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St. Joachim as a Model of Catholic Manhood in Times of AIDS: A Case Study on Masculinity in an African Christian Context

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“Joachim is the model of every Catholic husband and father... He is still a model of catholic men. Joachim is a symbol of Christian life to all men who persevere to live happy marriages.”

This quotation from the constitution of the St. Joachim Catholic Men's Organization in the Catholic Archdiocese of Lusaka (Zambia) presents St. Joachim as a model of Catholic manhood. According to apocryphal Christian traditions, Joachim is the father of Mary who is the mother of Jesus. Though Joachim, compared to his wife Ann, seems to be less popular in Catholic devotion, nowadays in Zambia a Catholic men's fellowship is named after him and actively promotes him as a role model for Catholic men. This presents us with an interesting case of “embattled masculinities in the religious traditions.” As I will explore in this article, the case of the Zambian Catholic men's organization of St. Joachim shows how religious traditions can be employed as a strategy to correct certain behavior and attitudes of men, to transform dominant concepts of masculinity and to address social problems such as HIV and AIDS. Furthermore, drawing from my research in a parish in Lusaka, in this article I will look at the ways in which the devotion to St. Joachim and the participation in the men's fellowship bearing his name helps individual Catholic men to find their place in the spheres of religion and society, (re)shapes men's gendered identities and enables men's agency.

With this article I want to make a contribution to the emerging study of men, masculinities and religion. While Krondorfer and Culbertson (2005, 5864) have noted that the scholarship in this field is “heavily located within the scholarly traditions of the West, specifically Christianity and Judaism,” I would add that as far as Christianity is concerned the focus has been on Western Christian contexts. It has hardly taken into account that Christianity has become a world religion, and that the rise of Christianity in non-western contexts “has effected dramatic changes in gender attitudes” and has given rise to “new concepts of masculinity” (Jenkins 2006, 165). This article offers some insights in masculinities in world Christianity by focusing on an African Christian context. Additionally, the choice for a Catholic case is meaningful to men's studies in religion. Though it has been observed that the devotion to saints is characteristic of the Catholic men's movement (Gelfer 2008, 51), little is known about the meaning of saints and devotional practice for the

construction of Catholic masculinities. In these two ways, this article broadens the scope of the current study of men and masculinities in religion. The article also provides a more fundamental contribution to this sub-discipline by raising the question how the case study is to be evaluated. Acknowledging the (pro)feminist roots and political edge of the study of men and masculinities in religion, Krondorfer has defined men's studies in religion with the term "critical" (2009, xvii). In his opinion, there must be a critical sensitivity to "gender-unjust systems" such as patriarchy in order to not slip back into the long tradition of male dominance in the sphere of religion. Though sympathizing with this stance, in this article I also problematize it. When to speak of a "gender-unjust system"? Is this always so evident? Are notions and performances of masculinity, especially in the sphere of religion, not more ambiguous? Could it be that they, even though they are "patriarchal", yet contribute to gender justice? As appears from the final section of the article, these are critical questions in light of current discussions on masculinities and religion in contemporary African contexts.

The article is based on a case study in Regiment parish in Lusaka conducted in 2008-2009 as part of a research on African Christian masculinities in the context of the HIV epidemic. I found several lay movements being actively involved in the parish, among which a women's organization named St. Ann and a men's organization named St. Joachim who work in a close collaboration. For the purpose of my research I was particularly interested in the latter group, which is the only men's fellowship in the parish (while there are four women's groups). During the case study, I conducted a group interview with four members and personal interviews with two members of St. Joachim as well as interviews with a diocesan officer in charge of the organization and with the parish priest. Furthermore, I attended some meetings of the group, both at parish and diocese levels. Though the body of materials is still relatively small, this initial study gives important insight into men and masculinity in the circles of the St. Joachim Catholic Men's Organization.

In the article, first I will provide information about the men's organization and the social, institutional and theological context in which it operates. Second, I will pay attention to the historical trajectory that leads to the promotion of St. Joachim as a role model for Catholic men today. Third, I explore how St. Joachim concretely functions as a role model for men in specific areas of life and in relation to real life challenges. In the concluding part, I will make some evaluative remarks about the questions this case study puts to the critical study of men, masculinities and religion.

St. Joachim Catholic Men's Organization

St. Joachim Catholic Men's Organization is a diocesan organization with sections in several local parishes. Originating from Zimbabwe, the lay-movement was introduced in the early 1990s by the Archdiocese of Lusaka as the first men's organization. It was the hope of the archdiocese that the organization would help to stimulate and strengthen the faith of Catholic men and their involvement in the church. This is considered necessary, as the archbishop has put it more recently, because "most Catholic men do not participate in a number of activities taking place in the parishes ... [and] men are usually fewer during Church celebrations and less involved compared to women" (in *The Parish Newsletter* of July 19, 2009, Regiment

parish). Out of this concern, the diocese has welcomed St. Joachim Men's Organization which, according to its constitution, aims "to promote unity, spiritual growth and matrimonial wellbeing among its members. To do works of charity, to actively participate in the Small Christian Communities, to promote baptism vows and to promote Catholic doctrines as well as to promote the dignity of the family." As this quotation demonstrates, the organization is not only concerned about men's spiritual lives and their participation in the church, but also about men's involvement in marriage and the family. This is also in line with a broader concern of the church. In their pastoral letters and statements the Zambian bishops frequently bemoan the breakdown of traditional family values and the institution of marriage, and they critically address the oppression of women in marriage and the family. The bishops relate these phenomena to the high levels of HIV in the country. It seems that the HIV epidemic has reinforced their teaching of the Catholic moral values concerning sexuality, marriage and family life and has also made them aware of the crucial role played by men. This is further informed by the ecclesiology of the church as the Family of God, which is popular in African Catholic circles and is adopted by the Catholic bishops in Zambia. In this inclusive ecclesiology, in which the human family is considered the smallest unit of being church, men have a key role to play. A diocesan official explained to me: "When we talk of the church as a family, the church is not complete without the men, the fathers."

There are social, moral and theological factors that inform the efforts of the Zambian Catholic Church to increase men's commitment to the Catholic faith, the church and its moral teaching. The men's organization of St. Joachim is an important instrument to achieve this goal. The section in Regiment parish has about forty members, most of whom are at middle and senior age, though some are in their thirties. The group has formal gatherings once a month, but almost every Sunday the members meet informally. In their gatherings, issues related to the parish and the Small Christian Communities (SCCs) are discussed, and personal, matrimonial or family problems are shared. Joachim members are supposed to participate actively in the SCCs and in the parish. Furthermore, they have to provide practical services in the parish and the diocese. Clearly, to be a member of St. Joachim is demanding in terms of time. This is a conscious strategy, the chair explained to me, because when a man is occupied with church affairs he has no time for "earthly things" such as drinking and womanizing. Participation in St. Joachim is also demanding financially. Members have to purchase a uniform, have to pay fees to the organization and are supposed to contribute substantially to the parish. Consequently, membership of the organization is likely beyond the means of many parishioners. Additionally, St. Joachim puts also high moral demands on its members and has a strict disciplinary code of conduct. This may discourage men from joining the organization, but those who are members testify that the demands are worth it and that their participation in St. Joachim has enriched their lives.

From Apocryphal Figure to Model of Catholic Manhood

Even though they may be historical figures, saints such as Joachim can be considered as constructions, because "they are remodeled in the collective representation which is made of them" (DeLooz 1985, 195). This is especially the case with St. Joachim. The historical

information about him is marginal (based on the fact that Mary must have had a father), but he has become the object of a cult in popular devotion. How, then, has Joachim been constructed as a saint, and what collective representations are made of him so that he today is promoted as a model of Catholic manhood? I will briefly explore this question by recounting the story about Joachim in apocryphal scripture, after which I will focus on the representation of Joachim in the men's organization in Regiment parish.

The figure of St. Joachim in the tradition of the Catholic faith can be traced back to the *Protoevangelium Jacobi* or the *Infancy Gospel of James*. This apocryphal gospel, generally dated 170-180 CE, tells about Mary's infancy. It starts with Mary's birth story following a general pattern in the biblical tradition: a childless couple is blessed with a baby in a mysterious way. Joachim is presented as an exceedingly rich and respected man who regularly makes offering in the temple. However, one day he is confronted with the fact that among all the righteous he is the only one who has not raised up seed in Israel. Full of grief he retires to the desert and is fasting and praying for forty days and nights. Meanwhile, his wife Ann starts lamenting, bewailing her childlessness and her seeming widowhood. Her lamentations are comforted when an angel announces that the Lord has heard her prayer and that she will conceive. Ann then promises that she will offer the child as a gift to the Lord. Joachim, too, is visited by an angel with a similar message. He leaves the desert, is reunited with Ann and brings an offering to God. After a time, Ann gives birth to a baby girl named Mary who, at age three, is brought to the temple and entrusted to the high priest. Clearly, this opening story about Joachim and Ann serves to explain how these two people were sanctified by God in view of their election to bring the blessed Virgin Mary into this world. For that reason, Joachim, as the father of Mary and grandfather of Jesus Christ, is presented as a pious, righteous and respectable man.

The gospel of James was widely spread and highly popular among Christians of the early centuries. This resulted in an emerging cult of Mary's parents, though Ann has always been more popular than Joachim. The popularity of this cult is closely connected to the cult of the Virgin Mary but can also be explained by the need of "Christian married couples [to] find in the parents of Mary a model of conjugal life such as they do not find in Joseph and Mary, at least on the level of conjugal relations" (Asselin 2003, 469). The latter explanation also applies to the devotion of St. Joachim and St. Ann in Regiment parish. They are the patrons of a men's and a women's organization deeply concerned with the matrimonial wellbeing of their members and of other people in the parish. The opening quotation shows that St. Joachim Men's Organization explicitly presents its patron as the model of every Catholic husband and father. Through centuries of Christian history, the apocryphal figure of Joachim has been modeled as the ideal husband in a Christian marriage and is today actively promoted in a Zambian Catholic context to strengthen men's commitment to faith and the church, marriage and family. The Catholic Church in Zambia uses his model to transform hegemonic forms of masculinity—associated with irresponsibility of men in marriage and family and with sexual immorality, alcoholism and violence against women—into a type of masculinity defined by Catholic moral and spiritual values. How then is St. Joachim presented as a role model for Catholic men? What specific values and virtues does he

embody, and how does he help individual men to (re)shape their identity and performance as Catholic men?

“I get inspiration from that!”

As historical figures are molded into saints, specific qualities become attributed to them. Thomas Aquinas, who himself became a saint, comments in the *Summa Theologica*, that different saints are praised for different virtues. As representations of specific moral and spiritual values, they are not just objects of devotion but become models for imitation. They set an inspiring example for people who seek to imitate them in their own life. As a young man said to me with reference to the lives of St. Joachim and St. Joseph: “I get inspiration from that!” The process of being inspired by and imitating a saint is a creative hermeneutical process (Duyndam 2004, 13-16). The values represented by a saint, who, after all, belongs to a different historical and cultural context, are interpreted by the devotees and applied to their lives in relation to specific issues and challenges they face.

This hermeneutical process of imitation can also be observed in the men’s fellowship of St. Joachim in Regiment parish. The constitution of the St. Joachim Men’s Organization identifies several aspects in which its patron is exemplary: “He was a model of love, faithfulness, obedience, devotion, diligence, goodness, openness of husband and wife to one another.” The values listed here specifically concern Joachim’s relationship to his wife: he is presented as a model husband. This is also central in the accounts of members of the organization in Regiment parish but they point to other aspects as well, such as Joachim’s piety, spirituality and his role in the family. Thus, in the areas of marriage, family life and faith St. Joachim is considered exemplary.

With regard to marriage, the emphasis is on Joachim’s faithfulness and loyalty to his wife Ann. Several members of the organization mentioned that Joachim remained faithful to his wife even though their marriage was childless for many years. In a cultural context where childlessness is associated with many taboos and can lead to separation or divorce, the Joachim members take the saint as an example to follow. The importance of faithfulness is also related to the reality of HIV and AIDS in Zambia. Referring to the tendency they observe among fellow men to sleep around and the concomitant spread of HIV, several members of St. Joachim point to their patron to demonstrate that the B of the popular ABC (Abstain, Be faithful or use a Condom) prevention message is possible. Apart from faithfulness and loyalty, St. Joachim in his relation to Ann is also considered a model of a more egalitarian relationship of husband to wife. Pointing to the hierarchy in traditional Zambian marriages, a Joachim member comments that even though, in his opinion, a man is supposed to be the head in marriage he has learned from Joachim that “when you are married, negotiation must come from both angles.” More generally, as put in the constitution, the men’s organization aims to “help men to cultivate positive attitudes towards women.” The executives of the group in Regiment parish explain that this is urgent in light of the common perception of wives as property, which in their opinion accounts for the high rates of domestic violence against women. Clearly, the example of St. Joachim is used to inspire men

to develop values such as faithfulness, commitment, love and respect as husbands in relation to their wives.

Broadening the scope from marriage to the family, it appears that St. Joachim is not only modeled as an ideal husband but also as a family-man. At meetings and in interviews it was often emphasized that St. Joachim took active responsibility for his family and led it spiritually. This is applied in several concrete ways. At a diocesan meeting of the men's organization, a priest critically pointed out that men often know the names of football players better than the names of their children and grandchildren. Hence, he emphasized the importance for men to spend time with their family. A Joachim member pointed to the traditional custom of men having their meals together, separated from women and children. But among Joachims, he continued, this is different: "In our families we are together. We eat together. And in that way we bring our families together." Others draw attention to the material aspect of being a family-man. "Since I joined St. Joachim, I have become very responsible. I support my family fully. My wife has now confidence in me that I bring all the money at home. Before I joined, I used to keep a part for drinking." Being a family-man also implies being an exemplary father to your children. Following the righteous and respectable Joachim, a man "must do good things so that his offspring follows his way of life." A specific aspect frequently mentioned concerns the issue of praying with the family. At a meeting of the men's fellowship, the responsibility of a man to lead his family in praying the rosary together was strongly emphasized: "A family that prays together, stays together." Though the *Protoevangelium Jacobi* does not say anything about Joachim praying with his family, the members of the men's organization consider him as an example of how to build a praying family. At the diocesan meeting mentioned above, the priest stated that "as a Joachim, it is your vocation to be a family-man." Since the term "vocation" generally applies to priesthood, the suggestion is that just as a priest is called by God to serve the church as the Family of God, so laymen are called to serve and build their family, the so-called domestic church. For one Joachim member, to participate in the organization "is a way of fulfilling my earlier call to priesthood. Now I try to live a spiritual life with my family."

The emphasis on praying with the family already points to the third area in which St. Joachim is considered exemplary: spirituality. Joachim is not only represented as faithful to his wife and responsible to his family but also as devoted to God. Prayer is a primary characteristic of this spirituality in both the form of individual and family prayer. Some members draw attention to a particular detail in the apocryphal story: the birth of Mary, so the story goes, was the result of God hearing Joachim after he had been praying and fasting for forty days. To them, this demonstrates the power of prayer (imagine: without Joachim's prayer, Mary and consequently also Jesus would not have been born). In the constitution of the men's organization, prayer is referred to as "a weapon of resistance to temptations." Indeed, a member explains how, when faced with temptations, he makes the sign of the cross, prays and then declares: "Get off from me, Satan." The spirituality of the Joachim members is symbolically represented by the uniforms, which they wear two Sundays a month and at special occasions. The meaning of the uniform colors is explained in the constitution. The main color is light blue, the "heavenly color," which in Catholicism refers to the Virgin Mary. The white blouse is the color of light and faith, purity and goodness, and the black belt

and shoes symbolize sin that has been tied. Clearly, the uniform stands for the spiritual orientation in life of the members of St. Joachim. They no longer set their hearts on “earthly things” but seek to live up to different values – values that are represented by the inspirational exemplar of St. Joachim.

The Performance of Masculinity and the Hermeneutics of Imitation

In their blue uniforms the members of St. Joachim most clearly demonstrate the performative aspect of masculinity. The devotees of St. Joachim come to embody the model of manhood represented by their patron symbolically most when wearing the uniform, since the colors refer to the values he stands for. The uniform illustrates not only their new orientation in life but also their new male identity modeled after the saint. Wearing the uniform is a perfect example of the “stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 1990, 191) through which gender identity is not only expressed but constituted. Members of St. Joachim further perform their masculinity through other more or less stylized and ritualized acts, such as leading their families in prayer, respecting their wives, sharing the meals with their families and bringing their income home rather than spending it in bars. Through these performances they imitate and embody St. Joachim.

Such performances of masculinity are inspired, in the words of Butler, by “a history of received meanings” that are “subject to a set of imitative practices” (1990, 188). In the case study, the history of meanings takes place in the shape of a saint who, as a figure, is constructed into a model until he becomes an ideal representation of Catholic manhood. Through a hermeneutics of imitation the meanings, specifically the moral and spiritual values represented by St. Joachim, are interpreted and translated by the devotees and applied to their lives. The fact that the men’s organization does not consider St. Joachim a mere saint but the embodiment of the ideal of Catholic manhood points to the power of a hermeneutics of imitation. Imitation becomes a gendered phenomenon: men seek to imitate the type of manhood embodied by a saint, not at least out of a confusion about their own male identities and a discomfort with prevailing performances of masculinity.

As much as imitating a saint is a personal affair, this case study indicates that it goes beyond the individual. Several members of St. Joachim told me that their wives encouraged them to join the organization, hoping that they would become better husbands and fathers. Furthermore, the tradition of St. Joachim has been deliberately revitalized and employed by the Catholic Church in Zambia as part of a political strategy to change men and to transform prevailing performances of masculinity. This church-based masculinity-politics is informed by a concern about social, moral and spiritual issues, such as HIV and AIDS, poverty, broken families, alcoholism, violence against women, extramarital sexual behavior and lack of involvement in the church. The church obviously presumes that the type of manhood embodied by St. Joachim is, as constructed as it might be, a positive ideal for men who need help to overcome these social problems.

Conclusion

Recently, some African scholars in religion and theology, who are concerned about high levels of HIV and AIDS and gender-based violence, have emphasized the need for African churches “to rethink their mission towards men” and to challenge “conventional forms of masculinity” (Chitando 2007, 40). St. Joachim Men’s Organization can be considered an example of a creative attempt of the Catholic Church in Zambia to mobilize men and to target them for a change. How can we evaluate this effort?

These African scholars offer some criteria for African Christian masculinities. They speak of “liberating masculinities” that free men and women from patriarchy (Phiri 2008, 107, 116) and of “redemptive masculinities” that challenge men to participate responsibly in and contribute constructively to families and communities (Chitando and Chirongoma 2008). Sympathetic to the tradition of African women’s (feminist) theology, these scholars emphasize that alternative concepts of masculinity must acknowledge and contribute to gender equality. In their opinion, patriarchy and its resulting gender inequalities are highly problematic in the face of HIV and gender-based violence. But the case of St. Joachim Men’s Organization shows the difficulty of applying these criteria. Clearly, this male-only organization is not concerned with modern values such as gender equality. It is easy to point to the patriarchal undertones of the ideal manhood represented and promoted by St. Joachim. It is a normative and archetypal model of masculinity, the image of the *pater familias*, who is in charge of the household. African scholars working on issues of religion, gender and HIV as well as Western scholars in critical men’s studies in religion look with suspicion at such a conservative, patriarchal movement of men reclaiming spirituality and male identity.

Though critical suspicion is always healthy, we should not close our eyes to the constructive contribution that St. Joachim men’s organization makes to the quest for transformed masculinities. In contemporary African contexts, this quest is informed primarily by the HIV epidemic and the high levels of gender-based and other forms of violence. Emphasizing responsibility, faithfulness, family values and respect for women can be helpful in light of these large social problems. St. Joachim and his devotees present us with a type of masculinity that may be redemptive without being liberating. The devotion to St. Joachim and the participation in the organization generate a mimetic and performative praxis and enable a constructive agency among men that may contribute to gender and social transformation. This Catholic strategy to transform masculinity, though not in line with modern ideas of gender equality, may yet enhance gender justice. Perhaps we need to nuance a monolithic conceptualization of patriarchy as an oppressive system and ideology of male dominance as put forth not only by African scholars but also by scholars in critical men’s studies in religion. The case of St. Joachim draws our attention to the diversity, ambiguity and complexity of men and masculinities in the sphere of religion and of religious politics to transform masculinities, and it challenges progressive politics concerning gender and masculinity in African Christianity as well as other religious and cultural contexts.

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