

# Be My Witnesses: The Vocation and Mission of Women in Church and Society Today

*A Pastoral Letter of the Catholic Bishops of Uganda-  
August 1996*

1. *This is a message addressed to you brothers and sisters in Christ and to all people of good will in Uganda. We greet you in the name of God the Creator and Father of all, and the Love of the Lord Jesus Christ our Liberator and Redeemer and in the unity of the Holy Spirit, our Teacher of the truth.*
2. Our message is on the vocation and mission of women in the church and in the Society today. It is on the women of all categories: wives and mothers, widows, single women, women leaders, women religious, young women, and little girls.

### 3. Occasion

In June 1992, we had for our Annual Study, the theme: "**THE ROLE OF CATHOLIC WOMEN IN THE CHURCH, THE FAMILY AND SOCIETY**". Women leaders organised and facilitated this study for us. It was a wonderful experience for all of us Bishops to hear from the women representatives, the joys and hopes, the visions and plans as well as the problems and difficulties, obstacles and anguishes catholic women find in their daily vocation and mission in the family, the church and society. It was from that enriching experience that we readily and gladly accepted the request of these women leaders to write a Pastoral Letter on the topic.

4. There is a new and strong awareness among women in our country in these recent years. The manner in which women have actively participated in the leadership of Resistance Councils at all levels and engaged in decision-making structures and organisations of our country has greatly impressed everyone. Their unprecedented contribution of views to the recent Constitution-making process has demonstrated beyond any doubt their capacity and their ardent yearning for full respect of their human dignity and equality. In this letter we want to support this vocal demand for justice and equal opportunities. We want to commend the efforts our government has made in this regard. It is with joy also that we note the wholesome provisions on women made in our recently enacted National Constitution. We only request the Government and parliament that, in implementing the Constitution, they make correspondingly good laws and statutes.
5. The International Community, especially since the early 1970s, has been very concerned about the plight of women all over the world, especially in our developing continents. It has highlighted the cultural, legal, religious and structural discrimination against women, the oppression of women in various circumstances and sectors of life, the poverty of rural women, the illiteracy of a large percentage of women, the absence of women in decision-making bodies and the marginalization of women in politics, economic development and community building.

There have been two important conventions organised by the United Nations for the purpose of rectifying the situation: there was the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in 1979 and the

6. During his recent Pastoral Visit to Uganda in February 1993, The Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, called on all Ugandan Women at Namugongo National Marytrs' Shrine to "**LET YOUR**

**VOICES BE HEARD, IN THE FAMILY AND SOCIETY".** This Pastoral Letter wants to point to the many sectors where Women's voices need to "be heard" and heeded.

## **SOURCES FOR UNDERSTANDING THE VOCATION AND MISSION OF WOMEN**

### **A. Biblical Teaching**

7. A deeper reading and study of the Word of God with contemporary eyes and realities clearly reveal that women both in the Old and New Testament played a leading and unique role in the Salvation History. Their virtues and courage, their struggles and successes stand out for women and men of all ages and cultures to imitate. Their contribution to the unity and growth of God's people and the witness of God's message was tremendous. There is the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of Jesus. We know her unique position. She is the first and most perfect believer, far above the Apostles. When dying, the Lord Jesus said to the apostle John: "This is your Mother" (*Jn 19:26*), thereby declaring Her the Mother of us all. We know the other outstanding women mentioned in the New Testament; like Mary Magdalen who was sent to bring the news of the Resurrection to the apostles. There are also many valiant women mentioned in the Old Testament, for example: Sarah, Ruth, Judith, Esther, the mother of the seven brothers in the second book of Maccabees.

We see then that the Bible gives us many women who were active in the life and mission of God and of Jesus Christ. They worked side by side with men and the religious leaders of the community. There is an important lesson we can learn from them which is relevant to Ugandan Christian Women today. Christian women are called to be witnesses to God's love and liberation. They are called to be evangelizers of God's people and the world at large.

8. We call upon the Christian women to learn to read and study the Bible with new eyes and a new heart. They will then find that the Bible is not man-centred but person-centred and people-centred. They will see the Bible as a message of life addressed equally to men and women, a message of equality and liberation for all. They will discover how God is presented both as Father and Mother and how both aspects are beautifully integrated to be relevant and inspiring to both women and men.

The images used in the Bible in reference to women must be understood within the historical and cultural milieu of the Bible and the Jewish culture. A reader should go beyond such images to discover the lasting message.

9. Woman is created in God's image, just like the man; "God created man in the image of Himself. In the image of God He created him, male and female, He created them". (*Gen: 27*) This text is the basis for the equality of man and woman. It is to both men and women that God pronounced these words: "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and conquer it. Be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and all living animals on the earth". (*Gen 1: 28*) It is this sharing of responsibility over creation, the common duty to develop the earth that forms the basis for the basic equality of males and females. They share the responsibility because both are made in the image of God the Creator and Redeemer.

### **B. Women in the Christian Tradition.**

**10.** In the long history of Christianity we find many examples of women who inspired by the Gospel, made tremendous contribution to church and society and remain worthy challenges to imitate. There have been women martyrs who have witnessed Christ with extraordinary courage to the point of shedding their blood for Him. There have been women teachers and doctors of the church who have taught Christianity, written books on faith, developed theology and spirituality, thus greatly enriching the church. There have been women foundresses of Religious and Lay Congregations for service and evangelization. There have been, and still are, thousands of good Christian mothers who have played and continue to play their active part as teachers of faith to their family, the domestic church, making it a living encounter with Jesus Christ and a school of Christian upbringing. The history of all these outstanding women should inspire Christian women today to become fully involved in all church ministries and in society

### **C. Recent Church Teachings on Women**

#### **11. Recent Church Teachings on Women**

All the recent social teaching on active participation of the laity in church has clearly brought out the urgency of treating women justly, both in church and society. It calls on everyone engaged in the pastoral ministry and public offices to promote justice to women and empower them to play their rightful role in church and society. This teaching is found in the following church documents which we highly recommend Catholic women to study and fully utilise: *The Family in the Modern World* (1982) *The Social Concern of the Church* (1987) *The Dignity and Vocation of Women* (1988) *The Vocation and Mission of the Laity* (1989) *The Mission of the Church* (1990) *A Century of Catholic Social Teaching* (1991) *The Splendour of Truth* (1993) *Women Teachers of Peace* (1994) *The Gospel of Life* (1995) *Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women* (1995) and *The Media: Modern Forum for Promoting the Role of Women in Society*, (Message of Pope John Paul II for the 30th World Communications Day, 1996.)

**12.** We add to these our own Pastoral Letters since independence. We can mention two which particularly highlighted and emphasised the dignity of women and the equality of men and women. One is, "Shaping our National Destiny" (1962) and the other, "*Let your Light Shine*" (1992).

**13.** Of special mention is the African Synod which was convened in Rome between 10 th April and 8th May 1994. It seriously addressed the position, vocation and ministry of women in church and society. It requested that, "woman be given quality formation to prepare her for her responsibilities as wife and mother but also to open for her all the social careers from which traditional and modern society tend to exclude her without reason. The Synod asks that woman be given once again that place which corresponds to the real importance conferred upon her by the responsibilities she already exercises". The Synod wants to see women being fully involved in decision-making within the Church, and to assume positions of leadership within the church, new ministries for women in the church were recommended and just wages to women workers and women pastoral agents were emphasised.

**14.** It is, therefore, clear that the demands of both contemporary society and church teaching are on the side of women equality and empowerment. The challenge is now turning to the women themselves to see how they interpret these welcome "signs of the times" and effectively use them for the greater service of church and society. Another challenge is to church and state leadership at every level to ensure that the new roles based on equality

which women have been called upon to assume out of justice, are fully explained to them and all obstacles removed for a greater participation of women.

15. There are obstacles which are still preventing achievement of full dignity for women and full empowerment in their participation in church and society. These obstacles must be analysed by both women and men in order to find worthy solutions for them and thus remove the "structure of sin". We list below some major obstacles:

### **Cultural Obstacles**

16. The superiority complex of men which tries to enforce an inferiority complex on women should be discarded as a negative tradition in our African culture. It is from this superiority complex that the injustices are done to wives who fail to give birth to male children; to girls in the family whose education and higher education are denied in preference to that of boys. This same attitude is the root-cause of injustices to widows: refusing them an equitable share in the possessions of their deceased husbands.

Wife-beating, the unjust manner in which women are forced into separation or divorce, the commercialisation of dowry at the marriage of daughters and others, are all clear manifestations of this unjust attitude of man's so-called superiority.

17. The exclusion of women from sub-clan, clan or ethnic group meetings and leadership, exclusion of women from judicial meetings of the elders and in the general governance of society are today seen as unjustifiable and oppressive.
18. The practices which sanctioned child-marriages, arranged marriages where the girl did not have a say let alone full free consent and the practice of polygamy, cannot any longer be condoned by our contemporary society which emphasises equality of man and woman.
19. In general, our African cultures must seriously examine themselves to discover the values that can remain as they are, those values which need to be modified to be relevant, the negative elements which need new worthy substitutes and those oppressive elements which must entirely go without any substitute. Our new national Constitution states the same point well: "Laws, cultures, customs or traditions which are against the dignity, welfare or interest of women or which undermine their status are prohibited by this Constitution" (*Article 33/6*). We call upon the implementers of this Constitution, the Law Reform Commission, the Human Rights Commission and the entire administration of justice, to ensure that all cultural injustices are eliminated in accordance with the principles of the Constitution. There should therefore, be no legal obstacles to the full emancipation of women.

### **Religious and Educational Obstacles**

20. The Church, being part of society and influenced by it, has at times manifested the "male" superiority within the Christian community. Sometimes by over-emphasising what women cannot be and do in the church rather than exposing more what they can and should be and do, it has given an impression of marginalizing women in church. However, despite these limitations, it has always, in its teaching, kept a positive attitude to women and their dignity, following the example of Jesus and his disciples, as we said above (ref.: Biblical and Church Teaching).

**21.** Lack of adequate education has been and continues to be a big hindrance to women's full liberation. A community or church which ignores promotion of its women's education, can never grow or have a positive impact on people as it should.

### **Obstacles from Inadequate Unity and Solidarity Among Women**

**22.** Situations of injustice and oppression are best handled through a strong and well coordinated unity of purpose and action by the victims. We are happy to note that women in Uganda are gradually getting united in purpose and forming associations and networks to that effect. It is unity in purpose that will help to set clear goals and proper vision to reach. It will help to find proper methods and means for the realisation of the objectives.

It will eliminate every dangerous extremism and the creation of undesirable rivalry between women and men.

**23.** We call on catholic women to be united and work together in the parishes, dioceses and at the national level to promote their dignity, increase their input in church and society. Such solidarity is the sure remedy to eliminate ignorance, illiteracy, unnecessary fear, a sense of inferiority and passivity amid injustices. We make the call of the Pope at Namugongo on 10<sup>th</sup> February 1993, our own: "***Women, let your voices be heard***". Eliminate the culture of silence and fully articulate your aspirations and hopes, your worries and dislikes.

**24.** We believe that once women undertake a serious study and analysis of the above outlined obstacles and others we have not touched upon, they will be able to find the necessary solutions which can lead to their empowerment and the improvement of the church and society.

### **CONCRETE PROPOSALS TOWARDS FULL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN CHURCH AND SOCIETY**

#### **Women Participation in Church**

**25.** All the baptised, women and men, share in the triple mission of Christ, through the sacraments of initiation. They are a Priestly People, Kingly People, and Prophetic People. Their common priesthood enables them to participate fully in worship and sacramental action. Their kingly character makes them leaders and servants among the people of God. Their prophetic mission makes them work unceasingly for the truth, denouncing evil and injustices, and preaching the Word of God without fear. Baptised women and men have an equal mandate from Christ Himself to go and "make disciples of all the world" (Mt. 28:19). Baptised women and men are to follow the example of Christ in their lives and ministry. They are the Church, the sacrament of Salvation and Liberation for all people and the world.

#### **Catholic Women in the Family, the Domestic Church**

**26.** Catholic wives and mothers, together with their husbands, have the duty to create an atmosphere and regular practice of prayer and meditation, reading and reflecting on the Word of God together as family, singing Psalms and hymns in praise of God and educating all members of the family, in the catholic faith and practice. Mothers and fathers have the primary

duty of educating their children in the human and Christian morality and sacramental life. The family is the most important human and Christian school for all the virtues and values a Christian must cherish and live. It is in this “domestic Church” that women ought to play their first leading role in the priestly, kingly, and prophetic vocation through the services or ministry we have just mentioned. We can add the ministry of reconciliation and counselling within the family, and the ministry of blessing the children within the family.

### **Church as Family of God**

27. The Fathers of the African Synod have been so much impressed by the relationships which exist in the African family. They chose as their preferred expression for understanding Church, the family image. This image should challenge the Christian family to eliminate all those elements which do not fit in the image of the Church. Christian families must be communities based on love, mutual respect, care and concern for every member, genuine dialogue among all, justice and constant reconciliation. It is the duty of parents to make this primary cell of the Church of God what it should really be.
  
28. We have so many types of families: families headed by widows, single mothers and single women with children of relatives. We have institutions of orphans and educational institutions headed by women. We have families of religious women living together and many others. All these types of families demand similar attention from those who preside over them. The women-heads of those families are called upon to make Christ fully present and alive in their midst; to educate all people entrusted to them with commitment and inspiration. The kingly character of the baptised must lead to service and leadership of love, respect and concern for each and every one.
  
29. The Christian family has been and will always be the inspirational source of the entire church. It is from families that we ourselves come, all priests, religious and civil leaders come. Once the parents fulfill their mission in the family we can be sure both our church and nation will never lack dedicated servants and the faith will never fade away, but rather grow from strength to strength. We are, therefore, most thankful to God and to those parents who have done all that is possible to sustain the Christian family, amidst great obstacles and difficulties. We pray that new efforts by Christian mothers may truly help to improve the family and the family education for the benefit of the family itself and the wider church and society.

### **Women in Small Christian Communities**

30. Catholic women have been and continue to be the backbone of the small Christian communities throughout the church in Uganda. We appreciate their role and commitment and request them for even greater involvement and service in these communities. These small Christian communities have been highly recommended by the African Synod and by the Bishops of Eastern Africa since 1979. They provide us with a rare opportunity, suited to our African sense of community, to live our Christian faith in a more involved manner. They help us to recreate the atmosphere of the first Christian communities which were fully animated by love and a sense of sharing. Christian faith cannot be lived in isolation or in an individual manner. Every family must be an evangelising family, thus networking with other families to make the faith strong and fully alive. These communities should help people to identify their problems, reflect on them as a community, together find solutions and carry them out as a community. Catholic women, both young and old, have a unique role in these communities.

We call on all the Christian women to discover these new roles and assume them with love and dedication.

31. Within the context of small Christian communities, numerous ministries come to the fore. These ministries should be undertaken by both women and men to renew the church and society as a whole. Let us mention some of the most urgent and important ones: the ministry of leadership and service, the ministry of reading and studying the biblical message and messages from church leaders; the ministry of promoting justice and peace in community; the ministry of organised visiting and praying with the sick, the poor and afflicted; the ministry of evangelising the not-yet baptised and consolidating the faith of the already baptised; the ministry of co-operation and promotion of the unity of Christians and of genuine dialogue with Muslims and members of other faiths; the ministry of literacy campaigns to assist those who wish to learn how to read and write; the ministry of development education to eliminate abject poverty; the ministry of reconciliation within and outside the community; the ministry, of civic education to enhance better understanding of politics and political participation; and the ministry of community development projects and programmes for the uplifting of the standards of living. Many other ministries relate to children, youth, the handicapped and those in special situations in the community.
32. All these ministries ought to be studied in order to be done well and produce a living community. We call on the clergy and other pastoral agents to emphasise these ministries and train all members of each community (including women) in those ministries which suit them best.

### **Catholic Women in Sub-Parishes, Parishes and Diocesan Community**

33. At all these levels of church, women have the right and call to play their rightful role. They should be represented in the decision-making bodies in order to make their voices heard and contribute to the common good of the church. These bodies include the councils, executive committees, various commissions and committees at all levels, the diocesan pastoral council, the diocesan synod and the commissions for the laity. Besides these, women are encouraged to make their own associations and commissions and committees for their special objectives. The important ministry of catechists is fully open to women. We encourage them to take it up enthusiastically for a more effective evangelisation.
34. The ministries of counselling, preparing young people for Christian marriage, settling disputes among married couples, caring for the poor, needy, sick, elderly, refugees and displaced, prisoners and the afflicted, need to be planned more effectively and carried out in a more organised manner with full participation of women. All levels of church need dedicated women to continue the ministries of caring for the pastoral agents, teaching catechumens, giving religious education to the young and the old, and above all, carrying out team-ministry with the clergy, catechists and the religious, and where possible, with Christians of other denominations.

### **Catholic Women at the National Level**

35. We are pleased to note that several catholic women's organisations are beginning to be well coordinated at the national level. We urge women to use extensively the newly created Uganda Catholic Women's Bureau at the Uganda Catholic Secretariat, Nsambya. The national

organisations, with strong support from the diocesan organisations, will greatly add to women's contribution to evangelization on the national level. They are powerful means for making women's voice be heard at that level. Let these organisations have a holistic approach to evangelization and women empowerment. Let them manifest the values of justice, peace, dialogue, transparency and democratic leadership.

36. Women have a central role and vocation in the entire life of the church. The fact that women cannot become ministerial priests in the Catholic Church should never be seen as limiting their full participation in all other aspects of the Church's ministry. It should, rather, make them more determined to play a leading role in all aspects open to them. The common priesthood of all baptised believers in Christ should be well understood to enable Catholic women to exercise their priestly vocation in the fullest sense in the christian community.

## **WOMEN PARTICIPATED IN EDUCATION AND LEADERSHIP**

37. Education has been chosen by women leaders as the priority for the empowerment of all women. We support this priority. We appeal to all parents, government, and above all, to our pastoral agents to put emphasis on the education of girls at all levels. We want to see well-organized awareness courses for both men and women, which are designed to give gender sensitization to all, development, education, and call to active participation in all socio-economic and political fields. It is through education that women will succeed to achieve self-confidence and reject any feeling of inferiority complex. Through education, men will learn to abandon the unwarranted, unjust, and oppressive male superiority complex.
38. The educated and professional women should do all in their power and capacity to work for the liberation of their fellow women and the entire society. They have an obligation of justice to do this.

### **Leadership**

39. Leadership is a fruit of a well-prepared education programme. Leadership education should be given to women and men on their role in the family, small community, parish, diocese and national level. It should bring out the values of responsibility, initiative, creativity, influencing people, motivating them and the courage to face problems and find worthy solutions to them.
40. We call on all our pastoral agents to involve women in all positions of responsibility and leadership so that their talents and commitment may be fully tapped for the good of all. At every level women leaders should be identified, given chances for more training, exposed to the community and fully utilised in areas they can perform best.

## **Women in the Economic and Political Fields**

### **Economy**

41. We acknowledge with great gratitude to women, the fact which is often overlooked, that women are the backbone of our family and national economy, especially in the field of agriculture. The sad fact, however, is that this immense contribution is often ignored or simply taken for granted by society. We wish to join those who appreciate the role of women in our economy to assure women that without their dedication and hard work, there would be no

economy we talk of. We, therefore, call on the society and on all men to fully acknowledge this unique contribution and do justice in empowering women economically.

42. The government, both local and national, should seriously address the plight of women in the economy and design programmes with the women to uplift their economic status, thus empowering them to improve the economy of their families and of the nation as a whole. Women themselves should be sensitised to be able to discern their needs appropriately.
43. We appeal to men, to work together with their wives in creating self-reliance of the family and uplifting the standard of living of the family. Lack of transparency and accountability in family income cannot foster unity and love within the family.
44. Uganda is blessed with many women who are employed both in the public and private sectors. These women, although still few, have a double task of carrying out their family duties and fulfill their tasks at the place of work. Our appeal is to the employers to fully understand and appreciate the demands on such women and be fully considerate. Special attention should be put on women-employees who are expectant, those with breast-feeding babies and those with children of tender age or with members of the family who are sick or disabled. We should never lose our African heart of sympathy and understanding in these matters. Money is at the service of life. We therefore support adequate maternity leaves for working mothers without prejudice to their contract, pay and promotion. We support equal pay for equal work for women and men. Promotion at work should be based solely on merit and not on gender.
45. We support women's clubs and associations in the rural and urban areas, which are designed to educate women in money-generating projects and activities of social promotion. Men should be co-operative in encouraging their wives to join and participate in such activities. A pastoral challenge to the Christian men is to form their own associations for their specific needs and, above all, for the improvement of their spiritual and material welfare. Unless this is done, men are likely to lag behind in acquiring new attitudes and values.
46. Population policy is one of the topical issues in the world. The principles which guide the church on this important matter should be made clear to all Christian women. The church fully accepts the close link between population and development. Each influences the other. The church puts greater emphasis on development which can sustain people and their dignity. It calls for responsible parenthood which should guide the Christian family to get the children it can well look after and educate. The church singles out methods of family planning which it recommends and others which it denounces. Christian women should know the best ways recommended by the church to space and care for their children. The christian people have the obligation and duty to defeat and promote the right to life of the unborn child and to assist those parents or single-mothers who, because of dire circumstances, would have wished to take anti-life decisions.
47. Family life Education, imbued with Christian and African values is the strongest means to children, adolescents and adults to acquire new values and lifestyles which can safeguard our lives and our population. In the presence of the AIDS epidemic, this family life education becomes a must in every family and community. We appeal to all the Christian women and mothers to undertake this change in our society. We request the Christian families to fully utilise the personnel and programmes of our family life education which is co-ordinated nationally at the Catholic Secretariat, Nsambya. Every local church should have fully trained family life educators for that purpose.

## **Political Participation**

48. We are happy to note that in the last ten years women in our country have made important strides in political participation and leadership. This phenomenon is most welcome. Using the political arena women leaders have been able to voice the cries of the fellow women and express their aspirations and hopes.
49. We appreciate women specialised bodies of Federation Internationale d'Avocats, (Association of Women Lawyers: FIDA), Action For Development (ACFODE) and others which have, with great dedication, designed and carried out awareness programmes for women on all social, political, economic and legal matters. We are grateful to the government, foreign nations and various NGO's (Non-Government Organisations) which have supported these programmes and continue to do so. We encourage many more such programmes at all levels of society and more particularly in the rural areas so that all women may benefit and become empowered in political participation.
50. Our hope and prayer are that women participation in the political sphere will make a real difference with our past performance. Women should stand for justice and democracy, accountability and transparency, reconciliation and peaceful resolution of conflicts. Women in politics should prevent any return to dictatorship and tyranny, violation of human rights and oppression of the people. Women should strive to stand up for what is right and good for the country. Women, above all, should become the strong and untiring advocates for the rights of the family, children, workers, handicapped, the aged and the sick and all who are under any disadvantage. Women should bring a feminine touch into our political life, a feminine touch which our Holy Father the Pope calls: a "feminine insight" or a "special genius". He says: "The specific gifts of feminine insight, compassion and understanding, greatly contribute to the 'civilisation of love'". (Media: Forum for Promoting the Role of Women in society. Message for the 30th World Communications Day).

## **Conclusion**

We commend the Catholic women of this country to the protection and guidance of our heavenly Mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary. May She always be your model and our model of accepting readily the call of God to shoulder all the responsibilities entrusted to you. Learn from her the management of a truly Christian family. Take her example in listening to Christ and always meditating on His Word and Ministry. Be united with Christ in the ministry as She was to the very end. Be one with all church ministers as She was with the apostles in prayer and ministry. Imitate all her virtues which inspire the church. May your new identity, new ministries both in church and society be so carried out as to bring new life and a culture/civilisation of love to all God's people.

*We The Catholic Bishops of Uganda.*