

UNIVERSITY OF PORT HARCOURT

WHO GETS COUNTED?

An Inaugural Lecture

By

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ORDER OF PROCEEDINGS

2.45 pm. Guests are seated

3.00 pm. Academic Procession begins

The Procession shall enter the CBN Centre of Excellence Auditorium, University Park, and the Congregation shall stand as the Procession enters the hall in the following order:

Academic Officer

Professors

Deans of Faculties/School

Dean, School of Graduate Studies

Provost, College of Health Sciences

Lecturers

University Librarian

Registrar

Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Research and Development

Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Academic

Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Administration

Vice-Chancellor

After the Vice Chancellor has ascended the dais, the Congregation shall remain standing for the University of Port Harcourt Anthem.

The Congregation shall thereafter resume their seats.

THE VICE CHANCELLOR'S OPENING REMARKS.

The Registrar shall rise, cap, invite the Vice Chancellor to make his opening remarks and introduce the Lecturer. The Lecturer shall remain standing during the Introduction.

THE INAUGURAL LECTURE

The Lecturer shall step on the rostrum, cap and deliver her Inaugural Lecture. After the lecture, she shall step towards the Vice Chancellor, cap and deliver a copy of the Inaugural Lecture to the Vice Chancellor and resume her seat. The Vice-Chancellor shall present the document to the Registrar.

CLOSING

The Registrar shall rise, cap and invite the Vice Chancellor to make his Closing Remarks.

The Vice Chancellor's Closing Remarks.

The Vice Chancellor shall then rise, cap and make his Closing Remarks. The Congregation shall rise for the University of Port Harcourt Anthem and remain standing as the Academic [Honour] Procession retreats in the following order:

Vice Chancellor
Deputy Vice Chancellor Administration
Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic
Deputy Vice Chancellor Research and Development
Registrar
University Librarian
Lecturer
Provost, College of Health Sciences
Dean, School of Graduate Studies
Deans of Faculties/School
Professors
Academic Officer

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THE LECTURE WHO GETS COUNTED?

PREAMBLE

Vice-Chancellor, Sir, my journey to the New Testament is non-sequential. I came to New Testament studies and a research interest in gender hermeneutics through the practical world of business and economics. My previous studies in Accounting, Management, and Economics, and the experience of teaching and practising in these fields, provided a pragmatic understanding of the “struggle to keep body and soul together,” particularly for women in patriarchal economies and a Church that has roots in Greco-Roman culture from which Christianity derives its cultural definition where women occupy the lowest rung of the ladder.

My transition into the Humanities via a master’s in Jewish-Christian Studies (2004) introduced me to biblical studies, a learning that cuts across the Hebrew Scriptures, intertestamental literature, and New Testament writings, concluding with a thesis titled: *The Covenanted Pilgrim: The Biblical Roots of the Consecrated Life*. The studies expose me to the biblical covenant that defines the relationship between God and humanity and the biblical roots of justice, setting me up to pursue the path of inclusion, and working against marginalisation, particularly women both in Church and society.



Flourishing like the Palm Tree

Thus, my motivation for biblical studies, with specialisation in the New Testament, complements my previous learning and positions me to follow academic paths to human flourishing—the state of optimal well-being where individuals thrive across all dimensions of life. This motivates my research into how language and interpretation can either reinforce bias or serve as a medium for liberation. This culminated in my doctoral research Mbonu (2009), an “inclusion project” titled: *A Redemptive Reading of the Doulē in (Luke 1:26-38): Towards a Liberative Process for Women in Igbo Society*.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Social Location of the Researcher.

Vice Chancellor, Sir, I approach this lecture from a multifaceted social and academic location. I stand before you as: A woman of Etche extraction and a survivor of the Nigerian Civil War (1966-1970), which provided a lived perspective on resilience and empathy. A Christian of the Roman Catholic Tradition, a member of the Congregation of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus for over forty-eight years, a Vowed Religious woman and Missionary, a Professor

of New Testament with research interest in Gender Hermeneutics in the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies at the University of Port Harcourt.

The Department of Religious and Cultural Studies takes an interdisciplinary and analytical approach to belief systems, examining their impact on politics and society. These programmes integrate diverse faiths such as African indigenous religions, Christianity, and Islam to foster pluralism and critical methods to explore areas like biblical studies (Old and New Testament), Church History, and the sociology of religion. Learning in the Department prepares students for careers in the public and private sectors, the academy, Non-Profit Organization and corporate administration.

Vice-Chancellor, Sir, permit me to state that biblical studies, my field, is an academic discipline that critically analyzes the Bible as a historical and literary document, distinct from literal or devotional approach, where people literally open the pages of the Bible to see “what the Bible says.” Using methodologies like textual, historical, and literary criticism, researchers examine the "three worlds" of the biblical text to understand its original context and development. This approach often requires proficiency in ancient languages. My specific area, New Testament is a multidisciplinary academic field focused on the analysis and interpretation of the 27 books of the New Testament. It utilizes Biblical Greek, historical context, and textual criticism to reconstruct original meanings and employs methodologies like historical-critical research, literary analysis, and socio-scientific models. Scholars examine early Christian theology, the life of Jesus, and the cultural settings of the Jewish and Greco-Roman worlds. Thus, a doctorate in this field in conjunction with African Christian theology—a scholarly effort to interpret and express the Christian faith

through the lens of African culture, socio-political and religious context—provided a robust backing to ground my pursuit in inclusion which engenders human flourishing offering me the academic authority to begin to ask the question, *who gets counted?* I, therefore, begin this Lecture with revisiting the “Woman Question.”



Questioning

The Woman Question, specifically the issue of *being counted*, surfacing from the religio-socio-political debates of the 19th and early 20th centuries, provides the critical aperture through which I investigate the challenges of exclusion and inclusion within Nigeria’s religious and cultural spheres. As a scholar of the New Testament with a research focus on gender, my work interrogates how patriarchal structures within religions and culture ascribe a “second-rate” status to women. The social construction of female inferiority is not merely a theoretical concern; it has profound implications for human dignity, social flourishing, and the collective human capability within a community. Put differently, those omitted from the “count” are relegated to a peripheral existence. The peripheral existence of a section of the population hinders a society's ability to thrive and progress alongside others. In my research I discovered the

marginalisation of women in the Church just as it in the larger society a situation inimical for the optimal functioning of church life. Working for the common good of society at large, therefore, demands investigating causes that perpetrate discrimination, that is, the attitude of who *gets included* in things that matter most in the community, with a view to redeeming the situation hence, the use of the biblical and cultural texts.



Women at the periphery

Defining “Text” and “Hermeneutics”

- Written Corpora: Scriptural and literary documents
- Cultural Artefacts: Symbols, rituals, customs, myths, kinship structures, and power dynamics

To engage these texts, I apply **hermeneutics**—the theory and practice of interpretation. This involves a rigorous interrogation of a text’s origin and structure, balanced against the interpreter’s own social location, to derive meanings that transcend a surface-level reading. Hermeneutics and language

are deeply intertwined because hermeneutics, as the theory and practice of interpretation, is fundamentally a linguistic act. Hermeneutics sees language not just as a tool for communication, but as the very medium through which to understand the world; the process of interpretation is seen as a continuous dialogue of understanding language within its context, culture, or the Bible. In this study, the text therefore becomes the primary source of ideas for exploring critical consciousness, examining the roots, and critically analysing systemic oppression.

Methodological Framework and Lecture Roadmap

To ground my claims on women's inclusion, I will present instances of exclusion-inclusion through the following methodological lenses:

- Historical-Critical Method
- Cultural Hermeneutics
- The Womanist Approach

The remaining portion of this lecture will unfold across six movements:

1. The Necessity of a Hermeneutic of Inclusion: Examining why being “counting” matter in the Nigerian religio-cultural milieu
2. The Ambivalence of the Biblical Text.
3. Background and Intellectual Trajectory: The *Doulē* Project
4. Challenges in Intellectual who gets counted
 - i. The “Stained-Glass Ceiling”
 - ii. Linguistic Patterns
 - iii. The Conflict of “Double Consciousness”
 - (a) Catholic Lectionary
 - (b) Linguistic Audit in public places

5. Who gets counted?: Patterns in Igbo Cultural Context
 - i. Name and Naming
 - ii. Girl-child name
 - iii. Boy-child name
 - iv. Equal value of persons
 - v. name in marriage and Progeny

6. Global Recognition at the Vatican

Conclusion

Future Research

Recommendations

Acknowledgements

1. Why a Hermeneutic of Inclusion?

In the Nigerian religio-cultural milieu, *who gets counted* determines access to participation in the dominant discourse. The strategy of *who gets counted* is decisive of a person's position in the exclusion-inclusion divide, both in the Church and society. In this context, establishing who gets incorporated in matters of significance depends on sex assignment; merits hardly play a role when the choice is between a man and a woman, a woman is hardly chosen. It is common knowledge that Nigeria's political arena, for instance, amplifies the connection between gender and public offices. A comparable situation is present in Nigeria's Christian setting, where top positions of leadership and administration remain the preserve of men leaving the women to play the second fiddle regardless of their piety, education or social status. In Mbonu (2009) research shows that *not being counted*, they are relegated to the periphery. The situation presents a one-wing pitfall which a Yoruba proverb aptly captures: *Eye kí fí iyé kan fo* (a bird cannot fly with one wing). The wise saying strongly expresses the pitfall of diminishing the importance of the other half of

humanity in social processes. Integral development requires the full participation of both wings, both halves of humankind. The ultimate path to integral development of humankind, therefore, calls for the full participation and recognition of the contributions of both women and men. In the Lecture I will explore the answer to *who gets counted* which reverberates as the findings.



Inclusion

2. The Ambivalence of the Biblical Text

I begin this section with two questions on the apparent contradiction in the Bible.

Was anyone really discounted in the Bible? What went wrong, the Bible or the Interpreters?

The response is that the ethos of the Bible as the Word of God is life-giving; it negates marginalization. For while the Bible is sacred to a specific demographic, its influence permeates global culture and ethics, Mbonu (2011). For the Christian faithful, the Bible is central to life. The centrality of the Bible and its overarching influence on the lives of adherents of

biblical faith tradition impresses an expository approach to the Book to draw meaning to encourage authentic living.

The second question is What went wrong? – the Bible or its Interpretation? Uncritical interpretations of the sacred text, however, have historically provided the rhetoric for marginalising women and reinforcing androcentric (male-oriented) worldviews, hence the perceived ambivalence. In Mbonu (2011), I argued that empowering women with the tools of biblical scholarship is essential in mitigating biased renderings of text. A close reading of Scripture shows that women *are counted* in all human endeavours but have not been highlighted. For this reason, my research adopts a liberative or redemptive reading—one that unburdens, lifts, the marginalised and promotes the holistic development of both the individual and society. Consequently, it becomes necessary to begin with interrogating inclusion by asking the question *who gets counted*.

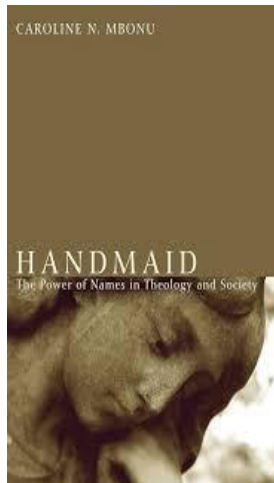
3. Background and previous investigations on the theme of inclusion:

The *Doulē* Project: *Who gets counted?*

Mary of Nazareth (*Doulē Kuriou*) Handmaid of the LORD

My dissertation titled: *Redemptive Reading of the Doulē in (Luke 1:26-38): Towards a Liberative Process for Women in Igbo Society* is the foundational text for my inquiry into inclusion-exclusion. In my dissertation (2009), I argued that the term *doulē* (a Greek term translated: servant, handmaid) should be understood not as servility to men but as a radical faithful servanthood of God alone just as Moses, Elijah and the other servants of God in the Jewish tradition. If the author of the Gospel according to Luke casts his characters in his first Chapter in the Old Testament model, it follows that Mary, the

doulē, of the Lord also is a servant (not a slave). The thrust of the research is the interpretation of the concept of the *Doulē* (handmaid). In this work, the handmaid was lifted from servility before men to faithful servanthood to God alone as she expresses in her *fiat*—(let it be done or let it be) thus: *idou hē doulē Kyriou; genoito moi kata to rhēma sou. Kai apēlthen ap' autēs ho angelos* (Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word) Luke 1:38. This narrative, grounded at the very of beginning of the Christian message—the Incarnation (Luke 1:26-38) in my rendering, is the foundational liberative story for women in Christianity. It shows that Mary of Nazareth, the mother of Jesus, was not a marginal figure in the Divine project; *she was counted*. The *fiat* (yes) of this woman places her at the centre of God's work of redemption.



Mary, Handmaid of the Lord

My research probes women's roles in the church through the lens of the Incarnation (Luke 1:26-38). The Christian faith tradition teaches that to save humankind; the Blessed Trinity

invites a woman to collaborate in the work of redemption. Worthy of note is that the woman so invited hails from Nazareth, a peripheral village where nothing good is expected (John 1:46). In this act of Divine encounter with a woman lies the seed of inclusion (an individual doubly disadvantage: woman and a peripheral). Thus, my research pollinated the imagination to steer the redemptive cause, which has yielded scholarly publications. The academic to grassroots impact extends beyond theory into social advocacy, inspiring initiatives like the cassava farm project at Egbelubi Ndashi Etche which fosters economic and spiritual awakening for women at the grassroots, ensuring that they *are counted*.

Although gender sensitivity has gained ground in the global village, certain areas in Nigeria remain impervious to change. Facilitating the resistance calls forth a contextual hermeneutic that supports the flourishing of all, women and men alike in a particular context. I articulated the subject of *who gets counted* in my book 2010 titled: *Handmaid: The Power of Names in Theology and Society*. With Mary as protagonist, the research challenges two currents that collude to keep the African woman excluded and submissive: African patriarchal culture and the popular Catholic image of a voiceless maiden of Nazareth, Mary. I assert that Mary's self-understanding is that of a servant-leader, an agent under God whose concern is for the liberation of God's people. Book reviewer Eduardo C. Fernandez of the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University and the Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, California firms that *Handmaid the Power of Names* demonstrates how people from oral culture have a particular insight into reading the Bible and that the book is destined not only to signal a new Mariology from an African perspective, but one which retells the story of the Maiden of Nazareth

whose self-gift, far from being passive, marks a vibrant agency worth emulating.

I further showed women not as marginal figures in society and Church life but full participants in research published in book chapters and other sources in exploring the question *who gets counted* in the context of ministry.

Women Evangelisers

Similarly, to buttress women's inclusion in society and church life, I found it necessary to research women in ministry as evangelizers in contemporary Nigeria. I employ the Lukan passage (Luke 1:39-45), showing that by their ministry of evangelisation, women must be included in matters of significance in Mbonu (2016a), *the International Journal of African Catholicism*. I equally contend that given the role of Jesus' women disciples in the resurrection-event, which I consider a divine example of inclusion *per excellence*, contemporary Christian women must not see themselves as those to be invited into the ministry already commissioned to be ministers of the word by the Gospel. A hermeneutic of inclusion exposes women's efforts to ensure that they are counted as in the encounter between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman.

The woman who changed Jesus

Several instances in the gospel witness to active women's voices, which are a signs of inclusion. These voices go unrecognised and oftentimes are explained away as attention seekers or needy persons. My work on the encounter between Jesus and the Syrophenician woman in *Acts of the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria* Mbonu (2025) debunks that assumption. I showed that the woman changed Jesus' perception about the insider-outsider, Jews-Gentiles divide. Her

voice became a liberative instrument that transformed her from being an outsider to an insider, having a share of the children's "bread." We leave teasing out the notion of Jesus as Bread of Life for another Lecture. But the Gospels makes counting women at the Last Supper was a given, for culturally, the Passover meal was a family ritual in which everyone participated.

Women Disciples-Apostles

Also, to argue women's exclusion from Jesus' core apostleship-discipleship in the Gospel becomes a contradiction that my research challenges. Theologians and Gender scholars in recent decades continue to debate on the subject, and as a researcher I authored articles on women's apostleship-discipleship from both Scripture and Christian tradition. I added my voice to the discussion by investigating the Emmaus narrative of the two disappointed disciples' return to their hometown from the perspective of (Luke 24:32), in Mbonu (2023a), *Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria Publications*. My research revealed that the authorised Gospels preserved the tradition of women apostle-discipleship. But centuries of preaching, teaching, and theologising have muted (and or erased) women followers of Jesus and relegated them to the role of mere benefactors. Hermeneutics of suspicion helped me to expose and correct commonly accepted interpretations that were provocative and sought to justify the male domination of women in Church life.

I researched the Lukan text from the larger context of the Resurrection of Jesus in (Luke 24) and the immediate setting of The Walk to Emmaus in (Luke, 24:13-35), where the two fleeing disciples reference some "women of our group" who astounded them with the news of Jesus resurrection (Luke 24:22-23). In this passage, I found that the evangelist paints a

picture of two confounded and dispirited followers of the crucified Jesus of Nazareth, one named Cleopas and his unnamed companion, who seem to a woman, in keeping with the Lukan parallel (Zachariah & Mary; Simeon & Anna). It is reasonable to assume that Cleopas was returning home with his wife Mary, who was present at Jesus's crucifixion, because the Gospel of John (19:25) names a "Mary [the wife] of Clopas" who had been present at the Cross on Mount Calvary; notable the Lukan Cleopas in the Greek is the equivalent of the Johannine Semitic Clopas.

To further pursue inclusion of women in the Apostolic college, I conducted an in-depth analysis of those present at the Passover meal, the Last Supper. I found out that there is no explicit reason for thinking that the women who followed Jesus from the beginning of his ministry in Galilee to its earthly end in Jerusalem would be excluded from this family religious ritual, the Passover meal, which culminated in the institution of the Eucharist. The question remains why there is no explicit mention of the presence of women at the Last Supper. I deduced from the circumstance that it was necessary to do so because the presence of women was assumed, whether they were mentioned or not. Matthew's Gospel gives a clue to the muting of the presence of women in the Gospel in his account of the Miraculous Feeding: "Those who ate were about five thousand men, not including the women and children" (Matthew 14:21).

The scriptural basis for thinking only men were present at the Last Supper is that the synoptic Gospels stress the presence of the Twelve at the meal, and the Twelve were indeed all men (Matthew 26:20; Mark 14:17; Luke 22:14). These texts of the synoptic Gospels could feature as comments on who was there, not on who was not there. The Gospel is clear about the unity

that existed in the followership of Jesus, and no distinction was made. To buttress this point, Luke records that the disciples living and praying together after the Ascension included women (Acts 1:14). This suggests that the liberating power of the Gospel was already at work in the followers of Jesus, allowing them to consider the testimonies of the *gunaîkés tines ex hēmôn* (some women among us). While other evangelists rejected the women's testimony of Jesus' resurrection, John's Gospel portrayal of Mary Magdalene was decisive. John showed her as part of the inner circle who participated in the rituals and ministries of the group as well. Jesus commissions Mary Magdalene, a woman, to announce his resurrection to his brothers (John 20:17-18). The foregoing discussion clarifies women as being "counted" and *bona fide* core members of the Jesus Movement. The Hebrew Bible equally shows women active participants in Israel's two primary institutions, the Monarchy and the Military.

Unnamed Women Peacebuilders

Similar research on the presence of women was carried out to identify nameless women peacebuilders in the Hebrew Bible in Mbonu (2023b), *African Journal of Biblical Studies*. XXXVIII. 1 & 2. The study dismantled the contention that women in the Hebrew Bible were beholden to the men, and as such played a minimal role in Israel's faith history. A critical reading of the selected passages from the Hebrew Bible yielded several unnamed women whose active participation in salvation history and political institutions of ancient Israel, though unsung (muted in the narrative), nevertheless, these women demonstrated their insider status. Particularly, the wise women of Tekoa (2 Samuel. 14) and the wise women of Abel (2 Samuel 20:16-22). The lesson derived is that a careful analysis of Bible passages allows the reader to establish a strong presence of women insiders in the Jewish cultural

context and the biblical literature. Women considered outsiders equally were *counted* in the Divine plan.

Outsider-Insider: Ruth

To *be counted* motivated the Book of Ruth, classified by many scholars as second Temple Wisdom tradition. The pressure to preserve the lineage of her husband Elimelech, Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth, the Moabite, married Boaz so that she could redeem the family devastated by death. This search for *being counted* was the focus of my article, (2021a) on Redemption in (Ruth 4:1-11) in *Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology*. Ruth's disposition to produce an heir, to keep the lineage of Elimelech alive, made her *to be counted*, she earned her place in the genealogy of Jesus the Christ (Matt.1:5). Moreover, Matthews inclusion of four other women (Tamar, Rahab, the wife of Uriah, "Bethsheba", Mary) mostly non-Jews in the genealogy of Jesus heralds the inclusion which the Gospel proclaimed. Women in our context have continued to follow the tradition of ministries towards the realization of the Divine plan for humanity.

Nigerian Women in Ministry

Moreover, shrouded in anonymity, the liberating role of biblical women and women in church history continued to be inaccessible to the ordinary reader because of the entrenched androcentric interpretation of the religious texts. These interpretations tend to minimise women's unique contribution repeatedly. Scripture and church tradition present women who, from the beginning of the Jesus Movement and down through the centuries, have collaborated with men and stood on their own recognition in church ministry. I studied this phenomenon by interrogating the Nigerian women's position in ministry from the prism of (Luke 24: 22-23) in Mbonu (2017): *AFRREV IJAH: An International Journal of Arts and Humanities*. The

work highlights Reverend Sisters and Catholic women's service to humanity through education, medical, social, and pastoral ministries in the nooks and crannies of the country and beyond. Most importantly, projects and pastoral actions of the various groups of the Catholic Women for example, draw attention to women's participation in building the People of God. Nonetheless, the absence of women in the ordained ministry and leadership in the core areas of church administration continues to be a worrisome subject as well as diminishing the full impact of the charism of the People of God. Catholicism's recent Synod on Synodality gave significant recognition to the predicament of women in Church life and set in motion structures to reverse the trend so that women will *be counted* in the religious and social context. The Synod voted for women's inclusion in ministries, reiterating equal dignity conferred by the sacrament of baptism. In the next section, I highlight bottlenecks in the pursuit for inclusion in Church and Society. I segue to the challenges encountered in realizing the fruits of hermeneutics of inclusion.



*Catholic Women Organization Church of Nativity,
Oroigwe, Port Harcourt Diocese*

4. Challenges in Interrogating *Who Gets Counted*

Vice Chancellor, Sir, despite the academic strides made in gender hermeneutics, the practical application of inclusion faces systemic factors that impede development by perpetuating marginalisation and discrimination against women. In both the ecclesial and secular spheres in Nigeria, I offer three instances; The “Stained-Glass Ceiling”; Linguistic Patterns, and The Conflict of “Double Consciousness”

(i) The “Stained-Glass Ceiling”:

While women constitute the numerical majority in most Christian denominations, over seventy per cent of those who occupy the pews during worship, they remain largely excluded from the “hall of power” and decision-making bodies. Their contributions are often restricted to domestic, fund-raising, or supportive roles—the “Martha” service—without the “Mary” privilege of being “*counted*” among the leadership. The stained-glass ceiling effect stems from a biased understanding that God ordained women's inferiority; for these thinkers, women's “second-rate” standard is fixed and does not require any discussion. This thought lays aside the understanding of humankind rooted in the *imago Dei* (image of God) and the Christian consideration that God made them “male and female” (Gen. 1:28). The comprehension of the *imago Dei* imposes equal reverence regardless of gender, as upheld in Mbonu (2016). *Acts of the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria*, where I contended that Saint Paul’s teaching on the sacrifice of body and mind in (Romans, 12:1-2) is not gender specific. Human capability of God is the basis of inclusion in all humankind endeavours.

(ii) Linguistic Patterns

Language serves as the house of being. When liturgical language remains exclusively masculine, it subconsciously

erases the female presence. If women are not named, they are not *counted*. This attitude is found among biblical scholars, where women form a minority. I encountered challenges in my research as a woman in biblical studies. Being a discipline dominated by men whose interpretive framework honours masculine point of view and is often devoid of feminine sensitivity, finding feminine voices to corroborate my research findings was difficult. Also, the dominant voice in the discipline, with little or no appreciation of womanist or feminist approaches in biblical scholarship, disparages women contributions. Undue criticism of feminine views in biblical studies tend to aggravate, in a subtle manner, the insider-outside challenge within the discipline. I highlighted the paucity of women biblical specialists in appropriating biblical interpretation in an article titled “New day for women Bible scholars” Mbonu (2018) in my global Sisters report column. The skewed position demands intentionally educating women biblical scholars. It also entails encouraging feminine sensitivity in the act of interpretation, where androcentric reading has failed to reflect the feminine face of God who created them male and female (Gen 1:28).

Another challenge in the discipline is a scanty representation of women in the writings of early Christianity. These writings and traditions deriving from them become doctrine for the uninformed. My current research on the depiction of women unearthed the influence of the *Mishnah* known as oral Torah on Christian literatures of that period. The *Mishnah* is the foundational written collection of Jewish oral traditions and laws redacted around 200 B.C. by Rabbi Judah the Prince to ensure the preservation of rabbinic wisdom. This work, which edited out women’s contributions in Second Temple Judaism (516 B.C to A.D. 70), informs attitudes toward underreporting the contributions of women in the early centuries of

Christianity. Thus, the muting and erasure of women in early Christian writings denies them the privilege of *being counted*. My research focuses on retrieving women's contributions during the early period of Christianity and re-inscribing them into contemporary Christian works that celebrate their insider status. We find similar patterns of hiding or muting women in the Catholic Lectionary.

(a) Catholic Lectionary and the Muting and Erasure of Women

My research Mbonu (2011) reveals that the presence and absence of women in the Catholic Lectionary speaks to this concern. The importance of the Lectionary in Catholic faith life opens for Catholics the treasures of all the books of the Bible in a three-year cycle (for Sunday and holy day Masses, and a more complete two-year cycle for weekday Masses). It is through the Lectionary that Catholics become familiar with the Bible. The suggestion is that the Bible most Catholic read is the Lectionary. Catholics who depend on the Lectionary for their major source of biblical reading hardly come across biblical passages that valorise women. Hiding women continues the practice of the *Mishnah* in reducing women's agency. The Lectionary in its present form appears to mute and erase women while emphasising passages that reinforce patriarchal prepositions. Key models of female leadership, peace-building and prophetess Huldah (2 Kings 22:14-20 and 2 Chronicles 34:22-28), the passage that discussed her role in authenticating the Book of the Law is typically, among others, such omission hide positive role models from the congregants. Peripheral Liturgy: Significant events like Mary Magdalene's encounter with the resurrected Jesus are often relegated to weekday readings, not exposing this significance moment to many Catholics who only attend Sunday Mass, but the passage is traditionally read on a weekday, the Monday following Easter

Sunday. Since women are not fully recognized in the arrangement of readings the Lectionary, their marginal existence in biblical literature persist in Catholic imagination.

(b) Linguistic Audit in Public Places

Linguistic Audit” in our public and religious discourses offers the picture of being left out of *who gets counted* and public discourse. It is imperative to adopt inclusive language that reflects the presence and contribution of both sexes in all human endeavours. On this note, I suggest a revisit of the University of Port Harcourt Anthem.

In the UNIPORT anthem, the phrase that reads “the vision of our fathers shining in the stars” can be rephrased to read thus: “the vision of our *forebears* shining in the stars” in doing so, the anthem will reflect the contributions of so great an army of women in this UNIQUE citadel of learning.

(iii) The Conflict of “Double Consciousness”



Conflict of “Double Consciousness”

Many Nigerian women face the tension of being “liberated” by education and modern professional roles, yet “subjugated” by traditional cultural interpretations of biblical texts that demand absolute domestic submission, such as the Household Code (Haustafeln), (Eph. 5:21-6:9; Col. 3:18-4:1; 1Pet 2:18-3:7; Titus 2:1-10; Tim 6:1-2). The Code, aimed to preserve social stability through clear hierarchies, has roots in Greco-Roman culture from which Christianity derives its cultural definition. The primary source of pain and dislike for the Code is the historical weaponisation of the texts to justify domestic abuse or the silencing of women. The Igbo maxim, “*Di bu ugwu nwanyị* (Husband is the dignity of a woman) that keeps women in perpetual subjugation, shares kindred spirit with sections of the Household Code. My research underscores that until we bridge the gap between academic discovery (what the text actually says) and ecclesial practice (how the text is used to govern), the marginalised will remain at the periphery. Herein lies the urgency of intentionally educating women in the art of biblical scholarship.

The conflict of double consciousness also manifests in navigating the religio-cultural terrain. It often feels like walking on a field of landmines when discussing issues that border on gender parity. This is because of the resistance one encounters where people have settled with the status quo. These opposers claim to safeguard centuries of prejudicial practices that kept a significant percentage of the population locked down. They have no interest in the progress made in gender parity in various parts of the global community.

Not only in church life does androcentrism—the social, cultural, or scholarly practice of placing a male or masculine perspective at the center of the worldviews, treating it as the neutral, universal standard while relegating women and the

feminine to the periphery. We find such way of being also in the local cultural context. I employ the Igbo name and naming to elucidate the findings.

5. Who Gets Counted Patterns in Igbo Cultural Context

i. Vice-Chancellor, sir, who gets counted, a pattern of discrimination and marginalization against women appear in most cultures. Permit me to offer an example from the Igbo culture from the point of view of name and naming. Until we can name these incapacitating human influences, resolutions to the inclusion project will remain far-fetched. My research from an Igbo cultural context on who gets left out ventured into texts such as name and naming, marriage, and widowhood as well. I will explore examples of designated girl-child names, the boy-child names, and aphorism for married women.

ii. The Girl-child Name



Naming a child

My research, Mbonu (2010), *Achebe's Women: Imagism and Power* studied the character of Beatrice Nwanyibuife in *Anthills of the Savannah* and unearthed the debilitating effect

of certain names given to a girl-child. In this work, I contend that reading text from a particular hermeneutical lens can become emancipatory. This was in-depth research because of the significance of a name in the Igbo cultural context. Among the Igbo, parents give babies names according to the circumstances prevailing at the time of birth, and in this way, names constitute a kind of family oral history. Given the freight a name carries in Igbo culture, naming a child becomes a conscious and attentive act. Innocuous as they may seem, a child unfairly named carries a life-long burden because a pejorative name impoverishes beyond physical possession and inadvertently impinges on the ability to flourish along with others. I investigated redeeming girl-child names that tend to be sidelined in Mbonu (2010). Names such as Nwanyibuife (a female is also something), Nwanyibuego (a female is wealth/money), Ejinwnwayiemenini (what can one do with a female?). In the context from which these names arose, one can decipher the unwholesome significance of the names within the family. What stands out is disappointment, a female-child too many, a deep yearning for a male-child. The full import of disparaging female names becomes more glaring when placed side by side with male names.

iii. The Boy-child Name

A boy-child's name exudes a sense of security and wholeness. We find that in names such as Amaechina (may my lineage never end), Chukwuemeka (the Almighty Creator has been gracious), Obilor (may my heart find rest/peace), these are all positive name Mbonu (2009). A pejorative name is inconceivable for a boy-child. A hermeneutics of suspicion reveals a fundamental craving of families for male progeny in names given to a girl-child or boy-child. The attitude of exclusion-inclusion deeply ingrained in the culture of the girl-child/boy-child conundrum is what my research work at

liberating. Thus, the reading of male names that suggest inclusion shows that from birth, the boy-child is unequal with the girl-child.

iv. Equal Value of Persons

Among the Igbo and other Africans peoples, there appears to be a disconnect between sex role and gender role. A view that feeds the exclusion-inclusion challenges. Sex role is inherent and distinct from gender role, which is a social construct. I researched these roles through the Igbo religious worldview by exploring the concept of Igbo “Chi” as a model for inclusion in Mbonu (2012) *Journal of Gender Studies*. In this work, I proposed the concept of *Chi* as the basis for equal dignity. The Igbo believe that the Creator Spirit bestows the God-self on humankind at conception. For the Igbo, the idea of *Chi* is like the Christian theological concept of the *imago Dei*, the God-self in a person. The Christian understanding of the human capability deriving from *imago Dei*, “a person is ‘capable’ of God (*capax Dei*),” coheres with the Igbo insistence that the *Chi* represents the basis for creativity in the person. If that is the case, discrimination based on sex is inconsistent with their belief. Again, I reflected on the Igbo ontological believe on the equality of the *Chi*: *Chi anaghi aka ibe ya*. (no *Chi* is greater than the other). I explore further the liberating potential of *Chi* in Igbo cosmology. Specifically, how the idea of the *Chi* promotes the equal value of persons in the community. I deconstructed the notion of *Chi ahaghi otu*, literally “there is no equality of *Chi*,” a growing trend that tends to foster unbridled sexism and discrimination, and a heresy at best. The contribution is that a critical analysis of the idea of *Chi* can heal the inferior-superior mindset and blur the boundaries of *who gets counted*. I further explore *Chi* or the *imago Dei* as the guiding principle that can unlock and make possible an

authentic and full participation of all, particularly women, in religio-cultural spheres.

v. Name Marriage & Progeny

Furthermore, there is a way in which certain maxims that question the equal value of persons have become a category of naming married women in Igbo culture. Maxims such as “*Di bu ugwu nwanyi* (Husband is the dignity of a woman) represent one such saying. Wariboko and Mbonu (2021b) in the *Journal of Gender and Power* interrogate the wisdom of *Di bu ugwu nwanyi* in the Igbo thought. The saying, reserved only for married women (no equivalent such name for a man) suggests existential outsider status regardless of being married. In other words, a woman has no dignity within marriage; her dignity derives from her husband! The aphorism reinforces the status of the husband as requisite for the visibility and pride of the woman. This may explain why the culture underplays marital issues such as wife-battering. There exists a plethora of other gender related issues that are rooted in the concept of *di bu ugwu nwanyi*. Sadly, women in marriage endure abuses deriving from such thinking because they desire *to be counted* so they remain with the man. Our research makes a case for a reinterpretation of *di bu ugwu nwanyi* and other such maxims that perpetuate exclusion and promote indignity. Ironically, while promoting the culture of *di bu ugwu nwanyi*, the culture expects women (the undignified) to bear children in the name of the man. In this part of the world, the inability of a couple to bear children is most often blamed on the woman; she is doubly ill-treated. While the culture diminishes a wife's independent dignity, it simultaneously relies on her to produce heirs for the man, which ironically makes the woman the true source of his social standing (*nwanyi bu ugwu di*).

As already demonstrated, the research method I deployed facilitated the uncovering, recovering and reinterpreting texts that discount and objectify women in so doing rendering them increasingly invisible. My methodology blurs the exclusion-inclusion divide and increases the opportunity for participation of those the culture considers outsiders. Without connection to patriarchy, a widow is emblematic of an outsider in a staunchly patriarchal society. My research shows that though a peripheral, she can successfully navigate the -cultural terrain in her context, as argued in Mbonu (2012b) *Nwanyi Isi Nkpe* (The widow) in the Igbo world,” *Igbo Studies Review*. The research findings of *who gets counted* from the perspective of the Bible and Igbo culture, shows that the attitude that feeds discrimination and marginalisation is a product of human culture which can be reinterpreted for the flourishing of all, women and men alike. Moreover, the Bible is unambiguous on the equal dignity and value of everyone, married or unmarried. That humankind is made in the image of God means that the dominant culture is called to develop the mindset that everyone is *counted*.

6. Global Recognition at the Vatican



Prof. Caroline Mbonu in private audience with Pope Francis

Although tangential to the Inaugural Lecture but nevertheless a significant contribution of my scholarship in biblical theology and gender hermeneutics. Pope Francis through the Dicastery for Culture and Education invited me as a theologian from University of Port Harcourt, to be a speaker on behalf of Africa geographical-theological area at the First International Congress on **The Future of Theology: Legacy and Envisioning** at the Vatican (Nov 9, 2024) cementing my status as a global theological voice for the continent.

Conclusion

In this lecture, I have argued that hermeneutics is not merely an ivory-tower exercise; it is a tool for social engineering, human dignity, and the flourishing of society. The liberative power of the Gospel undergirds every interpretive method of the Christian Scripture. Given the centrality of religion in identity formation, it becomes necessary to study inclusion from a religious and cultural interpretive framework. Jesus' inclusive principles in the gospels illuminate the path towards integral development of persons, which remains valid today even though Christians touched by fundamentalism hold on to unfounded allusions to women's less-than-insider status in the Bible. Consequently, humankind's flourishing cannot take place in an environment that tenaciously holds on tightly to the insider-outsider pattern of thought. The continued muting and hiding of women through interpretations that further androcentrism is not liberative; it deprives the church family and society of the constructive collaboration possibilities of members. Interpretations that focus on human flourishing blur the periphery and make it possible for everyone to *be counted*. A contextual reading of the Scripture with fresh eyes directs attention to new knowledge previously ignored put nonetheless significant in building up community for the common good. One cannot ignore the benefits women's voices bring to

biblical exegesis, offering, as it were, what an African proverb would term the lions telling their own story of the hunt, thus liberating unfounded assumptions tenaciously held about women in religion and culture. By revisiting the “Woman Question” through the lens of the New Testament scholarship and cultural studies, it becomes obvious that the exclusion of women is neither a divine mandate nor innate but a result of skewed interpretation that canonises and as well reinforces exclusion of women from social processes. When we count women, not just as labourers or to fill a space, but as leaders, scholars, and image-bearers of the Divine, we allow the proverbial “bird of society” to fly with both wings. My work in liberative and redemptive reading seeks to restore the *imago Deo* in every individual, ensuring that “counting” becomes an act of recognition rather than an act of control *Who gets counted?* is a question that demands an answer from every institution—the family, Church, school, government, industry. Vice-Chancellor, Sir, *who gets counted*.

Future Research

The future research continues in investigating the question of *who gets counted* in various areas of human endeavor. I will work with a team of researchers, and we will involve those responsible for drawing up curriculum of studies from creche to tertiary institutions, including courses of studies that addresses inclusion and human flourishing.

Recommendations

Taking into consideration the findings presented in determining *who gets counted*, I submit the following recommendations to the University community, the Church and the wider Society:

- Curriculum Integration: Academic institutions should integrate Gender Hermeneutics and Cultural Studies

across disciplines to sensitise students to the subtle ways language reinforces marginalisation.

- Ecclesial Reform: Religious bodies must move beyond “tokenism” and intentionally incorporate women into top-tier administrative and theological decision-making roles, recognising that spiritual gifts are not gender-bound.
- Linguistic Sensitivity: I advocate for a “Linguistic Audit” in our public and religious discourses. We must adopt inclusive language that reflects the presence and contribution of both sexes.
- Support for Grassroots Advocacy: The necessity to translate high-level biblical scholarship into accessible local languages and formats, empowering women at the margins to understand their inherent dignity through a redemptive reading of their faith, ensuring that they are *counted*.

Acknowledgements

Vice-Chancellor, Sir, Colleagues, the Inaugural Lecture Screening Committee, students, the Clergy, Religious, Members of the Press, Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen, I thank you for “counting” me worthy of your attention today.

Before I take my seat, I must acknowledge the shoulders upon which I stand:

- To the University Management: I thank the Vice-Chancellor and the Governing Council for the platform to share my life’s work. Thank you for fostering an environment where the Humanities can thrive and challenge the status quo
- To the Faculty of Humanities & Department of Religious and Cultural Studies: My gratitude goes to the Dean, Head of Department, and my fellow academics. Your

intellectual companionship has been the crucible in which my research was refined.

- To My Religious Community: I thank my Superiors and my Sisters. Your support for my academic ministry has allowed me to bridge the gap between the classroom and the convent.
- To my natal family, I am deeply indebted. I owe much gratitude to my parents, Nwatha Nwaiwu Mbonu and Onyegrom Nwaoghu Mbonu, and my paternal grandparents, Nwaoghu Nwanguma and Mbonu Mgbere Nwauzhi, for grounding me in the tradition of diligence, morality, and spirituality of Nde-Etche. To my siblings, ever passionate cheerleaders, Nwaobira, Nnene, Nwaobilor, Uwakwe, Onyinyechi, Uwanaghiakwa, Chibuzo, nuu kaaramunkaooo. Ever-faithful Kashirim Loveday Amakolonwa, all my kinfolks, may God bless you. May God grant eternal rest to our forebearers and bless all the living.

All thanks to God Almighty.

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CITATION



PROFESSOR CAROLINE NWAMBANAJA MBONU

B.Sc. (NYU, New York), M.A. (FORD, New York), M.A. (SHU, New Jersey), STL (SCU California), PhD (GTU, California)

Birth and Parentage

Professor Caroline Nwambanaja Mbonu came into this world on a Tuesday evening aligned with a special number: 3.4.56: the third day of April nineteen hundred and fifty-six, in Kaduna. She is the second child of eleven children of Onyegrom Lazarus Mbonu and Nwadhwa Nwuiwu Mbonu of Egbelubi Ndashi in Etche Local Government Area, Rivers State.

Early Education

A daughter of active-duty military personnel, Prof. Caroline Mbonu attended Army Children School, Kaduna, from 1962 to 1966. Interrupted by the Civil War (1966-1970), she lost three years of schooling but completed her elementary school education in 1970 at State School Ndashi, Etche. Young Caroline attended Gorette Girls' Secondary School, Ikot Ekpene, Akwa Ibom State, from 1971-1975. She was the first

student in her school and her hometown to achieve a **Grade I** in the West African School Certificate Examination.

Journey to Religious Life

Professor Caroline's childhood desire to become a Reverend Sister led her to join the Religious Congregation of the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus in 1975, the same year she completed her secondary school education. In 1977, she made First Profession of Religious vows, poverty, chastity, and obedience. She became a permanent member of the Congregation when she took her perpetual vows in 1985. The same year she graduated from the National Youth Subsequently, she celebrated her silver Jubilee of First Profession in 2002. She is in her 48th year of vowed Religious life.

Tertiary Education

- In 1979, Professor Caroline was sent to the United States for further studies at New York University, New York where she earned a B.Sc. in Accounting and Management in 1982.
- In 1983, she earned an M.A. in Economics from Fordham University, New York.
- She began her transition from the social sciences to the humanities in 2002 by taking up biblical studies at the Institute of Jewish Christian Studies, Seton Hall University, New Jersey, where she earned a Master's in Jewish Christian Studies in 2004, having earlier completed a certificate course in religious formation and spirituality at St. Louis University, Missouri, in 1984.
- In 2004, Professor Caroline Mbonu continued her doctoral studies at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California, earning a degree in Doctor of

Philosophy (PhD) in New Testament and African Christian Theology in 2009. She was the valedictorian of her class.

- Simultaneously, she earned a Licentiate in Sacred Theology (STL) with a focus on Christian Spirituality from the Jesuit School of Theology at Santa Clara University, 2009.

Early Career Path

Professor Caroline Mbonu worked in two Universities in Nigeria and a Major Seminary starting from the Federal University of Technology Owerri (1985-1990), where she was employed as account II and rose through the ranks to become a Senior Account in 1989 and the University of Uyo (1991-1993) where she taught accounting and economics as well as St. Joseph Major Seminary, Ikot Ekpene, Akwa Ibom State where she taught Accounting(1991-1993; 1997-2002). In 1986, she assisted bishop Mark Unegbu, of Owerri Diocese to set up the Diocesan Accounts Department, an office she occupied part-time for three years.

In 1989, she was appointed General Bursar of the Congregation for a six-year term (1990-1996) and reassigned to the Generalate (Headquarters) at Ikot Ekpene, Akwa Ibom State. She was subsequently elected General Councilor serving at the apex leadership Team her Congregation for a period of six years (1996-2002).

Second Career Path

Professor Caroline Mbonu work two Universities in the United States. the School of World Studies, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond (2010) teaching, and The Xavier University of Louisiana (2010) where she taught biblical studies.

In 2011, Professor Caroline Mbonu joined the University of Port Harcourt as a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Religious and Cultural Studies, teaching Biblical and Gender Studies, with a focus on New Testament courses. As a focus and assiduous worker having taught and published widely in local and international publication outlets and supervised many student's dissertations and theses, she attained the rank of full Professor in 2017.

Publications and Supervisions.

Prof. Caroline Mbonu has published widely in learned journals both locally and internationally. She has, to her credit, published more than 96 published works in her area of study in peer reviewed learned journals, monographs, books, chapters in books, edited works, newspaper columns, and conference proceedings. Professor Caroline Mbonu has supervised and co-supervised over 35 long undergraduate essays, 16 master's dissertations and 10 doctoral theses.

She has presented research papers at over 40 national and international conferences and was a Visiting Research Fellow at the Centre for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology at DePaul University, Chicago, in 2023 and presented a Public Lecture titled: A bird cannot fly with one wing: Women and the Church in Nigeria. She is one of the pioneers (2014) columnist for the Global Sisters Report since 2014.

At various times she served and still serves on the editorial boards member/Advisor of several academic journals including,

- African Journal of Biblical Studies
- Igbo Studies Review
- Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology
- Journal of Religion and Culture

- Koinonia
- Pan African Association of Catholic Exegetes
- African American Almanac (11th Ed.)

Academic Duties

At the University of Port Harcourt, Professor Caroline Mbonu served in various administrative capacities, including,

Head, Department of Religious and Cultural Studies (2021–2023)

Secretary, Departmental Disciplinary Committee (2011-2013)

Chair, Departmental Disciplinary Committee (2016- 2018),

member, Editorial Board of Departmental Journal, **member** Departmental Committee for the Affiliation of Colleges.

Member, Faculty of Humanities Doctoral Seminar (2012–2021).

Member, Senate Representative on Student Welfare (2022–2024)

Chair, Departmental Graduate Board. (2019 - 2021; 2023-2025)

External Assessor for Professorial/Associate Professorial Appointments/Promotion for the University of Uyo (2025-2026), Ignatius Aguru University of Education (2020), Veritas University (2018, 2026).

External Examiner, Post-graduate Studies, Catholic Institute of West Africa (2021-2024), University of Akwa Ibom State (2022-2025).

External Examiner, Undergraduate Long Essays, Rivers State University (2022-2025), Ignatius Ajuru University of Education (2021-2024).

Professional Associations

Professor Mbonu belongs to several academic associations,

- Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies.

- Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria.
- Catholic Biblical Association of America.
- Association of Pan-African Catholic Exegetes.
- Igbo Studies Association.
- Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians.
- African Catholic Women Theologians.
- Pan-African Catholic Theology and Pastoral Network.

Professor Caroline Mbonu is a woman of many firsts!

- She is among the first women from Rivers State to become Reverend Sisters.
- The first Reverend Sister from Etche ethnic nationality.
- The first canonical Reverend Sister Professor employed by the University of Port Harcourt.
- The first among the indigenous Clergy and Religious of Port Harcourt diocese to deliver an Inaugural Lecture in the University of Port Harcourt.

AWARDS RECEIVED

- Matron, Professor Caroline Mbonu House, Newland International Academy, Ndashi Etche, 2025.
- Visiting Research Fellowship, CWCIT, DePaul University, U.S.A., 2023.
- *Benemerenti* Medal of Honour conferred by Pope Francis, November 2022.
- Corpus et Sanguis Christi Cathedral Port Harcourt Diocese, Catholic Women Organization, Quintessential Award, 2021.
- Catholic Women Organization, Church of Nativity, Oroigwe, Dedicated Worker, 2021.
- Ambassador Christ Award, Rivers/Bayelsa Catholic Community, Corpus et Sanguis Christi Cathedral, Port Harcourt Diocese (2019)

- Port Harcourt Diocesan Council of Catholic Women Organizations, Trailblazer, 2016.
- Blazing Professional Excellence Ogbakor Etche (2016)
- First Rev. Sister and Academician of Ndashi by Patriotic Women of Ndashi, 2015
- Member, Nigerian Delegation to World Meeting of Families, Philadelphia, USA, 2015.
- Women in Focus, Nigerian Television Authority, International, 2014.

Missionary

Professor Caroline Mbonu lives out the missionary dimension of her vocation in a robust engagement in people and pastoral activities in her mission field. She served in the Diocese of Alexandria, Louisiana at St. James and St. Juliana Parishes as well as the Director of Kuumba Centre (1993-1996). She helped establish the Accounting Office in the (Arch)diocese of Owerri (1986-1988) and worked with the Committee charged with elimination obnoxious widowhood practices in the Diocese. She engages in pastoral activities in her parish church, St. James Parish, Rainbow Town, where she resides and is often invited to parishes within the diocese to speak on various aspects of the Christian life, mentoring both young and old alike.

Prof. Caroline Mbonu's scholarship extends beyond theory into advocacy for gender parity, inspiring and enabling rural women farmers in Egbelubi Ndashi to improve their economic and social well-being through cassava and vegetable farming and at the same time deepening their spirituality. At intervals she organizes medical outreach in rural communities with Ndashi as center, and skills acquisition programs for young people.

EXTRA CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Professor Caroline Mbonu's activities are in keeping with her life as a vowed Religious Sister, a summary of which is listed below.

- Local Superior of community.
- Member, Heritage Community of the Congregation
- Member, Finance Member of the Province
- Religious Vocation animator.
- Spiritual Advisor, Catholic Women Organization, Oroigwe, Port Harcourt Diocese.
- Spiritual Advisor, Catholic Women Organization, Corpus et Sanguis Cathedral, Port Harcourt Diocese.
- Spiritual Advisor, Men of Order and Discipline (Women's Wing), Port Harcourt Diocese.
- Organize/facilitate workshops on spirituality, vocations, economic empowerment
- Marriage Course Instructor.
- Teacher Catechism of the Catholic Church.
- Advocacy for Gender Parity.
- Grassroots Women's Development. Cassava Farmers, Ndashi, Etche.
- Collaborate with an NGO, Center for Women Studies and Intervention (CSWI), Abuja in providing Revolving Loan to women for economic development at the grassroots in Ndashi Etche.
- Member of an International Researcher team (five persons) on Safeguarding of minors and vulnerable adults in Africa.
- Unit Leader, Women' Research Unit (Mary at the Foot of the Cross) of the Pan African Catholic Theology and Pastoral Network (PACTPAN)

Global Recognition

Professor Caroline Mbonu achieved global recognition at the Vatican when Pope Francis, through the Dicastery for Culture and Education, invited her to represent the African geographical-theological area as a speaker at the First International Congress on **The Future of Theology: Legacy and Envisioning** (Nov 9, 2024), cementing her status as a global theological voice for the continent. Professor Mbonu's scholarship drives her pastoral concerns and advocacy, empowering women through spiritual direction and economic initiatives for the flourishing of all ensuring *everyone gets counted*.

Mr. Vice Chancellor, Sir, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I present to you our Inaugural Lecturer today, an academic of international standard, a consummate academic, a vowed Religious Sister, and Spiritual mother of many. Sister Professor Caroline Nwambanaja Mbonu.

Professor Owunari Abraham Georgewill
Vice Chancellor