

AFRICAN FAMILY AND AFRICAN IMAGE OF THE CHURCH-AS-FAMILY

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Introduction

In this short study, I wish to discuss the African renewed image of the "Church-as-Family" as a pastoral and missionary orientation inspired by present-day theological efforts in the continent, and which in turn, captured the attention of African Bishops at the 1994 Synod of Bishops, Special Assembly for Africa, held in Rome.

The evaluation of the image of the Church-as-Family (an extended or universal "Family of God") is the most recent result of theological research in Africa. During the 1994 Synod, it found great reception among the African Bishops, as the reports of the *circuli minores* and the final *message* of the Synod itself clearly indicated.¹ It is an ecclesiology developed in the context of Proclamation and Evangelization with its inspiration generally from Saint Paul the great Missionary. The inspiration is specifically from Paul's letter to the Ephesians on reconciliation of the Jews and the pagans with one another and with God (Eph.2:11-22).²

The Bishops accepted it as model for works of evangelization in the continent today because of its anthropological basis in the African context. It is a concept which Africans can easily appreciate and identify with, because of its African value of the extended family, bound together by the ancestral blood and community life. This communitarian accentuation of the family makes the *new model* a real African reading of the Vatican II concept of the Church as

¹The model of the "Church-as-Family" did not feature as such in the *Lineamenta and the Instrumentum Laboris* for the Synod; and at the beginning of the Synod it did not appear often in the individual interventions of the African Bishops. This is because many of them came with prepared Papers as recommended by the General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops, Rome. However, during the study sessions of the *circuli minores*, there was dialogue among the delegates to put more emphasis on the model of the "Church-as-Family" as an appropriate ecclesiology for Africa. In the end the Bishops recommended it as a suitable image for the Church.

²Cf. SYNOD OF BISHOPS, Special Assembly for Africa, *Message* 24, 25.

communion (*communio*) or as the people of God.³ It is an African cultural heritage which can contribute to the promotion of ecclesial communion in the continent.

The model of the Church-as-Family is not entirely new, because elements of it can be found in the New Testament (cf. ITm. 3, 15; Eph. 2, 19-22, etc), and in some Church Fathers, in liturgical prayers, both ancient and modern, in the documents of Vatican II (cf. *LG* 6, 28, 51; *AG* 32, 40, etc, as well as in post-conciliar documents), and in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC 759). However, in Africa, the model was first developed in the Francophone countries, particularly in Bourkina Faso in West Africa,⁴ and later in the Anglophone countries as well.⁵ The image of the Church-as-Family if properly studied and applied, has many pastoral advantages especially for the African local Churches.

Our study is divided into two major sections. The first section will examine the basic missiological issues in the model of the Church-as-Family, emphasizing the need to give pastoral attention to exaggerated ethnocentrism among the Africans. The second section will discuss the characteristics of the African family and the reasons for its choice as a model of evangelization in the continent.

1. The "Church-as-Family": Basic Missiological Issues

Gianfranco Coffele writes that missiology is that branch of theology which seeks to study, among other things, the problems confronting the Church in her evangelizing mission.⁶ The problems being referred to here, one would think, are those militating against the proper rooting of the Gospel in an area. In Africa, exaggerated ethnicism is a factor that if not well addressed could frustrate the on-going works of evangelization in the continent. Because it is a disturbing reality in contemporary Africa, I have chosen to examine in this study, its manifestations in relation to the works of evangelization in the continent, and in the light of the new image of the Church-as-Family. Hence, our interest here will be focused on how the model of the Church-as-Family could be used to address exaggerated ethnicism among the Africans. In doing this, my aim is not to raise ethnic sentiments, but

³Cf. *LG* 4.

⁴Cf. A.T. SANON, "The Universal Christian Message in Cultural Plurality", in: *CONCILIUM*, 135(1980), pp.91-95; id., "L'église de Dieu en Haute-Volta", in: *Fidélité et Renouveau*, 110(1979), pp.1-60. These Papers indicate that the Bishops of Upper Volta (now Bourkina Faso) chose this image of the Church as the guiding principle for evangelization in their local Church.

⁵Cf. E.T. CHARLES, *From Adaptation to Incarnation: A Study of the Theology of Inculturation in the Teachings of the African Bishops* (1969-1994), PUG, Roma, 1996, pp.195-196.

⁶Cf. G. COFFELE, "Mission", in LATOURELLE, R, & FISICHELLA, R. (eds), *Dictionary of Fundamental Theology*, Crossroad, New York, 1994, p.710.

rather to present it as a pastoral challenge to the mission of the Church in Africa and therefore, to African theology.

The "Church-Family" and Ethnicism in Africa

Ethnicism is not peculiar to Africans alone. It is a common phenomenon among other peoples of the world as well. However, in our context, exaggerated ethnicism is often one of the sources of difficulties in the actualization of ecclesial communion in the African local Churches. It is a major factor that militates against healthy distribution and acceptance of native pastoral workers (priests, religious, etc.) in some parts of Africa.⁷ Moreover, it creates difficulties in achieving a real nationhood in many independent African states. Indeed, ethnicism has continued to cause wars and produce corrupt leaders and dictators who have plunged Africa into an era of chaos. It is one of the Africa's weaknesses that foreign powers employ in manipulating the continent.

All this indicates that ethnicism poses a problem in the evangelization of Africa. This fact is brought out clearly by Archbishop Albert Obiefuna in one of his interventions during the Synod, Special Assembly for Africa (1994). Worried about how best to live the model of Church-as-Family, the Archbishop says:

The Church is indeed a family. Its boundaries extend beyond the clan and the tribe. The typical African even if he or she is a Catholic does not consider that. Indeed the African Christian with his exaggerated ethnicism finds it difficult to accept the truth that the man or woman in India who is a Christian is much more a brother or sister than the non-Christian brother or sister in the natural family (Gal 5,10). This mentality is so pervading that the saying goes among the Africans that when it comes to the crunch, it is not the Christian concept of the Church as a family that prevails but rather the adage that "Blood is thicker than water." And by water here one can presumably include the waters of Baptism through which one is born into the family of the Church. Blood relationship is more important even for the African who has become a Christian.⁸

⁷The Nigerian writer, Chinua Achebe, would agree that there are manifestations of ethnic consciousness which we can not condemn; for example, peculiar habits of dress, food, language, music, etc. In fact many of these manifestations are positive and desirable and confer richness on a national culture. But to prevent a citizen from living or working anywhere in his country, or from participating in the religious, social, political, economic life of the community in which he chooses to live is another matter altogether: "prejudice against "outsider" or "strangers" is an attitude one finds everywhere. But no modern state can lend its support to such prejudice without undermining its own progress and civilization"; C. ACHEBE, *The Trouble with Nigeria*, Fourth Dimension Publishers, Enugu, 1983, p.7.

⁸Cf. A.K. OBIEFUNA, "Intervention", SYNOD OF BISHOPS, Special Assembly for Africa: *Bulletin*, No.8 - 12.04.1994 - 5: *Synodus Episcoporum 1994* (English edition; hereafter referred to as Bulletin), Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City, 1994.

The same point is highlighted in the *Message* of the Synod:

Envy, jealousy and deceit of the devil have driven the human family to racism, to ethnic exclusivism and to hidden violence of all forms. They have led to war, to division of human race into first, second, third and fourth worlds, to placing more value on wealth than on the life of a brother, to the provocation of interminable conflicts and wars for the purpose of gaining and maintaining power and for self-enrichment through the death of a brother. But Christ has come to restore the world to unity, a single human Family in the image of the trinitarian Family. We are the Family of God: this is the Good News! The same blood flows in our veins, and it is the blood of Jesus Christ. The same Spirit gives us life, and it is the Holy Spirit, the infinite fruitfulness of divine love.⁹

That exaggerated ethnicism is a disturbing phenomenon in Africa, particularly, as it affects the works of evangelization in the continent, is also stated in the Post-Synodal Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* by Pope John Paul II:

The primary and most fundamental fact...identified by the Synod Fathers concerns the various forms of division which need to be healed through honest dialogue. It has been rightly noted that, within the borders left behind by the colonial powers, the co-existence of ethnic groups with different traditions, languages, and even religions often meets obstacles arising from serious mutual hostility. *Tribal oppositions* at times endanger if not peace, at least the pursuit of the common good of the society. They also create difficulties for the life of the Churches and the acceptance of pastors from other ethnic groups. This is why the Church in Africa feels challenged by the specific responsibility of healing these divisions.¹⁰

There is need to explain further the concern of the Synod Fathers and the Pope as cited above, since this is the hinge of the problem. At the 1994 Symposium of Nigerian Indigenous Priests Association held in Owerri, the Onitsha Archdiocesan contingent presented a Paper that brought out in clear terms how ethnicism militates against the work of evangelization in the local Churches of Africa. In a Paper entitled: "Towards a Self-Supporting Church in Nigeria", the priests defined a local Church as:

...an integrated Church community in a particular locus whether it be a town, a station, a community, a parish or even a diocese where the members by themselves interact in order to provide for all they need for the life and the

⁹SYNOD OF BISHOPS, Special Assembly for Africa, *Message* 25.

¹⁰*EA* 47, 49.

work of the Church community in the particular locus of our reference...To this end we would be proposing that where a group of Christians in a definable Church Community, within a definable locus, work together to provide all that they need for life, work and progress of their particular community, such a community would qualify as a local Church and all its members as local Church community members. Here, and all through our examples, our emphasis is more on community than geographical location.¹¹

This intervention Paper of the Onitsha Archdiocesan Priests, intends to correct the ugly situation created by ethnocentrism in the Nigerian society in general, and in the Nigerian Church in particular. There is no gain-saying the fact that the Nigerian situation is typical of most African countries as the African Bishops' choice of the "Church-Family" would confirm. In the opinion of the priests, local Church does not mean the same thing as "indigeniety" with the geographical location of that community, but rather with the integrity of the Church community situated in a particular locus. The Paper provides some examples of this: where a group of Lebanese Catholics live together and set up a Church station in a village in Mbaise (Nigeria), and they set up a basic Church community in that place, which they contribute to build up from their resources, their Church community would, in this regard, qualify as a local Church in that particular geographical location in Mbaise, Nigeria. Care is to be taken that it be not here understood that the said Church community is exclusive to only Lebanese.

Secondly, where the Christians from different parts of the world or of a country gather as a community and from their efforts, and resources corporately strive to build up a Church community in a particular place, the community so built up qualifies as a local Church in that place. Finally, Christians, who are living in their own geographical native place together with Christians from other places of origin but residing in that same place and integrating with the indigenes of that geographical location, build up a Church community from their corporate resources together with the indigenes of that geographical location, form one local Church community even if those of other non-indigenous members might be lending support or help to the Church formations located back in the places of origin of their ancestors.¹²

The foregoing descriptions of Church formations tells us some home truths about incidents that disturb African Christians residing in various parts of their countries. Hence, the descriptions should not be confused with the general

¹¹DIOCESAN PRIESTS ASSOCIATION, Onitsha Archdiocese (Nigeria), "Towards A Self-Supporting Church" (Symposium of Nigerian Indigenous Priests Association, Owerri, 1994), Onitsha Archdiocesan Secretariat, Onitsha, 1994, p.1.

¹²Cf. DIOCESAN PRIESTS ASSOCIATION, Onitsha Archdiocese, "Towards A Self-Supporting Church", p.2.

accepted use of the term "local Church" which refers to the Church at the level of an Episcopal Conference, or of the term "Particular Church" which refers to the Church at the level of a Diocese.¹³ The main concern of the priests here is how to drive home the truth that indigenous clergy of the country have to be missionary first to themselves before they can creditably launch out to the task of evangelization of others. The priests want to establish what a "local Church" in the African context is and who is a member of that Church. The bottomline in their definition of a local Church is their concern to help the local Christians live and work in love of God and one another in any part of the country, regardless of which ethnic-group one comes from.

Other Dimensions of Ethnicism in Africa

There are other dimensions of the reality of ethnicism in Africa. In fact, the problem created by exaggerated ethnicism in the African Churches and society goes beyond mere settlement of tribal conflicts. It involves as well the way the African conceives his or her relationship with the divine.¹⁴ In ATR (African Traditional Religion) as we noted elsewhere in this study, God is approached through the mediation of tribal ancestors.¹⁵ This traditional belief in ancestors still constitute a serious problem to evangelization.¹⁶ For instance, we saw in chapter four of this study, how some African theologians have even gone to the extent of constructing an African Christology using the ancestor model.¹⁷ To my mind, this type of approach may complicate the issue. I think that the best approach would be to use the African renewed model of the Church-as-Family and fashion out pastoral method that would address the issue from the root. There are two major reasons for this suggestion. Firstly, the situation in Africa demands a pastoral response which would help the African to stop seeing God or rather practicing his new faith in Christ, through the *eye of tribal ancestors* (syncretism). The issue here is about how to evangelize the African in such a way that he can enter fully into the

¹³Cf. E.D. PIRYNS, "The Local Church: Clarifications of Terms and Meanings", in: *The Japan Missionary Bulletin*, 37(1983), pp.103-106.

¹⁴Cf. M.N. NKAUFU, *Il Pensare Africano come "Vitalogia"*, Città Nuova Editrice, Roma, 1995, p.19.

¹⁵Cf. J.B. BALLONG-WEN-MEWUDA, "L'idea di santità nella religione tradizionale africana", in AA.VV., *Religioni e Sette: Religioni Tradizionali Africane e Cristianesimo* (Rivista Trimestrale di Cultura Religiosa), 2(Settembre 1996), p.67.

¹⁶Cf. B. GANTIN, "Valori Universali delle Religioni Tradizionali Africane", in: AA.VV., *Nuova Umanità* (Rivista bimestrale di Cultura), 18(Settembre-Ottobre 1996)5, p.595.

¹⁷Leading authors in that regard already discussed in chapter four are, Charles Nyamiti and Bénédet Bujo; cf. C. NYAMITI, *Christ As Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective*, Mambo Press, Gweru, Zimbabwe, 1984, p.25ff; B. BUJO, *African Theology in Its Social Context*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1992, p.75ff.

new theological thinking which the Gospel of Jesus Christ confronts us with.¹⁸ And to present to the African in the best way possible, the fact that Christ is the source of our life support.¹⁹ That it is not through the tribal ancestors we commune with or go to God, but rather through Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, the Saviour of all mankind.

The second reason for the suggestion still touches on ways for widening the horizon of the African. The concern here is on how to evangelize the African in such a way that he would accept fully the truth that we are all members of the family of God, the "Church-Family". This second aspect of our concern addresses squarely the issue of ethnicism in the African Churches and society. It looks for ways of achieving harmony, peace and understanding among people of different ethnic groups in the Church or African society. It touches as well, on the greater role the Church can play towards human promotion in Africa.²⁰

¹⁸Cf. J.O. EGBULEFU, "Do We Need Scientific Theology", in: *V i d y a j y o t i*, (Journal of Theological Reflection), 49(May 1985)5, p.231.

¹⁹Cf. M.N. NKAUFU, "La Teoria dell'Argomentazione nella Vitalogia Africana", in: *Il Cannocchiale* (Rivista di Studi Filosofici), 1-2 (Gennaio-Agosto 1996), p.263.

²⁰Cf. SYNOD OF BISHOPS, Special Assembly for Africa, *Relatio Ante Disceptationem* 3-4; id., *Relatio Post Disceptationem* 5-6.

The Issue of Communion and Autonomy

In addition to addressing the internal problem, the "Church-Family" has also the purpose of clarifying matters as regards the type of relationship that should exist between the African local Churches and the universal Church. This touches the problem of autonomy and communion or rather of unity in diversity. Here also, one is confronted with the issue of present *dependency status* of the African Churches and countries. Naturally, the older and richer members of the "Church-Family" have the obligation to assist the younger ones. The younger ones have also the obligation to utilize creditably, the assistance being received from the older and richer members of the "Church-Family" - as one of the means of developing potentials for maturity and greater self-reliance. In this regard, the "Church-Family" implies that the relationship between the Church in Africa and the sister-Churches in the North should be a healthy one.

In a typical family, no one carries himself or herself as a *superior* or *master* over the other. None is also regarded as an *inferior*. All the members of the family are equal and share in all rights, privileges, sorrows and joys of the family. But as the younger one grows and tries to find his feet on earth, he or she is encouraged and offered help where necessary by the elder one. The assistance so received is not done from the perspective of paternalism or dependence syndrome. Neither is it from the wrong notion of helping those "savages" from the poor continent of Africa. Rather it is in appreciation and admiration of the growth found in the life of the younger member of the family. The young one grows in admiration and not in sympathy. He grows well when he is offered hope and not demoralization.²¹

Furthermore, this implies that the "Church-Family" model touches the issue of the recognition of signs of growth or development into maturity found in the African Churches. This refers specifically to the on-going efforts on inculturation. The efforts indicate that at least primary evangelization has been done in this area and that African Christians have begun to advance the cause of the mission of the Church in their land. In other words, the efforts in the young Churches of Africa are fruits of the initial evangelization and the Church implantation done by the pioneer missionaries in Africa. The efforts are equally ways of building on what these pioneer missionaries had initiated. Thus the work of the missionaries and the present efforts of the African Christians (theologians) are one and the same work of evangelization with equal absolute aim.

²¹Cf. JOHN PAUL II, "Sunday Angelus Message", 24 September 1995", 1: *L'Osservatore Romano* (Weekly Edition in English), 27 September 1995, p.1.

Consequently, considering all the above factors, the African Bishops, following the orientations given by Vatican II, wish that the unity in diversity or rather ecclesial communion be interpreted dynamically, so that their young Churches could inculturate the Gospel in their cultures and develop new forms of Christian living, worship, and thought that are relevant to their people.²²

In fact, this is one of the principal motives behind the Bishops' choice of the model of the Church-as-Family of God. In the opinion of the Bishops, what is needed at the moment is a dynamic approach to inculturation - courage and good will to enable the structures of communion to function properly, as they should; that is, with certain amount of autonomy, responsibility and trust. I am thinking particularly of the African theologians working with courage and good will, but in communion with their Bishops so that the fruits that will flow from their efforts may enrich the common patrimony of the Church.²³ Furthermore, I am thinking also of the African Episcopal Conferences, the Regional Associations of Episcopal Conferences, and SECAM itself, functioning in constant dialogue with the Holy See and the other local Churches. There is no doubt that these organs of communion should enable the African local Churches not only to remain faithful to the common faith in their work of inculturation, but also to communicate to the other particular Churches outside Africa and to the whole Church their own experiences of God's grace operating in their particular socio-cultural contexts.²⁴

This is one of the principal ways these Churches will be enabled to enter into a relationship of enriching communion, of giving and receiving, within the universal "Church-Family".²⁵ However, all these must be carried out with the understanding that everyone is working for the good of the Church and for the authentic

²²For more on the Vatican II's teaching on diversity in matters of Christian living, discipline, liturgy, and theological expressions - within the unity of faith; cf. *LG* 13; *AG* 22; *OE* 2-4; *UR* 14-17, etc.

²³Cf. SYNOD OF BISHOPS, Special Assembly for Africa, *Message* 56.

²⁴The contention here is that it is the dream of the local Churches in Africa, that in no distant future, when all the local Churches of the universal Church-Family will assemble around the Chair of Peter as the centre of communion, each one of them with its own traditions and disciplines, liturgy and theology, arising from their various cultural contexts and rooted in the common faith in Jesus Christ and his Gospel, the African Church too will be among them, adorned with her own traditions. And together with all the local Churches of six continents, in a rich symphony of languages and songs, of colours and liturgical vestures, and of bodily gestures, will render honour and praise to God the Father through Christ and in the Holy Spirit. And when that time arrives, it is hoped, the Church will no longer be breathing with two lungs, East and West, as it is often said, but with multiplicity of lungs, because the Churches of Asia, Africa and Latin America will also have made their own contributions to the development of the common Christian patrimony. In recent encyclical on Commitment to Ecumenism *Ut Unum Sint*, 25 May 1995 (Liberia Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City, 1995), Pope John Paul II said, in reference to the urgent need for communion between Rome and the Eastern Orthodox Churches, that "the Church must breathe with her two lungs! (n.54); cf. E.T CHARLES, *Inculturating the Gospel in Africa*, Tipografia Poliglotta della PUG, Roma, 1996, p.129.

²⁵Cf. J. PÉNOUKOU, "Full Communion with the Universal Church", in *L'Osservatore Romano* (Weekly Edition in English), 18 May 1994, p.8; B. FORTE, *La Chiesa della Trinità: Breve ecclesiologia*, Queriniana, Brescia, 1984, pp.230, 237; W. KASPER, *Theology and Church*, SCM Press, London, 1989, p.160.

expression and living of the Christian faith. Moreover, they should be pursued above all, with the understanding that the Holy Spirit is actively present in all, and is leading all gradually to greater knowledge of the mystery of God revealed in Jesus Christ.

2. The African Family

Family is the basic unit of the society (and therefore of the Church).²⁶ In Africa, this basic fact is a living reality. But it is evident that family is not something peculiar to Africa, since it (family) exists everywhere and many common elements are found, particularly in the traditional societies. Where then lies the African originality of the family? In the words of Charles Nyamiti, the African originality of the family goes beyond the ordinary accentuation of the term. It lies in the cultural colouring of the term in Africa. In other words, it is only when the family is considered in its cultural context that its African individuality or originality appears. Thus for instance, in many non-African societies, family is made up of the husband, wife and their child or children.²⁷ It is as well seen as fount from which one is gradually introduced into the society. However, the African family is more extensive; as Nyamiti puts it:

It includes all living members of these groups, besides being mystically connected to the ancestors and, through social pacts, to outsiders such as friends and others. Besides, membership within the African family (clan or tribe) is usually brought about by special initiation rites showing thereby the sacredness of the family. In other words the category "family" in Africa evokes not only blood communal membership of few living members, but also the themes of clan, tribe, affinity, maternity, *patria potestas*, priesthood, ancestors (thereby including the themes of mythical time, archtypes, heroes, founders), initiation and hence fecundity, life, power, sacrality, and so forth.²⁸

This extensive concept of family in Africa shows that, although, the formal content of the term "family" is identical in Africa as it is in many other societies,

²⁶As we remarked earlier on, prior to the use of the term "Church-Family" by the Fathers of the 1994 Synod of Bishops, Special Assembly for Africa; the magisterium has for history taught that "the Family is the basic unit of the Church" (often referred to as *a domestic Church*); cf. *LG* 11; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, Vatican Council II Decree on the Apostolate of the Lay People (hereafter referred to as *AA*), 18 November 1965, 11: *AAS* 58 (1966) 837-864; See also *AT* 10-11; *EN* 71; JOHN PAUL II, *Familiaris Consortio*, Apostolic Exhortation on the Role of the Christian Family (hereafter referred to as *FC*), 22 November 1981, 75, 86: *AAS* 74 (1982) 81-190; *EA* 80-85.

²⁷However, this image of the family is rather recent and it is as a result of influences found in the technological and industrial societies.

²⁸C. NYAMITI, "Approaches to African Theology", in S. TORRES & V. FABELLA (eds), *The Emergent Gospel: Theology from the Underside of History*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1978, p.39.

the mode of its integration in its cultural contexts is different. It is particularly in this concrete mode of integration, that is, in the local colouring of the cultural themes, that the originality of the African concept of the family lies. The recent research by Joseph Healey and Donald Sybertz on *Church as the Extended Family of God*, provides an excellent way of appreciating the African sense of family. The authors assembled from various parts of Africa, proverbs and parables which tell us about the concept of family among the African people.²⁹

Now, what is the relevance of the African family to evangelization? What is in the African family that motivated the Bishops into choosing it as a model of evangelization? To answer these questions, we shall, next, examine the characteristics of the African family vis-a-vis the new image of the Church-as-Family.

Characteristics of the African Family

Here I wish to examine two characteristics of the African Family: the African extended family system, and community life and respect for traditions in the African Family. However, I will end the section by emphasizing some other aspects of the African Family that we must guard against if the model of the Church-as-Family is to achieve the desired result.

The African Extended Family System

In Africa, as we have noted, the concept of family has very rich meaning. One of which is that the family is not made up of only those who are still living in the flesh. The unseen ancestors and those yet to be born are part of the family and are every inch interested in it.³⁰ In addition, the African sense of the family extends beyond the husband, wife and children. It is an extended family which includes all the descendants of a particular progenitor (ancestor). A typical example would be the extended patriarchal family composed of the family head and his spouse, of his sons who are married and their wives, or still composed of numerous women whose husbands are brothers the first of whom has become the head of the family following the death of their father.³¹ There exists for example, in Mali, such an extended Family (among Dogon people) whose members live in sixteen homes embracing fifty individuals: eleven men, thirteen wives, sixteen sons and ten

²⁹Cf. J. HEALEY & D. SYBERTZ, *Towards An African Narrative Theology*, Paulines Publications-Africa, Nairobi, Kenya, 1996, pp.104-167.

³⁰Cf. F.A. ARINZE, *Sacrifice in Ibo Religion*, Ibadan University Press, Ibadan, Nigeria, 1970, p.19.

³¹Cf. J.B. BALLONG-WEN-MEWUDA, "The Role of African Social Structures in the Realization of an Ecclesial Communion" (A Talk delivered at the Symposium on "The Church-as-Family of God" organized by the Association of Nigerian Priests and Religious in Rome), Collegio San Paolo Apostolo, Rome, 19 February, 1995, p.2.

daughters. This is not an isolated case and in some societies, the large families can count up to hundreds of individuals.

The extended family therefore derives from the extension in time through matrimonial links of relationships between parent and children. Besides, it includes individuals without any parental relationships, but who, having been put under the care of the family head, end up being considered members of the family.³² Such a family with its members sometimes make up an entire village. However, this big extension remains an exception. This is so since the extended family may break up after the death of the father. Some brothers, can free themselves from the authority of the elder brother and establish themselves together farther away, thus with their wives, children and relatives, constitute a new nucleus for a new extended family.³³

Put together, in Africa, the family includes children, parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters who may have their own children, and immediate relatives. This is known by the ethnologists as *extended family system*. It is larger than that referred to by them (ethnologists) as *primary family*; meaning that which comprises parents and their children.

Moreover, in Africa, living the extended family system is seen as culturally binding. It is seen as a fact of life. Each person is born into an extended family. Cardinal Francis Arinze explains this fact very well: "Africans are at home both in the nuclear family and in the extended family. The sense of family belongingness is rather strong. Many African languages have the same word for brothers, sisters, cousins, nephews and nieces, the same word for grandfathers and uncles, and sometimes even the same name for fathers and masters. The sense of family belongingness pervades all these scales on the genealogical ladder".³⁴ In other words, it is in the sense of genealogy that the system is built. In fact, in the extended family all the members of the same generations are "brothers" and "sisters" (what others may refer to as distant cousins); in Africa, they can only marry outside the family where there are no blood links with their family.

Furthermore, any member of the extended family is free to visit the other household and feel at home. In many cases, children of the extended family need not be sent by their "biological parents" to the other household before they can visit there. They are free to visit any household of the extended family at any time and

³²Cf. M.N. NKAFU, *Il Pensare Africano Come "Vitalogia"*, Op. Cit., p.139.

³³Cf. J.B. BALLONG-WEN-MEWUDA, "The Role of African Social Structures in the realization of an Ecclesial Communion", Op. Cit., p.3

³⁴F.A. ARINZE, "Reflecting On Church As Family" (Introduction to Symposium organized by the Association of Nigerian Priests and Religious in Rome on "The Church as the Family of God"), p.2.

be accepted as well. One does not even need to write or phone the other household before visiting. Such is seen as being too formal in a house where one is considered a member.

Community Life & Respect for Traditions in African Family

Here, I would like to begin by emphasizing that among Africans, the stress on family is not on legality but rather on togetherness,³⁵ on communion, on respect for traditions and on unquestioning acceptance of what the ancestors have practised, sanctioned and established as the way things are done. From this standpoint, one can reaffirm that the stress is on community.³⁶ Community life is the soul of all African traditional society.³⁷

Furthermore, the African family has a strong sense of the divine.³⁸ It is true that the father is taken as the head of the family; yet his function has a link with the ancestors. The father is regarded as the family priest. He is regarded as the loving provider for the family unit, and as the reference point for tradition and the link with the ancestors.³⁹

Moreover, the African sense of the family brings out the complementarity of the role of the members of the family. Each member of the family knows his or her role. There are certain duties as well as obligations expected of husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, and children.⁴⁰ The emphasis is on communitarian living. The husband or father is appreciated as the protector and symbol of unity. The mother or wife is all the more appreciated as the one who disseminates love, tenderness, care, calm and peace. The children are considered a blessing from God, and as comforters of the parents and helpers of the aged or sick parents and grandparents. According to a general rule, the division of work between family members is done on the bases of two criteria: sex and age; the boys learn their job gradually in company of their father, the girls learn in company of their mother. In other words,

³⁵However, the recent events in Africa, where members of the same clan, ethnic group or family, exploit one another and engage in communal strife, tribal conflicts and civil wars, challenges the basis of this fundamental claim in Africa.

³⁶The people of Madagasy use the word "*Fihavanana*" (relationality in life) to express this fact. For them, the life of a human being is a network of *Fihavanana*, which consists of relationship with God, the ancestors, the spirits, the living, and even with nature. Hence, the Malagasy can say: "*je suis en relation donc j'existe*" ("I am in relation, therefore I am"); cf. F. BENOLO, "*Fihavanana et RAZANA*", in: EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE OF MADAGASCAR, *Actes de l'Assemblée Plénière Ordinaire de la Conférence Episcopale de Madagascar* (Antananarivo, 17-22 août 1994, unpublished manuscript), p.13.

³⁷Cf. F.A. ARINZE, "Reflecting on Church as Family", Op. Cit., p.2.

³⁸Cf. E. IKENGA-METUH, *Comparative Studies of African Traditional Religions*, IMICO Publishers, Onitsha, Nigeria, 1987, pp.125-127.

³⁹Cf. F.A. ARINZE, "Reflecting on Church as Family", Op. Cit., p.2.

⁴⁰Cf. M.N. NKAFU, *Il Pensare Africano Come "Vitalogia"*, Op. Cit., p.139.

the African family has room for all its members: parents, children, grandparents and grandchildren, sick and healthy, old and young, hard-working and handicapped members. Family affairs are settled through dialogue. None of the members of the family would dare to expose the failings of his or her family to outsiders.⁴¹

In another vein, it is through the family that the individual is progressively integrated in the society through the rites of passage from adolescence to adulthood; the rites which make the youth a real member of the society. In the African traditional society, rites of passage (initiation rites) are done through tough schooling made of sacrifices, denials and various physical tests, under the guidance of a master and in an unconditional obedience to the elder brothers already initiated. At initiation the young people take up the apprenticeship of death and they learn to dominate passions and emotions. To accept to go through the initiation rites is to learn with pain, that the passage through death is itself the condition for fertile life. One must die to be reborn.⁴² The rites of passage in Africa is an excellent example of Arnold van Gennep's three stages of initiation rites; namely, Pre-liminal stage (separation), liminal stage (margin or threshold) and post-liminal stage (aggregation).⁴³

Moreover, in the traditional African society, to be a newly initiated person, is truly, to experience newness, to be a new *person*.⁴⁴ Again, like the bonds of family relationship, the bonds of an initiation lived together creates among the participants, a solidarity which nothing can destroy. Normally, young people of almost the same age are received together for the initiation rite. After initiation the group is proclaimed an Age Grade. They are now recognized as adults and corporate body in the community. It is from now that they can participate fully in the community development. Where any of them fails to participate in the

⁴¹Cf. F.A. ARINZE, "Reflecting on Church as Family", Op. Cit., p.3.

⁴²Anselme T. Sanon, as we saw in chapter four, recently, published an article in which he used the initiation categories in Africa, with the aim of offering an African reading of the Mystery of Christ: "the Master of Initiation"; cf. A.T. SANON, "Jesus, Master of Initiation", in R.T. SCHREITER (ed.), *Faces of Jesus in Africa*, SCM Press, London, 1991, 85-102.

⁴³Arnold van Gennep (1909), defined rites of passage as that which accompany every change of place, state, social position and age. According to him, all rites of passage or "transition" are marked by *three* phases: i) *Separation*, which comprises symbolic behaviour signifying detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from set of cultural conditions (state), or both; ii) *Liminal* (margin or threshold), is the characteristic of the ritual subject (the "passenger"), who enters into the process, becomes ambiguous, as he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state; iii) *Post-liminal* (reaggregation or reincorporation); here the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-a-vis others of a clearly defined and "structural" type; he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customs, norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such position; cf. V. TURNER, *The Ritual Process: Structures and Anti-Structures*, Cornell University Press, New York, 1984, pp.94-130.

⁴⁴Cf. M. KAYTAKIBGA, "Il dialogo con le religioni tradizionali africane", in AA.VV., *Religioni e Sette nel Mondo: Religioni Tradizionali africane e Cristianesimo*, Op. Cit., p.107.

community's assignment to the Age Grade, he receives the appropriate penalty laid down by the customs.

Consequently, through the rites of initiation, the young learns that man is defined by the community.⁴⁵ That one can not fulfill himself except in the fulfillment of his duty within the community.⁴⁶ Furthermore, they learn that there are certain duties and rights, in the midst of the group where one must live; that one's first duty is to ensure the survival of the group while respecting the traditions, customs and secrets of the process of initiation. At the family level, the children have already received the apprenticeship of all these. The various members of the family have taught them the roles of adults. It is from the family that the children learn the first elements of tradition; in an atmosphere of love, trust and of friendship, characterized by an absolute respect to the elders of the family.

As regards marriage; this is a family affair. This means that marriage involving a member of the family is considered not just the affair of the young man and his fiancée (or the young woman and her fiancé), but a long process between both families (entailing the marriage payment by the fiancé, religious ceremonies and sacrifice, and the celebration of the marriage itself). The long process is often carried out on behalf of the intending couple by their families. One of the major reasons of the family's strong involvement in marriages, stems from the fact that the off-springs that would result from marriages are already counted members of the family. In fact, only the family head can give *his* daughter in marriage and receive wives for *his* sons. Marriage in turn, creates new relationships between couples and between them and their various in-laws and the two families thus allied.⁴⁷

Other Aspects of the African Family

Our study of the African Family will be incomplete if we do not point out some attitudes of the people that may in one way or the other hinder the realization of the ideals of the model of the Church-as-Family. This fact is well put by John Mary Waliggo:

The model of the Church-as-Family has some very fundamental problems that need clarifications, if it is to serve the purpose for which it is recommended. First, we need to be clear about the type of family being envisaged. Is it the

⁴⁵Cf. M.N. NKAUFU, *Il Pensare Africano Come "Vitalogia"*, Op. Cit., pp.146-149.

⁴⁶John Mbiti writes that the African can only say: "I am because we are; and since we are, therefore I am" (J.S. MBITI, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Heinemann Educational Books, London, 1990, pp.108-109.

⁴⁷Cf. J.B. BALLONG-WEN-MEWUDA, "The Role of African Social Structures in the Realization of an Ecclesial Communion", Op. Cit. pp.6-10.

African traditional or contemporary one? In any case, the African family, whether traditional or contemporary, is still very hierarchical. The father figure is still much feared by other members of the family. The wife is not yet given full rights of equality, and for this reason the women's movement in Africa is very powerful. The rights of children are only beginning to be realized and respected. Therefore, when the Church-as-Family model is recommended, it is important to agree that this does not mean any of the families that are not yet fully liberated. We must create a vision of an African family where equality is guaranteed, clear sharing of responsibility is accepted, the clear option for the disadvantaged members is made, and deadly tensions are eliminated.⁴⁸

One can say that in this assessment, Waliggo does not intend to underestimate the value of the model of the Church-as-Family. Rather he wants to warn that the qualities of the African family, should not blind one from the fact that the model of the Church-as-Family needs some clarifications if it is to serve the purpose for which it is intended. I think that here, Waliggo has thrown a challenge to African theologians and pastors. The fact is that the model of the Church-as-Family, if not positively understood, could become a double-edged sword. However, what Waliggo did not point out is the fact that the problem is not with the "Church-Family" model as given us by the Synod Fathers. Rather the problem lies with some basic attitudes of the people. Let me try to explain myself by pointing out some of those attitudes of the people vis-as-vis the African family and the model of the Church-as-Family.

In the first place, the African family is built around an altar of the ancestor, to whom a generation still traces its common origin. The family members still living in flesh, would love to hold tight, at any rate, what they may consider was the religion of their ancestor, and also to what they think their ancestor has left at their care. This consciousness that has divine undertone creates a problem of diverse dimensions. Firstly, it promotes the veneration of ancestors in one way or the other. Even if the person has become a Christian, he or she may be still nursing an idea of a divine mediator who is sectional or *tribalistic*. Medard Kaytakibga captures this fact very well in the following words: "At the beginning of the XXth century, it was thought that Islam and Christianity would have quickly replaced the traditional religions of Africa, but today we are witnesses to a serious problem among Africa's Christians: the culture of their fathers and their new faith live side by side within them."⁴⁹ The transformations or deformations in one way or the

⁴⁸J.M. WALIGGO, "The Synod of Hope at a Time of Crisis in Africa", in AA.VV., *African Synod: Documents, Reflections, Perspectives*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1996, p.208.

⁴⁹M. KAYTAKIBGA, "Il dialogo con le religioni tradizionali africane" (Summaries in English), Op. Cit., p.173

other of the ATR (African Traditional Religion) as found in the *independent African Churches* and sects all over the continent; and the attempts by some to provide an African reading of the mystery of Christ from the perspective of the ancestor model, are instances of the seriousness of the problem in the African Churches.

Another side of the family attachment to ancestral heritage, which may hinder the realization of the purpose of the Church-Family model, is the in-ward looking tendency found among members of the family. An example, is the situation where a family would, in order to protect what the members may claim is the property or heritage from their ancestors, do every thing possible to claim it, without minding whether their clinging to it hurts the common good or not.⁵⁰ For instance, many African families that have been enjoying the monarchical or kingship role (political leadership) of the community, still find it hard to yield to the modern democratic process of electing leaders.

There are other examples of the negative aspects of the African sense of the family which we need to be clear of if the Church-Family model is to produce the desired result. For instance, the father of the family is still much feared by the other members of the family. The family head who is there because of age advantage over others can, if not well checked, turn out a dictator. As a dictator, he would begin to appropriate the family property to himself and household; and may exclude any household that does not dance to his tune from the administration of the common goods.

This last point is very disturbing when one relates it to the means of livelihood in the African traditional society, and also, in a sense to the contemporary African society. Traditional African economy was, and still is based largely on subsistence farming. In many African communities, land is communally owned according to families. The father of the family determines how the land is to be shared among the members of the family, not only for cultivation, but also for erecting residential houses and commercial buildings. As Pantaleon Iroegbu puts it: "The father in question here determines... *onuama* (Igbo word meaning, open land for community gathering, recreational centre, building and cultivation), which is constituted by the totality of the nuclear families who are descendants of the same grand or great grand father".⁵¹ There is danger that this role of the father of the family may turn

⁵⁰The manifestations of this tendency as seen in today's Africa, include: disputes over boundaries or land, chieftaincy or leadership tussle, sit-tight administrators, exploitation of none family members, embezzlement of common fund by those in authority to enrich oneself or one's family, clan or tribe, and so forth.

⁵¹P.O. IROEGBU, *Appropriate Ecclesiology: Through Narrative Theology to an African Church*, International Universities Press Ltd, Owerri, Nigeria, 1996, p.89; bracketed added.

into totalitarianism. Iroegbu used the *umunna* concept to propose an African ecclesiology without, however taking note of this pitfall in the role of the father of the *umunna*.

Umunna is an Igbo word for the extended family system. Iroegbu contends that an ecclesiology based on the *umunna* is the most viable one for an African Church that will have a future.⁵² The proposition of Iroegbu could be tenable if and only if there is no continuity in the African understanding, between the negative aspects of *umunna* concept (example, paternalism and dictatorship), and the new concept of the Church-Family. Obviously, in the new concept of the Church-as-Family, the negative aspects of the *umunna* is eliminated. In their place, the new concept stresses the fact that as a people of God, the *umunna* has one destiny, namely to see each other as an important and equal member in the large family which God has established in Christ. This entails also, that as a Family, they have one economic and political destiny; so that none should try to lord it over the rest because of his or her position in the family. Each position is a position of service aimed at the common good.

Furthermore, the African family encourages polygamy, which nevertheless applied to only a minority of families. Other negative aspects of the African family include, domination by men in some cases and denial of equal rights to women,⁵³ especially in matters touching property and having an active voice in family or clan decision-making processes.⁵⁴

In addition, the people's attitudes in relation to the African Family, could breed *laziness*. This is true in the case of the extended family system. The extended family creates room for a *bread-winner* in the family. The bread-winner, who happens to be the fortunate rich person within the family, is pestered for help each day by other members of the family, the old and young, the healthy and the sick. Without underrating the assistance the rich can render to the poor, what I want to stress here is that this kind of situation has many bad sides. One of which is that some healthy young members (and sometimes not excluding the adult members of the family), may decide not to work hard to achieve their own means of livelihood, since there is already one in the family to whom they can depend always.

⁵²Cf. P.O. IROEGBU, *Appropriate Ecclesiology: Through Narrative Theology to an African Church*, pp.89-101.

⁵³Cf. A. NASIMIYI-WASIKE, "African Women's Legitimate Role in Church Ministry", in J.N.K. MUGAMBI & L. MAGESA (eds), *The Church in African Christianity: Innovative Essays in Ecclesiology*, Initiatives Ltd, Nairobi, Kenya, 1990, p.62.

⁵⁴Cf. F.A. ARINZE, "Reflecting on Church As Family", Op. Cit., 3.

Perhaps, this may be the origin of the present practice referred to by the theologians as *dependency syndrome*.⁵⁵ However, one may prefer to use the term *laziness*⁵⁶ because of some political orientations in the phrase, "dependency syndrome". The crucial question here is that one who lives like this, waiting each day for manna to fall from heaven can hardly be creative and original. There are also chances of such a person losing his dignity; for there is nothing as humiliating and alienating as begging and dependency.⁵⁷ Moreover, where the manna fails to fall, he is unhappy and angry with everyone in the family. Furthermore, where the manna happens to fall steadily from the house of the bread-winner, the recipients' attention are diverted to the hands that feed them. Instead of abandoning laziness by directing attention to creativity and to the needs of the larger family (the society), the recipients would be preoccupied with the concerns of the bread-winner, how to assist him eliminate his enemies. And on his own part, the bread-winner, may in a bid to meet up with the demands from the family dependents, in turn become an embezzler of the common good or fund. The point being stressed here is that laziness leads to unlimited aspects of unwanted behaviour.

However, in pointing out these attitudes of the members in the African Family, I do not intend to belittle the "Church-Family" model. Rather it is in keeping with the aim to find the best way possible of living the ideal of the model. For if it is true that in the traditional African family, there is a sense of being and belonging, as our investigations so far seem to suggest; we are led to ask: how is this sense of the family to be restored in today's Africa? What strategies of evangelization could be employed in order to address adequately the *tribal, ethnic and other forms of strifes*, which eat up the African sense of people and belongingness? These questions could become a new challenge to African theology.

3. Conclusion

I have in this study, employed the African renewed image of the Church-as-Family, in providing a pastoral orientation to that African ecclesiology which the Bishops accepted and adopted for works of evangelization in the continent at the 1994 Synod for Africa. The study has demonstrated how the new image of the

⁵⁵Cf. J.M. ÉLA, *African Cry*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1986, p.86; E.E. UZUKWU, *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1996, pp.88ff.

⁵⁶The term *laziness* as it is used here does not imply any lack on the part of the Africans - such as retarded intelligence. Those who used to hold such a view against the Africans have been proved wrong by modern scientific research as we noted elsewhere in this study. Such was the extent of propaganda designed to keep the out-side world ignorant of the African reality and to pretend as if it is justifiable keeping the continent as much as possible, as a place of adventure for the powerful nations of the North.

⁵⁷Cf. E.E. UZUKWU, *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches*, Op. Cit., p.70.

Church-as-Family could be used to address the problem created by exaggerated ethnicism in the African Churches and society. It has also presented us with some burning missiological issues in the continent. Moreover, our analysis of the characteristics of the African family has furnished us with how best to utilize the ideals of the *new* image of the Church in the evangelization of the continent. Very striking are the Africans' emphasis on community life, solidarity, and concern for the weak and elderly members of the family. Others include the respect for the traditions, and the importance the people attached to initiation ceremonies through which one is born anew into the community with the rights and privileges that accompany them. These aspects of the African family, among others, need to be appreciated, even as we struggle to grapple with the influence of modernity.

In spite of all this, however, the African situation calls for re-education of the people. It is re-education within the ecclesiology of the Church-as-Family. This is a call for pedagogy of awareness.

However, just like all models of the Church, the image of the Church-as-Family is limited in relation to the mystery of the Church, and so it must be complemented by other models.

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