

A VISION OF MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY IN THE LIGHT OF THE DOCUMENTS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN CAMEROON

(A Doctoral Dissertation Summary)

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The present consideration is a very shortened version of a doctoral dissertation written under the close supervision of Rev. Prof. Krzysztof Kietliński and submitted in Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University, Warsaw on the 5th of October 2022. The summary introduces the reader to the major tenets of marriage and the family, both general and particular, universal and African. Preceding this is a general which introduction situates the problem, namely, the complex moral problem confronting marriage and the family in Cameroon, thus, showing the urgency of the study, especially the light of the documents of the Catholic Church. This is also supported by a review of existing and available literature on the spot.

The dissertation is sub-divided into four chapters of unequal length. Chapter one discusses the Catholic basis for marriage and the family while chapter two focuses on the living conditions of marriage and the family in Cameroon. Chapter three identifies and analyses the causes behind the contemporary crisis of families in Cameroon and chapter four shows the relevance of the study within the Diocese of Kumbo. The summary presented here shall follow the chapter divisions.

Chapter One

The first chapter has as title *The Catholic Basis for Marriage and the Family*. The basis lies in the documents of the Catholic Church. The study of the selected documents is preceded by the Biblical and historical basis and concluded with a moral vision of marriage and the family. The entire chapter is, thus, a recourse to the sources of Catholic theology in general, and moral theology in particular, especially as concerns marriage and the family.

The Biblical sources include Old and New Testament texts. These begin with the Genesis accounts of creation, particularly those concerning God's creation of man in his own image and likeness, male and female and the commission to multiply, to fill the earth and conquer it (cf. 1:27-30; 2:20-24). The birth of Cain and Abel and their descendants underlines the fulfilment of the power and command to procreate. The family life of Noah and the covenant after the flood shows God's unflinching plan for marriage and the family. As such, the patriarchs, in spite of their irregularities are depicted as husbands and fathers. The Old

Testament shows not only the original plan of God for marriage and the family, but also the degradation undergone by this plan as a consequence of sin – man’s condition after the fall. The story of the patriarchs and the prophets show them not only as married men, but as polygamists. Moreover, divorce and remarriage seem to be permitted under the authority of Moses (cf. Deut 24:1-4). These and similar problematic texts are interpreted as descriptive and not prescriptive texts. They speak more about man’s condition which under divine pedagogy are allowed, but neither commanded nor approved. Furthermore, the Pentateuch’s legislation on sexual purity also forms a great basis for the Church’s teaching on conjugal chastity and pre-marital continence. The study of the New Testament prioritizes the words and deeds of Jesus, as in the infancy narratives in St Luke’s gospel where Jesus Himself is born into a human family of Joseph and Mary and grows under their parentage. His presence at the wedding feast in Cana shows God’s esteem for marriage. Even more forceful is His teaching about the irrevocability of marriage prompted by the question of the Pharisees (cf. Matt. 19:1-9; Mark 10:1-12; Luke 16:18). Other texts include the epistles of St Paul, especially 1 Cor 7: 1-39 and Ephesians 5:22-25 where he communicates the faith convictions about marriage as well as practical advices.

Closely related to the Scriptural sources are the testimonies of the Fathers of the Church and early Church Councils. St Clement of Alexandria lays emphasis on a positive opinion about marriage against the heretics of the day. He insists on the equality of dignity between a man and woman in marriage and calls for periodic continence as a way of birth control. John Chrysostom calls for a more dignifying attitude at weddings and wedding ceremonies as a propensity for keeping the devil outside of a marriage. He also insisted on the proper upbringing of children in such a way as to pre-empt them from the negative influences of the surrounding pagan cultures. Augustine’s unique contribution is the articulation of marriage under three broad categories (the goods of marriage), namely, procreation, fidelity and sacrament (indissolubility). The Council of Toledo (400) underlined the presence of God in marriage and the Council of Florence (1438-1445) laid emphasis on mutual consent of the spouses as the efficient cause of marriage. The Council of Trent (1545-1563) named marriage among the seven sacraments of the Church and goes further to outline some of the irregularities that render a marriage null and void, for example, some degrees of consanguinity.

The Catholic teaching on marriage and the family occupies a central place in the chapter. This consists of the papal magisterium, conciliar and post conciliar documents of the Catholic Church. Pre-Vatican documents include Leo XIII’s *Arcanum Divinum* (1880) against the negative influences of the contemporary ideologies on marriage and the family. Besides,

Pius XI's *Casti Connubii* (1930) was an attempt to put to halt the infiltration of state policy into Christian marriages, especially the introduction of ideas foreign to God's plan for marriage and the family. Documents of the Second Vatican Council deserve a special mention. *Gaudium et Spes*, in particular, underlines the holiness of marriage, the centrality of and purity of conjugal love, marital fecundity, indissolubility and the use of theologically sound methods of birth control. On account of this, chastity is fundamental over and against the contemporary challenges – hedonism and materialism which induce married persons to fall prey to a contraceptive mentality as a means of birth control. There is, thus, a strong emphasis on the essential link between the unitive and the procreative aspects of the marital act.

Closely following the Council are the Papal documents and speeches as well as other Church documents. John Paul II's *Familiaris Consortio* occupies a central position among the papal documents. It develops the major themes of the conciliar teaching on marriage and the family, especially the plan of God for marriage and the family, the role of the Christian family and some guidelines for the pastoral care of families. Benedict XVI's *Deus Caritas Est* provides a succinct reflection on the full understanding of love, precisely, the blend between *eros* and *agape* without which marriage would not attain its objectives. Pope Francis' *Amoris Laetitia* identifies contemporary problems of the family and offers some solutions to them, especially the pastoral care of marriages that have fallen apart. The dissertation acknowledges the lack of clarity in some areas of chapter eight which have attracted some criticisms from some Church circles and scholars. It, nevertheless, underlines the document's concern for responsible parenthood, a positive attitude towards women and vulnerable children, just to name a few. The Catechism provides a synthesis to the Church's teaching on marriage and the family from the point of view of the Sacrament of Matrimony and the relevant sections of the Ten Commandments of the Decalogue. The Compendium, on the other hand, underscores in a unique way the inseparable connection between marriage and the family. It also depicts the family as a society, the first natural society called to communion with other natural societies and, indeed, to the wider social order.

The Catholic teaching on marriage and the family is summed up by a discussion of aspects that constitute a moral vision. These include Christian love, fidelity, indissolubility, sacramentality and sanctity. They are indeed the values of the Christian religion that make for a stable marriage and family.

Chapter Two

The second chapter studies marriage and the family within the context of Cameroon – An African perspective. It is basically a socio-cultural analysis. Thus, it discusses the living conditions of marriage and the family within this cultural background. Three major sections characterize the chapter, namely, the historical and cultural outlook, the state policy and the economic situation of families. Each of these shall be briefly described below.

The historical and cultural outlook of Cameroon consists of a brief history of the country, former customs of marriage and the family as well as the religious dimension of the African family.

Historically speaking, the chapter describes Cameroon as a people made up of peoples. In other words, what is called Cameroon today is a random mixture of previously existing independent states and kingdoms under the leadership of a politico-religious ruler (king or chief). The over 200 indigenous groups that comprise today's national outlook are categorized under three or four major cultural entities, namely, the *Bantu*, the semi-*Bantu*, the *Fulani* and the Sudanese Negroes. Historical evidence reveals the presence of human life and activity in the area even thousands of years before the colonial era. Moreover, well organized social life existed in the area as in the case of the *Bamoun* of the Western Grasslands. The annexation of the territory by the Germans in 1884 was the beginning of new era in the history of Cameroon. This meant that the influence that the indigenous rulers had on their people was already weakened and their power taken up or at best shared with the representatives of the colonial government. A new language was also introduced as new ways and styles of social and political life. Following the outbreak of World War I (WWI) and the defeat of the Germans by the allied powers, colonial rule was taken over by a joint administration of Britain and France based on the Milner-Simon Agreement of July 1919. It went on till the independence of the French Cameroons in 1960 and of the British Cameroons in 1961. By the time of independence, a sub-cultural had been formed for the already constituted nation of Cameroon, under the leadership of Ahmadou Ahidjo (1960-1981) and Paul Biya (1982-). The joint annexation of Cameroon by Britain and France saw the disintegration of the previously established nation into the francophone and anglophone regions of Cameroon. These were again reunited after independence, first under a federation of states, but later on as a united republic. English and French are, thus, the official languages of the country while the English and French sub-cultures mark the civil identity of the people of the respective regions. The current war in the North-west and South-west regions is an unfortunate outcome of the quest for the independence of the English-speaking region from the Republic of Cameroon.

In a special way, the chapter treats the former customs and traditions related to marriage and the family. This goes back to the way social life was organized in the various ethnic localities prior to colonial rule, most of which have not been suppressed by the nation's contact with the West. Within this framework, marriage is understood as the main structure for the transmission of human life, the expanding of the lineage, the creation of new households and the preservation and transmission of the customs and traditions of the land from one generation to the next. Similarly, the family is regarded as a community of father, mother and children, but also extending to uncles and cousins, grand-parents, nephews and nieces, etc. Hence, when Africans talk of 'family' it could be immediate or extended. Analogously, marriage takes the forms of monogamy and polygamy (polygyny). The chapter also introduces the reader to the bride-wealth practice in the area. This refers to the transfer of goods and services from a suitor's family to that of a girl he intends to marry. Africans see this not as trading with a human being, but as a nominal compensation or token of appreciation to the bride's family for raising her up from infancy to a marriageable age. Although rates and intensity differ from one ethnic group to another, the meaning behind the practice is very much alike. The author proceeds to show discuss the marriage and family customs in some selected indigenous groups of Cameroon. These include the methods of wife acquisition among the *Nso'*, the stages of marriage establishment among the *Kom*, marriage processes among the *Yamba* as well as with the *Gbaya*. In each of these, the betrothal ceremony, based on the transfer or acceptance of the bride-wealth, takes place in the family of the bride and the wedding proper takes place in the family of the bridegroom. As a matter of fact, family residence is patrilocal in many African societies.

The study of the above-mentioned customs also highlights the roles of family members. Men as fathers and husbands are bread winners, owners of fields and producers of cash crops. Women as mothers and wives are managers of homes and producers of food crops. Children also contribute to the socio-economic well-being of the home, especially following their sexual characterization. As such, the boys assist their fathers in the tough activities while the girls help their mothers in house chores and child-rearing. The elderly, especially grandparents, are contribute to the resolution of disputes, discipline of children, story-telling, and as a connecting link between the living and the dead members of the family.

The former customs also manifest a religious outlook. This includes the cultural taboos rituals, rites and ceremonies. Extra-marital intercourse, incestuous relationships, cohabitation, divorce and remarriage are treated with scorn. The severe forms of punishment meted on account of these and similar offenses show the seriousness of the matter. Nevertheless, some

of the moral codes give the impression that women are of a lower status than men. The second element of the religious outlook includes the rites of passage, especially those within the family context. These are based on the African's belief in a supreme Being and the spirit world, especially the role of ancestors. The rites of passage are as follows: marriage and fertility rituals, naming ceremonies, initiation rites (circumcision), reconciliation ceremonies, family blessings, death and burial rites.

The second section focuses on the state policy. The state policy sheds light on what Cameroon legal policy set forth for marriage and family life. This includes civil marriages which could be monogamous or polygamous, but only heterosexual, that is, between one man and woman or between one man and several women. It also specifies marriage impediments, the place and time and state officials at the wedding and other requirements, especially the property ownership system. Furthermore, the state policy provides for the social assistance of families as in the case of family allowances, maternity and paternity holidays, the protection of minors and women from work beyond their physical and psychological dispositions.

The third and last section looks at the material situation of families in Cameroon. Like many African countries, the economy of this part of the world is quite weak. Although Cameroonians are producers of cash and food crops, livestock and raw materials, almost half of the population lives below the poverty line. These include mostly those who live in rural areas whose chief economic activity is subsistence farming. Moreover, the rate of unemployment is generally high, especially owing to the political system and the current wars in some significant parts of the country. With a low per capita income, access to education and medical care is not affordable to many families.

Chapter Three

The third chapter develops the problem of the research in a unique way. It is an exploration of the root causes of the complex moral problems of marriage and the family within the context of Cameroon. The factors are treated under two broad categories, namely, socio-cultural and socio-moral influences.

Socio-cultural influences begin with the negative role of globalization. Globalization is basically a socio-economic term which denotes a cross-border influence between cultures and larger regions of the world. This, in itself, does not constitute a moral issue. Nevertheless, the secular culture that characterizes today's socio-economic relations makes the global culture highly suspect. As a matter of fact, globalization as used here refers to the unilateral influence of the western civilization on African cultures. This goes along with some agenda contrary to

natural law as well as the doctrine of the Church, especially in the area of birth control or family planning. Closely related to a globalization ethics is gender ideology. Based on the transformation or rather deterioration in the use of the term 'gender', the ideologues use it to refer to fluidity in sexual differentiation and characterization. This has developed into the present-day LGBT+ movement and associated wings or branches. Although the problem is not yet a great concern in Africa, there are indications that it might soon get in. In fact, the research revealed that some attempts of transgenderism and homosexual movements are already operational in Cameroon, especially in the economic capital of Douala. Such activities leave little or no hope for posterity of family life and the values it inculcates.

War and emigration are equally identified as a root cause of family breakdown. The current wars in the Far-north and the English-speaking regions of Cameroon have precipitated the breakdown of many families. The abduction, imprisonment, and still worse, the loss of a spouse, a child, parent or any other blood relative as a result of war renders a family fragmented. Moreover, departure from home in search to a place of refuge on account of war exposes a family to many moral threats. Such is the plight of persons and families from the war-torn zones of English-speaking regions of Cameroon internally displaced and relocated in the French-speaking areas of the country as well as in neighbouring Nigeria. The living conditions and the new environment might cause serious hazards for the integrity of marriage and family life both for the in-coming as well as for the host family.

Socio-moral threats include polygamy, divorce, irresponsible parenthood, materialism and third-party influences. In spite of the rationale put behind the form of polygamy practised in most African societies a closer reflection shows that it is more of a source of problems than a promise of happiness. In the case of divorce, loneliness is introduced to the concerned. Moreover, the natural environment in which children can properly be raised is greatly hampered. Irresponsible parenthood, especially the absence of a father-figure is one of the main causes of the crisis of family life in Cameroon. This is seen clearly in the plight of single-mothers who have to single-handedly bring up the children and children who grow up before ever knowing their fathers. Furthermore, the interference of in-laws and relationships with other members outside of the family circle do constitute a problem for the stability of marriage even though these relationships are inevitable. They are both a blessing and a challenge and so need to be put under check. Finally, a materialistic and consumerist mentality can greatly undermine the economy of a family. If priorities are not clearly defined, basic needs and requirements like education and health care would be neglected. These and similar situations do not contribute to the well-being of marriage and the family.

The socio-cultural influences and socio-moral threats identified above constitute the complex moral problems that is ruining marriages and family life in Cameroon. They need to be attended to at various levels so that the crisis might be eradicated or greatly reduced.

Chapter Four

The fourth is entitled the ‘socio-moral challenges of marriage and the family in the Diocese of Kumbo’. Here, the author sets out to propose solutions to the complex moral problems that inspired the research as developed in the previous chapter. The basis of the solution is the wisdom contained in the documents of the Church, especially the documents relevant to the local Church of Kumbo. Three major sections develop the central idea, namely, the structure and general characteristics of the Diocese of Kumbo, significant socio-moral issues in the diocese and the pastoral activity of the diocese with regard to marriage and the family.

The structure and general characteristics of the Diocese of Kumbo include historical, geographical, religious, personnel and administrative structures. Canonically erected in 1982, it covers a surface area of 8,600km² and comprises eleven ethnic groups of the Bui and Donga/Mantung divisions of the North-west Region of Cameroon. Catholics constitute 19.6% of the close to 800,000 inhabitants. There are altogether 29 canonically erected parishes, 7 deaneries, close to 10 diocesan services and the episcopal curia through which the Gospel message is announced to the faithful and people of good will. Bishop George Nkuo, the second residential bishop is closely assisted by some 123 diocesan priests, 28 missionary priests, 193 members of institutes of the consecrated life and over 500 catechists and lay pastoral workers.

The second major section focuses on the socio-cultural and socio-economic challenges of the Diocese of Kumbo. Some of them include the negative influences of globalization, the changing practices of bride-wealth, access to land and home ownership, polygamy, divorce and the problem of single-mothers. The problems are quite similar to the socio-moral causes of family breakdown described in chapter three. The difference here lies not only in that the facts are those gathered from within the limited context of the Diocese of Kumbo, but also in the efforts put in place by the bishop and his close collaborators to provide a lasting solution to them. These include the ongoing dialogue with the traditional authorities regarding the challenge of bride-wealth. Regarding the burden of a triple nuptial ceremony, the author proposes that a meaningful dialogue should also be initiated between the diocese and the traditional rulers on the one hand and with the civil authorities on the other hand. Practically speaking, these suggest a path of inculturation of the marriage liturgy and the civil recognition

of validly celebrated marriages as an understanding between the Church and the state of Cameroon. The prevalence of polygamy, especially mandated polygamy of traditional rulers and the rising numbers of single-mothers are interpreted as an urgent call for catechesis and pastoral solicitude, especially through the existing programmes of the Diocesan Family Life Office.

The last major section focuses on the pastoral activity of the Diocese of Kumbo in response to the highlighted socio-moral challenges highlighted previously. These include preparation and education for marriage and the family based on the documents of the Catholic Church. The documents used include the letters and homilies of the diocesan bishop, recommendations of the diocesan Synod, the Provincial *Pastoral Plan* and the multiple manuals for the training programmes of the Family Apostolate.

Preparation for marriage and the family takes into account the three traditional stages: remote, proximate and immediate preparations. Remote preparation is carried out through an ongoing formation of the already married couples. In strengthening their marital commitment, the training influences their children by disposing them for future marriages and families. Moreover, the various activities of the Youth Apostolate during youth camps and rallies, help the young to inculcate Christian values in view of their future marriages, the priesthood or the religious life. Proximate preparation begins in senior youth groups, but especially for engaged couples. It treats in greater detail the themes of love, chastity, birth control, the culture of work, just to name a few. Immediate preparation takes place in the weeks and months leading up to a church wedding. It consists of a synthesis of the previous preparation in the weeks and months leading up to the wedding. According to the pastoral policy of the diocese, the final phase is facilitated distinctively by the candidates' pastors and personnel of the family life apostolate at parochial level. The priests focus on doctrinal and liturgical aspects of marriage and the family while the lay volunteers (married couples) provide the more delicate and practical issues of conjugal life.

Education for marriage and the family is a life-long process. As already intimated earlier, pastoral care does not end at marriage. The various programmes of the Diocesan Family Life Office assist married couples to conform to the requirements of their states, especially in the areas of disinterested love, marital fidelity and sexual purity. The programmes that enable this in Kumbo include marriage enrichment/encounter, the faithful house programme, integrated family life education programmes, natural family planning and marital counselling. The diocesan coordinator of the family office organizes training programmes round the year in

parishes as well as at the St Jerome Biblical and Pastoral Formation Centre, a facility owned and run by the diocese for pastoral matters.

The general conclusion restates the research questions, sums up the achievements, but also points to the limitations of the study. The greatest achievement is the side-by-side study of the Catholic basis of marriage and the family as well as the socio-cultural background of the author's audience. This is very essential for the necessary dialogue and transformation that the Catholic Church in Cameroon needs to spearhead so that the Catholic Christians in Cameroon today would be truly African and authentically disciples of Christ.

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