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The Family, Justice and the Culture of Life: Afro – Christian Perspectives

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Abstract

The African Synod of 1994 brought out and shared with the universal Church the richness of the African cultural concept of family, by understanding the Church as the family of God; this is born from the ontology of the African

culture, where the family is the cradle and the fundamental base of humanity and society; it is the sacred place where all the riches of our tradition converge. This paper reveals the depth of the concept of the Church as a family. It further argues that the place of the Church as a family is not a passive one. It rather positions the Church to be in the service of the promotion of justice and the culture of life.

Key words: Family, Justice, Culture, Life, Afro-Christian, 1994 Synod

Introduction

The Church has had a dynamic image. In Latin, the early Fathers referred to her as the *Ecclesia*- ‘the called out ones’. From this perspective it is understood why the Church is spoken of as ‘the elect’, ‘the saints’ and why Jesus asked Peter to ‘build my Church’ (Mt 16:18). In the wake of Greek neo-Platonism, the Church was seen as ‘the school of truth and the fellowship of adepts’ (Kung, 1981). To Roman Stoicism, the Church is principally seen as ‘a well ordered community governed by laws’. In the early Church, they were referred to as ‘the people of God’ or ‘the Church of God’. St Paul speaks of the Church as “the fullness of Christ and of fellowship” (Ephesians 3:19). He also speaks of the Church as “a mystery and sacrament of salvation” (Eph 3:4). The Second Vatican Council speaks of the Church variously, as ‘the people of God’, “Bearer of the message of salvation” (Gaudium et Spes, 1965), “Mystical Body of Christ” (Indulgentiarum Doctrina, 1967) etc. These notwithstanding, the African Synod of 1994 brought out and shared with the universal church the richness of the African cultural concept of family when she defined the Church as the family of God. This is significant because as Cecil observes, in African culture, the family is the cradle of culture, the fundamental base of humanity and society and the sacred place where all the riches of our tradition converge (Cecil, 1995). However, the burden of this piece is to show how the church as family can be in the service of the promotion of the culture of life and justice.

The concept of a family

The term family is very elastic. However, it suffices to say that the family is an organic part of society where meaning and life is given. “It is the cradle of society. It is the fundamental base of humanity and society and the sacred place where all the riches of our tradition converge (Cecil 1995, p.35). In the words of the Bishops of Amecea Imbisa, the family “is a place where deep African value of life comes to be, is protected and nourished, a place of

belonging where sharing and solidarity are at the heart of daily life and where each one feels himself or herself truly at home” (Pete 1994, p.8)

When we talk about family in Africa the following readily come to mind: unity, solidarity, responsibility; family based and centred education, fecundity; the family as a place where life is welcomed, nurtured and revered; shared in common with the living and the living dead; fraternity, understanding, mutual aid, trust, reconciliation through rites; non discrimination etc (Cecil, 1995). In the family there is a hierarchy and this has to do with function. It is not ontological because we are all children of God. This ontological equality does not in any way rule out the place of hierarchy in the family.

The culture of life

The phrase “culture of life” is a term used in moral theology to forward the idea that human life at all stages, from conception through to natural death, is sacred. As such, the idea of the “culture of life” is opposed to practices like embryonic stem cell research, abortion, euthanasia, contraception, capital punishment, degradation, poverty, war etc, which are often referred to as the “culture of death”. The expression owes its origin to Pope John Paul II, who first used it during a tour in the United States of America in 1993. Speaking to journalists, the Roman Pontiff denounced abortion, euthanasia, stating that the culture of life means respect for nature and protection of God’s work of creation (John Paul II, 1993).

The concept of justice

Justice is a much invoked claim and virtue. All peoples appeal to justice and demand justice, but at the same time, justice is a much controverted concept (Peschke, 2004). Following Plato and Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas defines justice as “the firm and constant will to give to each one his due”. It was from this perspective that Hormann (1961) defined justice as “the fulfilment of that to which our neighbour has a strict right” (p.244). There are agreements on the characteristics of justice. Justice is said to be a social norm, that is, a directive for guiding people in their actions toward one another. According to the positive law theory, justice is conformity to the law, this reduces justice to the legal. The social good theory defines justice as doing what is useful for the social good. While the natural right theory argues that natural right is the ultimate basis of justice (Peschke, 2004).

Why the family is a theological theme in the 1994 synod

As already indicated, the main theological theme that emerged in the 1994 Synod of Africa was the idea of the Church as family. Why was it not the idea of the Church as the people of God as in Vatican II, or the Church as a Mystery etc? The idea of family is enshrined in the life and philosophy of the African people. This ecclesiology emphasizes the warmth of love among widely extended relationships and an authority that finds its proper context in service. It constitutes part and wealth of our cultural life in Africa which the Church in Africa seeks to share with the universal Church. It is in this regard that Cecil (1995) writes that, "This model is deeply rooted in the anthropological configuration of every African" (p.34); for instance, an African would hardly define himself/herself without reference to his or her extended family. This is because the African family is bound together by sharing the same blood and being linked with the ancestors. The implication of such a model of the Church should be manifest in the relationship among its members: loving, open, loyal, forgiving and service. Therefore to place at par our understanding of the Church at this level is to acknowledge that the African family is a living cell from which models of the Church and experiences lived in Africa is found.

The theology of the church as family

The theology of the Church as family can be treated on three basic levels.

1. **The first is the doctrinal level.** In an analogical way we often speak of God as family, that is, the Trinitarian family: Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. In theological terms, this family is a mystery of unity and of communion in diversity. The father is the supreme creator who communicates life in abundance to all men and women. The son is the incarnate Word, who by the mystery of his incarnation, death and resurrection, ascension and sending of the Holy Spirit became an elder brother and an ancestor of a multitude of God's children. It is he who made us brothers and sharers in the life of God. Finally, the initiation into the family of God is made possible by the action of the Holy Spirit (Cecil, 1995).
2. **The second level is scriptural.** There is an abundance of scriptural references, texts and images which convey the idea of the Church as family. For instance, the commandment of love; Christ gave us a new commandment to love one another (Jn 13:34; 15:12-17). This

injunction is echoed and concretely applied to life in the way Africans understand and live community life and perceive family life. Therefore the model of the Church as family emerging from this African internalization of the love of God and neighbour is that of a church Constituted by unconditional love, and not by the walls of the Church building (Cecil, 1995).

3. **The third level is situated at the African concept of the Eucharist.** The Eucharistic meal is the centre of unity, a place of gathering of the children of God. It brings God's entire children home at the table of love where the very life of God is offered to all co-members of God's family. From an African point of view, the Church as family receives its fundamental identity in the Eucharist, not only because it is a sharing in the body and blood of Christ, and in the life of the family, but also because it constitutes the centre around which the family gathers in order to evoke its ancestral memories. Thus the Eucharist can be seen as an ancestral meal, an inexhaustible source of life for all the co-members of the Church as family.

Adaptations of the model of the church as family

The idea of the church as family is a new teaching which bears profound consequences for the life of the African church.

The church as family is a home for all

In the church as family, all are welcome. There is a home and a sense of belonging reserved for anyone in the extended family of God. The tensions which arise within her: marriage, family life and differences are constructively resolved and estranged parties are harmoniously reconciled.

From the synod Fathers, it is evident that one of the implications of the idea of the church as a family converges on the role of women in the church. No one will challenge the assertion that in Africa the woman is at the heart of the family. She is the backbone and the stability of the family. The fact remains that she suffers many injustices, abuses and oppression, such as marginalization, sexual discrimination, inferior and regulatory roles both within and outside the church. In this regard, the following points are imperative:

1. Women are an integral part of the life of the church as family. Therefore, they are to be involved in the decision making of the family of God at all levels.
2. In present day context of religious pluralism, women have proved to be effective agents of dialogue with Christians and non-Christians, especially with Muslim women, in several countries in Africa. Therefore, the church as family should consider training well and utilizing the catholic women to promote effective dialogue of life where men have often failed.
3. For the African women folk to participate fully in the life of the church as family, they must have unhindered access to quality formation and education in all spheres of the church and society.

The significance of according women this new role cannot be overemphasized. The message of the synod fathers is clear: “The quality of our church as family depends on the quality of our women folk, be they married or members of the institutes of the consecrated life” (Cecil 1995, p.39).

The young are also not left out. In the church as family, they enjoy a life giving link with the parents and elders of the church. They are future of the church as family. Their numerical strength alone bears witness to their importance in the life of the church. The church as family is a home for all. It embodies the spirit of sharing. The readiness of the co-members of the church as family to share is an indication of the sense of solidarity present at all levels. That is, within the parishes, diocese and various particular churches.

The church as family is universal and blessed with diversity

The model of the church as family poses a serious challenge to any narrow conception of the universality of the church. If within the family there is diversity and complementarity of roles and charisms of co-members, both vertically and horizontally, the corresponding model of the church as family, rather than being uniformity, is embraced and lived as a communion in diversity. This coordinated diversity precludes all forms passivity and exclusive appropriation of power and authority, and especially any animosity between ordained and unordained ministers. Finally, it admits the principle of subsidiarity. This implies that we hold the same faith but live in a variety of ways.

Furthermore, the question of ministry cannot be overlooked. Diversity of roles and charisms bring about a diversity of ministries. The church as family requires a reorganisation and re-orientation of existing ecclesial structures with the view of facilitating the emergence and growth of new ministries. The good thing is that these ministries which are open to all co-members facilitate the collective and common responsibility of each member for the task of evangelization. Some of these ministries recommended by the synod fathers are: community leaders, elders, ministers of Eucharist, the sick, the word; mediation, arbitration, and reconciliation; promotion of life, rehabilitation of widows and widowers; father and mother catechist.

The church as family is lived in small Christian communities

The idea of small Christian community as a privileged place for realising the model of the church as family is not new. Many African theologians have studied it and it has been a successful experience in a number of dioceses of Africa. It recalls the idea of family, clan and kinship as effective means of promoting communion and co-responsibility, as well as providing a sense of belonging. Unfortunately this is not the case in some parts of Africa. However, the new scheme of the synod proposed that these small Christian communities be stressed because they form the cells of the church as family, and are discreetly active as the salt of the earth, and human visible and palpable presence of the kingdom of God.

The church as family is celebrated in the Christian family

It is only fitting that a model of the Church based on the family must give particular attention to the Christian family. In this model, the Christian family, considered as an authentic domestic church becomes a place of meeting between culture and gospel. If the church is a family, Christian families must themselves become authentic domestic churches. In these domestic churches, the centrality of the word is vigorously accentuated, joyfully celebrated and fruitfully shared as the word of alliance of the family of God. As a result, the Christian family becomes the very first forum of the appreciation of value and effectiveness of the word. Our Christian families therefore, must devote some time to the reading of the word daily, and make it touch every respect of their life.

The church as family is the place of dialogue

The Church as family forms a basis for dialogue. In Africa, the family is the place of dialogue per excellence. Family life facilitates dialogue by the very fact that it is open to and offers welcome to all co-members who are not necessarily adherents of the same religion or faith. In fact, many African Christians belong to families where there are many religious confessions. So dialogue begins in the family, and it is a family affair which seeks to bring all believers to the realization that we are children of the same Father.

Once dialogue is situated within the same family, it becomes an exchange of persons, openness towards, a willingness to listen to and welcome the other co-members to the family in an atmosphere of mutual reciprocity, acceptance and tolerance.

The church as family in the promotion of justice

It is a common saying that charity begins at home but does not end there. So too justice begins at home and does not end there. This has great implications for the Church as family. There is a unity between justice and evangelization because justice raises in the human person questions leading to the gospel (Szurán, 2000). It is in this regard that the Second General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (1971) said in their 1971 document *Justice in the world*, “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel” (No.6).

One of the ways through which the Church as family can promote justice is by attending to the situation of women in Africa. One of the purposes why the idea of Church as family is taught is to teach us what it means to be co-members of the Church as family: where there will be no Jew or Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male or female (cf Gal 3:32). Where men and women would enjoy equal opportunities and be treated on the basis of their new humanity in Christ. Women suffer many injustices, abuses and oppression, such as marginalization, sexual discrimination, inferior and regulatory roles both within and outside the Church. If the Church as family is to promote justice in the world, it must start from within itself, especially with regard to women who are somewhat marginalised even in the Church. If the Church as family must promote justice, the following should be considered,

1. Christian men and women, in small groups, are to strengthen their commitment to liberation from a Christian perspective, so as to develop the consciousness of a new humanity and prepare for full involvement in women's movements (Devoc, 2000).
2. There is need to develop a new kind of spirituality that is based on theological reflections of women lived experiences in their specific socio-cultural milieu (Devoc, 2000).
3. There is need to courageously experiment with new forms of ecclesial structures which transcend existing patriarchal, hierarchical patterns that are rendering women quasi invisible in the Church (Devoc, 2000).
4. Theological education in seminaries, in pulpits homilies, in catechesis, in Sunday schools, in family home and Christian counselling etc., should be revitalized so as to include a sensitivity to the humanness of women in order to strengthen the community of women and men in church. In this context there is need to encourage the scientific study of the bible so as to give accurate interpretations to biblical texts (Devoc, 2000).

The Church as family can promote justice by educating people on their rights and the need to defend it. If the church understands itself as a family of God, she must also know that education for justice is first imparted in the family. Through our catechesis, on the pulpit or elsewhere, the church in the promotion of justice must educate people on the need for justice, on the need to respect other people's rights and their dignity. It was from this perspective that In the 1994 exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, John Paul II (2003) affirmed the inalienable rights of every human person and condemned the violation of those rights, "The Synod deplored those African customs and practices which deprive women of their rights and the respect due to them, and asked the church on the continent to make every effort to foster the safeguarding of these rights".

In the promotion of justice, the Church must begin from herself. This she can do by providing just wages for her workers. There are so many people who are working for the Church, and their wages are nothing to write home about, compared to the work they do. In many cases, it is not as if there is no money to pay them. This has so many challenges and implications for the theology of the Church as family.

The church as family in the promotion of the

Culture of life

Today the proclamation of the culture of life by the Church is especially pressing because of the extraordinary increase and gravity of threats to the life of individuals and peoples, especially where life is weak and defenceless. In addition to the ancient scourges of poverty, hunger, endemic diseases, violence and war, new threats are emerging on an alarmingly vast scale.

It is in this regard that the Second Vatican Council forcefully condemned a number of crimes and attacks against human life. Thirty years later, Pope John Paul II, taking up the words of the Council and with the same forcefulness repeated that condemnation in the name of the whole Church, certain that he was interpreting the genuine sentiment of every upright conscience:

Whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia, or wilful self-destruction, whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where people are treated as mere instruments of gain rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others like them are infamies indeed (Gaudium et Spes, No.27).

Faced with the countless grave threats to life present in the modern world, one could feel overwhelmed by sheer powerlessness: good can never be powerful enough to triumph over evil!

At such times the Church as the family of God and indeed all people, are called to profess with humility and courage its faith in Jesus Christ, "the Word of life" (1 Jn 1:1). The Gospel of life is not simply a reflection, however new and profound, on human life. Nor is it merely a commandment aimed at raising awareness and bringing about significant changes in society. Still less is it an illusory promise of a better future. The Gospel of life is

something concrete and personal, for it consists in the proclamation of the very person of Jesus who is the Life.

Through the words, the actions and the very person of Jesus, the Church as family is given the possibility of "knowing" the complete truth concerning the value of human life. And this, the Church has always proclaimed and should continue to proclaim. From this "source", she receives, in particular, the capacity to "accomplish" this truth perfectly (cf. Jn 3:21), that is, to accept and fulfil completely the responsibility of loving and serving, of defending and promoting human life. In Christ Jesus, the Gospel of life is definitively proclaimed and fully given.

The Church as family should have the objective of promoting the reality that human life is sacred because from its beginning it involves 'the creative action of God,' and it remains forever in a special relationship with the Creator, who is its sole end. God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end: no one can, in any circumstance, claim for himself the right to destroy directly an innocent human being.

The promotion of the culture of life is an all-embracing, progressive activity through which the Church as family participates in the prophetic, priestly and royal mission of the Lord Jesus. It is therefore inextricably linked to preaching, celebration and the service of charity. Evangelization is a profoundly ecclesial act, which calls all the various workers of the Gospel to action, according to their individual charisms and ministry.

As the community of believers who constitute the church as family, we have been sent. Everyone has an obligation to be at the service of life. This is a properly "ecclesial" responsibility, which requires concerted and generous action by all the members and by all sectors of the Christian community. This community commitment does not however eliminate or lessen the responsibility of each individual, called by the Lord to "become the neighbour" of everyone: "Go and do likewise" (Lk 10:37). Together we all sense our duty to preach the Gospel of life, to celebrate it in the Liturgy and in our whole existence, and to serve it with the various programs and structures which support and promote life.

It also involves making clear all the consequences of this Gospel. These can be summed up as follows: human life, as a gift of God, is sacred and inviolable. For this reason procured abortion and euthanasia are absolutely unacceptable. Not only must human life not be taken, but it must be protected

with loving concern. The meaning of life is found in giving and receiving love, and in this light human sexuality and procreation reaches their true and full significance. Love also gives meaning to suffering and death; despite the mystery which surrounds them, they can become saving events. Respect for life requires that science and technology should always be at the service of man and his integral development. Society as a whole must respect, defend and promote the dignity of every human person, at every moment and in every condition of that person's life.

The Church as a family of God needs to begin with the renewal of a culture of life within Christian communities themselves. Too often it happens that believers, even those who take an active part in the life of the Church, end up by separating their Christian faith from its ethical requirements concerning life, and thus fall into moral subjectivism and certain objectionable ways of acting. With great openness and courage, we need to question how widespread is the culture of life today among individual Christians, families, groups and communities in our dioceses. With equal clarity and determination we must identify the steps we are called to take in order to serve life in all its truth. At the same time, we need to promote a serious and in-depth exchange about basic issues of human life with everyone, including non-believers, in intellectual circles, in the various professional spheres and at the level of people's everyday life (Paul VI, 1975).

The first and fundamental step the Church as family is to take towards this cultural transformation consists in forming consciences with regard to the incomparable and inviolable worth of every human life. It is of the greatest importance to re-establish the essential connection between life and freedom. These are inseparable goods: where one is violated, the other also ends up being violated. There is no true freedom where life is not welcomed and loved; and there is no fullness of life except in freedom. Both realities have something inherent and specific which links them inextricably: the vocation to love. Love, as a sincere gift of self, is what gives the life and freedom of the person their truest meaning (Gaudium et Spes, 1965).

Conclusion

In this work, we have tried to understand the theological content of the designation of the Church as family, and very significantly to show how the

Church as family, in practical terms, can be at the service of the promotion of justice and the culture of life.

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