

**DOMINICAN SISTERS OF ST. CATHERINE OF SIENA, GUSAU, NIGERIA:
EXPERIENCE OF MINISTERING IN THE NORTH-WESTERN PART OF NIGERIA**

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Introduction

North-western Nigeria covers a total of nine (9) States, namely; Sokoto, Niger, Kebbi, Zamfara, Katsina, Kano, Jigawa, and Kaduna. It is a region that is blessed in terms of vastness of land which provides opportunity for engaging in agricultural projects especially in the large production of grains for which the area is known. It is also a region that is very passionate about religion and religious practices. Being predominantly Islamic it retains an atmosphere of strict Islamic ethics which gives an impression that people of other religious affiliations are either lackadaisically tolerated or totally unwelcomed. In spite of this reality, people of different religious beliefs have continued to co-exist in this region and engage with one another although sadly in mutual distrust especially in recent times. This is the region where the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena, Gusau, Nigeria, were founded over forty years ago, and where most of their communities are sited.

The Dominican Sisters: A brief history

In 1956, at the invitation of the Dominican Fathers of the Province of St. Albert the Great, USA to work in the then Sokoto Prefecture, the Dominican Sisters of Great Bend, Kansas, USA missioned three Sisters to Gusau to respond to the need for a Christian presence, and to carry out the most needed work of evangelization, healthcare and education in that region. These Sisters expended their youthful energies in these ministries. They established clinics/maternity in Gusau, Malumfashi, and Yelwa-Yauri (now Kontagora Vicariate). This was at a time when Nigeria was far from what it is today. The Sisters delivered healthcare services both at the clinics and in homes as at this time many of the rural dwellers thought that going to the hospital meant going to die. So rather than meet the Sisters at the dispensary/hospital for treatment and delivery of babies, the Sisters went to their homes for such services. They also engaged the rural women in skill acquisition programs.

After many years of strictly engaging in evangelization, medical and educational ministries, the Sisters saw the need to start an indigenous foundation of Dominican Sisters to assist them and to continue the ministries when they return to the United States of America. In 1966, six young women who were recruited as “preps” (preparatory to Secondary School) were sent to a Secondary School started by these Great Bend Dominican missionaries at Amakohia, Ikeduru in the present day Imo State at the invitation of Bishop Whelan of Owerri diocese. Unfortunately, this first attempt of training indigenous young women who would later become Dominican Sisters was interrupted as in October 1967, the Sisters at Amakohia who almost got trapped in the Nigeria/Biafran crises left the country at the last minute and as a result were not allowed entry when they wanted to return. That school was taken over by the then East Central State government soon after the civil war.

The Catholic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life

Vol. 11, 2015. ISSN: 2659-0301 (Online) 1597 6610 (Print)

In 1973, a fresh move was made to start again the establishment of an indigenous Dominican Community. Two young women were received as postulants in 1973. The fresh move of any worthwhile venture, however well planned initially, always carries with it its difficulties, hardships, uncertainties, and sometimes seeming failure. It was no less so for this community in its nascent stage as it had to face the challenges of seeking appropriate recognition both from Church and State for its survival. In 1977 the community had the first profession of its members. Growth came in trickles at that early stage in that first professions were not had every year. However, from 1982 things took a different turn. There were first professions yearly, sometimes even twice a year. It is so to this day.

The growth of the Congregation is evident in the presence the Congregation has registered in other Arch/Dioceses within Nigeria and beyond. So far the Sisters are ministering in the Catholic Archdioceses of Abuja and Jos, Issele-uku, Lokoja and Makurdi Dioceses and Kontogora Vicariate; the Archdiocese of Chicago and the Diocese of Denver USA; the Diocese of St George's, Grenada and the Diocese of Mampong, Ghana In these different ecclesiastical jurisdictions, the Sisters minister the love of Christ to all through the education, health, pastoral/grassroots evangelisation and social work apostolates.

Initial challenges faced by the Congregation

Like all other missionaries whose institutions were taken over by the Nigerian Government in the 1970s, the Dominican Sisters grappled with the challenge of the closure of their clinics and dispensaries in Gusau (now Zamfara State), Malumfashi (now Katsina State) and Yelwa-Yauri (now Kebbi State). Apart from the dispensary in Malumfashi which was later re-opened, the other two were never returned to the Sisters. The take-over of these institutions called for an "aggiornamento" - a reorientation of ministries and apostolates. The traditional ministries and the mode of running them had to be revisited. The sisters then played the role of "presence" among the majority Muslim community by working in government-owned hospitals and schools and offering literacy, hygiene and handicraft programmes to the less privileged rural women regardless of their creedal belief.

The Congregation was also faced with the challenge of a concerted effort by the Local Government to claim the property on which the administrative and formation house are located. From 1976 until 2013, the wall of the property could not be completed due to the Local Government's insistence on occupying the property within the Motherhouse premises on which the dispensary and maternity were located.

Present day Experience of ministering in the North-western part of Nigeria

The Dominican Sisters' presence in northwestern Nigeria for over fifty years has not been uneventful. Since life is said to be a combination of the good, the bad and the ugly, so has been the experience of the Congregation. Armed with the mission statement of her foundation, which is focused on being a Christian presence in northern Nigeria and ministering the love of God especially to youth and marginalized women, the Congregation has evolved through her many challenges which have enabled her to fashion out more creative ways of staying faithful to her mission.

n. Refusing to be deterred by the take-over of her institutions, the Congregation again ventured into opening of schools and engaging in the running of health institutions as well as offering social services in favor of the poor and marginalized. Her overall objective of being a Christian presence has also got her involved in pastoral activities of different kinds.

Positive Experiences

Being a predominantly Islamic environment that is barely tolerant of other religions, one would expect that the Muslim community in these northwestern areas where the Sisters are present will be unwilling to engage with the Sister. On the contrary, however, the opposite has been the experience of the Sisters as observed in the following areas:

- ***Utilizing services rendered by Sisters:*** There is usually high turn out from the Muslims community in the use of the education and health services rendered by the Sisters. We record a situation of up to sixty percent of Muslim students in a good number of schools run by Sisters. Many Muslim families would want their wards to attend mission schools not just for the academic excellence it offers but also for the moral formation in character which the students receive. In the same way the health institutions run by the Sisters are attended by a good number of Muslims especially women. These have resulted from the confidence which they have come to develop in the quality of the services rendered by the Sisters and in the unbiased way these services are given.
- ***Respect for the being of Sisters:*** In spite of religious sentiments, the average Muslim has profound respect for the Sisters even though they do not quite understand the concept of consecrated celibacy (reason why one should not marry). Some have interpreted it as “masu kin maza” (people who hate/deny men) and Sisters are described in such words. However, the idea of setting oneself apart for the sake of the Kingdom evokes awe and respect in their Muslim neighbours.
- ***Appreciation of the works of the Sisters:*** A good number of Muslims appreciate the charitable works done by Sisters to improve the lives of people irrespective of their religious affiliation. Although there has been instances where such charitable outreach were refused due to suspicions that they are targeted at converting Muslims to Christianity, a good number of those who have been courageous enough to accept such offers have been very appreciative of them and even those who do not take the offer recognizes that they are helping to improve the lives of the beneficiaries.
- ***Likeness for the use of the religious garb:*** There is an appreciation of the fact that Sisters dress modestly. Wearing the habit especially the veil seems to resonate with the manner the Muslims expect their women to dress (use of the hijab). For this reason, they often comment that they wish all other Christian women would emulate the Sisters’ way of dressing.
- ***Friendliness:*** In spite of the hostility of the environment, some Muslims are very friendly

towards the Sisters. They not only pay visits to the Sisters at the convent, they also share gifts with them at festive seasons. A very good example of this is the Magaji Sabon Gari of Gusau who always visits the convent with his family on Christmas day, a day which happens to be the birthday of his wife, and the Sisters would celebrate with the family.

Also, the Emir of Gusau has, on occasions, sent gifts to the convent at festive seasons and the Sisters have also reciprocated such gestures of friendship by paying him visits and giving him gifts.

Negative Experiences

On a negative note, the experience of ministering in the northwestern part of Nigeria consists primarily in the consistent air of tension that the people of this region breathe. The uncertainty that greets each day in terms of not knowing what to expect, makes the daily life of the Sisters stressful. Apart from this, there are other factors that contribute to the Sisters feeling unwelcomed in this part of the country. Such include:

- The unjust way in which the Government especially at the Local Government level have treated the Sisters over the years in terms of the desperate efforts to take over properties belonging to the Sisters.
- Litigations against the Local government which the Sisters had to undertake as a last resort for getting back their piece of land at the Motherhouse and completing the fencing of the property after over fifty years of presence. Up till now, the staff of the Gusau Local Government still occupies the clinic within the premises of the Sisters' Motherhouse even after the court returned the ownership of the property to the Sisters. They have continued to operate this clinic and have refused to vacate the premises.
- Difficulty in acquiring land for developmental purposes. It is very difficult to acquire land directly as Sisters. We have always had to go through some individuals, sometimes Muslim individuals who purchased the land and later turn them over to the Sisters. This is the case with acquiring land for the building of a Secondary School which the Sisters began in 2011. This property has recently been taken over again by the State Government without any clear sign of compensation.
- Fear of what might happen to the Sisters at any time given the prevalent air of tension that is being witnessed in the north especially in recent years. There has been loud cry from the families and friends of the Sisters to relocate to other parts of the country for their safety and well-being. Responding to these suggestions have been quite challenging for the Sisters who are struggling between abandoning the Mission in favour of their safety and staying in the north at the expense of their lives.
- Effect of the crises in the north on vocations into the Congregation. This reality is becoming more worrisome as more and more young people are declining to come to the north to become religious. Even when the young women want to take this courageous step, their families do not accept their decision. This means less numbers in the formation houses the effect of which is crucial to the survival of the Congregation.

- Low income from ministries due to the fact that the people among whom the Sisters minister are mostly economically deprived. In recent times, many Christian families have moved to the southern part of the country as a result of the crises. This has also contributed to the decline in the support which the Sisters could receive for their upkeep.
- Subtle denial of basic rights such as acquiring land for places of worship, approval of education and health institutions without rigors, easy access to government facilities which are supposed to benefit all citizens, etc.

Conclusion

A reflection on the situation of northern Nigeria and what role women could play

Many people have reflected on the situation of northern Nigeria especially in recent times and have come to the conclusion that what is happening is the outcome of a calculated attempt by a few people to impose their personal agenda on this country at all cost and they seem to have succeeded in doing so under the guise of religion as we see in the way Imams and Pastors use their pulpits to incite violence, and in the brand of religious bigots such as Boko Haram that has hijacked the life of the nation. Archbishop Ignatius Kaigama of the Catholic Archdiocese of Jos noted that some religious leaders and preachers are “happily fanning the embers of religious hatred and encouraging followers to fight in defense of their faith. This presupposes that the God they serve is too weak to fight his cause.”¹ To this end, he observed that “we are in danger of passing on our religious traditions that are characterized by hate messages, negative propaganda, mutual suspicion and bitter opposition to the other person who holds different religious views and beliefs. Muslims fighting Christians or Christians fighting Muslims will never solve our social problems. It is only through concerted efforts and using the values of our two religions that we can bring peace, prosperity and progress to our State and nation.”¹

Islam and Christianity are not the only religions practiced in Nigeria, in fact, they are later arrivals on the scene of religious beliefs and practices in our country because before the advent of these religions, the native people of Nigeria already adhere to the traditional African religion. This religion was soon looked down upon as obsolete and representing anything else but true religion and worship. With the taking over of the stage by Islam and Christianity, what Nigeria has come to witness is what John Cardinal Onaiyekan referred to as laying claims “each to the exclusion of the other, to absolute superiority and exclusive universal legitimacy.”¹ This, he observed, “is a claim that was never made by any of the great religions of the past, which as cultural expressions of the religious instincts of their respective peoples, left room for different expressions among other people.”¹ The same feeling of superiority of these religions over the traditional religion is what is still being perpetuated between the two religions causing unnecessary rivalry, the result of which is the untold hardships unleashed on the populace.

The biggest challenge of northern Nigeria is religious fanaticism and extremism, which as mentioned above, has been employed in most cases to advance personal agenda by a few. Religious fanatics or extremists have zero tolerance for anything that is opposed to their view point including

The Catholic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life

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ng their own way of practicing religion thus they regard those who hold other religious views as bitter enemies that must be ostracized or eliminated altogether. This way of understanding religion is at variance with the right of every individual to hold and practice whatever religious beliefs they so wish. Every human being has a right to “practice a religion and the right to share that religion with others. The exercise of this right should have no territorial boundaries...”¹ It is the lack of understanding of this basic fact of freedom to adhere, practice and share with others whatever line of faith one chooses to toe, that has resulted in much violence across northern Nigeria for some years now. People have undertaken to fight for their God who has become too impotent to be able to fight his own course. They make inciting statements in Mosques and Churches in the name of defense of faith. Such unguided zeal as this is largely responsible for the many incidents of wanton loss of lives and properties across northern Nigeria as, for instance, we have recorded in the accounts of the Kaduna religious riot of 1987. The Christian youth at the end of their submission on this event stated, “we the Christian youths hereby reaffirm our commitment to the unity and peaceful co-existence of all citizens in Nigeria. We also wish to specially appeal to the Muslim youths in this nation to borrow a leaf from our self-control and peace loving nature. They must not allow themselves to be used by few ambitious, selfish and unpatriotic people to destroy our father-land. They should understand that silence does not necessarily mean cowardice.”¹

As we reflect on these experiences, we perhaps need to look at what role women of both faith extractions in northern Nigeria could play in order to contribute to bringing about promoting life and fostering peaceful co-existence in the region. Although, the situation of mutual suspicion among people of both religions does not exclude women, it is also a known fact that women have a natural way of enabling life. By the very fact of being mothers, they are, irrespective of what faith they profess, on the side of promoting life thus whatever endangers or takes away life affects them adversely. It is on this common ground that women in northern Nigeria must stand to contribute their quota to bringing about an end to violence in northern Nigeria. Sr. Kathleen McGarvey observed that within their common experience of everyday life issues, friendships among women of all faiths develop, “some of which withstand the distrust and tension resulting from the conflicts.”¹

This ability to bond as women, as mothers irrespective of religious affiliation is a fertile ground on which the seed of peaceful co-existence could be sown. Identifying and helping to cultivate and nurture such fertile ground is part of the challenges which the Dominican Sisters in northern Nigeria must grapple with in the face of the reality of the conflict in the north today. The decision to remain in ministry in northern Nigeria therefore, is not a decision to engage in a collective suicide mission or a vain desire to seek martyrdom at all cost as some who have questioned the rationale behind such decision may think. Rather it is coming from the understanding of mission as being sent with a specific message for a specific time. The specific message which the Dominican Sisters bring by their presence in the northwest of Nigeria today is the message of love for all God’s people without bias and the conviction that it is possible to co-exist in spite of our religious belief. It is not an easy task, it is not the most convenient place to be but it is an expression of the hope they have, that someday Nigeria will overcome her challenges and people of all tribes, cultures and religious adherence will once again live side by side each contributing his or her quota to making Nigeria the great nation that God intends it to be. It is this light of hope th

at the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena, Gusau, Nigeria, holds out for all Nigerians.

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