

ALOYS OTIENO OJORE

CHURCH AND FAMILY IN AFRICA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Abstract. The author dwells on marriage and family life in the light of *Ecclesia in Africa*. He praises *Ecclesia in Africa* as a milestone in Africa's ecclesial life. He gives an overview of the various emerging models of family across the world confronting the traditional Catholic understanding of marriage and the family. He insists that the African family model of polygamy should be reviewed and re-considered in light of the emerging Western models of gay and lesbian families.

Keywords: Church; family; Africa.

INTRODUCTION

An anecdotal observation of the state of the family globally tells us that things are not going well. In the United States of America (USA) and many other European Countries, it has been recorded that eight out of ten marriages end in divorce. In Africa, families are no longer safe at home! For example, the level of violence and the number of homicides in Kenya between 2019 and 2022 alone was appalling. Despite all these bad tidings, the Church still “finds in the family, born from the sacrament, the cradle and the setting in which she can enter the human generations, and where these in their turn can enter the Church.”¹ There is a need, therefore, that we pay attention to the family.

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¹ John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation “Familiaris Consortio,” on the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World (November 22, 1981)* (Boston: St Paul Books and Media, 1981), 15. Hereafter to be referenced to as “*Familiaris Consortio*.”

This paper looks at the Church and the family in four different aspects. The first part presents the traditional Catholic model of the family. The paper then introduces the emerging family models across the world. The third section presents and evaluates the African polygamous model of the family in light of the emerging models. Finally, the paper applies the *law of graduality* and *the principle of reception* to selected models. A conclusion ends the paper.

CHURCH AND FAMILY: THE TRADITIONAL CATHOLIC MODEL

“The family has always been considered as the first and basic expression of man’s social nature.”² This is because a “person normally comes into the world within a family, and can be said to owe to the family the very fact of his existing as an individual.”³ Pope Benedict XVI explains that the family is the “sanctuary of life and a vital cell of society and of the Church.”⁴

In a healthy family we experience some fundamental elements of peace: justice and love between brothers and sisters, the role of authority expressed by parents, loving concern for the members who are weaker because of youth, sickness or old age, mutual help in the necessities of life, readiness to accept others and, if necessary, to forgive them.⁵

“The family is, therefore, the first place where lay people exercise their call to service and mission.”⁶

The Synod Fathers stated that “not only is the Christian family the first cell of the living ecclesial community, it is also the fundamental cell of society.”⁷ The family, made up of the father, mother and children, “is the image

² John Paul II, *Letter to Families* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1994), 7.

³ *Ibidem*, 2.

⁴ Benedict XVI, *Apostolic Exhortation “Africae Munus” on the Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace (November 19, 2011)* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2011), 26, 42. Hereafter to be referenced to as “*Africae Munus*.”

⁵ “*Africae Munus*,” 43.

⁶ John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation “Christifideles Laici” on the Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful (December 30, 1988)* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1988), 38. Hereafter to be referred to as “*Christifideles Laici*.”

⁷ John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation “Ecclesia in Africa” on the Church in Africa and its Evangelizing Mission Towards the Year 2000 (September 14, 1995)* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995), 80.

of God, who is the communion of persons.”⁸ The Church notes that a “Christian marriage and the Christian family build up the Church.”⁹ Therefore, the Church is “a family of families, constantly enriched by the lives of all those domestic churches.”¹⁰

Consequently, Pope Francis insists that the Catholic Church can only uphold the traditional family made up of a man and a woman who are open to life and dedicated to the raising of children, participating in the Sunday Eucharist and dedicated to daily dialogue with God in their prayers.¹¹ In this way, the family becomes “a school of following Christ in which all members evangelize and are evangelized.”¹² “By virtue of their ministry of educating, parents are, through the witness of their lives, the first heralds of the Gospel for their children...”¹³ Christian families “by the grace of the sacrament of matrimony, are the principle agents of family apostolate” (AL, no. 200, p. 100).

The Catholic Church has traditionally recognized nuclear, extended, single-parent, and childless families, provided they have been constituted sacramentally. The same applies to reconstituted families also called blended, step, or complex families. This is a family unit where one or both parents have children from a previous relationship, but they have combined to form a new family. The parents may or may not have children with each other in their new relationship. The Church in Africa does not have a different image or understanding of the Universal Church’s understanding. In Africa, there are plural marriages that “lead to polygamous families which are composed of two or more nuclear families linked by a common parent.”¹⁴ The Catholic Church only approves of the nuclear family, which is “described as the smallest typically composed of husband, wife and their immediate offspring. It consists of at least two adults of the opposite sex living in a socially approved sexual relationship.”¹⁵ This is the model of the family the Synod Fathers took as the norm for building the Church in Africa.

⁸ Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation “Amoris Laetitia” on the Joy of Love* (March 19, 2016) (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2016), 71. Hereafter to be referred to “*Amoris Laetitia*.”

⁹ “*Amoris Laetitia*,” 15.

¹⁰ “*Amoris Laetitia*,” 87.

¹¹ “*Amoris Laetitia*,” 44, 46.

¹² “*Amoris Laetitia*,” 46. See “*Familiaris Consortio*,” 2.

¹³ “*Africae Munus*,” 46.

¹⁴ Agnes Zani, “The Family, its African Socio-Cultural Context,” in *The Model of Church as Family*, edited by Patrick Ryan et al. (Nairobi: CUEA Publications, 1999), 46.

¹⁵ Agnes Zani, “The Family, its African Socio-Cultural Context,” 49.

During the African Synod held in Rome in 1994, the African bishops proposed such a family as the best model for the Church in Africa. The synod fathers were calling for a Church that is “close to the people and faithful in the service of life and in solidarity with its members.”¹⁶ The *Church as God's Family* emphasizes care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationships, acceptance, dialogue and trust. Pope St. John Paul II added that it was “earnestly to be hoped that theologians in Africa would work out the theology of the Church as Family with all the riches contained in this concept, showing its complementarity with other images of the Church.”¹⁷

The Pope was challenging African theologians to merge the new model of the Church as a family with traditional models of the Church, such as the Mystical Body, People of God, Community, Institution, Temple of the Holy Spirit, Flock and Sheepfold, House of God, Bride of Christ, Mother, Servant, Holy City, and Herald. We have to take all these images into account when developing an ecclesiology focused on the idea of the *Church as the Family of God*. Consequently, the African Synod urged the African Church and theologians to focus on five main areas:

First, the Holy Family of Nazareth has to be the model for all Catholic families in Africa. “The covenant of love and fidelity lived by the Holy family of Nazareth illuminates the principle which gives shape to every family, and enables it to better face the vicissitude of life and history.”¹⁸ It has to be stressed that “the future of the world and of the Church passes through the family.”¹⁹ In this regard, the Holy Family, which, according to the Gospel (Matt 2:14-15) lived for some time in Africa, is the “*prototype and example for all Christian families*” and the “*model and spiritual source for every Christian family*.”²⁰ All should emulate the silence of Joseph and Mary awed by the Divine mystery in their child, their dedication to every family member and their hard work in the carpentry shop of Nazareth.

Second, there is a need to uphold the dignity and role of a man and a woman in African families. The dignity of a man and a woman derives from the way God created them. We are told that “*in the image of God* he created

¹⁶ Aloyse Raymond Ndiaye, “Church as Family or Family as Church?” in *The Church We Want, Foundations, Theology and Mission of the Church in Africa*, edited by Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator (Nairobi: Paulines, 2015), 154.

¹⁷ “*Ecclesia in Africa*,” 63.

¹⁸ “*Amoris Laetitia*,” 66.

¹⁹ “*Ecclesia in Africa*,” 80.

²⁰ “*Ecclesia in Africa*,” 81.

him, male and female he created them.”²¹ Consequently, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World upholds that “human beings are the center (apex) or crown of God’s creation because they are created little less than God.”²² In response to the challenges facing the family today, the Church has to fight for the well-being of families by stressing “that the Church founded by Jesus Christ...accompanies humanity acting as leaven, communicates divine life to the world, and helps people discover their rights, enhances the dignity of the human person and preaches the unity of the human family.”²³

The assumption here is that the Church herself positively supports families that are in contact with it via its institutions before it calls upon the state and other organizations to do the same. No one should be exploited simply because he or she is in the service of the Church. The 1971 Synod of bishops warned:

While the Church is bound to give witness to justice, she recognizes that anyone who ventures to speak to the people about justice must first be just in their eyes. Hence we must undertake an examination of the modes of acting and the possessions and lifestyle found within the Church herself.²⁴

The early Church of Jerusalem was very keen on caring for all members. The Christian Community of Jerusalem can rightly be called the Family [domestic] Church. The believers gathered in the house of one of their members on the first day of the week to break bread together and responded to the material needs of poor believers. The domestic Church of Jerusalem cared for the well-being of all members. Everyone sold all they owned and placed the proceeds at the feet of the apostles. No one was in want as they owned and shared everything equally (Acts 4:32-37). The profits they made were ploughed back into caring for vulnerable members such as widows, orphans and strangers [immigrants]. It was for this very reason that the ministry of deacons was created. The family Church is an Ecclesia living

²¹ Gen 1:27. Cf. “*Ecclesia in Africa*,” 82.

²² Paul VI, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* “*Gaudium et Spes*” (December 7, 1965), 12, www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html, accessed: June 12, 2023. Cf. Psalm 8:5-7.

²³ “*Gaudium et Spes*,” 40, 41, 42.

²⁴ Synod of Catholic Bishops, *Justice in The World* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1971), arts. 35 and 40. See also SECAM. *Justice and Evangelization in Africa* (Kisubi: Marianum Press, 1974).

according to the Gospels [*Secundum Evangelium*]. The model of the Church as a family is, therefore, not only the best model for the Church in Africa but globally as well.

However, a quick look at how the hierarchical Church in Africa relates to the domestic churches on the parish, diocesan, national, regional and continental levels today reveals a disturbing picture. Do the laity who serve in our ecclesiastical institutions enjoy good salaries, better housing, health care, and access to good education like the clergy? Do we really believe that “the family is the first vital cell of society?”²⁵ There are excuses such as “the parish is poor” and so on. Well, what happened to the *principle of subsidiarity*? We need to apply it at the Parish, Diocesan, National, Regional and Continental levels. St. Paul always reminded richer churches that they had the duty to support poorer ones. He collected money to support the Mother Church of Jerusalem. Why can our richer town and city Churches not organize themselves to support poorer rural ones? The fact is that we are divided and people only care about their parish or diocese. We have forgotten that hoarding is a sin that led to the death of Ananias and Safira (Acts. 5:1-11). Richer European Churches have always applied the principle of subsidiarity towards poorer African Churches. Our richer Churches in Africa can now do the same. We have lost the sense of the domestic Church of Jerusalem and have been living contrary to the Gospels [*Contra Evangelium*]. According to the late Rev. Prof. John Mary Waliggo:

To work for the church is to be a perpetual volunteer, a beggar and an irresponsible family person. No wonder that the church in AMECEA cannot attract great brains and efficient personnel. From low input one can only get low output. Our inefficiency, non-productivity, and administrative stagnation and far from full committal of the laity to evangelization stem from absence of just pay and adequate motivation based on contemporary terms and conditions of service.²⁶

Third, we should protect and preserve the dignity and role of marriage. Stable marriages lead to stable families. The 1994 Synod Fathers stated:

The communion between God and his people finds its definitive fulfilment in Jesus Christ, the Bridegroom who loves and gives himself as the Saviour of

²⁵ John Paul II, “*Letter to Families*,” 42.

²⁶ David Kyeyune et al, eds., *New Trends for the Empowerment of the People* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1997), 92.

humanity, uniting it to himself as his Body.... In this sacrifice there is entirely revealed that plan which God has imprinted on the humanity of man and woman since their creation (Ephesians 5:32-33). The marriage of baptized persons thus becomes a *real symbol of that new and eternal Covenant* sanctioned in the Blood of Christ.²⁷

The mutual love of baptized spouses makes present the love of Christ for his Church. As a sign of this love of Christ, marriage is a *Sacrament of the New Covenant*. Therefore, marriage is a state of life, a way of Christian holiness, a vocation meant to lead to the glorious resurrection and to the Kingdom, where “they neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Matt 22:30). Marriage thus demands indissoluble love; thanks to this stability, it can contribute effectively to the complete fulfilment of the spouses’ baptismal vocation. If marriage is an example of indissoluble love and an everlasting bond, then the average African finds it confusing for the same Church to teach that death ends it. At the celebration of the Sacrament of Matrimony, African couples should be promising to remain faithful to each other forever, and not until death does us part! It is death that re-unites Africans. It does not separate them, for it is via death that they shall be reunited with all the loved ones who had died before them. This is also the Christian hope! A Catholic document perfectly captures the African view of marriage when it states:

A conviction carried out in life is that, far from destroying the bonds of human and supernatural love contracted in marriage, death can perfect and re-enforce them... Considered on a purely conjugal plane, death ends marriage as a physical union, but what constituted its soul, what gave vigour and beauty, conjugal love with all its splendour and its eternal vows subsists...²⁸

Fourth, “there is need to save and protect the African family from modern attacks and challenges.”²⁹ Many interventions in the Synod Hall highlighted present-day threats to the African family. The concerns of the Synod Fathers were all the more justified in that the preparatory document of the United Nations Population Conference held in September 1994 in Cairo seemed to wish to adopt resolutions contradicting many values of the Afri-

²⁷ “*Ecclesia in Africa*,” 162.

²⁸ Benedictine Monks of Solesmes, *Papal Teachings: Matrimony* (Boston: The Daughters of St. Paul), 499.

²⁹ “*Ecclesia in Africa*,” 84.

can family. The Synod Fathers and the entire Church launched an urgent appeal to safeguard the traditional Catholic family. Pope Francis laments that, due to distortions of the very notion of marriage and family, "... the family needs to be protected and defended so that it may offer society the service expected of it, namely providing men and women capable of building a social fabric of peace and harmony."³⁰ This is because the "future of the world and of the Church passes through the family."³¹ Consequently, the "Church openly and strongly defends the rights of the family against the intolerable usurpations of society and state."³² The "laity have to do everything in their power to strengthen and defend the family life."³³

Fifth, we must *ensure that the African family is open to society as they tackle challenges*. By its nature, marriage, which has the special mission of perpetuating humanity, transcends the couple. In the same way, by its nature, the family extends beyond the individual household: it is oriented towards society.

The family has vital and organic links with society, since it is its foundation and nourishes it continually through its role of service to life: it is from the family that citizens come to birth, and it is within the family that they find the first school of the social virtues that are the animating principle of the existence and development of society itself. Thus, far from being closed in on itself, the family is by nature and vocation open to other families and to society, and undertakes its social role.³⁴

Thus, the parish becomes the arena where each family meets others.

The Catholic family is part of the lay faithful, and "because they are members of the Church, they have the vocation and mission of proclaiming the Gospel: they are prepared for this work by the sacraments of Christian initiation and by the gifts of the Holy Spirit."³⁵ "It is the Church as Mother that gives birth to, educates and builds up the Christian family by putting into effect in its regard the saving mission which she has received from the Lord."³⁶ The "family is, therefore, placed at the service of the building of the

³⁰ "Africae Munus," 43.

³¹ "Ecclesia in Africa," 80.

³² John Paul II, *Letter to Families*, 46.

³³ *Ibidem*, 38.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, 85.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, 33.

³⁶ "Amoris Laetitia," 49.

Kingdom of God in history by participating in the life and mission of the Church.”³⁷ Consequently, the Christian family is deeply grafted into the mystery of the Church. Despite the beautiful images of the Church as the Family of God in Africa, there are serious challenges connected with this model.

The modern African family faces serious challenges, given the political, economic, social and cultural difficulties. They also need to be purified from impurities such as plural relationships, violence against women, early child-birth or arranged marriages, injustice towards widows regarding inheritance of property, exclusion of women in decision-making, child abuse and exploitation. How then can the African family preserve its essential values in the face of such numerous challenges? One has to admit that the new model of the Church as a family is not perfect. A model is merely a paradigm that assists us in understanding a complex reality. However, it “does not capture the reality, but it does yield true knowledge of it...”³⁸ The possibility of embracing the model of the Church as a family is all the more compounded by other globally emerging models. Africa is not spared.

CHURCH AND FAMILY: EMERGING MODELS

In his apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope John Paul II observed that the “family in the modern world, as much as and perhaps more than any other institution, has been beset by many profound and rapid changes that have affected society and culture.”³⁹ Some challenges that heavily impact the Christian family include spouses demanding freedom and independence, children resisting parental education, inter-family relationships, divorce, civil rather than Church marriages, and addictions of all sorts. St. Pope John Paul II identified the threats to marriage and family as “the rejection of moral norms that guide and promote the human and Christian exercise of sexuality in marriage.”⁴⁰ The traditional Christian family we have already described in the first section of this paper is being globally challenged by other forms of families.

³⁷ John Paul II, *Letter to Families*, 49.

³⁸ Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2008), 31.

³⁹ “*Familiaris Consortio*,” 1.

⁴⁰ “*Familiaris Consortio*,” 7.

Emerging forms of marriages and families include cohabitation (“Trial Marriage”), free unions [no institutional recognition], Catholics in civil marriages, separated or divorced but have not remarried, divorced and remarried.⁴¹ Claims for recognition by gay, lesbian and polygamous families have presented even more challenging issues. By 2014, for example, more than 14 countries had passed laws legalizing same-sex marriages. These countries include South Africa, Australia, Canada, the USA, France, the United Kingdom and many other European and Latin American countries. Ireland, a mostly Catholic country, voted overwhelmingly to make additions to Article 41 of their Constitution to read: “Marriage may be contracted in accordance with and by law, by two persons without distinction as to their sex.”⁴² These countries have modified their laws to include and recognize gay and lesbian relationships as new forms of marriage and family. Stanley Ntagali and Eileen Hodgetts have noted that “throughout the world, attempts are being made to redefine the institution of marriage. Christian understanding that marriage shall be a union of one man and one woman for life has been challenged.”⁴³ The world has shifted from looking at marriage from an exclusivity perspective to seeing it as a process that can be expressed in different ways.

Insisting on exclusivity in a Christian marriage, and that it reject other forms of marriage and family, complicates pastoral issues that are already difficult to address. The problem with the Church’s insistence on exclusivity in marriage is that it is based on the idea of Yahweh uniting himself with the people of Israel as a bridegroom to his bride. In this union, there is no other person. The question one may ask is: can God be exclusively owned by one people? Has he not also united himself to all other peoples in the world in a similar manner as with the Jews? There seems to be no exclusivity in the way God relates to human beings, as he has no favourites (Acts 10:34, 35). Taking the relationship between God and one people [Israel] built on their biases against other people does not seem to be a very attractive ideal that applies to all marriages of different peoples of all ages in the world. The world is already telling the Church that the family model based on the relationship between Israel and Yahweh does not suit the modern world. In any case, Israel has never recognized Christ as the Messiah of Yahweh. It is, therefore, strange that we have embraced a failed relationship as the ideal for

⁴¹ John Paul II, *Letter to Families*, 80, 81 and 84.

⁴² Raphael O. Gallagher, “Current Debates on Marriage,” *Doctrine and Life* 65(2015), no. 4: 34.

⁴³ Stanley Ntagali, and Eileen Hodgetts, *More than One Wife: Polygamy and Grace* (Kampala: Ntagali & Hodgetts 2011), 23–24.

our Christian marriages and family. The Church needs to explain exclusivity properly, or has to re-think its definition and understanding of marriage and family today. In the absence of this, other emerging forms of marriage and family will remain a pastoral challenge globally.

The cry for gay, lesbian, polygamous and other unions is not “born out of the desire to destroy marriage but, rather, in a cry for acceptance.”⁴⁴ As a married man in the Catholic Church with children, I agree that the Church may teach and insist that “marriage between a man and a woman is the best general context for the rearing of children and may, therefore, receive preferential treatment.”⁴⁵ However, it may not be the only one. In this world, human beings find themselves in situations created by circumstances of biology, death and accidents that radically alter the way they would like to live. Consequently, “mercy may be characteristic of everything the Church does.”⁴⁶

When Archbishop Justin Welby of Canterbury wrote to the African Anglican bishops about accepting gays and lesbians, he faced such resistance that it threatened to tear the Anglican Communion. However, it is interesting to note that Cardinals Schonborn of Vienna, Ruben of Colombia, Dolan of New York, McCarrick of Washington and Bergoglio of Buenos Aires [presently Pope Francis] have been quoted as having affirmed that “there can be same-sex partnerships and they need respect and even civil law protection. But that these unions may not be equated with marriage.”⁴⁷ While Christians in the developed world seem to be open to gay and lesbian relationships, Christians in Africa reject them *in toto* as grossly evil and immoral. On the same note, Western Christians would find the idea of polygamy or levirate unions revolting and even disgusting. It would appear that a type of marriage that is acceptable in one corner of the world would be considered unacceptable in another. Whose model ought to be the norm, or should we be open to surprises? Pope Francis has made it crystal clear that, in his view, “there are circumstances when divorced and remarried Catholics can receive Communion.”⁴⁸ People who were initially thought to be living in sin are now welcome to receive Holy Communion. In this regard, Cardinal Napier of Durban

⁴⁴ Raphael O. Gallagher, “Current Debates on Marriage,” 36.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, 42.

⁴⁶ Catherine Pepinster, “What Comes First is the Saving of Souls,” *The Tablet* (London: The Tablet Publishing Company, May 2, 2015), 2.

⁴⁷ Christopher Lamb, “Schonborn Leads Rethink on Same-Sex Civil Unions,” *The Tablet* (London: The Tablet Publishing Company, April 13, 2013), 26.

⁴⁸ Christopher Lamb “Signs of Change,” *The Tablet* (London: The Tablet Publishing Company, September 24, 2016), 27.

asked: “If Westerners in irregular [marital] situations can receive Communion, are we to tell our polygamists and other ‘misfits’ that they too are allowed?”⁴⁹ The Church should appreciate that there are marriages and families in the world that are radically different from what it teaches. It is prudent that the “Church ought to apply herself to understand the situations within which marriage and family are lived today, in order to fulfill her task of serving.”⁵⁰ In my view, polygamous families in Africa have to be looked at in the light of gay and lesbian marriages and families that African Christians are being asked to accept and respect.

POLYGAMOUS FAMILIES IN AFRICA

Pope Francis opens his Apostolic Exhortation “*Amoris Laetitia*” by stating that the 2015 Synod was on the Christian family:

allowed for an examination of the situation of families in today’s world, and thus for a broader vision and a renewed awareness of the importance of marriage and the family.... The complexity of the issues that arose revealed the need for continued open discussion of a number of doctrinal, moral, spiritual, and pastoral questions.⁵¹

How can a daring African theologian appeal for the possibility of tolerating certain polygamous unions in Africa? We know that the Catholic Church rejects polygamy because one man cannot be one flesh with two or more women. Fr. Eugene Hillman argues that it is actually possible for a man to be one flesh with more than one woman. For example:

Children in relation to their mother can be “one flesh” with her, by reasons of their unity in general and in maternal love. The relationship between the mother and each child, respectively, may even be regarded as a union of “two” in “one flesh” without hereby excluding the other children from the same relationship with their mother.⁵²

⁴⁹ Napier, “An African Cardinal asks a good question,” *Catholic Herald*, January 6(2017), 3.

⁵⁰ John Paul II, “*Letter to Families*,” 4.

⁵¹ “*Amoris Laetitia*,” 2.

⁵² Eugene Hillman, *Polygamy Reconsidered: African Plural Marriage and the Christian Churches* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books 1975), 168.

Following this argument, a married Catholic man who marries a second wife for very serious cultural or health reasons, has added a second woman to his fold. Since this is a socially valid union in African cultures, he can be united with each of the two women, “respectively, as ‘two’ in one flesh” – both in a carnal sense and in terms of kinship. St. Paul has shown that it is possible to be “one flesh” with several prostitutes in a successive way in 1 Corinthians 6:16-17. Therefore, is it really correct to take the “one flesh” of Genesis 2:24 to mean monogamy? The argument that the unity between Christ and his Church can only be represented in monogamy is just one way of looking at marriage and family. Yet, is it also possible that “the union between Christ and the Church can be symbolised simultaneously in polygamous families? Christ standing for the husband, is one; and the Church, as his wife is plural. For, in actual historical fact, God's people believed in the plurality of person.”⁵³ Ecclesiologists speak of domestic, local, national, regional, continental and universal Churches. These are collectively and individually “wives of Christ.” In the Post Vatican II Church, there is unity in diversity and pluriformity in singularity. One has to stress that “unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it.”⁵⁴

The late Fr. Peter Lwaminda explains that marriage is a secular reality and “has always existed in many forms and at many levels and its dynamic reality has included divine and human laws....”⁵⁵ Polygamy among Africans is one way of looking after women, which has proven useful for thousands of years before Christ. It is interesting to note that the first and even the second generations of many African priests, bishops, and religious men and women have come from polygamous families. Maurice Michael Cardinal Otunga came from a family of over 19 mothers. Bishop John Oballa Owa who addressed us during the Tangaza Theological Symposium is a son of a third wife. Is this not an indication that God's love can be realised in the purely traditional African marriage and family types? In the School of Theology at Tangaza, there are a number of students who come from polygamous families. Who can face them and tell them that they are from sinful families? Why then does the Catholic Church declare invalid that which the entire society considers valid? Fr. Donovan who worked among the Maasai

⁵³ Ibidem.

⁵⁴ “*Amoris Laetitia*,” 3

⁵⁵ Peter Lwaminda, “Introductory Talks,” *African Ecclesial Review* 28(1986): 179.

warned missionaries and the Church that the grace of God was always ahead of them and present in the cultures of the peoples in mission territories long before they arrived. The African marriages and families they found there were already ordained and blessed by God.

On the one hand, it is instructive to note that prostitution as an institution and industry only flourishes in the Western type of monogamous marriages and families. Every city has a Red-Light District visited by monogamous men. On the other hand, prostitution is minimal or missing altogether in Islamic countries that practice polygamy. This was also the case in traditional African societies before the Western Christian demand for monogamy was introduced. I am aware that monogamy was the norm in traditional African societies. However, those who had good reasons for entering polygamy did so following set regulations. It helped to avoid village prostitution and other forms of sexual abuse we find in Africa today.

Faced with such protracted theological issues regarding new models of marriage and family, it may be better to surrender all arguments to Divine mercy. For pastoral reasons, those of us who have fallen may be shown mercy, love and forgiveness. It is on this exhortation for mercy that Canadian and Brazilian Catholic bishops have received divorced and civilly married people back to the sacraments. Some moral theologians may be unhappy with the Brazilian bishops. However, if the two ministers of the sacrament of marriage [husband and wife] have agreed that their collapsed marriage was taking them to eternal damnation, and therefore dissolved it to free themselves from each other, why should the Church, [a mere witness], continue to insist that the marriage is still there? Why is it much easier to dispense a priest from ministry than to free a layman or woman from their sacramental bond? At ordination, we say “you are a priest forever according to the Order of Melchizedek.” *This sounds to me like some kind of ecclesiastical apartheid!* Pope Francis invites the whole Church to exercise patience. This patience called for by Francis is in line with the *principle of graduality*, which may help us understand and tolerate families that are not familiar to us.

THE LAW OF GRADUALITY AND IRREGULAR FAMILIES

The law of graduality states that the “Christian is... subject to the normal law of slow but sure growth in moral perfection, that is to the Divine pa-

tience and mercy.”⁵⁶ It is “the notion that people come closer to the ideals of Church teaching over time.”⁵⁷ At the incarnation, Christ put aside his heavenly “culture” and stepped into humanity’s messy history while embracing the Jewish [human] nature. During his ministry, he loved and patiently helped sinners to grow gradually into his heavenly culture. He even left them before they grasped it as we see in the person of Peter who denied him. When Jesus himself was called a Good Master, he retorted, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone” (Mark 10:17-18). Yet, it is the same Jesus who also tells us, “*You therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect*” (Matthew 5:48). The ideal is set so high for believers, but the reality is that we are *perfectly imperfect*, and Jesus who knows the frailty of human beings in his pilgrim Church warns against pharisaic extremism among his followers. Jesus, therefore, helped sinners to grow gradually in knowledge of the Divine Truth.

It should be noted that the customs and traditions of a people die hard. “Cultural development is a long-term process that undergoes slow evolution....”⁵⁸ It will take some time, for example, before polygamy is eliminated from African societies. In the meantime, the Catholic Church in Africa has to find effective ways of addressing it. The *law* or *principle of graduality* is one possible way of slowly addressing the custom. This principle may be applied where it is obvious that the *principle of reception* is very low or does not exist at all.

The principle of reception refers to the proposition of Church teaching on the one hand and assent to that teaching on the other. It simply means that no teaching takes place until someone has been taught, that is, until someone has to some degree understood and accepted or accented to the teaching, in this case the greater mass of the Church, namely the hierarchy and all the faithful together.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Joseph Kariuki, “New Trends in Moral Theology,” in *Towards African Christian Maturity*, edited by Aylward Shorter (Nairobi: St. Paul Publication, 1987), 150.

⁵⁷ Christopher Lamb, “Synod will seek to integrate divorced and remarried,” *The Tablet* (London: The Tablet Publishing Company, June 27, 2015), 28.

⁵⁸ Peter Onyango, *Cultural Gap and Economic Crisis in Africa* (Peterborough: Fastprint Publishing, 2010), 28.

⁵⁹ Laurenti Magesa, “The Hermeneutical Contribution of the Principle of Reception with Reference to the Propositions of the Second African Synod,” in *Proclaiming the Good News in Joyful Service and Hope*, edited by Declan O’Byrne, Beatrice Churu, and Jeletule Soko (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2013), 91.

For example, since the release of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in 1968, the Catholic Church has instructed Catholics to abide by its teachings and avoid using contraceptives in their family planning methods. The reality is that millions of Catholics all over the world do not obey. Where people have rejected [slow/reluctant] to receive a teaching, the principle of *graduality* may be embraced. The principle of *graduality* is based on the belief that God is patient with sinners. It seems that at the time of Jesus, for example, the levirate custom still existed; otherwise, the Sadducees could not have brought it up as an issue related to their question on the resurrection of the body (Matthew 22:23–33).

Divine patience [*graduality*] is manifested in how Jesus handled the Samaritan woman at the well. This woman had been married to five men and was in a sixth union when she met Jesus. Perhaps she was already looking for a seventh man, because she went to the well at the time when only men would be there. *She met Jesus the man par excellence*. Jesus does not dwell on her sinful relationships, but instead concentrates on slowly educating her and finally winning her over as a missionary to her people (John 4:7–42). The principle of *graduality* demands that “pastors and the lay faithful who accompany their brothers and sisters in faith... need to accompany them with mercy and patience to the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively occur.”⁶⁰ St. Pope John Paul II acknowledged the gradualness and conversion leading to an authentic Christian life. He explained: “Thus a dynamic process develops, one which advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gift of God and the demands of His definitive and absolute love in the entire personal and social life of man.”⁶¹

Applying the principle of *graduality* has been seen in history when the Church tolerated acts we would consider sinful today. It is clear that “no Christian would argue that slavery is good, but for 19 centuries the Church accepted it and defended it.”⁶² Even the Apostle Paul respected the institution of slavery as evident in the case of Onesimus (Philemon 1:1–25). Since we have all fallen short of God’s glory (Romans 3:23), it follows that all human beings shall stand before God, not as saints but as sinners. In *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis advises that, while “clearly stating the Church’s

⁶⁰ “*Evangelii Gaudium*,” 44.

⁶¹ “*Evangelii Gaudium*,” 9.

⁶² Christopher Lamb, “Signs of Change,” *The Tablet* (London: The Tablet Publishing Company, September 24, 2016), 28.

teaching, pastors are to avoid judgments that do not take into account the complexity of various situations....”⁶³

Certain people living in what the Church calls irregular families need a pastoral attitude of patience, kindness, sympathy, forgiveness, love and mercy, rather than that of condemnation, exclusion and threats of eternal damnation. If we take Luo widows in levirate unions for example, the Church says they are in polygamous unions and that they should abandon such unions and wed a single man or a widower. However, the Luo culture at the moment insists that a Luo widow remains the wife of the dead forever and cannot contract another binding relationship. The Catholic Church among the Luo ignores this and goes ahead, calling for a ban on married people that we know will separate in the future! Is this not abusing the sacrament of marriage? If the widow chooses not to remarry and remain alone and finds herself in frequent adulterous relationships, the Church readily accepts her to the sacrament of reconciliation as frequently as she comes! Is this not abusing another sacrament?

The Church teaches that a widow can remarry because death ended her marriage. Yet, the same Church teaches that marriage is an everlasting bond. She also adds that we Christians, baptised in the name of the risen Lord, have conquered death. Logically, Christians are superior to death. Paul boasts: “Oh Death, where is your victory or sting?” (1 Cor 15:54–57). If a Christian who is superior to death cannot put asunder what God has united, how then can the inferior death end a Christian’s marriage? Is it possible for pastors to apply the lesser evil principle and that of *graduality* in this case?

During the Second World War, millions of German men died in battles leaving millions of widows. The country was in dire need of human resources. Many married Catholic men cared for two or three other women. The German Catholic Bishops knew what was going on, but they cast a blind eye to it. The needs of the nation were greater, and polygamy was tolerated for some time! The reality in Africa is that our pastors are not courageous about unions and relationships that outsiders call sinful and yet, such relationships are actually the lesser evil if all circumstances were to be considered.

Peter Kanyandago observes that “the Church has no viable ready-made answers to marriage problems in Africa.”⁶⁴ There are no perennial answers to the same pastoral challenges arising in different parts of the world. In other

⁶³ “*Amoris Laetitia*,” 79.

⁶⁴ Peter Kanyandago, *Forms of Marriage: Evangelizing Polygamous Families – Canonical and African Approaches* (Eldoret: Gaba Publications, 1991), 32.

words, the Roman Church cannot continue to offer yesterday's Roman marriage answers to today's pastoral marriage questions being raised by families in distress all over the world. Doctrines may be clearly defined, but pastoral realities differ.

In the absence of comprehensive pastoral care for those in polygamous unions in Africa, for example, the Church has to find ways of addressing this way of being family. It seems to me that theologians who are calling for recognition of polygamous unions are not asking the Church to be less demanding, but that she be understanding like a true mother and teacher (*Mater et Magistra*). Former Anglican Archbishop of Kampala, Stanley Ntagali, and Eileen Hodgetts add that "the Church is a hospital for souls. It is not a holy club for angels, but it is a congregation of sinful men and women who want to know and worship Jesus Christ."⁶⁵ In his interview with Antonio Spadaro on September 30, 2013, Pope Francis is quoted to have said: "I see the Church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds."⁶⁶

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This article has presented the traditional Catholic understanding of marriage and family, which is a sacramental covenant between a man and a woman. Consequently, the ideal Catholic family is made up of a father [man], mother [woman] and children. Any other family type is rejected. However, the paper has also appreciated the fact that this traditional Catholic understanding of marriage and family is increasingly being challenged by emerging models. The Christian Church does not have to change its teachings to suit every demand of modern women and men. She has to remain the perpetual moral guide, even when some people move away from her due to her difficult teachings. However, this paper urges the Christian pastor to constantly strive to interpret, re-think and renew those true moral guides in the light of modern understanding. For example, this paper has argued that, for pastoral reasons, the Church could apply the principles of *graduality*, *re-*

⁶⁵ Stanley Ntagali, and Eileen Hodgetts, *More than One Wife: Polygamy and Grace* (Kampala: Ntagali & Hodgetts 2011), 126.

⁶⁶ www.americamagazine.org/pope-interview

ception and *lesser evil* to embrace Christians who are perceived to be living in sin.

The pastor acting in *persona Christi* constantly remembers that the Son of man came to seek, find, and save the lost (Luke 19:10-11). Judgment is left to God. If the Church refuses to adjust and accommodate new challenges, she will remain irrelevant, with empty edifices with no worshippers. Eventually, our magnificent basilicas and cathedrals will be converted into museums as is already the case in many European capitals. In my view, anyone who insists on passing on ‘eternal truths’ that must be applied uniformly everywhere is perhaps the greatest enemy the Church has today in Africa. Like the paralytic in Mark 2:1–12, African theologians have been paralyzed by the fear of foreign missionaries, local ecclesiastical authorities and Rome. Pope Francis is inviting us to rise, take our mats and walk home. We may falter as we head home, but let us rejoice in our mistakes rather than allow visitors in Africa to perpetually direct us in the manner we must always think and live.

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KOŚCIÓŁ I RODZINA W AFRYCE: WYZWANIA I MOŻLIWOŚCI.

Streszczenie

Autor porusza kwestię małżeństwa i życia rodzinnego w świetle *Ecclesia in Africa*. Docenia dokument jako kamień milowy w życiu kościelnym Afryki. Prezentuje różne kształtujące się na świecie modele rodziny w świetle tradycyjnego katolickiego rozumienia małżeństwa. Podkreśla, że afrykański model rodziny poligamicznej powinien zostać ponownie przeanalizowany i prze-myślany w świetle pojawiających się zachodnich modeli rodzin gejowskich i lesbijskich.

Słowa kluczowe: Kościół; rodzina; Afryka.