

**RAISING CONSCIOUSNESS REGARDING THE  
DIGNITY AND VOCATION OF WOMEN IN THE  
CATHOLIC CHURCH IN ZIMBABWE:  
A HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTAL PROCESS**

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*Abstract*

Shona culture, Church tradition, and the Roman Catholic Church in particular, are very patriarchal. Thus culture and Church have the capacity at once to include and exclude, liberate and oppress, empower and disengage. The corollary is that just as these structures demonstrate a history of patriarchy, so, in an agenda for an inclusive paradigm, they can be transformed. Since men in the Roman Catholic Church enjoy a monopoly on power, they are generally reluctant to liberate women from patriarchal marginalisation. In this article, the raising of consciousness regarding the dignity and vocation of women in the Roman Catholic Church in Zimbabwe is explored. The discussion is based on an important tenet of liberation theology that states that women themselves, as proactive agents of their own history, have the capacity for intentional or conscious becoming. Thus, women, in their historical situatedness, must respond to the imperative of their creation and baptismal status of *imago Dei/Christi* and the baptismal vocation to participate in all areas of church life.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The Roman Catholic Church generally operates within a strongly patriarchal paradigm. For centuries, theological discourse by the fathers has been monologic, and theological definitions have been monolithic in excluding women's experience and images. Patriarchal theology contains half-truths of faith at best, and at worst distorted truths arising from the marginalisation of women's experience. Church structures relegate women to the margins. The face at the apex of the patriarchal pyramidal organisation that is the Church is a masculine one. Here, and theologically, God and the rulers are synonymous – and male; women in leadership positions are encountered only at the lower levels of the pyramid. If the Church were to be drawn as a circle, even though women make up the majority of Church congregations, they would be found only at the periphery, and the centre would be populated almost exclusively by men. Raising awareness of the dignity and role of women in the Church challenges this status quo in terms of ecclesiology and the theology on which

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it rests, exposing the discrepancy between what is and what ought to be in Church praxis.

Raming (1980) highlights the impasse concerning the inclusion of women at the centre of church life in the Roman Catholic Church. She explains that all important church offices – teaching, defining of doctrines and decision-making – are the preserve of the priesthood. Women are excluded from these offices because the question of the ordination of women in the Roman Catholic Church is not open to debate, as is evidenced by the fact that in the encyclical *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, Pope John Paul II (1994b) declared that men alone may be admitted to the priesthood.

In both the Bible and Church tradition, women's experience has been censored. At best, women's voices have been muted. *Anamnesis* as remembering women's lost tradition reveals, for example, that in Old Testament tradition women were leaders and prophets. Similarly, in New Testament and Church traditions, women were once apostles, disciples and deaconesses. Consciousness-raising exposes the appropriation of the common priesthood by male clericalism, as a result of which women have been divested of the power to name God and the freedom to speak of their experience, and relegated to the margins of church life. Yet, since the patriarchalisation of the Church has developed historically, there is no reason why transformative praxis restoring women's dignity and role in the Church should not be a similar historical developmental process.

It is a general observation that the dignity and status of women in the Roman Catholic Church in Zimbabwe is not fully realised. More than a decade has elapsed since the African Synod of Bishops (which met in Rome in 1994) acknowledged the gender disparity existing in Church and society, referring to it damningly as the "apartheid of gender". Thus, the question to which the present study seeks an answer is whether, in post-synod times, the bishops are taking any action to rectify gender discrimination in their respective countries and dioceses.

This article is a sequel to my Masters and doctoral dissertation and thesis respectively. In the former (*Christ the ancestor: Shona Christianity and the roots for feminist liberative praxis*, 2000), I argued that Shona culture and the gospel contain the roots or seeds of the liberation of women. In the latter (*An incarnational Christology set in the context of narratives of Shona women in present day Zimbabwe*, 2002), I endeavoured to include the voice of women at the table of theological discourse. The analysis and synthesis presented in this article is structured according to the six-stage scheme for consciousness-raising and conversion devised by Gaylor and Fitzpatrick (1987), which consists of the "no big deal", the "eye-opening", the "on the fence", the "coming home", the "passion" or "appropriation," and the "acceptance/appropriation/incorporation" stages. In the present context, advocacy concerning the moving of women from the periphery to the centre of church life (and thus their inclusion in aspects such as worship, decision-making and theological discourse) will entail becoming passionately conscious on the part of women. Church leadership, in turn, will have to pay

sincere attention to the question of the inclusion of women in all sectors of church life.

## 2 THE “NO BIG DEAL” STAGE

Characteristic of the “no big deal” stage in the present context is the trivialisation, by both overt and subtle means, of the problem of the patriarchal marginalisation of women in the Church. As Malone (1996:367) notes, this takes the form of denial of the problem, and constitutes a dilemma in which both men and women, the holders of power and the marginalised, the oppressors and the oppressed, are caught up. While patriarchy may offer men a means of retaining power, women have come to internalise the dominant culture, to the extent of scarcely being aware of their marginalisation.

Language is a powerful tool in enabling or disabling the intentional becoming of women in the Church. Being gender conscious, I often falter on reading from androcentric texts such as the Bible, the Prayer of the Church, and liturgical lectionaries in the Roman Catholic Church. Concerning the trivialisation of the problem, women themselves are among the worst offenders. I have heard women admit to accepting “man,” “mankind,” “brethren,” “sons of God,” “he,” “his” and “him” as being inclusive of both genders - this while women are subsumed by or no more than shadows of men. In similar vein, a woman who discusses inclusive ways of being Church is either labelled a feminist (with the term being used pejoratively), or asked whether she wants to become a priest.

A marked lack of gender-consciousness is discernable among members of the clergy in their ministry in Zimbabwe. For instance, a young priest saying Mass in the community of religious women of which I am a member on one occasion exhorted us to “[p]ray, brethren, that our sacrifice may be acceptable to God.” More distressing even than this, however, was a remark made by a priest on the occasion of the revision of the lectionaries for the liturgy by a commission from a diocese. The commission consisted of priests only. When it was pointed out to the priest in question that women needed to be involved in this exercise, especially with regard to the use of inclusive language, he responded that this was unnecessary, as women do not officiate in Mass. Women fulfilled a perfectly adequate role in the home, he concluded, where they could cook and look after the house.

Women in the Roman Catholic Church feel most excluded from the heart of the Church during the Holy Week services. During the Maundy Thursday Christ Mass, the priests celebrate the ordained ministry, which does not include women. During the evening service of Holy Thursday, the ritual of the washing of feet is observed, for which most churches seek twelve men. Even a community of nuns will take pains to look for twelve men (even small boys may be included among the twelve, but never a girl or woman) – yet Jesus set the example by washing the feet of his disciples to emphasise the concept of service assigned to all believers, both women and men. There should be inclusive ways of exemplifying this Christian concept.

In the Easter vigil mass readings on Holy Saturday, particularly of the accounts of the flight from the Egyptians and the crossing of the Red Sea dry shod, most lectionaries rely on the edition of the Jerusalem Bible that speaks of the “sons of Israel”, even though the Revised Standard Version, which uses the inclusive “people of Israel”, could quite easily be used. The women or daughters of Israel were certainly present with the men at this important occasion of deliverance, as confirmed in Exodus 15:20-21, where we read of Miriam, the prophetess, leading the paean.

That gender discrimination in the Roman Catholic Church is considered “no big deal” is further evident from the encyclical *Ordinatio sacerdotalis*, in which Pope John Paul II (1994b:8.239) speaks of the need to respect the “feminine genius” in all aspects of civil society. He advocates the elimination of every form of discrimination against women from the workplace, from culture and from politics, yet stops short of mentioning the Church, creating the impression that discrimination against women is happening everywhere *but* within the Church. Moreover, the Synod fathers find nothing wrong in speaking *for* and *about* women, *without* women. All of these examples illustrate a lack of introspection and self-criticism concerning the need to renew Church structures in order to foster inclusiveness.

### 3 THE “EYE-OPENING” STAGE

Malone (1996:368) explains that during the “eye-opening” stage, people begin to see and feel uncomfortable about injustices. This stage offers a “*kairos* moment” in which to seize the opportunity and claim responsibility in a process of transformation concerning the dignity and role of women in the church. Knitter provides the following useful explanation of the concept of *kairos*: “a ‘kairos’ is not just a situation; it is also an opportunity, and in fact, a burden of responsibility is laid into the recognition of this ‘kairos’” (Knitter in Hill, Knitter & Madges 1990:18).

Awakenings to the equal dignity of women and men include the acknowledgement of the God-given creation and baptismal dignity of the *imago Dei/Christi* (the equality of believers through Christian baptism). In consciousness-raising, both women and men must take cognizance of the fact that the equality of believers, translating into shared and equal participation of women and men in all aspects of church life, is according to God’s will. Holistic truths of faith are inclusive of the experiences, reflections and articulations of both women and men – all of creation remembers, reveals and reflects the Creator (Chittister 1998:7). Thus, the concept of the historical development of revelation is open to both women and men.

The equality of believers is consonant with God’s and thus Christ’s mission (Lk. 4:18f.; Is. 61:2). Woman as a social category suffers anthropological poverty and represents all oppressed groups. In Christ Jesus, all barriers of race or ethnicity, social status and gender have been dissolved (Gal 3:28). In the *Abba-adelphoi* relationship we have all become brothers and sisters - children of the same Father. Thus, in the new dispensation in Christ, women as well as men dream dreams of the new humanity in Christ. In terms of this perspective, women want to be part of the decision concerning which vehicle

to travel in, and not simply to jump onto an already moving patriarchal bandwagon (Kanyoro 1998:24). In his conduct and attitude towards women, Christ advocated a community of equal discipleship. Christ had both men and women disciples. The highest vindication of women by Jesus is seen in the fact that women (in the person of Mary Magdalene) were the first to witness to the good news of the resurrection.

Ruether (1993:156) claims that Jesus introduced social iconoclasm, a view that is supported by numerous Gospel examples. In responding to the common patriarchal claim that the primary role of women is biological motherhood, also stated as a sort of compliment by a woman in the words, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breast that you sucked" (Mk. 11:27), in stating "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it," Jesus emphasised that membership of the community of faith is a free response of faith. Christ was counter-cultural in affirming the dignity and vocation of women, and he moreover endorsed the right of women to be taught something not always approved of in rabbinic circles (Erickson 1991:581). A practical illustration is to be found in the story of Martha and Mary (Lk. 10:38-42): Martha, unlike Mary, adopts the traditional feminine role in offering hospitality to Jesus, while Mary is seen learning (theology) at his feet, a position, Erickson points out, that mirrors that occupied by Jewish males, who learnt the Torah at the feet of a rabbi.

The kenotic counter-cultural Christ healed and affirmed the woman who was culturally deemed ritually unclean (Lk. 8:43-48), and advocated symmetry of responsibility of both men and women for the sin of adultery (Mt. 5:27-28, 31-32). Nasimuyu-Wasike (1991 in Schreiter 1997:73-74) and Erickson (1991:584) view Christ as an egalitarian teacher who used both female and male imagery, particularly in twin parables of the Kingdom or reign of God (Lk. 15:4-7, 8-10; Mt. 13:31-32, 33).

Concerning the authorisation of male priesthood by Jesus, the same proof texts are cited in arguments both for and against the ordination of women. Yet Jesus left no blueprint for the organisation of Church structures, and the gospel contains no plan for ordination to the priesthood as we know it today. As Raming (1980:34) notes, the Gospels contain no evidence of any explicit and deliberate act of Jesus indicating that he wished to restrict priestly vocation to men. On the contrary, church office was understood strictly as service. There is thus no theological justification for the exclusion of women from priesthood.

The treatment of the subject of women in Church and society in the *Lineamenta* of the African Synod of Bishops held in Rome in 1994 constitutes a practical example of "eye-opening" for Roman Catholic Church leadership in Africa, including Zimbabwe. Women in the Roman Catholic Church in Zimbabwe are a force to be reckoned with, yet they participate purely on the margins, a fact acknowledged by the then Bishop of Gokwe, Zimbabwe (at the time of writing Bishop of Masvingo) on this occasion when he stated that "rural women are the back-bone of their parishes and communities. Without them the Church would surely fail in its evangelising mission". Bishop L Agboka of Benin expressed a similar sentiment when he observed that "the church is

worth what a woman is” (Njue 1995:4). Women pay the majority of pastoral visits to the sick and dying. They are the main caregivers, particularly in the context of the HIV and AIDS pandemic. Thus women respondents to questionnaires administered as part of my research expressed their dissatisfaction concerning the appropriation of the healing ministry by the ordained priesthood, and asked why the holy oils are not given to lay people who are believers for use in ministering to the sick.

Shona women respondents who participated in my doctoral research also confirmed the existence of what Bishop Harold de Jong of Ndola, Zambia called the “apartheid of gender” in the church (Njue 1995:4), claiming that: “There is no equality in the Church between men and women”; “The equality of women to men is not fully recognised, and for example, women are denied some positions of authority”; “There is no equality of believers in the Church. I feel God is MALE due to the unequal treatment of male and female parishioners”; “In the Roman Catholic Church in particular, it is (the Papal Magisterium) priests, bishops and the Pope who make decisions”. The majority of respondents belonging to the Roman Catholic Church in Zimbabwe were aggrieved at being barred from the ordained priesthood, and, in consequence, from church offices associated with ordained ministry.

As regards the Papal Magisterium and Episcopal Synods, as a Zimbabwe woman member of the Roman Catholic Church, I have observed with alarm that the Church, which should take the lead in liberating women, is replicating the Shona *dare* (decision-making body), in which women traditionally have “ears and no mouth”. As Keane (1988:10) points out, in the Synods men speak *for, about* and *without* women. If present at all in the Synods, women are no more than observers or *auditores*: as in the *dare*, women in the Roman Catholic Church have “ears and no mouth”.

Bishop John Njue of Embu, Kenya (Njue 1995:3) states that the *Lineamenta* of the Synod of African Bishops specified that women *auditores* participate in the *circuli minores* so that their contributions *may* (emphasis mine) be taken into account in the final document of the Synod. Unfortunately, it would be correct to say that, as a result of male censorship, in the final document, some, if not the majority, of women’s voices will not be heard.

That being said, there is always a discrepancy between theory and practice, and between words and deeds. It has been demonstrated that Church leaders acknowledge the existence of the apartheid of gender in the Church, and the fact that it is to the disadvantage of women. It has also been stated that, although some women are aware of being sidelined in the Church, women generally take little or no action to liberate themselves. This inertia on the part of both Church leaders and women themselves is accounted for by the “on the fence” stage in consciousness-raising.

#### 4 THE “ON THE FENCE” STAGE

Malone explains that during the “on the fence” stage, people remain ambivalent. There is a hesitancy or lack of courage to speak out or stand for the truth. The status quo is also protected in subtle ways. In my view, the

reluctance of the male Church leadership to introduce inclusive paradigms is attributable to the fact that men enjoy the privilege of power accorded to them by patriarchal structures in both Church and society, and are unwilling to forfeit it. In this I echo Shantz (1995:7), who notes that men have a vested interest in maintaining patriarchal structures in Church and society. In his view, men enjoy social power and fear being "lone wolves" in a strongly patriarchal church, fearing being labelled feminists or effeminate, and fearing competition with equally competent women for jobs; therefore, unless men find emotionally satisfying solutions to some of these issues, they may be reluctant to speak out in support of gender equality. Moreover, fear of reprimand by a conservative bishop makes some clergy ambivalent and protective of the status quo. To cite an example of precisely this: a priest describes his humiliation when, having had altar girls ready for Mass, he was told by his visiting local bishop that the girls should remove their vestments and should not serve at Mass.

An important reason for stagnation in affirming the dignity and mission of women in the Church is the internalisation by women of patriarchy to the extent that they collude with patriarchy and subvert their personhood in subtle ways. For example, women usually vote men onto the Parish Council where they could vote for women, and women religious often choose priests as spiritual directors and retreat givers. Furthermore, women are paralysed with fear concerning changing the status quo relating to ways of being Church. In the Roman Catholic Church, this is exacerbated by the fact that, as mentioned previously, the question of women priests is not open to debate.

The discrepancy between theory and practice as it relates to the inclusion of women in the centre of church life is further reflected in the fact that Church declarations of intent as contained in papal encyclicals, synods and councils (in particular Vatican II), are far from being matched with practice.

The Synod left it up to the various dioceses to determine how best to implement changes concerning affirming women as equal participants in the priestly ministry. These changes included involving women religious in the formation of priests in universities and seminaries, appointing women as spiritual directresses and Ministers of the Eucharist, and having women read and briefly expound the Word, that is, the first and second readings from the Old Testament and from the books of the New Testament other than the Gospels, respectively. This last is a prerogative of the priest in the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, in practical terms it would appear that at best there is tokenism, and that at worst, under the leadership of African bishops of Zimbabwe, church praxis demonstrates regression as regards the inclusion of women in the centre of church life. To quote Oduyoye, it would appear that the bishops' deliberation on women at the Synod is no more than a "smoke screen that dissipates on closer examination" (Oduyoye 1995:180).

It has been the practice in some dioceses, particularly Masvingo and Gweru, for women and lay people in general to take part in reading and preaching the Word as mentioned above in the Sunday liturgy. Unfortunately, for some unclear reasons supposedly contained in a directive from Rome, the practice of having the laity (including women) explain the Word has been stopped.

That this is regrettable is made abundantly clear when one listens to the women preach, for example at a wedding ceremony: one is struck by the mediation quality of experience, as older couples display great talent and breathe life into the much-needed exhortation given to the new couple, and on occasion, women outshine men in preaching. In this regard, a participant in my research responded: "The church should accept women leadership and in so doing, appreciate what the women can give."

Pope John Paul II, in his *Letter to women* (1995), underscores this view by urging the church to utilise what he called the "feminine genius," women's gifts or talents. However, his postulation of the feminine genius is in itself insufficient to affirm the full humanity and vocation of women in the Roman Catholic Church. In giving women a womb-shaped vocation, Pope John Paul II subscribes to biological reductionism (Caldecott 1996:76); women are accorded biological and spiritual motherhood and the feminine genius is acknowledged in women's capacity to affirm life - yet this does not take women to the centre of church life.

## 5 THE "COMING HOME" STAGE

According to Malone (1996:369), the "coming home" stage involves viewing the status quo in a new light; experiences that were previously regarded as normal are now evaluated somewhat differently. In the context of the present discussion, this entails the making public of various issues integral to affirming the full dignity and humanity of women in the Church. Individuals or groups recognise the sin of patriarchy in the church for what it is and are uncomfortable with the ensuing cognitive dissonance; the patriarchy observed in the church is recognised as not being in accordance with God/Christ's salvific mission and is acknowledged as the cause of distorted gender relationships.

In terms of the natural order (order of creation), men and women are said to be equal but different. In sacramental patriarchal ecclesiology, men and women are said to play complementary roles, which is generally accepted as justification for the differentiation into the male vocation of priesthood and the female vocation of motherhood. Thus, denying women sacramental representation is an indirect way of denigrating their full humanity in God/Christ. Man is seen as the norm for full humanity, and woman is not.

At issue here is whether true partnership of men and women in mission is possible in a situation where the concept of "equal but different" is used to justify hegemonic structures. I believe it is not. The concept of "equal but different" is valid only when difference is welcomed for its power to enrich the faith community rather than taken to signal inferiority, and therefore employed as an instrument of marginalisation and exclusion of the other.

In the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici* (1994a, par. 51), Pope John Paul II assigns women in particular, and the laity in general, a collaborative role in the priestly ministry, with the homily and the administration of sacraments remaining a priestly preserve. Laymen have reclaimed the role of deacon in the ordained ministry design, but women have not. Similarly, according to the *Codex Iuris Canonici* (1983), laymen have

reclaimed the so-called non-sacramental lower ordinations of lector and acolyte. In the common priesthood of believers, women and men can share the marginal roles of catechist and caregiver (praying for and with the sick). Here complementation, in response to the prevailing concern about the shortage of priests in Zimbabwe, means the filling of gaps. In such cases, women and laymen may act as Extraordinary Ministers of the Eucharist, with bishops and priests holding the office of Ordinary Minister. Within the present endeavour to affirm the full dignity and vocation of women in the Roman Catholic Church, the shortage of priests may be seen as a *kairos* moment – a sign of the times illustrating the urgency of the need for the full admission of women to the centre of church life.

The engagement of women in gender issues concerning theology, Church and society is a powerful step in consciousness-raising and conversion. In hermeneutics of suspicion, re-membrance, proclamation and active actualisation, women may draw inspiration and support from reclaiming the history/her-story of their foremothers and fore-sisters in the Bible. Ruether (1990) discusses the conscious appropriation of the stories of biblical women such as Miriam, Deborah, Abigail, Judith, Esther, Ruth, Mary the Mother of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Priscilla and Junia as a powerful tool in raising the consciousness of women and encouraging them to cast off the shackles of patriarchy in the Church, and exposes male failure to acknowledge women as equal partners in prophetic advocacy as a blind spot on the patriarchal lens.

Women must be made aware that the Bible as God's Word in human words bears the stamp of patriarchy. Male biblical writers tended to highlight their own experiences at the expense of those of women. As Schüssler-Fiorenza (1984:xvi-xvii) remarks with regard to consciousness-raising, the Bible must be viewed not as a normative, immutable archetype, but as a historical prototype for structuring models for emancipatory praxis for both women and men in the Church. This awareness is what underlies the task of "digging up our fore-mothers" (cf. Landman 1996) and fore-sisters, whose voices have been muted or even silenced.

A practical example is in order here. Women participants in my research conducted in search of a Shona women's incarnational narrative Christology jointly explored a Shona women's re-visioning, or re-membrance (cf. Greek: *anamnēsia*), of the story of the matriarch, Rachel, in Genesis 35:18, which reads:

And as her soul was departing (for she died), she called his name **Benioni** (Hebrew: Son of my Sorrow); but his father called his name Benjamin (Hebrew: Son of my Right Hand or Son of the South). So Rachel died ...

The women took issue with the male bias in this passage, and agreed that in the Shona context, Benjamin would appropriately be called *Marufu* (The One Who Brought Death) or *Musiwa* (The Bereaved One), since Rachel actually died in labour.

The maleness ascribed to God/Christ is a stumbling block for an inclusive paradigm of Church. In the reification of God as male, the God symbol is monopolised by the clergy, and *man* becomes the norm for full humanity. The action of making the symbol of the male God synonymous with power undergirds the hierarchical male church in which men are definers of codes and women are neurotic consumers. At issue is the concept of the contingency of particularity as trajectory of the Incarnation.

Concerning the concept of the contingency of particularity, Carr (1992:132) comments that we can appeal to the patristic adage, "What was not assumed was not saved." Thus we see in the Roman Catholic Church, which denies women sacramental representation, not only the reification of God as male, but also the failure to recognise that in the incarnation God in Christ took on human nature as both female and male. If Christ took on the full humanity of both women and men, the corollary is that the historical, biological and ethnic provenance of Jesus of Nazareth is contingent. In other words, we cannot absolutise the maleness of Jesus in as much as we cannot absolutise his racial and historical affinities. In this context feminist theologians are emphatic that we are not saved by the *maleness* of Christ. Thus, Ruether (1993:116-138) poses an incisive question, "Can a male Saviour save women?" In other words, Ruether (1996:346) states with emphasis that in the contingency of particularity, Jesus represents *humanity*, not *maleness*.

## 6 THE "PASSION" STAGE

In a hermeneutic of suspicion and engagement, prophetic witness is the hallmark of the culmination of consciousness-raising regarding the dignity and vocation of women in the Roman Catholic Church in liberative praxis. Prophetic witness and dialogue between men and women constitute an opportunity for dreaming dreams for the new humanity in Christ. Tamez (2001:57), subscribing to the Old Testament prophetic paradigm, explains that "[a] vision or dream is a response to a state of affairs with which we are deeply dissatisfied, and which we want to change". The "passion" stage of consciousness-raising thus highlights the influence that orthodoxy and orthopraxis exercise on one another; during this stage, theory is accompanied by action.

According to Malone (1996:369), this is an integrated stage involving both head and heart. She explains that individuals and groups are challenged to enliven their dispassionate discourses with some emotion, such as anger at instances of oppression and injustice. Efforts are made to break impasses and allay fears. Here, Malone upholds the Christian understanding of *orgē theoû* (the wrath of God) as an element of divine justice. She adds that the challenge is to go beneath the words to get to the energy of the emotions, and that only when stories of personal experience and emotional responses to the problem are shared can there be any movement in the Church toward some deeper conscious awareness.

Malone (1996:370-371) views passion and acceptance as synonymous with conversion. She describes conversion as a seeing with new eyes, and warns that continuing to support or collude with oppressive structures is wrong or sinful. The challenge lies in detecting the pattern of oppression in individuals

or groups, not only in cases where they oppress, but also in cases where they are themselves oppressed. People need to realise that it is very easy for the oppressed to become oppressors in other circumstances, and unless there is a conscious intention to break the cycle of oppression, it is likely to continue. Spiritual conversion calls the Church to live the gospel in a radical way, such that there can be true love, forgiveness and reconciliation. Conversion of this nature is counter-cultural (Malone 1996:370).

Conversion (*metanoia*) to the affirmation of the full humanity of women as well as men in the Church takes note of mutual partnership, celebrates difference, and fosters dialogic or reciprocal relationships between men and women in the Church. Ruether (1993:153-164) makes a distinction between the male and female journey in *metanoia*; in this process, both men and women need to grapple with sins specific to their gender within the exclusive paradigm of being Church.

Prophetic witness to the affirmation of the dignity of women in Church and society is evident in the encyclical of Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in terris* (1963:19, par. 41), in which he identifies the liberation of women as one of the signs of the times to be taken seriously by the Church. Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Mulieris dignitatem* (1988:3-4), acknowledges this *kairos* moment as follows:

The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of women is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and power never hitherto achieved. That is why at this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation, women imbued with a spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid humanity in not falling.

In the subsequent Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Christifideles laici*, Pope John Paul II (1994a:7.216-217) promulgated that:

Without discrimination women should participate in the life of the Church and also in consultation and the decision-making process ... (Women) ought to be associated in the preparation of pastoral and missionary documents and ought to be recognized as co-workers in the mission of the Church, in the family, in professional life and in civil communities.

Other passionate prophetic voices concerning the dignity and vocation of women in the Roman Catholic Church in Vatican II belonged to Jean Danielou and Archbishop Paul Hallinan of Atlanta (Mitchell 1991:543). Danielou is quoted as follows:

I am partisan to the idea that the Council authorize the ordination of deaconesses without delay, indeed before the end of the Council. As for the eventual female priesthood, there is no basic theological objection to it.

Archbishop Paul Hallinan filed an intervention at Vatican II for the immediate acceptance of women into the ministries of lector, acolyte and deacon, as well as the full and equal representation of women in the Congregation of Religious and the commission for the revision of Canon Law.

While ministerial priesthood and therefore the entry of women into the papal Magisterium (church governance) is a subject not open to debate, in 2004, Pope John Paul II took unprecedented action in appointing two women to the International Theological Commission (ITC) and one to lead one of the three primary pontifical academies in Rome, namely the Pontifical Council Academy for Social Sciences, which advises the Vatican on social policies. The ITC, a body of not more than 30 theologians, has the task of advising the Holy See and the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith on important doctrinal questions. From the perspective of the present discussion concerning taking women to the centre of church life, the criticism may be voiced that pontifical academies, which are advisory, are different from curial dicasteries, which execute policy, are full-time, and reside in Rome (a small step for women 2004). Thus, an important challenge in the Vatican's commitment to incorporate women in all sectors of church life lies in the appointment of women thinkers to commissions that may question and criticise some of Rome's unexamined assumptions.

## **7 THE "ACCEPTANCE/APPROPRIATION/INCORPORATION" STAGE**

The crux of consciousness-raising is passionate appropriation that transforms the lives of both women and men in the Church. Prophetic witness urges believers to strive with passion for justice. We begin to see the integration of theory and praxis in a move towards an inclusive Church that affirms the full humanity and dignity of all people, women as well as men. Both women and men can dream dreams for the new humanity in Christ, and we can begin to see this translated into daily Christian life.

In passionate appropriation of the full humanity and vocation of women in the Church, there is an urgent need for dialogue with women. As Knitter (in Hill, Knitter & Madges 1990:193-195) points out, the requirements for authentic dialogue are: (a) equality of partners in dialogue that takes account of the fact that holistic truths of faith include the experiences, reflections and articulations of both women and men, (b) awareness that God is part of the dialogue, and thus that God inspires all people, also concerning the concept of historical progression of revelation, (c) the awareness that truth can be discovered only if partners engaging in dialogue are as honest as possible, each listening to the other as open mindedly as possible, (d) the awareness that dialogue includes agreements and disagreements, all of which are engaged in respectfully and carefully, and (e) openness and willingness to change.

In the Roman Catholic in Zimbabwe, there is a need to listen to women's experiences, and women need to feel that they have been heard and have made a contribution to the life of the Church. These outcomes can be achieved through the incorporation of women in the teaching and decision-making bodies of the Church. In passionate appropriation of the dignity and

vocation of women in the Church in Zimbabwe today, I propose that the dialogue of study be engaged in as a matter of urgency.

The Church's dialogue of study with women is necessitated by the understanding that education is power, and by the observation not only that positions of leadership in the Church have been appropriated by men, but also that the practice of theology displays inequality. Both women and men are necessary for the purposes of theology and being Church. Zimbabwean women theologians are few in number, and for some theology is a second profession. Theology has for a long time been viewed as a male preserve, and specifically as the preserve of male seminarians in preparation for ordained ministry.

Certainly there are men and women whose task it is to engage in equal partnership with priests in pastoral work. But unless efforts are made to narrow the gap in theological training, the relationship will remain vertical or pyramidal rather than becoming a horizontal or lateral one founded on gender equality.

There is a need for the Roman Catholic Church in Zimbabwe to provide a forum for theological reflection upon women's experience. There is simultaneously a need for ecclesial doctrine that is congruent with the growing self-identity of women. Women and men must unite against all forms of marginalisation and to ensure that gender concerns become human concerns. If the Church takes dialogue with women seriously, exclusively male theological institutions will soon cease to exist. Research needs to be done into providing literature or study materials that unearth female images of the deity in God-language. Women theologians must become involved in the revision and translation of the Bible and liturgical guides and in fostering inclusive God-language.

As the dimension absent from the centre of male-dominated theology, women studying theology will offer a view from the margins. As Ackermann (1997:67) observes, the view from the margins recognises the places of exclusion and pain because it knows them and sees where the core has gone soft.

In the dialogue of study, women require expert assistance in achieving self-awareness and self-fulfilment as they become aware of the covert and overt means and forms of oppression in the Church. It is my sincere hope that the research I have conducted at Honours, Masters and Doctoral level into the mediation of a Shona women's Christology or theology has constituted an opportunity for the conscientisation of both women and men concerning equality and true partnership in both Church and society.

Passion/acceptance/appropriation and incorporation of women in the dialogue of study in Zimbabwe currently finds expression in the work of the Jesuits in initiating women as spiritual directresses of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. The Jesuits have also begun in a small way to incorporate women in theological discourse by including them in their philosophical/theological institutions as teaching personnel and students, and would welcome women religious students in greater numbers. It is now up to women religious leaders

to respond more positively to this offer. The Jesuits are reportedly responding favourably to the Jesuit General Congregation document entitled “Jesuits and the situation of women in church and society” (GC34). Terroni (1998) comments that they are thus acknowledging the situation of women in Church and society not as a peripheral issue, but as basic to divine justice and, therefore, to the mission of the Church.

As a passion for affirming the full humanity of women is thus coming to receive priority in public space such as synods, councils and chapters of religious congregation, I have pleasure in reporting that, in my own congregation, the Congregatio Jesu, founded by Mary Ward (1585-1645), the two most recent General Congregations, GC93 and GC2002, gave priority to the empowerment of women in Church and society.

In the Roman Catholic Church in Zimbabwe, theological colleges such as the Arrupe Jesuit School of Philosophy (Associate College of the University of Zimbabwe and the Gregorian University in Rome) and Holy Trinity College (which is seeking Associate College status from the Catholic University of East Africa) have opened their doors to women. Diocesan seminaries, however, may be reflecting the conservative attitudes of the bishops in not accepting women students.

Surprisingly, the response from women’s religious orders in the country has been very poor. Women are not availing themselves of this opportunity to engage at the table of theological discourse for a number of reasons, both subtle and overt. One obvious reason is that women religious engaged in pastoral work are poorly remunerated. The same applies to professional religious teaching in seminaries. The Sunday collection benefits only the priests, and women religious therefore need well-paid employment if they are to earn a living.

Through gender consciousness networking among church groups we may soon see, for example, a Gender Desk alongside the existing Education, Health, and Justice and Peace Desks as the Church’s option for the poor and marginalised of society. In Zimbabwe there is a joint body for women and men religious leaders, which allows women and men to share expertise on leadership and demonstrate solidarity in their experience of the joys and problems of religious life and the Church’s mission.

Once women gain an insight into the overt and subtle ways of patriarchal marginalisation, they find the necessary courage to challenge Church leadership. The women who participated in the interviews and responded to the questionnaires during my doctoral research acquired a new Christian consciousness that calls the Church to account for disparities resulting in the exclusion and alienation of women, especially from the centre of church life. After having completed the questionnaires focused on women claiming their creation and baptismal dignity and vocation, and having participated in the Stations of the Cross on Good Friday, one of these women questioned the priest as to why the women did not take their turn to carry the heavy wooden cross. She reminded him that Christ’s disciples included both women and

men, and demanded successfully that both women and men be given the opportunity to participate equally in this important ritual.

## 8 CONCLUSION

Women in the Roman Catholic Church in Zimbabwe are not free. In this article, the sin of patriarchy was identified as eroding the creation and baptismal dignity of men and women. Although the Church contains the seeds of the liberation of both women and men, it nevertheless oppresses as it liberates. Patriarchy demonstrates historical developmental progression, and cannot be shown to be of God's will. However, as a corollary to this statement, this article has demonstrated that patriarchal structures in both Church and society have the potential for transformation. Consciousness-raising in conversion requires exposure of the overt and subtle ways in which men and women are entangled in the sin of patriarchy. Women, in particular, are caught in the patriarchal web through collusion, and therefore forfeit their personhood. Consciousness-raising subscribes strongly to the tenet of liberation theology dealing with the empowerment of women to be proactive agents of their own her-story.

It was shown in this article that people are at different stages of awareness concerning the problem of the marginalisation of women in the Roman Catholic Church in general, and the Roman Catholic Church in Zimbabwe in particular. The discussion was structured according to the six stages in consciousness-raising identified by Gaylor and Fitzpatrick, with due cognizance of the fact that the progression from one stage to the next is characterised by overlap and retrogression.

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