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Charism in the Life of Catholic Sisters: The Contribution of Sisters of Blessed Virgin among Christian Communities in Nyanza Since 1964

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Abstract:

Women are both the majority of the active church goers and volunteer workers in most churches. Although this is the case they have not been given equal presentation in the church. The full incorporation of women into the church has become the critical issue in the Catholic Church, with many people calling for expanded inclusion of women in decision making process in the Catholic Church. This paper examines the contributions of Sisters of the Blessed Virgin in Nyanza as an attempt to address the apparent marginalization of women in the church. In the mission of the Catholic Church, Women religious orders serve in a range of ministries, often with most marginalized in the society. The types of ministries and services associated with Nuns and Sisters are education, catechist contributions that these women religious orders have made among Christian communities. Discussions in this paper are guided by the gender theory with specific focus on the role of religious women in the Church. The theory analyzes leadership roles and empowerment of women in the Church. Findings of this paper are drawn from research carried out among Sisters of Blessed Virgin in the Catholic Diocese of Kisii, Homabay and Kisumu through descriptive design. Based on this design, interviews were conducted to a sample of individuals that have worked with the sisters of this congregation, ordinary members of the congregation at various stages and some sisters who have been in-charge of various communities of the congregation. These informants were selected purposively based on their long experience with the ministry. Key informant interviews were conducted among the 7 sisters in-charge of the seven convents of the SBV, 3 bishops, 12 members of the convents, the provincial superior and the sister in charge of formation and 7 alumnae of their schools. Secondary was collected from the congregation's archives, Diaries and diocesan offices. This study has provided a detailed textual historical account for SBV congregation in Kenya thereby promoting vocations to religious life through the reading of this historical accounts. It has also highlighted the contributions of Catholic Women Christian missionaries in Kenya in terms of ministerial and leadership functions in the last 50 years.

Keywords: Sisters, charism, Christian communities, Catholic Church, women Religious Orders

1. Introduction

Sisters of the Blessed Virgin have undertaken a dramatic breadth of service and ministry in Kenya since its inception in 1964. Driven by changing societal structures and other forces, the Blessed Virgin Sisters have ever since had the commitment of following their "vocation" and as nuns they have played a number of influential roles in the life of the Christian communities they serve, particularly in education and nursing. However, these achievements have received limited significant documentation in examining the underlying nature of their approach to direct service. This paper examine show Sisters of the Blessed Virgin think about their ministry, their experiences, achievements and challenges among Christian communities in Nyanza. Discussions on this theme focuses on an analysis of the historiography of the church in Africa, the Charismatic Life of Sisters of the Blessed Virgin, their role in cultivating love and nurturing God's people and their participation in the Church and contributions in education.

1.1. Historiography of the Church in Africa

Sundkler and Steed's magnificent work *A History of the Church in Africa* observes that "a bitter pill which the majority of writers on Christianity and missionary activities in Africa should swallow is that they have not been writing Africa Church History" (Steed, 2000). The point, of course, is that the majority of popular and scholarly writing about African church history until very recently has been Eurocentric, almost exclusively devoted to the exploits of missionaries and the work which they did in bringing the gospel to Africa.

The classic work of C.P. Groves, *The Planting of Christianity in Africa*, for example, is a marvelous piece of missionary history, but tends to leave one with the impression that Christianity in Africa is simply the result of Western vision and Western effort with no

recognition of the contribution of women in the development of the church (Groves, 1948). The work of African evangelists, church planters, prophets, martyrs, scholars, and church leaders is appropriately put in the foreground but in a similar context, women evangelists and martyrs appear not to be a major concern in the discussions on the experiences of the growth of the church in Africa. However, the story of the church in Africa cannot be understood as merely an invasion of a foreign religion and a domain of men. There is therefore need to redress this imbalance and to raise consciousness of the criticism that past histories have not only marginalized the Africanness but also the Womanness of African church history. According to Hastings', there is need to relate the history of the church in modern Africa to its context in such a way as to underline that the history of the church in Africa is not intelligible without an understanding of women participation in African church history (Baur's, 1994).

This is because in Africa, women congregations emerged through sisterhoods introduced at different times but their significance has simply been subsumed with the achievements of the mother churches. In Tanzania for example, the Spiritans who worked hand in hand with the Precious blood sisters founded sisters' congregations in Kilimanjaro and Morogoro. The Spiritans and the Precious Blood congregations had traditional religious orientation and handed that to the women religious organizations that they founded which began as more docile and often dependent on the clergy. Such women congregations have not been able to nurture their institutional independence but after many years of existence are today trying to curve an independent role for themselves (Baur's, 1994).

It is ironical that the White Fathers who had established themselves in different parts of East Africa were helped by the White Sisters in training the local female religious congregation. But they were guided by the rule that the sisters were never to cook or wash for priests. These traditions were inherited by congregations that they founded in Tabora, Bukoba, Sumbawanga, and Mbeya. The Benedictines also established women congregations in response to local needs. These congregations enjoyed both the privileges of nuns and sisters and were heavily financed by the Benedictines. As was the case with the Spiritans, they were docile because of restrictions placed by the endo-centric rules and regulations rituals of the Catholic Church (Groves, 1948). International and local partnerships have not received much attention especially the contribution of locals who joined European founded missionary movements and religious orders.

Modern missions in Africa witnessed special and widespread involvement of women everywhere in the work of evangelization. Unlike the case among protestant missionaries who came with their wives, Catholic missionaries in Africa welcomed sisters and called them to their ministries because in terms of the goals of the girl child and evangelism, they were considered competent and relevant persons to educate girls. They were also considered suitable to run dispensaries or hospitals and in the long term, they developed self-confidence of African girls and mothers inculcating a sense of independent womanhood to promote their emancipation in Africa.

Over the pioneer stages of missionary establishment in East Africa especially in Zanzibar which was the gate of colonial pacification in East Africa, numerous orders of sisters augmented the establishment of the Roman Catholic missions. This process was replicated in other African countries. The Filles du Saint Coeur de Marrie, a sisters catholic mission founded by le Vavasseur in Reunion in 1846, particularly assisted the Holy Ghost fathers. They accompanied Fava to Zanzibar and stayed on after the secular priests from the reunion left the mission.

Nine sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny founded by Anne Javouhey in 1806 came to the assistance of the Filles du Saint Coeur de Marri women order in 1897 when, Le Roy decided that English speakers were needed for work in hospitals and schools. This order arrived in Zanzibar in October, replacing six of the Filles du Marrie sisters who returned to Reunion. In 1910, the sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny left Zanzibar to Nairobi after their hospital was suppressed. In 1914 they were recalled from teaching in Nairobi and they left East Africa altogether.

In Kenya, the Sisters of the Blessed Virgin were founded in 1964. It derived its roots from the Mother House in Cremona in Italy whose foundation was laid in 1610. Today, many other women congregations founded at the same time work in Kenya, most of them deriving their distinct Kenyan name and identity from the mission stations where pioneer members of their respective congregations were first established in Kenya. For instance in western Kenya, the centers include, Asumbi Sisters associated with Asumbi Catholic Mission, Mukumu Sisters with Mukumu Mission, and Lwak Sisters with Lwak Mission. The Blessed Virgin Congregations is commonly referred to as Tabaka Sisters due to the fact that when their Italian counterparts of BVC came to Kenya, they first settled in Tabaka, a Catholic Mission in the Diocese of Kisii where they established a convent, a hospital, a school, and community center for orphans (Baur's, 1994).

From Tabaka Convent in Kisii Diocese established in 1964 the BVC mission spread to Yala in 1966, Karungu Convent in the Diocese of Homa Bay in 1979, Malava Convent in the Diocese of Kakamega in 1984, Nairobi Convent in the Archdiocese of Nairobi in 1985 and thereafter followed a series of Convents that flourished in Kenya. The total number of convents opened now is fifteen with Soko Convent being the last one in 2013 in the Diocese of Kisii.

The first missionaries who arrived in Kenya and founded the congregation were: the late Mother Fernanda Zanchi, the late Mother Stephana Pazetti and the late Mother Mary Lourdes both from Italy. They first recruited two African girls, Sister Rosa Bosibori and Sister Salome Moragwa both from the Diocese of Kisii. The devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary together with education of the youth was the main activity of the Congregation at the time of its foundation, however today the Congregation has expanded and has 163 professed Sisters. The activities have also expanded from education of the youth to health services and social work (Baur's, 1994).

1.2. The Charismatic Life of Sisters of the Blessed Virgin

This mission is an international religious family composed of active and contemplative branches with perpetual public vows of Chastity, poverty, obedience and whole hearted and free service to the poorest of the poor, leading each of them to the perfect love of

God and the neighbour, making the church fully present in the world today. Many themes have therefore emerged from the rich conversations with sisters of this mission explaining their various achievements in Nyanza.

The first pair of themes connects with the foundation of their religious life that shapes the character of their religious work and allows them to serve others effectively. Interviews revealed that, charism, formation, and the nature of community life that they engaged with emerged as defining aspects that enabled sisters of this mission to successfully sow the seeds of love through their ministry. Charism which is both a conceptual understanding of the sisters' call to ministry and a description of what the ministry of Sisters of the Blessed Virgin looks like on the ground is one of the key themes that guide the lives of sisters in their ministry in Nyanza. Mother Giovanna, interviewed at Tabaka, Kisii observed that....

Charism of sisters of our congregation serves as the "guiding principles" around which our work is organized. Our charism, stems from the Gospels and defines the spirit of our congregation and the formulation of our call to serve (Mother Giovanna, May, 16th 2016).

Various focus group discussions referred to charism as the "active ingredient," "propelling energy," and "spiritual DNA," of the mission. It is the thread that links sisters to one another and to the people they serve. In this sense, charism is both timeless and evolving to meet the ever-changing needs of the people (Sister Pricilla Masinde, Tabaka, Kisii, 20th June, 2016). She further explained that,

"For our congregation, I think that charism is a practical expression of our concern for others and to help people come to grips with who they are and what they can do with what they've got, so I think that's what we do all in the light of gospel".

From these personal expressions from different sisters of this congregation, what is common in respect to the contributions of Sisters of Blessed Virgin in Nyanza is their sense of enduring qualities and responsiveness to the changing face of needs in the communities they serve. They are specifically committed in responding in whatever way they can with the resources they have to the needs of the people. This results in their being very diversified in terms of mission achievements as they continue to discern and respond to the ever-changing needs of the community.

Mother Giovanna summed up this experience by stating that, 'our charism as Sisters of the Blessed Virgin is humility, and for us that means authenticity, integrity, speaking the truth and being very down to earth (Mother Giovanna, Tabaka, Kisii, May, 16th 2016). Other sisters interviewed also confirmed that their image in society is hospitality which they perceive as a very tough charism to live, but they believe that it is by the grace of God that they are attracted to the community to move forward in tough times (Sister Rosa Bosibori, Ichuni, Kissi, 21st May, 2016).

As a central feature of their ministry, they note that the communication and infusion of the charism to lay partners is an undertaking for their religious conviction. Thus, the lifestyle of Sisters of Blessed Virgin, as vowed women in community, provides freedoms and allows them to take chances, be supported, have time to reflect, and access resources in their work in ways that others often cannot.

They are unified in their view that, because they have unconditional support from their community, they have the freedom to put their entire selves into ministry and go wherever the needs are. In addition, they use their status as religious women and organizational leaders to elevate others – both clients and lay co-ministers. This is a proof of the fact that there is an authenticity to the life of Sisters of Blessed Virgin that is counter-cultural. This has influenced people to respect, listen, and learn from them.

Sisters of this congregation identify numerous aspects of community life that allow them to be more effective in their work. A key aspect in their work is the mutual support and reinforcement that they receive from each other. Sister Salome Moragwa, explained that.....

- "As a sister I have thousands of people behind me that are pushing me and moving me and saying "You're doing a good job," and if I didn't have anybody telling me that, I don't think I would get up in the morning you know and go. I'm not alone in what I do, we do have the support of congregations and that support is pretty powerful you know in terms of encouraging you, telling you to go farther...but you know you're not alone, and in today's worlds o many other people that you're working with, they're very alone (Sister Salome Moragwa, Kangeta, Meru, 18th, May, 2016)

Another attribute is the ability to nurture oneself spiritually, an activity that is encouraged and fully supported by the community. Sisters of the Blessed Virgin enjoyed community support, but also enjoy the opportunity by choice to be reflective persons individually as their call and commitment strive to be much focused to spread the gospel. Their mission therefore is not simply about identity but more focused to the achievement of mission goals. They also feel they are able to take risks and change course if necessary when others often cannot or will not take such risks due to their life situation (Armstrong, 2005).

This commitment was aptly expressed by sister Mary Millicent of St Pauls Kanyakwar, who explained that.....

- There is something to devote my life to that does allow me certain levels of freedom. There are certain levels of risks that we cannot take that other people are free to take because of their relational commitments and their marriage and family (Mary Millicent, St Pauls Kanyakwar, Kisumu, 24th July, 2016).

1.3. Cultivating Love and Nurturing God's People

A second thematic area has to do with how these sisters undertake their work in ministry, that is, in translating their charism into action. This particularly has to do with their distinct focus on the care of people and on the power of presence. This role has its background in how they are personally nurtured in the process of caring and being present. Sisters of Blessed Virgin believe that their work is more effective because the people that they serve feel welcomed, comforted, and cared for in an authentic way (Armstrong, 2005). Their core commitment is in building relationships with those they serve, affirming the dignity of the person and serving as a catalyst for personal development. Members of our congregation believe that they are accepted for who they are and where they are (Berchmans, 2005).

One sister noted happily ... "When one of the little boys in my class heard that I was coming to teach them, said 'Oh good, I've got a mother, 'because when you get a nun you get a second mother'" (Sister Rosalia, Nyaburu, Kisii, 23rd, July, 2016). Sisters of Blessed Virgin uniformly express commitment to equality with those they serve, even if sometimes members of the community do not project this equality. This practice has always translated into a feeling of being cared for, rather than being helped or served amongst members of the community that we serve in Nyanza. We have also been encouraging our laity to move forward and to do a little bit more, to try to change what they've come to know as their way of living (Congregation for the Institute of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 2007).

This concept of caring has been a basic principle in our engagement with Christian communities and even in our institutions. We have always been seen as being "with the people" both within and beyond the structures of the Catholic Church. This has created a strong bond with the people and neighborhoods we serve. "We have been seen as having durable commitments to the people we serve" (Murchu, 1998).

In all these endeavors, these sisters express a level of commitment that people can see because they believe that their faith grounds them enough to be able to stay with their commitments and vows in both good times and bad times. They demonstrate their commitment to the church and observe that..... "When we look at our institutions and structures, there is a long-term commitment and we have a history, and that history continues to give us momentum. We see ourselves serving the mission of the broader Catholic Church because our followers do not distinguish between our different catholic missions (Stuber, 2000).

The Blessed Virgin Sisters have therefore remained a steady and distinct part of the general Christian community in Nyanza with a positive presence in both tangible (physical) and intangible (through prayer, bond) terms. The Blessed Virgin Sisters presence in Nyanza has manifested a feeling of unity and solidarity with the people in the communities where they live. Sometimes this has translated into Blessed Virgin Sisters residing near the people they serve in Nyanza and through prayer sisters have extended their presence much further. Sister Inviolata, commented that...

- We live in the community. We live the really ear long and we're right in the heart of the villages. I think this has helped us a lot with our relationship with our lay follower as we experience the same dangers with them (Gekano, Kisii, 12th June, 2016).

The Blessed Virgin Sisters give much in their ministry and they are quick to point out that they receive a great gift through their ability to serve. Sisters of this mission uniformly express that whatever they give in their ministry, they receive much more in return. They confess that it is in giving that they receive more back. They have a general sense of gratitude from those they have served in Nyanza and believe that the response of an individual offered them a crucial gift. Thus the broader experience of service has therefore enabled them to observe and retain a sense of fulfillment of their charism (VanDeusen, 2009).

A third thematic area relates to what is needed to bring ministry to fruition. Among these, the work of ministry is seen as requiring a collaborative spirit and the cultivation of new leaders and leadership skills. Sisters there foresee themselves as uniquely suited to advocate for better systems and conditions that affect the poor and vulnerable. They know and believe in the value of collaboration and have increasingly pursued such approaches in their activities in Nyanza (VanDeusen, 2009).

In the early days, there were varying degrees of restriction or reluctance to reach beyond their own community and work together with other religious communities; however, colleges were established to educate sisters to nurture the skill and desire to collaborate with other Christian communities. The Blessed Virgin Sisters always partner with others. "It's not about us. It's more about mission." Nevertheless, it has taken the challenges of today's environment, fewer sisters, constrained resources, and growing needs to firmly root the commitment to, and confidence in, collaboration. Sisters are particularly good at recognizing the gifts of individuals and in building relationships at all levels; this makes them more effective at collaboration (VanDeusen, 2009).

Their willingness to engage in collaboration stems in part from their selfless view of the work, with a focus on the end goals and making use of whatever means available to get the job done. They note the value of "figuring it out together" in order to work around barriers..... It's not about us at all. It's about the mission, and we jointly figure out a way to do it. We figure our challenges together and bring our gifts and talents and our communities' gifts and talents to the work at hand (Sister Donata Akinyi, Karungu, 20th August, 2016)

Sisters of the Blessed Virgin always see a natural relationship between them anifestation of charism and the call to be collaborative, and that these work together. Collaborative efforts really mesh and create a very strong tapestry as an image or an underpinning which is understood as a means to an end and must bring about added value to their work. They see particular value in collaboration to address systemic problems and conditions. This includes being willing to question or advocate for people within existing systems for serving people's needs where change is needed (Small and Wills, 2007)

It was noted that even though they were drawn into hierarchical structures in terms of responsibilities, over time, there is a sense that they are now trying to envision and develop collaborative initiatives to meet the growing needs of the people. In the past, sisters took up leadership roles with little training or experience in the field, however, today there are efforts to nurture leadership skills in fellow sisters, lay partners, and those they serve to strengthen and continue the ministry of the Catholic Church.

There is a sense of tenacity that sisters bring to the ministry that fuels commitment to leadership. Sisters capitalize on positive attributes in their congregation encourage people to improve in particular areas. Within their communities, they further acknowledge the importance of differing skill sets and callings observing that while some are called to leadership and advocacy, others are called to direct service. A full range of callings is therefore needed for the community to be effective, and all of these are to be nurtured. Mother Longoni observed that,

- We're encouraged to become the best teacher or social worker or nurse. We're given opportunities for training, I mean, and encouraged to go as far as we can in our education and to learn from one another. Now that mentoring process that happens to community is really a big part to helping us to be the best. (Anna Maria Longoni, 12th June, 2016).

Sisters of the Blessed Virgin therefore highlight the crucial role to be played in cultivating leadership in others, particularly lay partners. They seek to empower others to use their own gifts to strengthen and sustain the ministry. The conscious engendering of the capacity of leadership in lay partners also allows them to extend the scope and scale of ministry that would otherwise be possible. They are guided by the belief that one person can't do everything and so they trust, delegate, encourage, appreciate all the gifts of the people around them, recognizing that even though as the Administrator or whatever it is, their job is to encourage other people and leadership is about encouraging the gifts they see in other people and developing them (Fischer, and Bartholomew, 2012).

A final thematic area is to ensure the future of the harvest. It is observed that the attentiveness to how needs change over time is tied to the nature of charism as well as to the effectiveness of ministry. Sisters of the Blessed Virgins vision a future where more lay partners are called to execute the work of ministry and provide key leadership in these endeavors. Sisters seek to use the skills already described, especially collaboration and leadership development, in an intentional way. They are well aware of the need to prepare for transitions in their work, with an eye toward ensuring that the people's evolving needs are effectively met over time.

In fact, one sister stated bluntly.

“Our obligation is and continues to be the forming of others for the future because there are not enough of us to continue. The goal of our transition is to groom leadership” (Mother Anna Maria Longoni, Italy).

Blessed Virgin Sisters increasingly see the value of advocacy and a role for them, working collaboratively to be a “voice for the voiceless.” As advocates, they are powerful internal and external leaders and as a group, they bring a record as highly educated and accomplished women, along with their status as moral authorities working for social justice. They have continued to encourage lay partners to take on leadership roles and serve as advocates by taking on other emergent roles. They have always acknowledged that as vowed women they are particularly effective in taking on the task of empowering others and serving as advocates for change. Mother Maria stated in a telephone interview that....

- “We are the ones who are best able to impact change and that may take a long time, but we can empower others as advocates to bring that change about, and I think we're motivated to do that where others may not. So I think in spite of the constraints, we're probably better able to bring about institutional change than most anybody, and we're motivated to do it” (Maria Longoni, 30th July, 2016).

As Sisters of the Blessed Virgin scollaborate and empower others to take on leadership roles, they have more time to advocate for upstream social change that helps those involved in direct service. And, at all times, they continue to minister through prayer.

1.4. Participation in the Church

The church which is under the influence of the Holy Spirit is in a continuous process of renewal. Christian communities find inspiration and guidance for their own spiritual and apostolic life through the work of sisters who are committed to their charism. Through the Sisters of Blessed Virgin, the Catholic Church has been able to manifest the character of Christ to both believers and unbelievers alike (Lewis, 2004).

These sisters have been compelled to bring the marginalized, the poor, the weak and the down hearted and the oppressed to the family of Christ because they are co-responsible for the establishment of the church of Christ by spreading the Gospel. They have embraced evangelization in a wider way, creating human living conditions and a Christian atmosphere where the seed of the Good News can germinate and grow (Lewis, 2004)

A part from the spiritual commitments, Sisters of this mission have prioritized on agricultural development as the basis of nutritional support to their congregations in Nyanza, promotion of medical care for preventive and curative support, teaching and training of children and adults on technical skills are key aspects of evangelization. Through these interventions, the Blessed Virgin Sisters have been able to tell the people of God that: God loves them, they are worthy of the church's mission (Kauffman, 1995).

The pastoral teaching of John 11 has in meantime, clarified and defined their presence and involvement with the Christian communities in Nyanza, giving additional matter for reflection and inspiration. It highlights the present attention given both to human problems and to the cordial encounter with Christ and with His Gospel. The desire to be increasingly involved with communities in their present historical situations has therefore been central in the mission's intervention because Sisters of Blessed Virgin have often found themselves in positions to experience at close range the events that affect the lives of the people whom they serve (Fialka, 2004)

This has been strengthened further by the fact that, the prophetic nature of their religious life requires that they embody the church in their desire to give themselves completely to the radical demands of the beatitudes. Thus, they are often found at the outposts of the mission taking the greatest risks for their health and for their very lives (Juteau, 1986). It is therefore worth noting that this mission is at work in everyday lives of the Christian communities in Nyanza. Through the various agencies of evangelism, Bible translation, agriculture and industrial training, education and medicine, Sisters of the Blessed Virgin have been able to fulfill the mission of the Catholic Church in Nyanza region. At the same time, what has been done in evangelization by these sisters involving consecration to prayer, silence, penance and sacrifice have been particularly effective in witness and in apostolic fruitfulness in Nyanza.

With such activities, Sisters of Blessed Virgin have been in a special way able to comply with the call for vocation by Pope John Paul II, who said. “By your vocation you are for the universal church, by your mission you are in a definite local church. Your vocation the universal church, then, is experienced within the structures of the local church. You must make every effort to carry out your vocation in the individual church as to contribute to their spiritual development, in order to their special strength. Union with the universal church through the local church, this is your way” (Pope John Paul II)

The mission of Sisters of the Blessed Virgin has therefore been by its very nature nothing else than the mission of Christ continued in the history of the life of Christians in Nyanza region. This has been expressed principally in the co- participation in the obedience of

Christ Who offered Himself to the Father for the life of the world. Sisters of the Blessed Virgin have therefore continued to play an indispensable role in the church because their contributions have not been limited only to the people who go to church, for instance Christians, but has also covered people from all walks of life (Briody, 1988).

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