

THE MATRIARCHS OF THE CHURCH IN ZAMBIA: TRACING THE LIFE TRAJECTORY AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF MARY XAVIER WALSH AND THE CATHOLIC WOMEN'S LEAGUE IN ZAMBIA

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ABSTRACT

Sr. Mary Xavier Walsh was a matriarch in a patriarchal church and society. Through the analysis of documentary evidence the paper explores her life trajectory as a matriarch of the church through her influence on and contributions to women in the church, with specific reference to the Catholic Women's League (CWL) in Zambia. In addition to fulfilling multiple roles within and outside the home (including both formal and informal employment ventures), women make time for church activities and provide leadership, in that way contributing to development in various spheres. The paper demonstrates that contrary to the perception of women in religion as being oppressed, jobless and alienated from the pulpit, they can be agents of change in their own communities and beyond.

Keywords: Religion; gender; women; matriarch; Catholic Women's League

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the work of the Catholic Women's League (CWL), a movement for the "mothers of the Church," and specifically the life trajectory of Sr. Mary Xavier as a matriarch of the Catholic Church in Zambia. Tayob (2014, 12) makes the observation that biographies tell us a great deal about people in a particular context, and in the context of the present paper the life trajectory of a nun and missionary leads us to an acknowledgement and appreciation of the matriarchs of the Catholic Church in Zambia. This paper arises from the concern raised in the literature on gender and religion that the active contribution made by women in different contexts is generally overlooked. For

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example, Babacan (2004) observes that women experience considerable disadvantage and discrimination in societies perpetuating gender-differentiated structures.

In consequence, the efforts being made by women both in the church and wider society remain uncelebrated. The *National Mirror* acknowledged in the 1970s that the most significant “missing stories” in the context of religion relate to the active role many women play in transforming their religion and communities. Hans (2012) also notes that although women are venerated and considered to be valuable, they are often invisible in the public sphere.

By focusing on the life trajectory of Mary Xavier, the paper serves to show that women in their own space are agents of change in the church and beyond. The paper therefore contributes to the existing literature on religion and gender. A documentary review was undertaken to show how a single woman’s life influenced many others and society in general in Zambia. Through the use of document review as the main data collection method, the paper seeks to emphasise that social scientists have largely neglected and ignored the use of documents in favour of methods in which they are actively involved in producing data for their own purposes (McCulloch 2004; Ahmed 2010). Thus, the paper sought to utilise the rich data in documentary research.

The aim of the research was to establish how a woman in the Catholic Church, in the person of Sr. Mary Xavier, has influenced other women in the church through the CWL. The paper thus focused on the life and work of Mary Xavier and the CWL, which celebrated its golden jubilee in August 2014, and acknowledges that many religious women both individually and as members of women’s groups in Zambia have contributed to the church and the wellbeing of the nation. Consequently, the findings of this case study are not for the purposes of generalisation, but may be used as stepping stones to understanding the role of women in the church in different historical periods in Zambia. The paper begins with a definition of concepts, which is followed by Sr. Mary Xavier’s biography and an exposition of her influence as a matriarch in the CWL in Zambia.

DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS

The paper focuses on the concepts of religion and gender and the relationship between them, as exemplified in the life and work of Mary Xavier and the women of the CWL in the church and community. It reflects the increasingly lively debates on the relationship between religion and gender (Hopkins 2009; Seguino 2011; Moghadam 1991; Chaudhuri 2013). A significant amount of recent research has been based on the assumption that gender roles are constructed primarily through religion, culture, lifestyle, and upbringing (King 1995). Women are said to be more inclined than men to participate in religious life (Hamplová 2013, 2011; Renzetti and Curran, 1999). This paper examines women’s participation in religious life as influential personalities in their own right as exemplified by the life of one woman and her contribution to the life of the Catholic Church in Zambia.

Religion

Religion plays a vital role in the cultural life of different communities; it is deeply rooted in peoples' experiences, and influences the socio-economic and political direction of societies (Stump 2008). Scholars such as Geertz (1993) have acknowledged the centrality of religious beliefs in everyday life, as religion provides the moral codes by which people live. Consequently, religion has been studied and defined from a wide range of perspectives such as philosophy, sociology, anthropology, political science and economics.

Iannoccone (1998), in his influential contribution on the economics of religion, defines religion as any shared set of beliefs, activities, and institutions premised upon faith in supernatural forces. Religious beliefs are therefore considered to have a significant influence on different aspects of a society. Religious beliefs not only provide a framework of general ideas or systems of meaning, but also shape them (Geertz 1993; Iannoccone 1998). Drakopoulou Dodd and Seaman (1998) also observe that religion both shapes and is shaped by society. Thus through the the work of Mary Xavier in Lusaka in particular the paper explores how religion has shaped society and how society has shaped religion. By referring to a woman and women in the church, the paper limits the concept of the church to an organisation and a community of believers. As a community, people are not only or even primarily in the church as institution, but are themselves and collectively the church, the communion of saints (Berkhof 1979, 392–410).

Gender

From its origin in the Western worldview the concept of gender has been universalised, even extending to the already existing African worldview (Oyewumi 2002). According to Reeves and Baden (2000), gender refers to the distinctive patterns of ideas, beliefs, and norms which shape the way of life of and relations between males and females as groups in society. Included in these patterns of ideas are expectations and characteristics, as well as aptitudes and likely behaviours of manhood and womanhood.

Although gender as a concept has been universalised, gender interpretations are not universal, and hence culture-specific norms of gender should always dominate gender applications. With regard to religion and gender, most studies have focused on the low status of women in religion. For example, Young (1987) suggests that all world religions have maintained male social dominance within societal structures, while women have been more inclined to participate in religious life (Hamplová 2011; Renzetti and Curran 1999).

Scholars such as Yemisi and Dada (2015) have interrogated the interface between gender and religion by tracing the changing status of women within religious contexts, and argue that the roles and status of women have changed, as demonstrated by the leadership positions women occupy within the Christian tradition. In the early (Biblical Old Testament period), the position and duties of a woman were limited to domestic

affairs and child bearing and rearing, while the man was the major breadwinner, the provider, and the protector of the family (Ojo 2009). This paper is a departure from the debates on religion and gender which focus on women's subordination, and focuses instead on the ways in which women in religion have taken the initiative in promoting leadership and development both within and outside the church in Zambia.

The Life of Mary Xavier

Very little is known about Sr. Mary's family background: her adult life and work in the church is more prominent.¹ Sr. Mary Xavier Walsh was born on 3 July 1936 in England, in a family of eleven siblings and baptised Christine Walsh. At the age of four, she lost her mother and was brought up by her father until he remarried when she was twelve. She enrolled for sisterhood in Milltown on 11 October 1954 and took her vows on 12 August 1957 as a member of the religious Sisters of Charity. Thereafter, she did a two-year City and Guild's catering course. She spent the next year in Walthamstow making preparations for missionary work by doing short courses.

In 1960 she was sent to Northern Rhodesia to do missionary work, and thus came to Chivuna. After a short stay there she was relocated to Kabwata Parish in Lusaka. Her apostolate was pastoral. She visited people in their homes, especially in Chawama and Kabwata, on Fridays and also spent time with the sick in the hospitals on Saturdays (Catholic Women's League archives). In addition to being a parish sister, she also worked in the home craft centre in Kabwata, where she interacted extensively with the women. This interaction showed her the great potential these women had and helped her become familiar with their culture and with the Chibemba language. In 1961, she studied Bemba, so that she could speak to the people in the compounds and evangelise in their language (Simushi 2013).

As her work increased to the point that she could no longer cope on her own, she decided to establish a branch of the Catholic Women's League, a women's organisation founded in 1906 in London by Margaret Fletcher Coetzee and Evans (1997) note that Margaret Fletcher was concerned that Catholic women living in so called "modern society" would grow away from Catholic norms and teachings, and so the League's objective was to train and encourage Catholic women to take part in religious, social, and civic affairs.

From 1965 Sister Xavier was involved with the women in Kabwata Parish, building up the CWL. She gradually withdrew from the lead role in Kabwata in favour of encouraging the women to take responsibility for the initiatives themselves. As a mother of the organisation she helped to introduce the CWL to other parishes, in that way making it a vibrant organisation serving the church in many ways, for example through Bible study, prayer groups, instruction of adults in the faith and religious instruction

1 The information in the biography presented here was gathered from the Catholic Women's League archives and Religious Sisters of Charity archives.

for children on Sunday mornings. To facilitate the instruction of children in particular, a gallery was erected in the grounds of the church where they held their classes. Sr. Xavier also organized retreats, seminars, lectures and training sessions in order to equip the members with the necessary skills for different activities. As a result, the CWL grew from strength to strength and has continued to develop and become a valuable means of evangelisation in the Church.

In 1985 Sr. Mary Xavier was recalled to Ireland to fill a vacancy at the Dublin Centre, which treated alcohol addiction. She was sent first to work in the Parish Centre in Sherrard Street, so as to become acquainted with parish work in Dublin. She was also prepared for her involvement in a pastoral care programme. She and a number of others trained on site for two years, and in January 1987 she went to Hazelden, Minnesota to complete the training there by means of a four-month course. In November 1988 she returned to Dublin to establish a treatment programme for addicts. She worked very successfully at the treatment centre until she reached retirement in 2001 though she continued to render her services to the church until her death.

Thereafter, she went to Ard Mhuire, Harold's Cross, as local leader. For the next six years she threw herself wholeheartedly into promoting the care of the elderly and ill in our Lady's Hospice. The residents, patients and staff were aware of her concern for their welfare and responded with great affection for her. Towards the end of those six years she was diagnosed with cancer. Despite losing sight in one eye as a result of the disease she continued her work without complaint, evangelising and praying, writing and visiting those who needed her care. In 2009 Sr. Xavier returned to Stanhope Community for almost two years and the final few weeks of her life were spent in the Hospice, this time as a patient, where she received all the care she needed.

Sr. Xavier's apostolic work can therefore be divided into the 25 years in Zambia (1960–1985) and the 25 years at the home mission on her return to Ireland (1985–2010). She died on 12 March 2011. As a way of honouring and celebrating her life, the Lusaka Archdiocese CWL organised a mass on 15 March 2011 at 13:00 to coincide with the time of her burial in Ireland (Simushi 2011). Hundreds of CWL members attended this mass at Kabwata Good Shepard Parish, where she had spent a quarter of a century.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CATHOLIC WOMEN'S LEAGUE IN ZAMBIA

The story of the CWL in Zambia is a success story of a matriarch of the Church. The CWL in Zambia was formed in 1964 with valuable contributions by Mesdames Victoria Kasonde, Margaret Chisanga, Anna Chipimo, Dorothy Konoso, and Jessy Lengalenga.

The organisation was established in Zambia for the purposes of evangelisation, to assist the poor both spiritually and materially and to support and pray for the holiness of the priests (www.maryimmaculatelusaka.org). Its first meeting was held in Rugambwa Hall, Kabwata, on 8 February 1964, and was attended by 11 women in addition to Sr. Xavier (CWL archives).

Sr. Xavier's idea of establishing the women's league in this context demonstrated the importance she placed on uplifting women and giving them a voice in a male-dominated society. The early sixties were associated with the awakening of African politics. However, while African men were rising to ministerial positions, the social status of women was generally neglected. This was a situation that that Sr. Xavier sought to rectify.

The CWL sought to promote the spirit of fellowship and Christian charity amongst Catholic women, and encourage the formation of strong and enlightened Catholic opinions. In addition, the organisation aimed to openly defend Catholic principles and teachings and promote Catholic influence in the preservation of faith and morality, especially in the home (Hinfelaar 2004). Women who wanted to join the group were therefore encouraged to analyse situations, use their resources and help create resources through fundraising activities. They also had to be committed and able to sacrifice and willingly work hard for the betterment of the organisation. In addition to being self-disciplined, they were to be prayerful, cheerful, and accommodating. These principles formed the basis for the women's developmental activities both within and outside the church.

The main duty of the CWL was to be at the service of people in need, especially those from the parish. In addition, they were also to help the priests by taking care of the cleaning and general maintenance of the sacristy and attending to everything related to the liturgical service (Coetzee and Evans 1997). They also took care of the cleaning of the church premises and parish offices.

Since the formation of the CWL, it has operated in an environment shared with other Christian churches and religions in Lusaka. The religious landscape therefore includes numerous Christian churches and groups, whose members constituted roughly 70 per cent of the country's population (Carmody 2004). In Lusaka, Christianity grew in the World War II period, when many Christian missions were established in Lusaka, with much of the initial work being done by the Roman Catholic missionaries represented by the Society of Jesus or Jesuit Order (Hinfelaar 2004).

THE WORK OF THE CWL AND SR. XAVIER'S INFLUENCE

From the inception of the CWL and thus through various church activities women have played a part in different historical moments in the country. For example, Sr. Xavier recalled how the women in the organisation had empowered many Zambian women, who in turn had supported the Catholic Church on many levels. She recalled that when communism, under the label "scientific socialism," was introduced into the country, the CWL in Lusaka opposed it so vehemently that it was defeated once and for all (Xavier 2011). The CWL's opposition to scientific socialism has also been reported by Larmer (2013). Macola (2008) reports that the first public confrontation between the Catholic Church and the government was as a result of the enactment of the Termination

of Pregnancy Act in 1972. In this instance, the CWL complained about a deliberate parliamentary delay with regard to inheritance and succession issues.

In the early years of the organisation the women also invested their time in educational activities. This reflected Sr. Xavier's passion for training in different fields. Inspired by her example, the women underwent training, after which they began to offer adult literacy classes and classes in cookery and sewing (Simushi 2011). They also established a poultry co-operative and vegetable garden in Chawama, which led to the opening of nutrition depots at Kamwala Clinic and at Rugambwa Hall in Kabwata. These ventures contributed to the well being of the people in the surrounding areas.

In the 1970s the league opened a nursery school where working mothers could leave their children for a nominal fee. This led to the training of nursery school assistants – a project that was still underway in 2017. . This was to help many Form III dropouts find a career, and the trainees were employed in numerous nursery schools around the country (Simushi 2011). Thus the investment of the women of the CWL in the nursery school not only changed the lives of working mothers, but also contributed to the nation's educational efforts through employment of the trainees.

The seeds which Sr. Xavier planted in the CWL in Lusaka are to be seen in the Saint Lawrence Home of Hope, established in the late 1990s in response to the social environment in Lusaka, and which reflects Sr. Xavier's concern for the needy. Home of Hope is a centre for homeless children and youth in Lusaka (United Nations Communication Group/IOM 2012). It is located at Kabwata parish and was founded in 1999 by the CWL of Lusaka at the request of the then Archbishop R.R. Medardo Mazombwe in response to the growing numbers of street children in Lusaka. In addition to being responsible for the centre, the women are in charge of advocacy, sourcing funds, developing infrastructure and taking care of the running costs (Zulu 2015). The centre not only has outreach programmes but is also involved in family tracing, residential care, and reintegration of the children.

By 2011, Home of Hope was successfully responding to other societal problems resulting from violence among the population of homeless youth and children in Lusaka (Saint Lawrence Home of Hope News Letter 2011). The most common of these were assaults, including registered cases of murder, child sexual abuse, abortion, and suicide. Responses to these problems have taken the form of assistance to the victims in terms of medical help, or funeral arrangements. All these projects have been carried out in pursuit of the league's objective of helping the vulnerable in society (Munishi 2013).

In addition to fostering educational development and supporting the vulnerable through orphanages and transit homes, the CWL has also dedicated themselves to the sick. For example, St. Ignatius Women's League group chairperson Priscilla Chimba cited the efforts of her organisation to close the gap between rich and poor, especially where the government cannot reach out. The organisation had therefore adopted two wards at the University Teaching Hospital and Chilenje Transit Home, where they were helping meet the basic needs of patients (Chimba 2008). Their role model in this care

was the mother of the League, Sr. Xavier, who made time to visit the sick in different places from the time of her arrival in the country.

PUBLIC RESPONSE TO THE CWL'S CONTRIBUTION TO SOCIETY

The work and activities of Sr. Xavier as carried forward by the CWL have not gone unnoticed, as has been shown through commendations and the support rendered to the League in their numerous activities. The League has received support from different sectors in its fundraising endeavours as a way of sustaining its developmental activities. For example, the Kabwata CWL of the Good Shepherd congregation held a luncheon to raise money for their projects (Kaiko 2013). The CWL of St. Ignatius Lusaka branch held a fundraising breakfast. CWL chairperson of the St. Ignatius Lusaka branch, Beatrice Grillo, explained that the aim of the function was to raise funds to help the needy in society (ZNBC News 2016).

These efforts have attracted praise. For example, Health Minister Joseph Kasonde observed in 2016 that the Catholic Church remained a valuable partner in improving the lives of the less privileged in society and that the government recognised that in addition to spreading the gospel, the Catholic Church was making a significant contribution in taking care of the sick, the aged and other vulnerable people in society (ZNBC News 2016). First Lady, Esther Lungu, also hailed the Archdiocese of Lusaka Women's League for its unfailing support of vulnerable people in society, and noted that the Women's League had continued to diligently reform street children by providing them with shelter and access to education through Saint Lawrence Home of Hope (Zulu 2015).

At its fiftieth birthday celebrations in 2014, the activities of the Zambia Catholic Women's League (ZCWL) activities were further described by the then Minister of Defence under the fifth Republican president's regime (Mr. Edgar Lungu) as being of great value to communities and the country at large in the provision of health and education (Chisha 2014). Furthermore, the CWL was acknowledged for supplementing government efforts in caring for orphans and vulnerable children in communities under the presidency of Mr. Rupiah Banda (Fourth Republican president) by the former first lady, Mrs Thandiwe Banda (Times of Zambia 2009). These accounts demonstrate that rather than remaining unacknowledged, the contribution of these women to development were being recognised and appreciated.

ACCOUNTING FOR MARY XAVIER AND THE ACTIVITIES OF THE CWL

The work of and inspiration provided by Sr. Xavier through the CWL can be explained in different ways. The first is the religious faith of members. The CWL in Lusaka is composed of women from both the formal and informal employment sectors. Thus, in

addition to being mothers and wives at home, they also have responsibilities at their places of work as teachers, nurses, doctors, managers, and business owners, among other occupations in different places. In addition, they are involved in spiritual works and they are expected to attend League Mass, a monthly League and Holy Communion, and to attend a retreat once a year and a day of collection quarterly. They embody the foundational principles of the organisation, namely charity, work and loyalty.

As the capital of the country, Lusaka experiences numerous socio-economic problems (Lusaka City Council and Environmental Council of Zambia 2008). In addition to religious belief, the socio-economic environment in the country has inspired the CWL in Zambia since its inception, as has been reflected in the dedication of the organization to helping vulnerable members of society such as the sick in hospices, those in prisons, and the homeless.

CONCLUSION

The paper reflected on the life and contributions of Sr. Mary Xavier as mother of the CWL in Zambia to demonstrate a woman's influence in a male-dominated religion and society. The paper has revealed that in addition to being inspired by religious belief, Sr. Xavier through the CWL also responded to societal needs. This has demonstrated that although women in religion are often relegated to inferior status, they have been and are the agents of change in Zambia, and through their contributions as members of the CWL are deemed the "mothers of the Church."

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