

SYMPOSIUM DES CONFERENCES  
EPISCOPALES D'AFRIQUE ET  
MADAGASCAR



SIMPÓSIO DAS CONFERÊNCIAS  
EPISCOPAIS DE ÁFRICA E  
MADAGÁSCAR

SYMPOSIUM OF EPISCOPAL CONFERENCES OF AFRICA AND MADAGASCAR

# THE PASTORAL CHALLENGE OF POLYGAMY

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The African family is built on covenant: covenant between human groups, covenant with ancestors, covenant with God. At the heart of this family, the child represents a priceless treasure, a divine blessing. The child perpetuates the lineage name while also helping to strengthen present life. Having numerous descendants is a gift from God.

It is in this context that the institution of polygamy must be understood. This refers to a marital system in which an individual is bound, at the same time, to several spouses. For a woman with several husbands, the term is polyandry. For a man with several wives, the term is polygyny. This is certainly the most frequent case. The term "polygamy" has become commonplace to describe the practice of a man living with several wives, because polyandry has almost completely disappeared. But this reality is not unique to Africa. It is universal. This is why it challenges the pastoral care of the entire Church. Nevertheless, the practice of polygamy is most visible on the African continent, and it is there that Christians feel most deeply affected.

### 2. POLYGAMY IN AFRICA, FROM YESTERDAY TO TODAY

The causes of polygamy are numerous. In agrarian or nomadic societies, the pursuit of a large family was driven by imperatives of survival and expansion. Marriage had a strong communal and religious dimension: it involved extended families and inscribed the union within a sacred order. Divorce was exceptional. Anthropological studies, however, show that even within polygamous societies, the symbolic ideal often remained monogamous: the first wife held a unique status, while the others occupied a secondary position. Subsequent contact with Islam and Christianity modified these structures, sometimes reinforcing, sometimes transforming, marital practices.

### 3. LISTENING TO BIBLICAL EXPERIENCE

To inform pastoral discernment, it is necessary to compare this cultural reality with the biblical understanding of marriage. In the Old Testament, polygamy is attested and legally tolerated. Patriarchs—Abraham and Jacob—as well as royal figures like David and Solomon, lived in polygynous relationships, often linked to the desire for offspring or the assertion of power. Mosaic law regulates these situations without elevating them to an ideal.

However, a theological movement runs through Scripture. The creation narratives present the union of a man and a woman as the original paradigm. The prophets, developing the theology of the Covenant, describe the relationship between God and his people as one of exclusive love. The wisdom literature extols fidelity to “the wife of one’s youth”, and the Book of Tobit offers testimony to a fully embraced monogamous ideal. Thus emerges a divine pedagogy: what was tolerated throughout history is not thereby proposed as a definitive norm.

The New Testament offers a crucial insight. Referring to the Creator’s plan, Jesus recalls the original unity of marriage: “the two will become one flesh”. In the spirit of Matthew’s antitheses, Jesus reaffirms the monogamous marriage willed by the Creator: one man and one woman (cf. *Mt* 19:4-5). The Apostle Paul incorporates this requirement into the life of the Church, asking leaders to be “husbands of one wife”. The revelation in Jesus Christ thus demonstrates that marital unity and exclusivity belong to the profound truth of marriage as willed by God (cf. *1 Cor* 7,2; *1 Tim* 3,2.12).

#### **4. CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE: ONE MAN AND ONE WOMAN**

The form of marriage is rooted in the Christian theology of marriage, which itself draws inspiration from the word of God. The text of Genesis reminds us that: “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them man and woman” (*Gen* 1,27). This shift from the singular to the plural clearly demonstrates the equal dignity of man and woman before God. The second, older creation text (cf. *Gen* 2,21-23) is more explicit on this point. Woman is taken from man. Man himself recognizes woman as his partner of the same nature: “This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman – Ishsha – because she was taken out of Man” (*Gen* 2,23). Is this not one of the places where the unique bond in the couple is affirmed: that of a man and a woman? It is indeed on these passages from the book of Genesis that Jesus relies to affirm the unique value of monogamous marriage.

In the Bible, the human couple is meant to transmit life, even God’s own life, thus continuing his work. However, one of the causes of polygamy is female infertility. While the question of motherhood is crucial, the term “mother” does not refer solely to the one who has given birth. In a biblical sense, the term “mother” is therefore broader than biological motherhood and encompasses other ways of giving and promoting life. This is fundamental for every woman.

From now on, the believer’s gaze is no longer obstinately fixed on biological fertility. The works produced by virtue render one even more immortal than offspring. Sterility is gradually embraced and transfigured. Thus, a spiritual fertility is proclaimed, a testament to the gratuitous nature of God’s salvation and the immensity of His love. Therefore, polygamy is not presented as a palliative to a situation of biological sterility.

#### **5. PASTORAL EXPERIENCES**

The pastoral approach implemented by the missionaries focused primarily on combating polygamy. Monogamous marriage was therefore a requirement for being or becoming a Christian. For the missionaries, polygamy was a form of enslavement of women and, as such, profoundly immoral. For the Fathers of SECAM, there could be no ambiguity whatsoever: there was absolutely no room for compromise with the official doctrine of the Church: “the pastoral approach to polygamists [...] must avoid anything that could appear as a recognition of polygamy [...] by the<sup>2</sup>

Church”.<sup>1</sup> The Fathers of SECAM encourage the promotion of the monogamous dimension of marriage by embracing the teachings of Scripture on the uniqueness and indissolubility of marriage.

In the contemporary African context, several pastoral practices have been adopted to address situations of polygamy. Some require a polygamous man wishing to receive the sacraments to choose only one wife, while guaranteeing justice and support for the other wives and their children. Others establish a “permanent catechumenate”, welcoming the individual into the community without access to the sacraments. Sometimes, the first wife is baptized when she is considered a victim of an involuntary polygamous union. Finally, “veiled polygamy” – unofficial multiple unions – requires specific support, often focused on the woman and children.

## 6. THEOLOGICAL EVALUATION OF PRACTICES

Baptism, by which a human being becomes a person in the Church – that is, a subject of rights and obligations (CIC/83, can. 96) – is the sacrament of faith that transforms us into the image of Christ. In the name of faith in the unity of sacramental marriage, which is closely linked to the sacrament of baptism, and knowing that the latter is a sacrament of character, it would be preferable not to have it brought forward for polygamous catechumens who request it. Doing so would create more problems than it would solve, especially considering the rights that flow from baptism, particularly the right to receive the other sacraments.

Therefore, it is recommended that polygamists who wish to identify with Christ through baptismal grace be thoroughly prepared, free themselves from certain cultural constraints, accept the Gospel message, adhere to the Christian ideal, and commit to monogamous marriage before receiving baptism. Thus, the Church will not baptize a polygamist based on a promise or who will continue to be so, even after receiving this sacrament. Ultimately, there is no need to anticipate the sacrament of baptism for polygamists, but rather a need for accompaniment within the framework of an inculturative pastoral approach, which opens pathways to a pastoral approach to polygamy.

## 7. A PASTORAL RESPONSE TO POLYGAMY

A patient and demanding preparation, geared towards a concrete commitment to monogamous marriage before receiving baptism, should be prioritized. This is not about rejection or stigmatization, but about accompanying individuals towards genuine conversion and full sacramental integration.

This pastoral care must be characterized by closeness, listening, welcoming people, and respect for their individual journeys. This pastoral care of proximity must also aim to uphold the dignity of women. Like Mary, the mother of Jesus, she is at the forefront of an inculturated pastoral approach to marriage and family. The proclamation of Gospel truth cannot be separated from mercy. The Church is called to support this aspiration, to strengthen marriage preparation, and to broaden the understanding of fertility beyond its purely biological dimension.

Finally, the issue is also ethical, anthropological, and ecclesiological. If marital union represents “the gift of oneself to the other”, one can ask how a man or woman can live this “gift of self” by giving themselves to several wives or husbands at the same time. Similarly, from the beginning, the Creator made them male and female. And He said, “For this reason a man will leave<sub>3</sub>

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<sup>1</sup> SCEAM, *Recommendations on marriage and family life of Christians in Africa*, «Catholic Documentation» (1981), 1021.

his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh". So they are "no longer two, but one flesh". How can a man or woman in a polygamous relationship "become one flesh" with several wives or husbands? The Christian theology of marriage affirms that its unity and indissolubility stem from God's creative design. The promotion of monogamy thus contributes to the effective recognition of the dignity and equality of men and women. The question of polygamy does not only concern a family structure; It refers to the truth of the Covenant and to the vocation of conjugal love as a visible sign of the faithful unity of Christ and his Church.

## **8. CONCLUSION**

The Church's pastoral work in Africa, accompanying polygamous couples seeking acceptance into the Church, appears as an attempt to remain faithful to the Church's understanding of marriage and the Christian family. The need to welcome and accompany individuals and families is becoming increasingly evident, so that they may respond more clearly to the call of the Gospel's revealed truth regarding the vocation and mission of the family in the Church and in society.

*This pastoral approach of closeness and attentiveness will foster a respectful and fraternal dialogue between these polygamous couples and the pastor (priest, bishop), the representative of the merciful Christ who seeks out the "lost sheep" and accepts to sit at the same table as tax collectors and sinners. It will thus open the doors of the Church to the children of God who languish on the spiritual or "existential" peripheries. This aims to help these people discover the infinite love of God manifested in Christ Jesus, who "did not come to judge men, but to save men through Him".*