sisters were called to set up health, educational and social services. They also did works such as teaching catechumen classes and taking care of the sick people. Later, other international groups of sisters arrived to help in social development, health and educational services.

Today the White sisters are working in four dioceses namely; Chipata, Lusaka, Kasama and Mpika (Catholic Directory, 2010). There are more than 20 groups or congregations of consecrated women who are doing development work in the areas of education, health and social services. All these women are bringing change to the lives of many people in Zambia. The Church used and it is still using consecrated women to bring change in society.

With the presence of many sisters or nuns in the country some local girls became interested in consecrated or religious life and joined this type of life which many parents did not subscribe to because it meant giving up married life and motherhood, a situation which was unacceptable in African culture. As stated above consecrated women lived a vowed life, by vowed life we mean that these women undergo training which lasts 2-3 years for them to become fully-fledged nun

or sister/consecrated person. The three vows or evangelical counsels are chastity, poverty and obedience (Loudon, 1992). By chastity, one renounces marriage and promises to live a chaste life. By poverty, one promises to live a simple life of sharing everything and not to own anything. Lastly, by obedience, one promises to obey all the superiors of the congregation (Lobo, 1986). This is a life style which African parents were not familiar with and were not in support of as it meant that girls were to give up marriage and motherhood.

It can be stated that, despite the opposition the African girls faced from their families and other members of society, some African girls joined sisterhood or consecrated life; some missionaries doubted even whether the African girls would manage to live the challenging life of sisterhood. Waliggo (1976:217) gives an example of a missionary in Uganda, who doubted whether virginity would be possible among the Ganda (in Uganda) and whether the parents would accept their daughters 'choice not to marry. As of 2010, there were 1,560 sisters and nuns in Zambia (Catholic Directory, 2010). A small number of these consecrated women or nuns belong to the Poor Clares Order. The Poor Clares sisters lived in a monastery in the eastern part of Lusaka and lived an enclosed life. Below is a profile of the Handmaid Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Short History of the Handmaid Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary

The Handmaid Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary is one of the locally founded congregations in the country. The establishment of the Handmaid Sisters goes back as far as 1946 when Monsignor (Mgr) Bruno Wolnik, a priest from Poland initiated the idea of founding an indigenous congregation for Lusaka Archdiocese. Mgr Wolnik was the then ecclesiastical superior for Northern Rhodesia. He resided at Chikuni Mission in Southern province and his basic aim or objective was to establish an indigenous group of African sisters, who would later educate African girls and women.

The congregation had to be established at Chikuni mission, and at that time, the Jesuit priests, who were a group of foreign priests, had opened a school for boys. The Jesuit priests were only interested in the education of boys, whom they had hoped would become priests. The Jesuit priests could not establish schools for girls as they were following the customs and traditions of the local community, who thought that educating African girls was a waste of time since girls were meant

to be at home to raise children and take care of their husbands. They often said, “Girls don’t need the education for staying at home”. This apparently fitted very well with the thinking of Fr. Moreau, the founder of Chikuni mission, who did not want girls to be educated because he did not want to interfere with the traditional way of life of the Tonga people. Cited by Carmody (1992:41), Fr. Moreau argued:

... for the present the girls are not taught any school. It is the among these people for girls to remain constantly with their mothers, and they are all the better for being left under the maternal charge. At present it does not appear wise to disturb this custom by trying to get girls to school.

The constitution of the Handmaid Sisters was officially approved by the Vatican in July, 1960 thus the Handmaid Sisters came into existence as stated in the letter from the Apostolic Delegate to Archbishop Kozloweiecki:

The Sacred Congregation for the Propaganda of the faith has granted permission to found with regular decree one Religious congregation with the name Handmaid Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Lusaka, and at the same time to accept into the new congregation, without being bound to repeat their profession and novitiate, the nine professed sisters and the four novices who had been sent to the congregation of the sisters called, The Little Children, our Blessed Lady (Handmaid Sisters Archive, Lusaka).

The first sisters received their formation (training) in Zimbabwe under the direction of the Dominican Sisters. In 1946, the first three girls left Chikuni and went to Makumbi to train as sisters or to become consecrated women. In 1948 the three girls made the first profession by taking three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. As stated on page 4 when a girl/woman completes her training, the three vows they mean that the women renounces marriage and motherhood, vows to live a common shared life and promises to obey the superiors of the congregation.

According to the Handmaid’s constitution, a consecrated woman promises to live the vows for six years, renewable annually, and then after a period of six years or more a sister will request to make perpetual profession. After perpetual profession, a consecrated woman becomes a fully-fledged member of the congregation with an active vote in the General Chapter.

As indicated earlier the Vatican approved the constitution of the Handmaid Sisters in 1960. At the time of the approval, the girls that were recruited were still being sent to Zimbabwe for training and at this time the congregation had only 9 sisters.

The New Congregation: Handmaid Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary

As already stated the title of the new congregation was Handmaid of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Handmaid means servant. It meant that the consecrated women were to be servants of God and the people they promised to serve as their vows stated. The Handmaid Sisters constitution stated that:

The sisters were to render works of mercy, particularly to the female sex, and improve their education. The revised constitution states that: this service is rendered to others through our ministry of teaching, nursing, social, domestic work or any form of Christian service directed especially towards women, whether children or adults, both in and out of school (1991: Article No. 7:7).

We can deduce from the above statement that the Handmaid Sisters were founded to provide service to the female sex whether children or adults. The service was to be done through health, education and social work. The sisters are agents of change through the above work which they are doing as stated in the constitution.

Handmaids' sisters as agents of change

The handmaid sisters as agents of change are involved in three activities, namely education, health and social services as a way of bringing change to society.

Education

Education is very important for the development of an individual and the country. Many of the groups of consecrated women are involved in educating boys, girls, women and men. The consecrated women have established educational institutions from pre-school to tertiary. They also managed home craft centers. Examples of some of the educational institutions that are managed by the consecrated women in particular the Handmaid sisters are Mary Queen of Peace School, St.

Mary's Secondary Lusaka, Ibex Secondary, Ibex Hill Primary and St. Patrick schools in Lusaka. Chikuni Girls in Monze, Stephen Luwisha in Kabwe and Mpunde Girls in Kapiri Mposhi district.

The Handmaid Sisters are also managing home economics centers. In these centers, the consecrated women provide different skills such as home management and sewing just to mention a few. The girls and women who are educated at these centers, their lives are changed. Because once they completed their training they are able to perform many skills, some establish hospitality industries and sewing shops, as a result their lives and the lives of those they touch change significantly. This was clear evidence that the consecrated women are contributing to the development of the community and society at large. The Handmaid Sisters are managing Home craft centers in Monza and Lusaka.

The women are also involved in giving education to the less privileged in society. Through educating the boys and girls and caring for the less privileged, they are agents of change in the lives of the people they are involved with.

Health Care

Apart from education, the consecrated women manage health institutions. These are clinics, health centers and hospitals. Nongoma Hospital in Mumbwa District, Chikuni hospital in Monze, Mpunde clinic, these health institutions are operated by the Handmaid Sisters whose main objective is the education of the girl child and different services to the communities they live in. The health care they gave to the sick gives them hope and in this way they brought about change to the lives of the people they served. As the Handmaid Sisters constitution states 'nursing gives its own special opportunities for the apostolate. The nursing sister prepares those in need to receive baptism and the sacrament of the sick. Those convalescing may be taught arts and crafts' (1991: article no.76). As stated in the above quotation, the patients not only recover from their sickness but they are taught arts and crafts which in turn changed their lives. The Handmaid Sisters' constitution further notes that it's not only the health of the people the sick but the spiritual lives of the people they served is changed too. 'They are also concerned about the spiritual welfare of the patients and encouraged them to pray, to conform their will of God and to unite their suffering with the suffering of Christ' (chapter five, article 75).

Social Services

The sisters are also engaged in social services, the services included parish work, prison and community services. At the parish level, the sisters worked with different groups such as small Christian Communities, Legion of Mary organization, Holy Childhood and Catholic Women organization.

The sisters are also involved in community development by teaching skills such as designing and tailoring in home craft centers. Through various developmental skills the sisters taught the girls and women who are not main stream education in the community, the teaching of these skills constituted the sisters' contribution to the improvement of human society.

The consecrated women are also involved in prison work. By serving the prisoners, the women imitated Christ who came to save souls. In this way the sisters brought hope to the prisoners and proclaim the Good News of liberation (Handmaid Sisters Constitution, Chapter 5, article no. 86). Through the above services, the consecrated women had contributed to the empowerment of the community they served in particular the girl child and women.

Conclusion

It is important to state that currently, the consecrated women who have vowed to lead a religious life continue to lead their lives in line with their vows, although there are a number of challenges that they continue to face in this walk. Those who have failed to live according to these vows have left their congregations. However, some have left because of certain circumstances that have led them to ask their congregations to release them to attend to such, but may be allowed back after they are ready to go back.

Notably, the consecrated women have had an impact on the societies they serve and this can be attested to the many projects they are involved in. Hence, this study has argued that consecrated women who are driven by their vows to lead the life of chastity, poverty and obedience are agents of change.

References

- Armstrong, K. (1986). *The Gospel according to Woman*. London: ELM Tree Book.
- Azeveo, M. (1988). *Vocation for Mission: The challenge of Religious Life Today*. New York: Paulist Press.
- Baur, J. (1994). *Two Thousand Years of Christianity in Africa*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications.
- Battelli, G. (1990). *Religious Life in the Light of New Canon Law*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications.
- Brockham, N. (1990). *A Popular History of Religious Life*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications.
- Bryman, N. (2008). *Social Research Methods*. London: Sage Publications.
- Carmody, B. (1992). *Conversion and Jesuit schooling in Zambia*. Leiden: Brill.
- Chipungu, S. (1992). *Guardians in Their Time*. London: Macmillan.
- Jones, A (ed), (1974), *The Jerusalem Bible*. London: Longman.
- Handmaid Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary Archives*. Lusaka.
- Hinfelaar, H.F. (2004). *History of the Catholic Church in Zambia*. Lusaka: Bookworld.
- Hinfelaar, M. (2004). *Identity of Zambian Sisters congregations: Challenging their past and future*. Lusaka: (Unpublished report).
- Kiaziku, V.C. (2007). *Consecrated Life in Bantu Africa*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications.
- Lobo, G. (1986). *New Canon Law for Religious Life*. Bangalore: St. Paul's Publications.
- Loudon, M. (1992). *Unveiled Nuns Talking*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Matungulu, O. (1983). *To be with Christ Chaste, Poor and Obedient*. Nairobi: St. Paul's

Publications.

Namalambo, C. (1991). *Constitutions and Directory: The Handmaid Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary*, Lusaka: Teresianum Press.

O'Murchu, D. (1991). *Religious Life: A Prophetic Vision*. Indiana: Ave Maria Press.

Schneider, S. (1991). *Religious Life (Perfectae Caritas); Modern Catholicism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Yin, R.K. (1994). *Case study Research Design and Methods*. (2nd ed). London: Sage Publications.

Verstraelen, F. (1975). *An African Church in Transition: From Missionary Dependence to Mutuality in Mission: A case study of the Roman Catholic Church in Zambia*. Leiden: Brill.

Waliggo, M., Crollius, J., Nkreamihigo, R., Mutiso-Mbinda, J. (ed), (1986). *Inculturation: Its Meaning and Urgency*. Nairobi: St. Paul's Publications.

Weinrich, A. M. (1975). "A Aspect of the Development of Religious Life in Rhodesia" *Themes in the Christian History of Central Africa*. Berkeley. University of California Press. Pp. 218-37.

Zambia Catholic Directory (2010). Ndola: Mission Press.