Sister Agatha Chikelue: A Force for Peace in Nigeria

The United Nations counts that, as of 2019, 7.1 million people in Nigeria are in need of urgent, life-saving humanitarian assistance and 1.8 million Nigerians have fled from their homes and are internally displaced (IDPs) due to an ongoing conflict, now in its tenth year. Violent extremism, exemplified in Boko Haram but also other groups, peaked in 2014-2015, but the country’s religious communities remain fractious, necessitating a need to build a platform by which to train local religious leaders in interreligious dialogue, conflict transformation and peacebuilding across the country. These peacebuilding efforts are more than exuding compassion and providing humanitarian relief—they are a direct response truncating the reach of violent extremism.

Sister Agatha Chikelue DMMM is a Nigerian Catholic nun and newly elected Chair of Religions for Peace’s (RfP) International Women’s Coordinating Committee, the leadership body of RfP’s Global Women of Faith Network. She is also the Executive Director of Cardinal Onaiyekan Foundation for Peace (COFP), based in Abuja, Nigeria. The foundation’s recent work includes organizing for peaceful and credible elections and supporting young people in overcoming addiction. However, Sister Agatha’s work has brought her to the frontlines of the complex challenges of terror and displacement. She visited IDP camps, witnessing high rates sexual violence and exploitation, and began to implement vocational training for women to start micro-businesses, supporting their families and preventing them from turning to dangerous sources of income.

For Sister Agatha, every religious leader, including women and youth, should learn skills to prevent and mitigate violent extremism nonviolently, and be able to counter “silent extremism”: hateful narratives that propagate ethno-religious discrimination and violence. These dangerous narratives, sometimes passed on to children from their parents, religious leaders, and teachers, lay the foundation for religious stereotyping and hatred, and the COFP actively overcomes these biases through programming and fellowships for conflict resolution and interreligious dialogue.

Sister Agatha’s years of experience building peace in Nigeria has brought about an understanding that peace and development are linked but cannot be achieved without justice, forgiveness and reconciliation. She has also learned that gender plays an important role in negotiating and resolving differences, and that women are the inspirational actors in this field.

“Dialogue is the most important tool in addressing conflict and no matter how badly people behave, we should learn to give each other a second chance.”

Sister Agathe explains her work building peace during a press event during the RfP 10th World Assembly in August 2019