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ABUSIVE SEXUAL PRACTICES: BREAKING THE SILENCE IN THE CHURCH

Based on my experiences as a woman, wife, mother, student, theological teacher and Lutheran pastor in an area of Africa that has been exposed to serious conflict and violence, I must use my freedom and take the courage to speak out about the evils plaguing our society which are usually not talked about: the use of sex by men as a system of violence and domination over women in the churches as well as society at large.

It is difficult to talk about sexuality because it involves that which is deepest in us. Throughout our lives, sexuality is at the core of who we are, experienced and expressed in our thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, attitudes, practices, roles and relationships. Sexuality is influenced by biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors. It is important that sexuality be lived out appropriately, in terms of where and with whom to be intimate, as well as being comfortable with and not ashamed of our bodies. Certain societal pressures,

along with a prevalent sense that all sexual passions should be expressed freely, are contrary to the moral values conveyed in the Bible.

God created us as sexual beings; male and female are created in God's image. God created us with our distinct physical and physiological traits, including our sexual drives and pleasures (Gen. 1:26–31; Song of Songs 4:10–11). God commands both men and women to “have dominion over” (take care of) the earth (Gen. 1:26–31); it is **not** that men are to dominate women. Women and men are partners, called to support each other, and as sexual partners to be one flesh (Gen. 2:18–25). God's purpose, as realized in and through sexuality, is to end loneliness and to enable human beings to procreate. We need one another in order to experience life's fullness (Gen. 2:2–24).

My pastoral work involves teaching women and youth. Here and in my conversations with colleagues, I seek to address the fate of female victims who have been subjected to sexual pressure, harassment and even rape, including by church leaders, within churches and theological institutions. Men's “instinctual” sexual power, armed with spiritual authority, often is exercised in church groups, choirs, women's associations and at other church functions. Sometimes women have to endure outrageous situations in these environments, where they often would rather choke than fight back. They fear that if they speak up and reveal what their pastors, evangelists, catechists, etc. are doing, they risk undermining the faith of some believers. For these women, sex has become a vampire whose power is expressed and deployed through the domination of women. What is particularly sickening is how those who are responsible for educating and instructing people in the rules that God has given, are the first to violate this. Such sexual immorality leads to serious emotional problems and feelings of inferiority.

God has provided marriage as a framework within which to express sexuality. Within this context, men and women can grow and enjoy love and pleasure (Prov 5:18–19). In marriage, what matters most is not pleasure or passion, but

rather a long-term commitment and loyalty to each other. This includes learning self-control and respect for others. Having sexual relations with someone creates a link. This is positive in the context of marriage, if there is a climate of security, trust and true love. However, in our parishes, institutions of theological training and in church governance we often encounter deviations from this. Some male church leaders deceive their wives, or leave them and join their mistresses. Some theological teachers sexually harass their students. How then does this adversely affect the working relationships between male and female pastors and theologians? Can we still credibly speak of the Christian faith in situations where sexuality is lived out in such ways? The Bible teaches us that sexual activity is meaningless if it is not rooted in a long-term relationship of love, that blossoms deeply and meaningfully through radical, mutual responsibility for one another.

In many cases, male sexuality is lived out in ways that are sinful—against the spiritual foundations of human life and against a Christian ethic of life. According to Jean Blaise Kenmognet, insofar as sexuality without ethical standards or spiritual depth leads to the spirit of domination, it engenders violence in principle and in the erotic relations between men and women. This violence can only be destructive. It destroys through the most humiliating and degrading practices, such as through pornography, rape, forced marriage and the trafficking of women.¹

It is also important that we recognize that, with regard to human sexuality in African traditions, there are both negative and positive aspects. Certain cultural dimensions are always associated with sexuality; ways of being sexual are conveyed through culture. What are considered the best ways to feel, express, signify or symbolize the sexual aspect of life—how we live, love, hate and conduct ourselves—are strongly affected by our cultural contexts. Yet, we should not emphasize the cultural aspects too strongly. While certain sexual

practices are considered normal and sacred and are thus to be preserved, those engaging in other sexual practices have been subjected to beatings, floggings, mutilation, humiliation, exclusion and killing. We have to consider which kinds of sexual moral conduct in the Bible and in culture protect and enhance human beings and their sexual relationships, and are thus to be respected, and which meet neither the standards of African nor Christian ethics.

Let me conclude by emphasizing that we must take all possible steps to denounce sexual abuse within churches because sexual abuse is a form of dehumanization and destruction of especially women. Women have been turned into objects of desire. These practices, especially when committed by religious leaders, cause disgust and create trauma. It is our duty and responsibility to talk about this in our communities, churches and society, to rethink how we understand love and to integrate it into human sexuality in ways that are consistent with the Word of God and with certain positive cultural values.

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NOTES

¹ Cf. Jean Blaise Kennmogne, "Dieu sexualité et violence dans l'Eglise Africaine," in *Pour la voie africaine de la non violence* (Yaoundé: Edition CLE, 2009), p 318.

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