Voices of Sisters
Ministry



A family is pictured sitting near a damaged home after an attack by suspected members of the Islamist Boko Haram insurgency, Nov. 1, 2018, in Bulabulin, Nigeria. (CNS/Reuters/Kolawole Adewale)



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Life in Nigeria is better experienced than described. A country in West Africa with a population of about 219,000,000, Nigeria has a Christian majority in the east and south, a Muslim majority in the north, and both Christians and Muslims in the west. It is not news anymore that life in Nigeria is as unsafe for its citizens as it is for foreigners. At one time a country with some of the happiest and most religious people in the world, it is currently one of the most terrorized nations on the face of the earth: and this is where the religious sisters witness to the Golden Rule, on a daily basis, without counting the cost.

Equipped with spiritual armor, the sisters traverse the country to strengthen the populace, in spite of physical dangers. In the past, not many sisters were seen in Nigeria engaging in works that would have had a place in the limelight, but a vocation boom has multiplied the number of religious congregations and institutes in the country. Today, sisters are everywhere. Their mission: eloquently advocating for peace, conscientiously cleaning wounds, and courageously wiping the faces of impoverished and traumatized masses who have been turned into refugees in their own country, thus united in hardship. *Justice* and *peace* are the watchwords of these sisters.

I have been reflecting on how religious sisters/nuns — women who profess the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience — participate in the daily work of peace and justice in Nigeria, to strengthen their resilience in the work of evangelization. Once chosen and called, no one who looks back is worthy of the kingdom (Luke 9:62), and our experiences as sisters in Nigeria, I believe, will be an encouragement to others in other parts of the world.

Corruption has robbed our country of good leadership, impoverished the people, destroyed social amenities and infrastructures, and promoted and empowered terrorists' activities that are violating human rights and rendering many homeless, orphaned and widowed. The recent events of the #EndSars protest in the country is just a tip of the iceberg of brutality which is producing victims who need the attention of sisters in many situations.

As every sector is endangered, the lives of the sisters also are in perpetual danger, yet they go out daily to give hope to the people all over the country in schools, orphanages, civic centers, clinics, hospitals, rehabilitation centers, home visitations, and camps for people who are displaced.

I am still thinking about Sister Henrietta Alokha of Bethlehem Girls College, Lagos, who was killed when a pillar fell on her as she searched for her trapped students, after an explosion leveled their school last year.

Due to insecurity all over the country, the bandits, kidnappers, herdsmen, and Boko Haram activities know no bounds. The fate of sisters engaging in apostolates in every corner of the nation is wrapped in uncertainty.

I remember one example of some sisters working in a diocese in western Nigeria. For years they have been agents of security and peace in the area, where they run a diocesan school. The school has been set on fire three times by parents from an "untouchable tribe," whose children were sent home because of their refusal to pay school fees; not that they could not afford it, but because they felt impunity. Sisters have continued teaching there for the sake of others who also need education. Their perseverance and undaunting spirit always calm the residents of the area.



The author, center, and sisters from other congregations are pictured in the Catholic Cathedral of Ilorin, Kwara State, in Nigeria, during a national march in 2017 to protest the killing of two priests and members of their parish while they were at Mass. (Courtesy of Cecilia Nduaguba)

When I was serving as principal of a school in the north, I watched very traumatized students struggle with perpetual anxiety because of religious differences that led to gunshots and the raiding of churches, schools and homes by terrorists. Here, the sisters organized forums for parents to discuss our common goals for the students' welfare and their positive mental health.

Sisters have also joined our voices in calling for an end to incessant killings in the country, justice for victims and equity for all.

Again, our identifying with the people paves the way to acceptance and collaboration. There is a high acceptance of the sisters among Muslims. They especially appreciate the sisters' habits, which indicate — "we come in peace" — and endear them to the people. Bishops in the north are leveraging this acceptance and are using more sisters in evangelization in the dioceses.

Sisters in the medical field take mobile clinics to very remote settlements, to provide as much help as they are allowed to give to the numerous young mothers who are married off very young due to religious belief in early marriage. Such opportunities are used to instruct the women on topics not prejudicial to religion, to maintain peace and harmony. Many sisters work with displaced persons in camps and use the opportunity to give them hope.

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In addition, some sisters engage in advocacy for the vulnerable victims of human traffickers. They, the sisters, go from school to school, to town gatherings, markets and village settings, giving enlightenment programs and training people on various skill acquisitions to develop self-worth and self-confidence, and reduce the chances of being exploited.

Other sisters take in girls with unwanted pregnancies, nurture them to term, and train them in skills for motherhood, thus helping to reduce the rate of abortion. Some get involved in ecumenism and interreligious dialogue programs; since sisters' integrity is not in question, they broker peace and harmony wherever they are. Trust and confidence in the sisters is the only key that opens the door allowing them access to all these places.

Therefore, adorned in their religious habits, sisters work for and among all classes of people; among Christians and non-Christians, in churches and in civic centers, in camps and villages, in schools, clinics and hospitals — anywhere there are human beings in the country, regardless of creed — giving love, offering hope and encouraging fervent faith to drive out fears.

This story appears in the **Sustainable Development Goal 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions** feature series. View the full series.