

AFRICAN LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE OF VIOLENCE AND DISCRIMINATION IN AFRICA

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Abstract

This work raised questions as regards what Christianity is calling men and women to become: to become a new people in Christ, who are reformed by grace. This is because the destiny of man is his divination, and the incarnation is the divine proposal of humanity's divinization, which is part of the historic-concrete order of creation. The researcher, thus, employed the method of liberation theology to study the experiences of women in Africa. The highlighting of major points in liberation theology is to help the human person to reflect on the dignity of its humanity. The hermeneutic method of inquiry was employed for the purpose of this study.

Keywords: Africa, Liberation, Theology, Women, Violence, Discrimination.

Introduction

Liberation theology is an aspect of Christian theology. It is a movement that attempts to interpret Scripture through the plight of the poor. These theologians strongly believe that the followers of Jesus, must work hard toward a just society, where social and political change would be evident. The reason for this position being that Jesus Himself was poor, and focused on the poor and downtrodden during his ministry. Therefore, and any legitimate church will give preference to those who have historically been marginalized or deprived of their rights. All church doctrine should grow out of the perspective of the poor. Defending the rights of the poor is seen as the central aspect of the gospel. In relation to

women, this theological method of interpretation of Jesus' person and works is employed to study the experience of women, especially as it concerns discrimination and violence. It raises questions as regards what Christianity is calling men and women to become¹. It is not just about the unmaking of the fall of man. It is also about becoming a new people in Christ and who are reformed by grace. This is because the destiny of man is his divination, and the incarnation is the divine proposal of humanity's divinization², which is part of the historic-concrete order of creation³. This work, therefore, employs the method of liberation theology to study the experiences of women in Africa. The highlighting of major points in liberation theology is to help the human person to reflect on the dignity of its humanity.

The suffering God and the suffering woman

The negativity of the cross is not incompatible with God as the idea of 'the suffering God' may suggest. Philosophically speaking, it is an absurdity; however, theology has been able to arrive at an explanation that helps a better understanding of it⁴. Whenever people speak of the suffering God, their minds must go back to the cross of Christ Jesus, which is the center of all Christian theology and activity⁵. The suffering God is the God who is in solidarity with humanity in their experiences; the God who is capable of incarnating himself in history. It is an error to interpret God's suffering as sublimation, just as it is erroneous to justify suffering in itself. The fact is that God encourages real incarnation in history through his suffering. This is the only way history can be saved. It is from this perspective that Jon Sobrino writes: "The phrase 'crucified God' is therefore no more than another term, provocative and shocking, with the same meaning as 'God of solidarity'"⁶. He insists on this point a little further: "What God's suffering on the cross says in the end is that the God who fights against human suffering wanted to show solidarity with human beings who suffer, and that God's fight against suffering is also

¹ Ibid, p. 135.

² Martin Egbuogu, Op.Cit, p.66.

³ Gaudium et Spes, 22

⁴ Jude Osai, *Suffering God and the Suffering People in the Christology of Jon Sobrino*, Unpublished Thesis, June, 1998, Gregorian University Rome, p.26

⁵ Ibid, p.26

⁶ Jon Sobrino, *Jesus the Liberator: A Historical Theological Reading of Jesus of Nazareth*, Trans. P. Burns and F. McDonagh, Kent: Burns and Oates, 1994, p. 245

waged in a human way”⁷.

All peoples are called to be in solidarity after the crucified Christ: the suffering people who are those that are poor, less privileged, marginalized, dehumanized, relegated to the background of second class citizens etc, who are primarily women are called to be in solidarity after the crucified Christ in their suffering and pain. God may seem not to take part in the suffering of women in Nigeria, as he seemed not to in the case of Christ: as Jesus is presented as the abandoned in the most crucial moment of his life and ministry. Here again Jon Sobrino agreeing with Boff, argues that God partakes in the suffering of the cross through his apparent silence: “If God is silent in the face of suffering, it is because he himself is suffering and making his own the cause of the martyrs and those who suffer”⁸. In the face of suffering, God does not do anything of the sort that human beings would like him to do. What is unexpected and novel to human beings is that God too, participates in suffering⁹. This is a channel of revelation which should challenge our inertial human way of thinking about God.

African hospitality and liberation

Bartholomew Chidili sees hospitality as one of the essential home-ground concepts that is necessary for aiding women in their struggle for liberation¹⁰. The African understands hospitality as welcoming or receiving a stranger into our homes and making the stranger feel at home. This implies that one can come into a home at anytime without notice or prearrangement and receive hospitality. There are no charges upon leaving except for the blessings the guest showers on his host, and the guest is even directed on the best way to go and even accompanied until he or she can find the way. This is built on reciprocity, openness and acceptance¹¹. She further contends that hospitality from the African context offers opportunity for friendship and is a force for renewal¹². Mercy Oduyoye sees hospitality from a theological perspective by seeing openness and acceptance which are the characteristics of hospitality as the

⁷ Ibid, p. 246

⁸ Ibid, p. 246

⁹ Ibid, p. 242

¹⁰Mose Iyara, Op.Cit p.132

¹¹ Mercy Oduyoye, *Introducing African Women’s Theology*, Cleverland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2001, pp.93-94

¹² Ibid, p.94

divine contact points, through which God visits a person through other persons¹³, as such, welcoming someone into your house could turn out to be welcoming God. This was the experience of Abraham who in receiving the strangers at Mamre received God (Gen 18:1-15). The concept of hospitality is expected would enable men to rid themselves of all forms of discrimination against women which they have learnt from their patriarchal coaching¹⁴. In each woman, made in the image and likeness of God is a potential divine visitation.

God's liberation through creation

God who is the maker and owner of everything, visible and invisible is the point of reference when in African theology theologians consider God as the one who liberates through creation¹⁵. This is because in the African thought system, without God, nothing holds together and nothing has any meaning¹⁶. This in the contention of Bartholomew Chidili, has opened a channel for interrelatedness among all the creatures of God both living and non-living¹⁷. From this perspective, Oduyoye argues that this interrelatedness in creation inspired in the African by the fact that God is the owner of the universe, liberates, since it places the creation story as a challenge and judgment on human daily running of the world¹⁸. It challenges us to act like people who are created in God's image and likeness. This becomes significant from the fact that God is very much involved in everything we do, and is actively involved with us in our suffering, and through our suffering, works towards realizing our liberation. From this understanding, we can say that in redressing the injustices perpetrated against women, God's love and justice would flow into the society through the way women act. Like Christ, their response must be an act of love for in this way, the entire universe is reconciled to God in Jesus Christ.

¹³ Ibid, p.95.

¹⁴ Bartholomew , Op.Cit, 2001, p .137.

¹⁵ Bartholomew Chidili, Chidili, *Pedagogy of Human Dignity: Through the Visio of Mercy Amba Oduyoye*, Jos: Fab Educational Books, 2008, p.97.

¹⁶ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, 1986b, p.85.

¹⁷ Bartholomew Chidili, Op.Cit, 97.

¹⁸ Mercy Amba Oduyoye, Op.Cit, 1986, p.85.

Jesus as Liberator

For a genuine world perspective of theology, full account must be given of the increasing number of African theologians who reflect and write out their experience of their own rich and distinctive culture. These theologians are giving written expression to African traditional religion and also reaffirming the religious beliefs, values, symbols and rites of their peoples which they feel were needlessly, sometimes ruthlessly, suppressed by the Christian missionaries of the last century and a quarter¹⁹. These African Christian theologians have focused on the mystery of Christ, by searching for Christological resonances in traditional African themes that could be a key to the liberation of women from oppression.

It is obvious from the soteriological emphasis of African Christology that the figure of Christ as liberator underlies many of the images that arise from African concept of saviour and also has liberative consequences for women. To the African, Jesus is the liberator from all that keeps him or her in bondage, in fear, in domination, in exploitation, oppression, and in religious distortion be it economic, political, psychological or social terms. He is the liberator from all that robs them of their dignity as full human beings and hampers the full realization of their potentials. He has come to proclaim the good news to the poor, to proclaim release to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the broken victims go free and to proclaim that the Lord's year of favour has come (Lk 4:18ff)²⁰. This image of Christ has great relevance in the discussion of the theology of the liberation of women in Africa.

Hope and liberation

Teilhard de Chardin liked to repeat: "The world belong to those who offer it the greater hope"²¹. It is from this perspective that Bernard Haring maintains that what is offered to us and what we can offer to the created universe is Christ, our hope²². In the process of liberation, women in

¹⁹ Caritas McCarthy, "Christology from a Contemporary African Perspective", paper presented at the Conference on 'Theology from a World Perspective', May 1988, pp.1-15.

²⁰ *African and Asian Contributors*, quoted in Caritas McCarthy, "Christology from a Contemporary African Perspective", paper presented at the Conference on 'Theology from a World Perspective', May 1988, pp.16-17.

²¹ Teilhard de Chardin, quoted in Bernard Haring, *Hope is the Remedy*, England: St Paul's Publication, 1971, p. 21

²² Bernard Haring, *Hope is the Remedy*, England: St Paul's Publication, 1971, p. 21

Nigeria and Africa should be so careful that nothing takes the place of Christ nor conceal him who is truly their hope, peace and joy. Christ is our hope, and the fulfillment of God's saving love, of God's saving mercy and of God's saving justice. He is our hope as the great sacrament, the great visible sign of God's fidelity and love for all men and women. Christ is the hope of women, as the victor over all the power of frustration, over oppression, over subjugation, over sin and over our solidarity in sinfulness and selfishness, over anguish and over death. Christ is our hope as the risen Lord; he is the new creation²³. Christ is the great and ever present reality in which our common history was and is anticipated in a personal event. Christ who died for us and was raised to life is a real event in human history. Yet, this is more than just a past event, it is an event that gives meaning and direction to all our hope and to our history and experiences. It is only when we accept Christ as the judge over the sinful world, over our selfish desires, over our anguish that we can truly receive him as saviour, our hope²⁴.

In relation to the men who profess hope in Christ and who are at the same time promoters of all kinds of injustices against women, it is good to point out here that hope is dialogical, it is an interpersonal relationship. It is a word that reaches man, a message that moves him, a peace that communicates its peace to which man must be open, attentive, receptive and responsive²⁵.

Education and liberation

There is an urgent need to eradicate all forms of discrimination against women based on their natural biological functions. Already Christianity and urbanization are changing the attitudes of many people. However, as Kenneth Kojo Anti observed, it is only through education, both formal and informal that the minds of people can change for the better²⁶. Only conscious and consistent educational programs mounted at all levels and on all fronts can defeat the tyranny of obnoxious customs and traditions which discriminate against women. He therefore called on parents, teachers and religious groups and on-governmental organizations especially

²³ Ibid, p.21

²⁴ Ibid, p.22

²⁵ Ibid, p.29

²⁶ Kenneth Kojo Anti, "Women in African traditional religions", A Presentation for the Women's Centre Eastern Washington University. www.mamiwata.com/women.html

those dealing with women's affairs to get involved in the campaign to liberate women from all discrimination²⁷.

Inculturation and liberation

Having seen the experiences of women in Nigeria, the question here is how does inculturation relate the Gospel of liberation to the experience of the Nigerian woman. Inculturation does two things: it roots the gospel in a culture and inserts that culture into Christianity. To root Christianity in a culture prompts two events: the first is the transformation of the Nigerian culture that oppresses women; secondly, it involves positively developing the culture of the Nigerian people so that they enhance positive potentials towards the development of the woman.

Inserting the Gospel of liberation into the experiences of women means all owing that gospel to be read and understood in the context of the experience of women, their joys and pains, their hopes and disappointment, their achievements and failures, their language. In this process Christ is again brought into the experience of the Nigerian woman so that even within their experience they hear him say to them again "Talitha Qumi", that means "Daughter arise", thereby liberating her from the dehumanizing conditions, that she might have life and have it in abundance. This would involve the *Bride of Christ* the Church preaching against the evils of polygamy, violence against women, trafficking, poor representation of women in the political and economic spheres, discrimination of women etc. It challenges the church to form supportive groups to help widows stand up for their rights. This process would also involve exposing the eschatological hope of liberation, in such a way that it energizes and motivates the woman in bondage to work towards the hoped liberation²⁸.

Koinonia and Liberation

Koinonia is a key word in Christian life. It means fellowship, sharing communion, which is further strengthened by the Eucharistic meal which is a daily call to a life of communion and inclusive solidarity. It is from this perspective that Pope John Paul II calls on Christians to examine

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ U.E Umoren, "The Gospel of Liberation and the Culture of Nigerian Womanhood", in *The Nigerian Journal of Theology*, pp.46-47.

themselves at every Eucharistic celebration:

The Eucharist is not merely an expression of communion in the Church's life; it is also a project of solidarity for all humanity. In the celebration of the Eucharist the church constantly renews its awareness of being "a sign and an instrument" not only of intimate union with God but also of the unity of the whole human race²⁹.

From the vertical perspective, it means being one with Christ in his passion, death and resurrection. Horizontally, it means union with those who believe in Christ³⁰. Communion is both the origin and the purpose of the Church's mission.

The concept *Koinonia* has gained popularity among feminist theologians as is observed in the 1996 conference organized by 'The Circle'. It was a strong point for discussion because women are treated as junior partners rather than daughters in God's house³¹. It is in this regard that Mercy Oduyoye argues that *Koinonia* is not a life that is ruled by the limitations that traditions and culture associate with one's gender. When among a community of believers, men discriminate against women it turns the church into a pseudo-church and obstructs the proclamation of the gospel. In this case, the church would fail to witness to the kingdom of God. In relation to the society, *Koinonia* necessitates the balance of political power between men and women.

Woman – The Mother of God

At the fullness of time, God sent his only begotten son, who is one in substance with the Father, to become man and was born of a woman, through a free cooperation of a woman in answering 'yes' to the will of the Almighty God, the heavenly Father and Source of all Life³². This event is the turning point in the history of humanity, understood as salvation history³³. St Paul calls Mary, *Woman* (Gal 4:4), which coincides with the proto-evangelium in the book of Genesis (3:15). She is the woman who is present at the nucleus of our salvation history which marks the fullness of time. It is not easy to think of this salvific event in the history of Israel

²⁹ John Paul II, *Mane Nobiscum Domine*, 2004, No.27.

³⁰ Don Bosco Ochieng, Op.Cit, p.181

³¹ Mercy Oduyoye, Op.Cit, p.85

³² George Maloney, *Mary: The Womb of God, A Vivid and Powerful Study of the Greatest Woman who ever Lived.*, New Jersey: Dimension Books, 1976, p.49.

³³ John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, Dublin: Veritas Publications, 1988, No.3.

where women occupied a low status, yet in it is seen how God in his eternal wisdom unravels the puzzle of the de-dignitization of women. He has come out in the most grandiose way to confirm that women like men have the same dignity in his sight. Thus the fullness of time has manifested the extraordinary dignity of the woman³⁴. This dignity consists in the supernatural elevation to union with God in Christ Jesus, which determines the ultimate finality of existence of every person, both on earth and in eternity. From now onwards, she is the archetype of all humanity, representing the humanity which belongs to all human beings³⁵.

God - As Mother

During worship, from the examples of Christian tradition and language of the scripture, the divine is often invoked as mother because of our experience of the divine's love and compassion. This is noticeable in the writings of church ancestors. For instance, Clement of Alexander (+215) writes that,

God is love, and for love of us has become a woman. The infallible being of the Father has out of compassion with us become mother. By loving, the Father has become woman³⁶.

However, a quotation from Alan Lewis shows the disagreement surrounding the use of mother for God, "(Some) believe that to call God Mother would be illegitimate, and cause hurt, (others) believe that they have heard it said in the word of God that the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the maker of all, resembles, though he far transcends, everything that is best in the female way of being human and the human way of being motherly"³⁷.

Increasingly in the last three decades African women have emerged as theologians. They have joined male theologians in supporting Christologies of inculturation, recognizing the need for their people to approach Christ through the realities of their traditional life experience,

³⁴ Ibid, no.4.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Clement of Alexander, Quoted in Ursula King, "The Divine as Mother" in *Concillium*, eds Anne Carr and Elizabeth Florenza. Norwich: Page Brothers, 1989, p.128.

³⁷ Alan Lewis ed, *The Motherhood of God*, quoted in Ursula King, "The Divine as Mother" in *Concillium*, eds Anne Carr and Elizabeth Florenza. Norwich: Page Brothers, 1989, p.128.

and to be liberated from an Europeanized Christ³⁸. They have turned to that woman's experience so central to African community life, especially that of mother in labour and giving birth, and have found as Christ himself did, a powerful image of his Paschal experience³⁹. They have pondered deeply into the New Testament image of Christ as Mother:

... in Christ all that we know of perfect womanhood is revealed. He is the caring compassionate nurturer of all. Jesus nurtures not just by parables but by miracles of feeding. With his own hand he cooked that others might eat... Jesus is Christ -- truly woman (human) yet truly divine, for only God is the truly compassionate one⁴⁰.

In Christ women in Africa have also found the assumptions of their traditional society transcended: "The Christ of the women of Africa upholds not only motherhood, but all, who like Jesus of Nazareth, perform 'mothering' roles in bringing out the best in all around them"⁴¹. These ideas point to the fact that one can enrich and widen his or her concept of God by speaking of him as mother. Very significant to this study is the fact that our concept of God as mother gives more meaning to the quest for the dignitization of women.

The Church - The Bride of Christ

The church is the bride of Christ; it is a symbol for the Church, that expresses the love that is between Christ and his church. Christ is the male figure and the Church the female figure. These are figures rooted in the biblical reality of the creation of human beings as male and female, created in the image and likeness of God and called to spousal love. And in this regard, the relationship between man and woman must correspond to the personal truth of their being: as creatures in God's image and likeness. And very significant is that fact that the feminine character which the church employs to describe herself in relation to Christ the

³⁸ Mercy Oduyoye, "Birth", quoted in Caritas McCarthy, "Christology from a Contemporary African Perspective", a paper presented at the Conference on 'Theology from World Perspective', May 1988, p.19.

³⁹ Caritas McCarthy, "Christology from a Contemporary African Perspective", a paper presented at the Conference on 'Theology from World Perspective', May 1988, p.19.

⁴⁰ Oduyoye, M., and E. Amoah, "The Christ for African Women", quoted in Caritas McCarthy, "Christology from a Contemporary African Perspective", a paper presented at the Conference on 'Theology from World Perspective', May 1988, p.19.

⁴¹ Ibid

bridegroom, shows how much of the feminine character the church values, respects and calls others to honour⁴². It also stands as a standard for men and women in their relationship with each other. It is one of love and not exploitation and oppression.

Priorization of holiness

Blessed Joseph Allamano, the founder of the religious congregation of *Consolata Missionaries* made a crucial contribution to missiology and more to the basic principles of interaction when he said that “saints first, then missionary”, this can be put another way, “holiness before interaction”. This implies that if one is to prioritize holiness then he or she would not tread the path of hatred, discrimination and subordination. It is a question of appropriating the mystery of Christ and so becoming credible, this helps a person to go for the essentials in life⁴³.

The holy person makes a good representation of God’s image and likeness, and from this dimension, man is able to identify others as God’s image and likeness rather than second class human beings. This was the case with Adam. God made him from clay, in his image and likeness, and seeing him alone God made the woman, sharing the same nature with man (also made in the image and likeness of God), at the point when God’s image in man was not yet tarnished, he was able to see in Eve the image of God; no wonder he said, “This is the bone of my bones and the flesh of my flesh” (Gen 2:23), meaning this is one with whom I share the same being. The level to which one discriminates against women reflects his level of personal holiness.

Conscience formation

In the formation of our conscience, the gospel values are supposed to be elevated and lived in genuine humanity. In this regard, Christians must distinguish themselves by their level of living out genuine humanity and co-humanity. Our identity as followers of Christ is the foundation for forming a distinctively Christian conscience whereby we think of our solidarity with humanity⁴⁴. Like conscience formation, conscience deformation, takes a process, and as such, each person must take care in

⁴² Ibid, no.23.

⁴³ Don Bosco Ochieng, “Tribalism in Religious Communities in Africa”, in *African Ecclesial Review*, September 2005, Vol.47, No.3, p.179.

⁴⁴ Buhlman, W. *The Coming of the Third Church*, p.152.

the formation of his conscience, in the same way, parents must be careful with the principles with which they use in forming the conscience of their children. False principles corrupt the mind and life to the extent of governing our lives⁴⁵. As such, parents must be careful with the tools they employ in building their children's conscience. When young boys in the family are taught that they have a humanity superior to that of the girls, they grow to segregate against women, and if girls are taught that they are inferior they would grow to accept all kinds of discriminations. For those whose consciences have been built on the wrong foundation, there is need for a rebuilding of our consciences on the principles set by Christ, through whom alone we experience a new and genuine humanity.

The concept of a chosen people

In the scriptures, the concept of a chosen people does not involve second class citizens or the rejection of others. Divine election always involves a relationship with others. In the case of Israel, election did not mean a privilege of some, but rather hope for all. Israel was elected for service, to reveal God's affection for all peoples. In this case, the election of Israel did not mean monopoly but a model for others⁴⁶.

In the New Testament, the chosen is not only restricted to the twelve apostles or to the other disciples. It is open to all the followers of Jesus. The following of Jesus is open to all. Both men and women have come to belong to this new relationship in Christ. Indeed, in bringing about a single incarnation with universal meaning, God meant to avoid the splintering among his people. A people of God must be in solidarity with all without exception⁴⁷. In the same way, as a chosen people, human relationship is a relationship with others, and the fact of sex inequality among us does not mirror the reality of our chosenness; we have a responsibility as men to reveal to women the affection of God as Jesus did to all whom he encountered in the New Testament.

The kingdom of God is jeopardized

Those who are entrenched in discrimination against women are preoccupied with the annihilation of the kingdom of God, in their

⁴⁵ Don Bosco Ochieng, Op.Cit, p.179.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 174.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 174.

consciences, in their daily choices of hatred for the other sex in their communities and in their structural order of passive oppressive and exploitative resolutions which affect the lives and service of others in the church and in the society⁴⁸.

It is the unity and love which we have for one another that anticipates the kingdom of God as described in the book of Revelation: "a huge number impossible to count, of people from every nation, race, tribe and language", (Rev 7:9). This was a communion devoid of segregation and discrimination. Wherever there is no discrimination, oppression and exploitation, there is the kingdom of God present. It is in this regard that Karl Rahner holds that,

Wherever obedience to God occurs in grace as the acceptance of God's self-communication. And this does not take place solely in the church as the socially constituted, historically visible society of the redeemed. It does not take place in the secrete inwardness of conscience, in met-religious subjectivity, but in the concrete fulfillment of an earthly task, of active love of others, even of collective love of others.⁴⁹

The Lord will condemn to eternal damnation those who segregate, oppress and exploit others, saying, "Go away from me, with your curse upon you, to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you never gave me food, I was thirsty and you never gave me anything to drink, I was a stranger...." (Mt 25:41-46). This is true because where discrimination reigns, people are denied their freedom and the basic needs of life. "Women... ought to be allowed to play their part fully according to their own particular nature. It is up to everyone to see that woman's specific and necessary participation in cultural life be acknowledged and fostered"⁵⁰.

Sons and daughters of the same Father

The first work of the Spirit of Jesus in us is to make us sons and daughters of God. This happens in baptism. Baptism makes us one with Christ so that God sees in each of us what he sees in Christ, "his

⁴⁸ Ibid, pp.174-175.

⁴⁹ Karl Rahner (ed), *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, Vol.1, New York: Herder and Herder, 1968, p.347.

⁵⁰ GS, 7th December, 1965, n.60.

beloved son on whom all his favour rests". Whatever the social class or income bracket to which a human person belongs, in reality he or she is someone in whom Christ lives, someone who bears Christ's image. It is only at this level of reality that evil can be grasped in all forms of discrimination and ill-treatment of others⁵¹. Whatever wrong or injustice that is inflicted on others is inflicted on Christ himself. It is only here that we can grasp the full value of charity and justice towards others⁵². Whatever is done for others in their weakness and sorrow, their oppression and need, is done for Christ himself.

St Paul demanded of a faith not only of faith but of works as well, a faith that works through love. He asks for a faith made effective and dynamic through love. St James, in the feast of the Old Testament prophets sharply denounces class distinctions and all forms of discrimination against others, calling them irreconcilable with true faith in Jesus Christ (James 2:1-9)⁵³.

Sharing in the Eucharistic meal

The model or standard for all talk about the Eucharist is the meal that Jesus celebrated with his friends before he died⁵⁴. For Jesus as well as Africans, a shared meal is a sign of fellowship, communion and familyhood. But for Jesus in particular, meals were a sign of God's kingdom, where all people, from the East and West, North and South are invited to sit together at table, to enjoy the blessings of God's love⁵⁵. Jesus ate with all sorts of people to demonstrate his fellowship with the entire human family in order to create a universal table fellowship⁵⁶. The use of exclusive language during the Eucharistic celebration does not express what the Eucharist signifies. If it is a meal of 'fellowship', this fellowship must be expressed even in the language used.

The Eucharistic meal also implies that we live as a covenanted people, which formed a central point in the liberation of the people of Israel. The

⁵¹ *The Work of Justice*, Irish Bishops' Pastoral, Veritas Publications, Dublin, 1977, P.14

⁵² Ibid, P.15

⁵³Ibid, P.15

⁵⁴ Hearne B., *One Bread, One Body, Spearhead*, No.55, Eldoret: Gaba Publications, 1978, p.10.

⁵⁵ Ibid

⁵⁶ Ibid

basic obligation of that covenant is love – love of God and love of neighbour. We give our accent to that covenant when we at baptism denounce evil and profess our faith in God. Each time we celebrate the Eucharist, we renew this covenant obligation to love and commemorate the fact that we are bound to God in a special way as his family, just like the Israelites of the Old Testament⁵⁷. Given this understanding of the covenant relationship, Christians are supposed to lead a life of dedicated to love as a response to the covenant. This further means that the celebration of the Eucharist must be the melting-point where all unchristian acts (oppression, subordination, discrimination, exploitation etc) give way to God's irreplaceable covenant of love.

Conclusion

A cursory glance at the experiences of women in Africa, reveals a couple of experiences that are most times not positive to be remembered. The experiences of women in politics, in terms of representation, in the labor market, in their homes, in religion, etc., reveals one of discrimination and violence, and thus the need for liberation. It is in this regard that several theological concepts and ideas that are liberative were employed. Going through the document, *Ecclesia in Africa*, especially the subsection that treats the church as family, one finds a clear teaching that emphasizes the centrality of the family. Every effort towards liberation should also begin from the home. Pope John Paul II saw the word 'family' as embodying: "Care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationships, acceptance, dialogue and trust, avoiding all ethnocentrism and excessive particularism, trying to encourage reconciliation and true communion"⁵⁸. This is because the family is the nucleus of society. The implication of this statement to the study of the dignity of womanhood is that our consciences must be formed right from our homes against all forms of discrimination against women, only then would it make more sense when taught elsewhere.

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⁵⁷ Mose Iyara, Op.Cit, pp. 97-97.

⁵⁸ Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 1995, Nairobi: Pauline Publications, no.63.

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