

## Laurenti Magesa

# Christology, African Women and Ministry

---

*Laurenti Magesa is a diocesan priest from Musoma, Tanzania. He holds a Ph. D. and D. Th. from St Paul University, Ottawa, Canada.*

### FROM SEXIST AND RACIST CHRISTOLOGIES ...

Jesus Christ invites the whole of humanity to follow him. In his ministry of salvation, men and women of all times and places are called to be his disciples (cf. Mt 28:19-20; Mk 16:15-16; Acts 1:8). It follows, then, that by the very fact of its universality, this invitation to discipleship can never mean that Jesus requires his disciples to become his physical, racial or psychological replicas. Rightly understood it has never implied any such thing. We know, of course, that there were attempts right from the start of the Christian movement to bend Jesus' universal invitation towards exclusion, particularly, on the basis of race. But as Luke shows in the *Book of Acts*, such attempts failed. As Christians, we have to believe that this was due to the action of the Holy Spirit of God in faithfulness to the realization of the mission of Jesus. It was also in accordance with the order of creation which Jesus came to fulfill.

The creating hand of God, from the beginning of human existence, guaranteed the uniqueness of every individual which, though in some respects can be so elusive and impalpable, is the mark of the divine in every man and woman. But, in other respects the distinction is clear and beyond equivocation. Without anyone's *personal* choice, for instance, God made each person a member of a given sex, race and culture. Thus if we read the reality of creation correctly, and if we are to believe the message of the Scriptures — particularly, at this point, the meaning of the myth of creation (in the Book of *Genesis*) — diversity in the whole of creation and in the human race stands as God's eternal intention.

Male and female, God created the human race in its duality and with all of the essential diversities and differences that constitute man and woman, male and female, masculine and feminine. Indeed, the diversities and differences in the human race are not only those of sex, gender and culture, but also those that relate to physiology and psychology, not only across genders and cultures, but even within them regarding individual persons. We are told in *Genesis* that uncorrupted, God saw all of this diversity as good, indeed very good (Gen 1:31). As Restorer of divine order — what we call the Reign of God — Jesus has incorporated this diversity into the economy of the salvation of the world. That is how authentic Christian faith perceives it and should not set out to obliterate it.

In the understanding of the relationship between human existence and salvation, diversity must therefore be seen theologically as an irreducible fact. Reduce humanity to requirements of physical, psychological or racial identity among human beings or individuals to Jesus and you have the perfect rationale for the destruction of one person, race or gender by the different, dominant other. In forced identity, in the sense of uniformity, begins the desecration of the Spirit, *Ruah* of God, that has taken shape and is inherent in every person. Some historical and current events can be considered as illustrations of this desecration of God's Spirit in the other. These may include the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Slave Trade, anti-Semitism, the Holocaust, the near extermination of the original peoples of the Americas, the treatment of the Aborigines of Australia in the past, etc. In our own times, are the ravages of tribal strife all over the place, all of the modern forms of ethnic cleansing, the intolerance against minorities, the rampant xenophobia, and the perpetual subjugation and instrumentalization of women everywhere. The list can certainly be expanded. All of these atrocities have as their foundation the requirement of sameness among human beings.

The logic here is simple, sad but thoroughly destructive. It amounts to this, the different *others* are, on account of that fact alone, non-persons. They are more or less fair game, precisely because they are different from *us* by gender, race, culture or class. The ultimate conclusion of this logic is always this, that either identity exists and is enforced or that which is different must be removed. It is the reasoning not only of *we* against *them*, but of we who are worthy and deserve such and such, and they who are not of much value and deserve very little, if anything at all. It is the sort of perception of reality that scatters rather than brings together. Unfortunately, God is invariably called upon to sanction this kind of thinking and attitude.

It should be obvious why the Christian faith obliges all believers to reject this sort of perspective as unwarranted by the message of Jesus. Uniformity is contrary to the Divine intention for humanity as far as we can gather from the Christian Scriptures according to the best of today's interpretation. On the contrary, faith in Christ urges us to treasure, to be thankful for and to protect the God-given biological and cultural differences as well as all other legitimate diversities. Precisely because these diversities are God-given, the practice of any deliberate exclusion and discrimination based on them cannot be sustained on Christian and theological grounds. Consequently, they cannot be sanctioned on the basis of any legal prescription that Christians could accept in good conscience. If that is the case, Christians may never entertain as valid, notions of discipleship that exclude one another or categories of people solely on account of legitimate human diversity; something they have no control over. This would be antithetical to the truth of both Jesus Christ and the kernel of our great Christian Tradition.

Whatever else may be said about St Paul's praxis conditioned by his existential socio-economic and religious environment (and a lot *can* be and *has* been said about it with justification) his warning against unjustifiable exclusion of people from Christian discipleship because they are different represents in a unique way the clarity of the authentic Christian Tradition on this point. Perhaps more explicitly than anyone else in the Christian Scriptures, after the life and teaching of Christ himself, Paul argues that good human diversities are divinely granted and sanctioned. They have to be cherished. They do not, he stresses, qualitatively differentiate people in God's sight. Instead they make them all children of God and friends of Christ. All are one in Christ, Paul emphasizes, despite varieties of race, class, nationality and gender (cf. Gal 3:28). His own ministry among the non-Jews, the *gentiles* as he calls them, was a witness to this conviction.

A true Christian community for Paul is a celebration in thanksgiving and unity in diversity among the disciples of Christ throughout the world. That is why the Church is a *Eucharistic* (thanks-offering) assembly; a gathering together, an *ekklesia* of women and men of various viewpoints, social classes, races and cultures. Paul's wrath against the Corinthians in their desecration of what should have been the Lord's Supper, the meal of unity despite differences, is understandable within this context (cf. 1 Cor 11:17-22). He fumes because of their segregation based on class. They are not celebrating oneness, but destroying the Body of Christ and the Reign of God and to Paul, such behaviour is abhorrent.

To stress, as we do here, that Christ's invitation to discipleship, which is the meaning of the Good News, is for all human beings regardless of their God-given diversities, might perhaps appear trite and unnecessary to some today. But is it really? Not so at all in my opinion. I have already alluded to the Judaizing tendencies at the beginning of the Christian movement. I have also already mentioned some historical and current tragedies arising out of intolerance towards differences and diversities. But perhaps it needs to be mentioned also that some pretty strong but clear, from the point of view of the Christian message of unity in diversity, unwarrantable convictions of such towering theologians as Augustine on matters pertaining to this issue persist. Augustine is not alone, for one can cite Thomas Aquinas as well. Philosophical, theological and spiritual influence from thinkers with similar views throughout the history of Christianity is deep in the Church. This is often used today as justification to deny full privileges of Christian discipleship to many followers of Christ.

Theology and people are, however, generally becoming more and more conscious of the necessary human limits in the thought of those early Fathers, as well as in the historical structures of the Church that were based on it. Just as St Peter, as recorded by Luke in *Acts*, was constrained by the Spirit to speak against discrimination with regard to denying people the Sacrament of Baptism on the basis of tribal belonging, many people today feel constrained by the same Spirit to speak out against sexist and other alienating christologies that are used even today to direct the Church's life and order. Much contemporary theology understands Peter's words to be an indictment equally of discrimination based on tribe and nationality as of exclusion from ministry based on any God-given differences, including the difference of *sex/gender*. With Peter, the realization has irreversibly dawned among many now that "God treats everyone on the same basis. Whoever fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God no matter what race [or, indeed, gender]" (cf. Acts 10:34-35).

### ... AS WELL AS CHRISTOLOGIES OF POWER AND DOMINATION ...

The fundamental equality advocated by Paul consists in unity in diversity in the God of Jesus Christ. It needs to be concretely and practically expressed in Church structures and practice of leadership and authority, in its life and order and in its forms of ministry. The same thing applies to Peter's basic consciousness that God's attitude to persons is determined solely by the latter's attitude with regard to love-justice, not their race, class or sex. Current understanding of the Gospel message stresses the aspects that these structures were always called to be and reflect in Christ. The Spirit intended them to be structures of authority of service, not of power and domination.

Nevertheless, it is clear that, historically overly-influenced by worldly models and appetites, many Church structures have unfortunately come to base themselves more and more upon christologies of domination and exclusion. Within them some Church leaders, otherwise personally good and holy, are often not helped to become leaders of the assembly of the communion of the faithful in humility, after the example of the Founder. Instead these structures co-opt leaders into behaving rather more like governors (*emperors*) of the people. Because of the structures we have in the Church, the controlling analogy from Church leaders has come to be that of Christ as an emperor who controls by the (often bloody) power of the sword (a show of prestige and glory) after the manner of the historical Constantine. It is less the power of the Suffering Servant of Deutero-Isaiah, who liberates by his seeming weakness in suffering for others (cf. Is 42:3-4; 50:4-7; 52:14; 53:12).

Yet Jesus' vision and entire practice of ministry in respect to leadership is one of the clearest in the Christian Scriptures. It is summarized in the words attributed to him that we find in *Mark* "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45). But, practical change in this area is one of the most difficult things to achieve in the process of Christian conversion. In the historical life and presence of Jesus himself, if we can accept the testimony of the Johannine writer, his disciples must have frequently vied with each other for raw, dominating power; for opportunities of authority to rule, not to offer service. Against this their Teacher's warning could not have been more direct, sharper or sterner. The Johannine writer has Jesus spell it out to this effect:

The rulers of the Gentiles, as you know, boss their subjects around and those in authority over them act tyrannically. *It must not be so among you*. Whoever is entrusted with leadership authority among you must use it to serve. In service will any leader among you achieve greatness (cf. Mt 20:25-27).

Jesus knew, since as narrated in the Gospels, his most inviting temptation, and therefore the one most difficult to overcome, must probably have been the third (in the Matthean version of the Gospel) which reads, "Then the Devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in their greatness. 'All of this I will give you', the Devil said, 'if you kneel

down and worship me" (Mt 4:8-9 and parallels). In turning the temptation down, Jesus was conscious that he was turning down power, political and economic clout. He was quite aware that he was thereby frustrating the expectations of many in Israel at that time with regard to their version of the *messiah* to come. He understood and appreciated the fact that he was going to pay a dear price for this. Notice his disciples' question as late in his association with them as after his Resurrection: "Lord, is this the time that you will give the Kingdom back to Israel?" (cf. Acts 1:6). They still had not understood!

In turning down power as we know it, Jesus was aware that he was exposing himself to be seen by everyone as a failure. But the point is that he *did* turn it down. He told the tempter in effect, "Forget it!" He preferred the authority that comes from humble service. "Worship the Lord your God and serve only him", he cited the Hebrew Scriptures to Satan in justification of his position. With that firm attitude, he had freed himself from co-optation by the establishment mentality, that of effecting change through a show of wealth and domination. Constantinian as well as previous and subsequent secular imperiousness in Christian leadership is hereby unequivocally rejected. Isaiah's liberating model of leadership is, at least theologically, confirmed. Jesus' crucifixion and death on the cross, and the rise and phenomenal spread of the Christian movement from such *weak* beginnings, would confirm in practice the evangelical power of this form of authority.

There is only one conclusion we can draw from this: *If Church structures do not help to free a person for service and thus sanctify them; if, on the contrary, they lead in the opposite direction of creating an environment of oppression and fear, it is not Christian to maintain them.* The entire world knows that even with the best personal intentions, the best of human beings quickly succumb to the corruption of worldly power and the desire to dominate others. No one is entirely free from this potential sin, perhaps the *original sin*, in the hearts of all human beings. It has been said that a person soon acquires a taste for the glorious smoke of incense when constantly surrounded by it. At the very least, one cannot help but smell like it. In the absence of appropriate structures of checks and balances in the use of power, even religious power, glory, not service, unfortunately soon become the underlying motifs in the practice of leadership. It is then a short step from here to prejudice and justification of physical and psychological violence against all types of people in the name of Christ. Once again, we have too much glaring historical evidence to dwell on this.

### **... TO A CHRISTOLOGY OF LOVE, JUSTICE AND MERCY ...**

The only acceptable christology that authentic Christian Tradition offers is one that is founded on the liberating/redemptive action of Jesus. Already in the Hebrew Scriptures, there are plenty of intimations of this. We have just made allusion to the Prophet Isaiah. The Prophet Micah sums it all up in this way, "Human being, you have been told what God requires of you. It is only this: act justly, live tenderly and walk in humility with God" (Mi 6:8). Passionate compassion, mercy, understanding, forgiveness, unaffected love; these are the characteristics of a christology faithful to the kernel of the message of Christ as demonstrated in his life as well as shown in the most germane Christian Tradition.

Foreshadowing Jesus' ministry, Mary, his mother, underlined the same christology in her song at the beginning of Luke's account of the Gospel (cf. Luke 1:46-55). We now refer to it simply as the *Magnificat*. But at the same time, unconsciously perhaps, Mary also applies christological qualities to herself in this song. Though weak and downtrodden, she notes probably also in reference to her ambiguous condition of pregnancy out of wedlock, she hopes for vindication; a virtual *resurrection*. She is perfectly sure that because of her acceptance of God's message, her trust and obedience to it, she will be vindicated of shame and raised to glory. When this happens, it will be the real, deserved shame of those who, by their behaviour, are haughty and self-righteous that will come to light. The oppressors and unjust powerful will be *deposed* and dispossessed by God's hand.

Mary in the *Magnificat* does not speak only in the passive voice as it might appear at first. Underlying her seemingly passive speech, there is a strong, assertive voice in her tone. Take the story as a whole. By consenting to co-operate in the foundational work of the liberation of the world as mother of Jesus, Mary is extremely active. Indeed, it is the active voice in her "yes" that enables her to speak in the passive voice as recipient of God's Word. It enables her to await in assurance the vindication of her innocence against spoken or unspoken accusations of infidelity to her forthcoming marriage, among other things. Of course, this points to the Paschal Mystery. Jesus suffered rejection and derision and died out of love for us, *in fidelity to God*. From his conscious act of accepting a shameful death trusting in the power of God to vindicate him, humanity has been given the chance to convert or change course (*metanoia*). It has been given the chance to rise in the true and lasting glory of the Resurrection.

In the dying and rising of Jesus we find the whole meaning and culmination of the incarnation. The Christ event — the birth, death and Resurrection of Jesus — is the axis of the faith of the Christian. The extensive genealogies supplied in the Gospels (cf. Mt 1:1-17 and Luke 3:23-38) are meant to underline the seriousness of the incarnation, life and death of Jesus for Christian belief. Through the incarnation, as his mother Mary had prophesied in the *Magnificat*, and as did also old Simeon and Anna (cf. Luke 2:34-35; 38) Jesus began the mission of uplifting humanity from humiliation and made all of us children of God. Through it too, God became one of us, our neighbour and friend (Emmanuel, Mt 1:23). Through it, and as completed in the Easter happenings, all humanity is gathered as one in Christ on the way to the eternal reign of God.

Neither in Mary's song nor in the Paschal Mystery is there any hint of prejudice, sexual exclusion or discrimination. Judgment is solely based on one's life-attitude of compassion (cf. Mt 25:35-40). What is prominent and seen as criteria for evaluation concern behaviour, i.e., justice, love and mercy, not gender or nationality. Even the judgment on moral grounds is best left to God (cf. Mt 7:1-5; Luke 6:37-38, 41-42). It all goes to show that any christology that in one way or other condones any form of discrimination on grounds of gender, race or class needs to go to school at the feet of the Jesus of the Gospels. He is the Messenger of the all-loving, all-inclusive God, who is capable even from stones (in the sense of the most poor, marginalized, downtrodden, kicked-around of humanity, the *other* in the most radical sense of the word) "to raise up children to Abraham" (cf. Mt 3:9 and parallels).

### **... FOUNDED ON THE MEANING OF THE MISSION AND MINISTRY OF JESUS ...**

The power to call people of different races, nationalities and both genders to one fold in God comes from the meaning of the mission and ministry of Jesus, which is royal, priestly and prophetic. Our Tradition is unambiguous about these attributes of Christ. He is indeed King, Priest and Prophet. These are ontological qualities definitely proper to him. In the economy of salvation, however, they are eminently functional. We risk doing violence to these attributes of Christ if we fail to see and treat them in his context of the salvific ministry. This is why christology must situate them in the context of the historical experience of Jesus' mission and ministry. Otherwise his kingly, prophetic and priestly attributes are liable to be misinterpreted and misused to buttress structures of oppression and to sanctify alienating forms of authority in the Church.

The very essence of the salvation work of Christ is for humanity to be relational. This is what the three attributes of his ministry call for. They derive from the Trinitarian character of the Christian God. Writing to the Corinthians, Paul explains this point succinctly: "Our message", he writes, "is that God was making all humanity his friends through Christ. God did not keep an account of their sins, and he has given us the message which tells how he makes them his friends" (cf. 2 Cor 5:19). As Paul sees it, the purpose of the entire ministry of Christ is to make us sharers in "the righteousness of God". Such is what he wishes to confirm without equivocation to the Corinthian Church:

Here we are, then, speaking for Christ, as though God himself were making his appeal through us. We plead on Christ's behalf: let God change you from enemies into his friends! Christ was without sin, but for our sake God made him share our sin in order that *in union with him we might share the righteousness of God* (cf. 2 Cor 5:20-21).

The *righteousness of God* consists in the relationship of love that exists in and, indeed, constitutes the Holy Trinity. Jesus' kingship, prophethood and priesthood have meaning in this relational sense. Over against guidelines, rules and principles, Jesus posits context, connectedness and relationships as the foundations of his way of life, which is Life and Truth. The Fourth Gospel puts this pithily, "I do not call you servants any longer, because a servant does not know what the master is doing. Instead, I call you friends, because I have told you everything I heard from my Father" (John 15:15). This means that through Christ and his message, Christians have been enabled to share in the relationship of the Trinity. If there is any longer any Commandment, rule or principle for the Christian, it is now this relational one of love; a love which knows no boundaries or discriminations. "God is love" (1 John 4:8) and Christians must walk in that love of God to be true to their discipleship (cf. Mt 22:40). As a matter of fact, perfect love cancels all laws, regulations and principles. Yes indeed, *Love, and do what you will*.

In the functional context of salvation and in this Trinitarian relational view of Jesus' ministry, the usual human systems and structures we would expect to be the operational modes of his kingship, prophethood and priesthood are turned on their heads. What ruler would not call upon the armies at his disposal to defend him in times of crisis? Yet this is what Jesus would not do. Acknowledging his ontological kingship, sometimes implicitly and at other times explicitly, he is not ready to follow what we would *normally* expect to be its obvious normal and logical consequence. So that, for example, Jesus turns down Satan's second temptation (Matthew's version) to throw himself down from the pinnacle of the Temple. As God's Son and King, the Tempter observes quite correctly, God would have ordered his hosts of angels to "hold you up with their hands, so that not even your feet will be hurt on the stones" (Mt 4:5-6). But Jesus is saying that his is another style of rulership. He repeats this even more forcefully during his arrest. Against the proposition to fight as the kings we know would, and even though he could muster there and then "more than twelve legions of angels", he orders swords put away (cf. Mt 26:51-54)!

In at least two other instances in the Gospels Jesus defines the nature of his kingship rather clearly, and in terms contrary to human expectations. At his trial before Pilate Jesus accepts the title of ontological kingship (in all of the Gospels). But he feels constrained to say that its nature or function does not involve calling upon his followers to "fight to keep me from being handed over to the Jewish authorities". The nature of his authority is to speak and do the truth (cf. John 18:33-37). "And what is truth?" Pilate did not wait for an answer to his own question. Had he done so, Jesus would most probably have referred to what he had previously said to the Temple officials at the High Priest's court, that his entire life and teaching witnessed to the truth (cf. John 18:19-21). This entails service, in inverse order, from what the world knows and expects. Jesus' disciples were privileged to have the practical meaning and demands of his kingship actually demonstrated to them as recorded in John:

You call me Teacher and Lord, and it is right that you do so, because that is what I am. I, your Lord and Teacher, have just washed your feet. You, then, should wash one another's feet. I have set an example for you, so that you will do just what I have done for you. I am telling you the truth: no slave is greater than the master, and no messenger is greater than the one who sent him/her. *Now that you know this truth, how fortunate you will be if you put it into practice!* (John 13:12-17).

It is within this same context that the function of Jesus as priest and prophet fits. Except for the specific purpose of inviting partnership with people in love, Jesus chooses neither to show nor exercise these qualities. In the sense of prophecy as foretelling the future, he resists repeated requests from his disciples to utilize it. We have already alluded to their pressure on him to be

specific as to the time of the restoration of the Kingdom of Israel. His answer? "The times and occasions are set by my Father's own authority, and it is not for you to know when they will be" (Acts 1:6-7). Substantially the same reply is given to James and John, the sons of Zebedee, with regard to their own (cf. Mk 10:35-40) or, on their behalf, their mother's (cf. Mt 20:20-23) request for positions of influence in heaven. He resists temptations to impress by being prophet in the conventional sense.

But even more striking is Jesus' profession of ignorance concerning his own Second Coming! "The Father alone knows" is all he can say (Mt 24:36; Mk 13:32). Yet the text forming the wider context of this profession, and within which it is situated, particularly in Matthew and Luke (cf. Mt 24:37-39; Luke 12:36-37; 21:34-36) presents Jesus as emphasizing one thing: that true prophecy is to be alert and ready in deciphering as correctly as possible what is required of love here and now and doing it. The prophetic ministry of Jesus, in other words, is knowing the will of God which consists in love, mercy and justice, and living it.

The same is true of his quality and ministry as Great High Priest. His priesthood is a functional one, intended to gather every human being in love before God's throne. *The Letter to the Hebrews* is classic here, as well as the *kenosis* passage in the *Letter to the Philippians*. Both *Letters* are unambiguous as to the purpose of the incarnation and Jesus' act of dying from which priesthood in terms of the economy of salvation is made manifest. That purpose is none other than compassion; compassion which is meant to gather all human beings to God. Jesus' compassion as our High Priest, who knows us inside out, gives us confidence to "approach God's throne" (Heb 4:14-16). It is his example of emptying himself completely for us that Christian faith, through Baptism, invites us all to approximate in our lives. In sharing in his kingship, prophethood and priesthood in this way in a functional manner, we also share in these qualities in a fundamental ontological way.

### **... WHICH REFLECTS THE EMPIRICAL EXPERIENCE OF AFRICAN WOMEN ...**

To recapitulate the above in the economy of salvation, the attributes of Christ as Prophet, King and Priest are intimately connected. Jesus is Prophet, not only because he *hears* and *sees* the word of God and announces it (this is what the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures also did) but over and above them, he *is* the Word of God. Through his person he announces God, so much so that anyone who has seen him has seen God (cf. John 14:8-11). But it is precisely because he is Prophet in this sense that he is also King. Through Jesus' person God establishes his reign and he does so supremely through sacrificing his own life as Priest for the purpose of gathering all creation together once again in God. Unlike the priests before him, Jesus is not concerned with extrinsic purification rites or cult, but with liberating consciences from dead work towards a life of *service* of the living God.

Now without exaggeration, African women do capture in an existential and pragmatic way in their lives these attributes and qualities of Christ. As is now well acknowledged, African women have been treated rather like so many worthless *stones* in the cultures of Africa, and doubly so when the continent was subjugated by slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism. Yet through the role or ministry they have played in African society, their *self-emptying* unto death for the sake of life, love and unity of family as well as society in general, it is theologically clear that God has raised them as his own dear children by virtue of their life experience of suffering which echoes closely that of Jesus. The stones which the builders rejected have become the cornerstones of the preservation of life (cf. Mt 21:42). The metaphor of Ps 118 [117]:22 which Jesus applies to himself can, in many senses, be applied to them. In what ways?

Despite the marginalization and humiliation they have suffered from society and from the Church throughout history, African women have represented in their life the meaning and significance of the royal, prophetic and priestly qualities of Christ by being the main food suppliers, the organizers and the bonds of unity for the African family and society. Anne Nasimiyu-Wasike

describes African women as, "The energy house from which ... [a] strong sense of unity among the family members is passed on from one generation to another and from which solidarity ensues in the form of hospitality, generosity, kindness and gratitude". These may not, at first sight, be seen as theological functions, but a moment's reflection will show their intrinsic connection to the pragmatic purpose of God's Reign on earth. The picture of Jesus which has emerged so far in our analysis has been that of a person whose love for God is reflected in his love for humanity; a *love* which is defined in terms of freeing people from all sorts of captivity: sickness, hunger, thirst, nakedness, fear, and so on (cf. Mt 25:35-40). It is only the person who does this that performs the work of Christ (cf. Luke 4:18-19) and of God (Mt 7:21-23). African women have done just that.

Let us underline an important point here: *the only way to love God is to love humanity and the only way to realize concretely the realm of God is through love*. To anyone who reads the signs of the times in faith, as the Second Vatican Council based on the Gospels insisted that Christians do, African women have manifested the realm of the God of Jesus through their practice of love as service and self-giving on behalf of the entire African society. Like Jesus, they have cherished the life of all at their own expense and throughout the ages have poured themselves out for the sake of the rest of society. If the royal, priestly and prophetic qualities of Jesus find their *raison d'être* and completion in the outpouring of himself for the sake of the world, the analogical (I would say almost "literal") affinity between his life and ministry and that of the African women cannot be mistaken.

It is worthwhile, in this connection, to listen to the description of the function of the African woman supplied by the poet, Okot p'Bitek, in his book, *Song of Ocol*. It sounds as if it is literally culled from the characterization of the Messiah in the Scriptures. African women go through almost the same experience that Jesus as Saviour did:

- *Woman of Africa*
- *Sweeper*
- *Smearing floors and walls*
- *With cow dung and black soil.*
- *Cook. Aya, the baby on your back*
- *Washer of dishes,*
- *Planting, weeding, harvesting*
- *Store-keeper, builder*
- *Runner of errands,*
- *Cart, lorry, donkey ...*
- *Woman of Africa*
- *What are you not?*

The African woman is supremely mother. The function of *mothering* in Africa, is more than its mere biological sense. It incorporates nurturing of life from conception to death as well as acting as go-between and peacemaker in conflict and being central in teaching the children. Motherhood in Africa entails a lot of patience and suffering, without which, society or even better put, life, collapses although this task is generally relegated to an inferior status among many an African people. One hears comments like, this is "women's nature", and "women's work". African men do all they can to distance themselves from such responsibilities. But African women shoulder them, not for the purpose of power and glory, but to serve life. In doing so they place themselves at the centre of the salvific message and purpose of Jesus. This happens through the power of the Spirit of God. This Spirit makes them adopted children of God in a very special way and so co-heirs with Christ. The promise is made quite clear by St Paul:

All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God ... and if children, then heirs, both heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, *provided we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him* (cf. Rom 8:14-17).

By doing what they do, by suffering with Christ, African women are co-heirs with Christ and will be glorified with him.

### **... AS FEMINIST THEOLOGIANS EVERYWHERE, AND IN AFRICA, ARE SAYING ...**

This realization is becoming more and more clear in the writings of feminist theologians in Africa and all over the world. "Whose experience counts in theological reflection?" They are asking. Women are now insisting that their experience as women in the world and in the Church be taken seriously as a source for theological reflection. Among the many voices in feminist theology today, an important strand refers to how this exercise ought to lead to a renewed christology and ecclesiology.

Searching the Synoptic Gospels Rosemary Radford Reuther, for example, finds in them, "a startling element of iconoclasm toward the traditional subordination of women in Jewish life". Not only does Jesus have women as his intimate friends and companions, he likens himself to a "mother hen" and identifies his role with that which women were supposed to play during his time. All of this leads Reuther to conclude that we have distorted or ignored what Jesus wants to tell us in Mt 23:8-11, which is that all of us, men and women, have only one Father, God in heaven. If the intention expressed here, which has to do with the equality of all believers regardless of gender and social differences, "had been maintained", Reuther notes:

The very root of sexism and clericalist hierarchism ... would have been decisively undercut. The fatherhood of God could not have been understood as establishing male ruling-class power over subjugated groups in the Church or Christian society, but as that equal fatherhood that makes all Christians equals, brothers and sisters.

We have, therefore, to recapture the true Jesus of the Gospels and the earliest Christian Tradition. Among other things, Elizabeth A. Johnson recalls for us one attribute of Jesus not given much emphasis in contemporary christology. Yet, it is one that the early Christian communities stressed and which carries with it enormous consequences for the present. For them Jesus was also *Sophia* (Wisdom) the female personification of God. Approaching him from this perspective, as Teresa M. Hinga has explained, rather than the familiar but imperious image of Jesus as warrior, conqueror or subjugator, he would acquire a different, more Christ-like face. He would come to be seen as a friend, enabler and harbinger of freedom. This is no small shift in christology.

Feminine spirituality in tune with such a shift in christology means nothing less than an *ecclesio genesis*, which Sandra M. Schneiders refers to as, a rebirth of the Church. It is so new that it goes beyond patching up things in the old Church structure (cf. Mk 2:21). What the new spirituality calls for is a Church in touch with the goodness and holiness of the body, with nature, with community and with sharing of experiences in ritual and intent both on personal and structural transformation for justice and true human community. This is the sort of community that arises only "as a mixture of those things, values, roles, and temperaments that we divide into the feminine and the masculine", as Mercy Amba Oduyoye points out. Consequently the struggle is against all "entrenched attitudes and structures that can only operate if dichotomies or hierarchies are maintained".

### **... AND SHOULD LEAD TO A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF STRUCTURES OF MINISTRY ...**

But contradicting this christological experience of the women of Africa the patriarchic ally controlled Church here has often made use of the myth of the fall in *Genesis*, not only to blame women in ways far beyond what the myth itself suggests, but also to exclude them from certain forms of ministry in the Church. Such interpretations have justified for many a man and many social and religious institutions the exercise of control and subjugation of women. African cultures also have many such myths and they have been used to the same effect. As nurturers of life, women have been extremely vulnerable to these myths. Since their primary concern has always been to preserve life as fully as they could, they have refused to abandon this ministry despite the negative constraints historically imposed upon them. But so did Jesus. However, the extent to which women have been brutalized and humiliated, is the same extent that society and the Church have suffered diminishment because as the saying goes, "destroying your mother can only mean that ultimately you are destroying yourself".

Without abandoning the oppressors, Christ showed a *preferential option* for the poor and marginalized. Though this has not been historically emphasized, it is true from studying the Gospels that he was also very concerned about women who formed a significant part of the marginalized at his time. The hemorrhaging woman (cf. Mt 9:20-22) the Canaanite woman (cf. Mk 7:25-30; Mt 15:22-28) the whole episode concerning the Samaritan woman (cf. John 4:1-42) the case of the adulterous woman (cf. John 8:1-11) the incident about the woman who came to weep at the feet of Jesus (cf. Luke 7:36-50) and Jesus' relationship with Mary Magdalene, who was a companion of Jesus almost throughout his public ministry (*passim* in the Gospels) as well as with Mary and Martha of Bethany, the sisters of Lazarus his friend (cf. Luke 10:38-42; John 11) are just a few examples among many others which illustrate the solicitude of Jesus towards women. All of these are realities in the situation of women in Africa today. There is no reason not to believe that Christ shows them the same concern.

It is quite clear from the Gospels, on the other hand, that both women and men formed the band of Jesus' disciples. As I have just mentioned, Mary Magdalene was with him almost continually throughout his public ministry. Most conspicuously and tellingly, women were there along the way of his journey to the crucifixion, identifying with his pain and suffering. It is noteworthy that Jesus takes time to talk to them on the significance of his impending death (cf. Luke 23:27-31). Further, not only are they the first witnesses of the Resurrection, it is to the very same Mary of Magdala that Jesus first appears after his resurrection (cf. John 20: 11-18). It would seem that these facts would have profound implications for the theology and practice of ministry in the Church today. It would seem also that just as much significance should be placed in our own circumstances on the precedent in the early Church of the ministry of such women as Priscilla/Prisca (cf. Acts 18:2), Damaris (cf. Acts 17:34), Tabitha/Dorcas (cf. Acts 9:36-42). Given the prevailing environment then, the fact that they are mentioned, at all, means that they did more for the early Church than the writers give them credit for.

What all of this says is that efforts at the liberation of the Church from all forms of oppression are doomed not to succeed until and unless they are linked with efforts to liberate women. Richard Foran, one of my students, has perceptively noted in a paper recently that he sees the struggle for the full emancipation of women in the Church and society as the gravitational central theme of theology and the hallmark of its authentic Christian spirit. He believes that it may well be that the foundational oppressive structure in society and the Church is that relating to the complete distortion of the man/woman relationship, and that all other oppressive structures, systems and relationships proceed from this archetypal distortion. As he sees it, it is the feminine in our humanity that has to be recovered if the Church is to be truly a community of disciples, the *Body of Christ*, the sacrament of communion between God and humanity.

The image of the *body* in the Church and ministry ought to go beyond masculinity and femininity, that is, beyond gender. It concerns attitudes and values we hold and witness to. This is what we have tried to establish in the foregoing paragraphs. At the same time, it needs to be recognized that the meaning of the body in the life of Jesus, and in relation to the ministry of women in the

Church, has not yet been fully explored and exploited. We need to remember that in the final analysis, the real Gospel of Jesus is never, primarily, a written text. By reducing it to such a text in our theology of ministry, we have robbed it of its impact in Christian pedagogy and on values determining Christian living. Before being a text, the Gospel is the broken, crucified and resurrected Body of Jesus himself. The Gospel, in other words, is Good Friday; it is the Cross; it is Easter. If this is the case, the Gospel text is written on the bodies of African women which, like Christ's body, have been brutalized and crucified in every way "so that they may have life, and have it fully" (John 10:10). Thus if representation of Christ (*in persona Christi*) is a determinative qualification for ordained ministry, perhaps it might best be sought by the Church among these broken bodies of African women which witness unmistakably to the identity and mission of Christ.

An exclusively male ministerial structure can hardly be said to constitute the fullness of the Church. An approach to ministry that takes into account African women's faithfulness to life and to God, as these are expressed by their lives, as qualities of the redemptive work of Christ truly reflects the Christian meaning of ministry as a sacrament of salvation through service and love. As Rosemary Edet and Bette Ekeya have argued in their essay on Church women in Africa as a theological community:

Perhaps the major task in building the Church in Africa is the fundamental rethinking of the basic approaches to the theology of the Church, because the one consistent and persistent scandal that obscures the full symbolic presence of the Church as the sacrament of communion between God and humanity is male predominance. The vision of the Church as androgynous can contribute significantly to the crisis posed by the need to renew the Church in contemporary African society.

### **... TOWARDS TRUE UNITY AND COMMUNION IN THE CHURCH**

We must be aware, however, that the historical experience of women in Africa, though it has been redemptive, cannot be blessed as desirable. Neither was Jesus' suffering and death desirable or a situation to be maintained. In her book, *Beyond Anger*, Carolyn Osiek interprets Paul's understanding of the death and Resurrection of Jesus "as an image of transformation. The more lowly and humiliated the way of death, the more surprising the opposite extreme of exaltation and new life". If rejection, suffering and death happened to Jesus, Osiek argues, it is bound to happen to his disciples. But like Jesus himself, they are called to transform this life-denying situation into a life-giving one. They are not to acquiesce in it as given, but to change it for their own good and the good of all. Osiek further warns, we can rejoice and glory in the cross only when it is an inevitable consequence. We may never seek it for itself. This is a caution and responsibility that African women must take to heart. The task before them is one of redemption for themselves and others from the cultural and religious shackles that bind them in Africa and to do so with life-generating love. According to Osiek, the following is a prophetic task:

To speak and act publicly in the name of God to recall members of the community to their destiny and identity before God; to interpret the signs of the times; to condemn injustice; to keep before the eyes of all the vision of the reign of God in its full purity in the midst of historical compromises.

Man and woman are the true image and likeness of God. The Church is called to be and mirror this communion of the male and female humanity in God. It cannot reject its androgynous character and remain faithful to itself. Male and female must work as a body. This implies the full incorporation of women into the ranks of ministers at all levels of the Church under criteria more faithful to Christ. These include the ability to say, as Jesus did:

Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are made clean, the deaf hear, the dead are given life, the poor receive the good news [that they are

poor no more] (cf. Luke 7:22); and also to declare with one's life: Today this text of Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing (cf. Luke 4:21).

In as far as they give life where there is none, in as far as they embody the qualities and message of Jesus the Christ in any way in their life experience, it is difficult to see how women cannot stand in *persona Christi*.

Ref. AFER, Vol.38, n. 2, April 1996.