

**SYMPOSIUM DES CONFERENCES
EPISCOPALES D'AFRIQUE ET
MADAGASCAR**



**SIMPÓSIO DAS CONFERÊNCIAS
EPISCOPAIS DE ÁFRICA E
MADAGÁSCAR**

SYMPOSIUM OF EPISCOPAL CONFERENCES OF AFRICA AND MADAGASCAR

SECAM COMMISSION

**THE PASTORAL CHALLENGE
OF POLIGAMY**

FINAL REPORT

[Official text in English]

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1

INTRODUCTION

The African family is built on the Covenant: an alliance between human groups, an alliance with ancestors, and an alliance with God. At the heart of this family, the child represents an inestimable treasure, a divine blessing. He perpetuates the name of the lineage, while helping to consolidate the present life. Having numerous descendants is a gift from God.

It is in this context that the institution of polygamy should be placed. This refers to a marital regime in which an individual is linked, at the same time, to several spouses. For a woman with several men, we speak of polyandry. For a man linked to several women, we speak of polygyny. This is certainly the most common case. The term “polygamy” has become established in everyday language to designate a practice of living together between a man and several women, because polyandry has almost completely disappeared.

In the vast majority of African societies, only the first wife has the status of wife. This traditional legal arrangement, however, has evolved in Islamic societies where polygamy has become the law. In this context, the proclamation of the Gospel soon encountered the situation of aspirants to baptism living in a situation of polygamy.

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 challenged.

For this reason, in the synodal process of the universal Church, SECAM has been asked to delve into the issue and make relevant pastoral proposals based on their concrete experience, but which can inspire other communities in other parts of the world.

In the synodal dynamic which takes up the classic methodology of “see-judge-act”, initiated by Cardinal Joseph Cardijn (1882-1967), our approach could be translated by this triptych: “listen, appreciate, engage”. The first moment supposes a quadruple listening:

- listening to the African world, yesterday and today (1);
- listening to the Word of God on polygamy (2);
- listening to the word of the Church on Christian marriage (3);
- listening to pastoral practices (4).

Then, it will be necessary to critically assess pastoral practices as well as the theology that supports them (5). Finally, it will be necessary to answer two questions (6): what pastoral care can be appropriate to help those who have been encountered by the Gospel while in a polygamous relationship? What pastoral care can we implement to help Christians adhere to monogamous marriage?

In conclusion, we will see that polygamy is one of the subjects which acutely raises the great question of inculturation, which has inhabited all Christians in the world since the beginnings of Christianity.

POLYGAMY IN AFRICA, FROM YESTERDAY TO TODAY

2.1 The experience of traditional African societies

Polygyny is a very ancient form in many African societies. Indeed, in traditional society, having multiple wives was completely normal. This is why the issue of polygamy, in its dual traditional form (polygyny and polyandry), has been the subject of numerous anthropological studies in Africa. For many authors, it is not the prerogative of African traditions or cultures. A historical assessment reveals that in Sumerian, Mesopotamian, Akkadian, Jewish, and Egyptian societies, from which modern traditions and cultures, including Christianity, developed their culture, social, religious, political, and economic requirements were factors that influenced the way marriage was approached.

In early nomadic and agrarian societies, there was a strong demand for large families to ensure stability and security against attacks and expansion. Therefore, it was important for women to have more children in order to raise large families. Polygamous marriages were practiced not only for the sake of large families, but also for reasons of solidarity, alliances, and political objectives.

By marrying into another race or ethnic group, the two families naturally became obligated to each other; they became vassals. Not only did having more children demonstrate the strength or power of a family, but it also demonstrated the honor and prestige of the man or woman who had many.

The Akan and other ethnic and tribal groups of Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana had the "bedudwan", a special ceremony that honored women and offered them special gifts when they were able to give birth to ten or more children. They were called nation builders and received respect from all members of the community.

In fact, one of the criteria for marriage, besides the ability to care for the wife and children, was the ability to bear children. Since a single wife could not provide the number of children needed to secure, expand, and arm families against external attacks, more than one wife became necessary, for only in marriage could a child be born in Africa. No married woman in a family was left uncared for or deprived of her rights or privileges.

Once a woman was married, divorce was not an option due to the nature of the spirituality and religiosity that accompanied the celebration of marriage, which brought together not only the physical members of a family in a special relationship, but also the spiritual members or ancestors and even the gods. Thus, in traditional Africa, marriage is not celebrated by just the individuals involved, but by the entire family or even the community. Everyone would come together to support and celebrate the event.

Based on solid anthropological elements (rites and structuring cultural texts) found, it appeared that the polygamous institution was tolerated in many traditional cultures where the rule of alliance would be monogamy. At the semantic level, certain cultures reserved the term wife only for the first; the other women were designated "companions", "concubines", "girlfriends", etc.

Another element of great heuristic interest that these anthropological studies have brought to light is the impact of religion on kinship structures. Endogenous religion, also called African

Traditional Religion (ATR), as a religious structure of alliance, establishes a form of matrimonial alliance between families, which has undergone inflections following the encounter with Islam and the Christian religion. Thus, the reconfiguration by Islam of traditional African culture permeated by the ATR, may have induced a form of polygamy that certainly did not belong to the ancient layer of matrimonial alliance.

In short, the causes of polygamy are multiple. The first is prestige. Indeed, in ancient African societies, the power and prestige of a man were measured by the importance of his family, and that of a kingdom by the importance of its allies.

The second is the problem of sterility mentioned above. If it is the woman's fault, the husband feels compelled to marry a second wife to ensure posterity. Or in patrilineal regimes, if the couple only has daughters, the husband takes another wife from whom he hopes to have sons to ensure the inheritance.

Another cause of polygamy is the law of levirate marriage, considered normal in certain customs to ensure continuity and guarantee a certain security for the widow and orphans. The brother, often the younger brother, inherits his deceased brother's wife. The wife often does not have a choice. It is for her a kind of protection, a guarantee, even if it is forced. Finally, a wife who feels overwhelmed by the mass of domestic work can ask her husband to take a second wife.

2.2 The current state of polygamy in Africa

Such studies must, however, be extended to include other postmodern forms of polygamy and the growing phenomenon, particularly in the Americas, of "polyamory", which is seeking legitimacy and for which the situation of African polygamists could well serve as a pretext.

Indeed, socio-cultural changes in Africa are very significant. Decolonization, almost as brutal as colonization, contributed to this. Thus, the traditional environment has crumbled. With the ethical collapse, we now note a real distrust of traditional institutions and values, whether sociocultural, political, or religious.

Thus, the great feminist movement that began in the United States has also reached Africa. Women now intend to take their rightful place in society. In many countries, they control the informal economy and sensitive social processes, particularly those within families.

These ongoing transformations in Africa also require a re-examination of polygamy, the main historically documented reason for which was the high infant mortality rate in traditional societies where ensuring a large number of offspring was the supreme value to be sought. Sociological surveys of the modern reasons for polygamy reveal that the sterility of women is the main one. But the reasons are complex. With modernization and evangelization, polygamy has been discredited.

Yet today, it remains alive and well. It is once again popular. Thus, women, even intellectual and Christian ones, are embracing polygamy. They intend to defend their freedom, that of living their femininity, as a woman and mother, in complete peace without sacrificing their desire to pursue a career, both socio-professional and in the political arena.

Moreover, polygamy coexists with its modern version, the system of multiple offices, which is far from being unique to Africa. Except that here, from a traditional point of view, it is not a question of cohabitation, since "the offices" have been "endowed". It is a "veiled" polygamy.

In short, while modernization, demographic transition, and convergence toward the nuclear family model might have suggested a gradual disappearance of polygamy, its sustainability reveals the weight of traditions and social codes. Indeed, in a country where divorce is seen as a social catastrophe, and being a single woman is almost intolerable, polygamy represents, for some, a path to salvation. This is why it is more than a resilient phenomenon.

2.3 African legislation on polygamy

The reconciliation between the Africa of yesterday and that of today, between tradition and so-called modernity, is reflected, among other things, in a legal hybridization. This legislative hybridization is evident in the Family Code, particularly with regard to the acceptance or rejection of polygamy. This reflects the diversity of national legislation regarding polygamy and must necessarily be taken into account from a pastoral perspective.

Here is a table of countries where laws allow polygamy, outside Africa and in Africa:¹

OUTSIDE AFRICA	AFRICA
Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Bangladesh, Burma, Brunei, Cambodia, United Arab Emirates, Indonesia, Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Kuwait, Laos, Lebanon, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Sri Lanka, Syria.	South Africa, Algeria, Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Comoros, Congo (Brazzaville), Djibouti, Egypt, Eswatini, Gabon, Gambia, Equatorial Guinea, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Libya, Mali, Morocco, Mauritania, Nigeria, Uganda, Senegal, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, Chad, Togo.

As we can see, around thirty African states have institutionalized polygamy. Africa is thus ahead of other continents. However, not all do it in the same way. Three possibilities should be distinguished. We have the case of most African countries where polygamy is authorized, either due to the presence of Islam or due to the pressure of tradition, even in highly Christianized countries or those living under the regime of endogenous religions and cultures. This is one of the best examples of legal hybridization where the state tries to reconcile traditional families.

We have the case where polygamy is permitted, but the husband can only do so with the consent of his wife. Both opt for a monogamous or polygamous regime. In some countries, polygamy is prohibited by the constitution. But there are de facto monogamous situations, linked either to traditional marriages that escape official legislation, or under pressure from Islam.

Two interesting points to note. On the one hand, even laws that authorize polygamy in accordance with cultural or religious traditions nevertheless emphasize the need to evolve these traditions to adapt to the modern world. On the other hand, more and more women are speaking out against legislation in favor of polygamy, which is considered unfair and disrespectful of gender equality.

¹ CICADE, *Droit de la famille des femmes françaises & maghrébines. Le mariage polygamique*, <https://www.cicade.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Le-mariage-polygamous.pdf> (accessed 3 November 2024).

2.4 Polyandry

Although it is rarely practiced, in some places, the pastoral care of marriage can be challenged by polyandry. This can be simultaneous or successive. It is simultaneous when a woman has a loving, or even marital, relationship with several men at the same time. It often takes the form of “visiting husbands”. Polyandry is mainly practiced in southern India and western China, in Oceania, New Caledonia, or in Sumatra among the Minangkabaus. In Africa, it is attested in certain tribes of South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique. It is recognized by the Constitution of Kenya.² It is still found among the Bahima people of East Africa, particularly in Uganda.

Among the Bashilélé of Kasai Central, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), we speak of a common wife. In each village, young people of the same age group were grouped into kumbus, groups of ten to thirty young single men of the same age. When they reached marriageable age, they began by obtaining, due to a lack of means, a collective wife. This compensated for the scarcity of women due to the numerous marriage prohibitions and the polygamy of wealthy men. The children of the union belonged to the group of the age group. The polyandrous woman had a special status that allowed her to free herself from sexual taboos. Moreover, her quasi-sacred status, due to the social services she provided, likened her to the king’s sister. She was like a future queen.

This tradition has crumbled due to contact with colonization and Christianity, but also due to fear of sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV/AIDS. However, in countries like South Africa, its resurgence is proposed in the same way as polygamy, to give women the same rights as men. If men can have multiple wives, why shouldn’t women have multiple husbands?

² The new Gabonese constitution says nothing about the form of marriage: neither monogamy, nor polygamy, nor polyandry. Will there be a family code to clarify the situation?

LISTENING TO THE BIBLICAL EXPERIENCE

To enlighten our pastoral discernment, we must allow ourselves to be challenged by the Word of God. It does not give us ready-made answers, but it does inspire us. So, what type of marriage is favored or recommended in the Bible? Let's say first that the Bible mainly refers to monogamy or polygamy, commonly called polygamy.

3.1 Polygamy in the Old Testament

In the world surrounding the people of the Bible, forms of marriage varied, from polygamy to monogamy. However, among the Semitic peoples of Chaldea, from whom the Patriarchs came, the trend was more towards polygamy. Thus, the book of Genesis mentions several cases. Abraham himself, unable to have a child with his wife Sarah, asked him to resort to a legal procedure common at the time, to have a son with his servant Hagar, who would be adopted by Sarah (cf. *Gen* 16,1-4). But can we speak of bigamy here? It is difficult to decide. The fact remains that at the time, Abraham's attitude posed no problem.

Moreover, according to the priestly text, our patriarch has another wife named Quetoura. She will give him many sons (cf. *Gen* 25,1-4). Abraham even has many concubines (cf. *Gen* 25,5-6) who also gave him children, even if Isaac, the son of the Promise, has a special place, especially with regard to the sharing of inheritance. Here, as in Africa, it is the concern to have numerous offspring, especially in the case of sterility of the wife, which justifies polygamy.

Jacob, for his part, would successively marry the two sisters Leah and Rachel. It is true that Rachel was the woman of his heart. It was through cunning that his father-in-law Laban made him marry his two daughters. But the patriarch was quite happy with this bigamy. Moreover, with his servant Bilhah, he would have two children who would be adopted by his favorite Rachel (cf. *Gen* 30,1-8). Can we call Bilhah Jacob's wife?

Later, under the judges and the time of the monarchy, polygamy was increasingly practiced (cf. *Judg* 8,30-31). The book of Deuteronomy considers it legal (cf. *Deut* 21,15-17). Like the oriental despots, the kings will demonstrate their power and wealth by the constitution of harems which are not subject to any reproach. According to the book of Samuel, David had nine wives (cf. *2 Sam* 3,2-5) and multiple concubines (cf. *2 Sam* 5,13). In a certainly hyperbolic manner, the book of Kings attributes to King Solomon 700 wives and 300 concubines (cf. *1 Kings* 11,1-8). Much more modestly, his successor Rehoboam is said to have had eighteen wives and sixty concubines (cf. *2 Chron* 11,18-22).

3.2 The exaltation of monogamy

Nevertheless, despite this strong tendency towards polygamy, monogamy is exalted. First, not everyone was powerful and wealthy enough to be polygamous. This certainly explains the strong practice of monogamy in the Old Testament. Thus, we can mention the monogamous union of Uriah (cf. *2 Sam* 12,9), of the Shunammite woman whom Elijah knew (cf. *2 Kings* 4,8), of Isaiah who speaks of his wife as the prophetess (cf. *Is* 8,3), and certainly also of Ezekiel who loses his only wife,

the delight of his eyes (cf. *Ezek* 24,16-21). This tendency towards monogamy is confirmed after the exile due to the precarious situation. The family is reunited and closer. This monogamous tendency is confirmed after the exile for various reasons.

Already, do not the stories of the creation of the first human couple, whether according to the priestly text (cf. *Gen* 1,27) or according to the Yahwist text (cf. *Gen* 2,21-23), reflect the practice of a monogamous marriage, which is proposed as a model? God created man and woman, Adam and Eve. This parable of creation has paradigmatic value.

Moreover, the patriarchs of the line of Seth are monogamous, such as Noah (cf. *Gen* 7,7), while those of the reprobate line of Cain are polygamous (cf. *Gen* 4,19). Moreover, is this not the first case of polygamy mentioned in the Bible? According to the sacred author, “polygamy was introduced into human history by Lamech, who took Adah and Sillah as wives” (*Gen* 4,19). The preaching of the prophets leads to an ever-increasing respect for women, symbolizing the people in their relationship with God. Biblical law guarantees their promotion. They cannot therefore be assimilated to goods and chattels, alongside animals and slaves, which one can possess (cf. *Ex* 20,17). The Deuteronomic laws increasingly protect women, whose importance in the education of children is emphasized: it is better to have few children than many ill-bred sons (cf. *Sir* 16,1-4; *Wis* 4,3). Finally, the theology of the Covenant exalts the figure of monogamous marriage: Israel is the unique spouse of the One God (cf. *Is* 50,1; *Jer* 2,2; *Hos* 2,18-23; *Ezek* 16,8...).

The prophetic or wisdom writings (with the exception of *Sir* 37,11) provide a picture of a monogamous society (cf. *Mal* 2,14-15; *Prov* 5,15-19; 12,4; 31,10-31; *Eccles* 9,9; *Sir* 26,14, etc.). Thus, in *Mal* 2,14-15 and *Prov* 5,15-19, two texts that may date from the Persian period, we have the criticism of divorce and adultery as well as the exaltation of fidelity to the unique love of one’s youth. Thus, the High Priest can only have one wife. Similarly, the family celebrated in *Ps* 128 is indeed that of a monogamous couple: “Your wife is a bountiful vine in the depths of your house...” (*Ps* 128,3).

The Book of Tobit is certainly the one that best exalts monogamy. Written after the exile, it testifies to the family virtues cultivated during the diaspora, in Babylonia or Egypt. All families there are strictly monogamous (cf. *Tob* 1,9; 7,2-19). They are imbued with religious tradition and marital fidelity.

3.3 Comings and goings

Yet, at a time when monogamy seems to have been established, we find remnants of polygamous practices. Thus, the book of Sirach, written in the Hellenistic period, shows us traces of polygamy. Two passages evoke the rivalry between two wives, recalling that of the two sisters Leah and Rachel. In *Sir* 26,6, we read: “It is heartbreaking and distressing for a woman to be jealous of a rival...” and in *Sir* 37,11, “Do not consult a woman about her rival...”. Both passages speak of a woman’s backbiting of her co-wife. It thus evokes the conflicting jealousies, almost inevitable, between rivals.

These two verses therefore attest to the strong survival of polygamy. Moreover, the Dead Sea Documents allude to cases of polygamy in the second century BC. They thus evoke the dispute between Babata and Miriam, the two wives of Yehua, after his death. Flavius Josephus, for his part,

will mention several cases of bigamy in the royal family and the priestly class in the 1st century.³ In both cases, these are exceptional situations linked to wealthy families. Ben Sira warns young people against polygamy and the luxury that goes hand in hand. It is only a source of conflict in families.

In the New Testament era, according to Flavius Josephus, Herod the Great was polygamous, having nine wives. But his sons were monogamous, in accordance with Greco-Roman law. In the New Testament, Jesus reminds us that marriage, as willed by God, is monogamous: “In the beginning, the Creator made them male and female and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh’” (*Mt* 19,4-5).

After Jesus, Paul will address his advice to the Christians of Corinth, as well as to those whose charism is marriage, telling them: “To avoid all immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband” (*1 Cor* 7,2). Later, the Pastoral Letters recommend that married men who intend to assume responsibilities in the local community be “the husband of one wife” (*1 Tim* 3,2.12).

3.4 Divine pedagogy

In conclusion to this listening to the biblical experience, it emerges that God the Father is a teacher who gradually educates his children. This is also true of marriage and its various forms. He allowed polygamy to continue for centuries. But, in his Son, he shows that polygamy is not the ideal couple desired by God. In the spirit of the Matthewian antitheses, Jesus recalls the monogamous marriage desired by the Creator: one man and one woman.

³ Cf. NURIA CALDUCH-BENAGES, *Polygamy in Ben Sira?*, in ANGELO PASSARO (ed.), *Family and Kinship in the Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature*, Deuterocanonical and Cognate Literature Yearbook 2012/2013, 127-138.

CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE: ONE MAN AND ONE WOMAN

4.1 Male and female he created them

The form of marriage is rooted in the Christian theology of marriage, which itself draws inspiration from the word of God, particularly the first three chapters of the Book of Genesis.

These passages retrace the history of origins. God is presented as the Creator of all things. And everything He created is good, even very good. The sacred author insists on this original goodness of all creatures to clearly show that from God, who is exclusively Goodness, can only come good things, such as marriage.

Thus, man and woman, creatures among others, certainly, but created in the image and likeness of God. They are the principal witnesses of God's goodness. They bear within themselves the mark and seal of God. Moreover, on earth, everything is ordered to man and woman as its center and summit. God has made them lords of all earthly creatures to dominate them, that is, to manage them while glorifying God. As the psalm says: "You made him scarcely lower than a god, crowning him with glory and splendor; you set him over the work of your hands; by you all things were put under his feet" (*Ps* 8,6-7). It is this position of the human person within creation that justifies his greatness and dignity. The concept of human dignity is about recognizing that every human being possesses an intrinsic value that is fundamentally inviolable and inalienable.

It is also in the name of this same dignity, a value of internal excellence that makes each human being a separate being, endowed with reason and freedom, that he is subject to rights. The text of Genesis recalls that: "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; man he created them" (*Gen* 1,27). This passage from the singular to the plural clearly shows the equal dignity of man and woman before God.

The second, older text of creation (cf. *Gen* 2,21-23) is more explicit on this point. Woman is taken from man. To come from someone or to be taken from him is to be of the same nature and equal dignity as him. Man himself recognizes woman as his partner of the same nature: "This time, behold, bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh! She will be called woman – *Ishsha* – she who was taken from man – *Ish*" (*Gen* 2,23). Is this not one of the places where a 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. This is what the first Christians and the Fathers of the Church would do after him. Thus, at a time when some advocated various forms of polygamy and when monogamy was not yet fully established, Tertullian also drew inspiration from these passages to affirm, with his characteristic radicalism, the requirement of monogamy. For him, it comes from God himself. We are taken back to the origins of creation. For Tertullian, all the *pro-domo* justifications that have been

developed here and there to justify polygamy are invalid. Indeed, in the beginning, God created a man and a woman, a parabolic way of consecrating the monogamous couple.⁴

4.2 From biological fertility to spiritual fertility

In the Bible, the human couple must transmit life, the very life of God, thus continuing his work. Now, as we have discussed at length, one of the causes of polygamy is the woman's sterility. While the question of maternity is crucial, the term "mother" does not only refer to the one who has given birth. Judge Deborah, for example, is referred to as "a mother in Israel" (*Judg* 5,7) even though she is not credited with having any children. In a biblical sense, the term "mother" is therefore broader than biological maternity and invites other ways of giving and promoting life. This is fundamental for every woman.

It is the prophets who will deepen this sense of God's fertility, which does not necessarily involve biological fertility. Thus, for Hosea, God is a father to Israel (cf. *Hos* 11,1). Moreover, the prophet uses matrimonial images to evoke the relationship between Yahweh and his people. This is a figurative language. It is not a question of biological paternity or maternity, but of spiritual ones. For the prophets, biological fertility does not exhaust the meaning of paternity and maternity. Thus, in a context of contempt and exclusion, Deutero-Isaiah affirms that sterile men and women have their place in God's plan:

For thus says the Lord to the barren who keep my Sabbaths and choose to do what is pleasing to me, holding fast to my covenant: I will give them in my house and within my walls a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that will never be erased (*Is* 56,4-7).

The Book of Wisdom will continue the reflections of the prophets. Written between 50 and 30 BC, this deuterocanonical writing achieves a remarkable synthesis between Greek thought and Jewish faith. It is like the culmination of the reflection on the afterlife, tentatively glimpsed by the prophets, affirmed in the second century by the books of Daniel and Maccabees. This horizon broadens theological and ethical perspectives.

In this sense, true fertility is no longer biological, but rather that of fidelity to God, that of works. From then on, exalted fatherhood and motherhood are above all those of virtue, a pledge of immortality. With or without children, married or single, it is through their virtuous conduct and their work that men and women fertilize the future and leave imperishable fruit:

It is better to be childless and to be virtuous, for immortality is attached to her memory, for she is known to God and men. When present, she is imitated, when absent, she is missed; in eternity, crowned with a crown, she triumphs, for having won in a struggle whose prizes are spotless (*Wis* 4,1-2).

From now on, the believer's gaze is no longer stubbornly focused on biological fertility. The works that virtue produces make one even more immortal than offspring. Sterility is gradually accepted and transfigured. Thus is proclaimed a spiritual fertility, a witness to the gratuitousness of God's salvation, to the greatness of his love. From now on, the future of Israel is not in prosperity,

⁴ Cf. TERTULLIAN, *On Monogamia*. The author particularly attacks successive polygamies, which he believes are linked to intemperance. Whether successive or concomitant, all forms of polygamy call into question the will of God.

longevity, or offspring, but in fidelity to God. This announces Jesus, the prophet of God's love. In him, fertility is perceived in the broad sense of the tree that bears good fruit (cf. *Lk* 6,44). And there are so many ways to bear fruit, fruit that endures.

In short, in the Bible, sterility is always presented as a tragedy to which God is not indifferent and which must be fought by all means. Jesus came to bring an "abundant", fertile, full life. This can come through biological childbirth, sometimes after a (long) period of sterility, or through other forms of alternative fertility. If sterility is perceived as a form of death, the Bible affirms that it is possible to be resurrected from it, whatever form this resurrection takes.

If the biologically sterile man or woman is considered a dry tree, from the biblical perspective, this dry tree can bear even more life-giving fruit, because it is rooted in God, the foundation of the couple. Therefore, polygamy is not imposed as a palliative to a situation of biological sterility.

4.3 An ethical question

The biblical perspective on monogamy raises ethical questions. Indeed, if marriage translates into "the gift of oneself to another", one might wonder how a man or woman can experience 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 his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'", thus being "no longer two, but one flesh" (*Mt* 19,5-6). How can a man or woman in a situation of polygamy "become one flesh" with several wives or several husbands? These questions place us at the heart of the ethical problem of the relationship to oneself and to the other. In other words, what fundamental human concern does polygamy respond to, such that we can give it a serious ethical value on an individual and collective level? Perhaps it has only a cultural value, deeply rooted in the habits or ways of being and living of a given people.

In this case, as Monsignor Bernard Ardura points out, "the Gospel overcomes cultural obstacles and reaches each person in their cultural identity, while cultures purified of the signs of their finitude and sin flourish by expressing the highest and most fundamental message in the world: God saves us in Jesus Christ and calls us to enter the great family of the Church".⁵

The Church, in her capacity as teacher, and therefore as pedagogue, must, in the light of the Word of God, lead the polygamous man or woman to ask themselves questions about the relevance of their choice. Indeed, can having shared feelings between several wives or several husbands not be a source of psychological discomfort? Similarly, can a man or woman experience a deep communion with a wife or husband who is not entirely theirs? Is there not a risk of erecting a kind of marital infidelity as a standard of life?

Ethics, as a questioning of human action, enlightened by the Word of God, could help to overcome certain inconsistent and even degrading cultural practices, since they subjugate man. The choice to follow Christ must be clear, without compromise and with the requirement to take up one's cross and truly commit to promoting for oneself and for others a liberating way of living and thinking, in conformity with the Word of God.

⁵ BERNARD ADURA, "(Intervention)", in *Faith, Culture and Evangelization in Africa at the Dawn of the 3rd Millennium. Special Post-Synodal Conference*, «Review of the Catholic Institute of West Africa», n. 14-15 (1996), 21.

The marriage covenant between man and woman, of the order of nature and willed by God, is so precious that the apostle Paul compared it to the covenant between Christ (husband) and the Church (wife). A special bond of love that cannot be experienced with several wives or several husbands at the same time. The person in a situation of polygamy must be confronted with this truth that liberates. This echoes the words of Jesus: “You will know the truth and the truth will set you free” (*Jn* 8,32).

This ethical biblical reflection prepares us for a calm discernment of practical theology that takes us back to missionary experiences concerning polygamy, to the perspective that SECAM has taken on this issue, before arriving at the concrete pastoral situation of our ecclesial communities with its nagging questions. A man or a woman in a situation of polygamy, with stable social ties, requests baptism. What should be done? What are the pastoral practices of the Church? How should we evaluate them?

PASTORAL EXPERIENCES

5.1 Polygamy: a thorny issue for the first missionaries

The issue of the “pastoral care of polygamists” is not new. It is linked to that of the family, which, from the beginning of the evangelization of the continent, has been the focus of attention of pastors. In the apt words of Cardinal Malula, the pastoral care of the family is the key to the evangelization of the African continent:

Among the very complex problems posed by the evangelization of Africa at the present time, that of the Christianization of families certainly occupies one of the first places. If we want to Christianize African society, we must begin with the family, which is its cell.⁶

In the pastoral care of the family, the thorny issue for the missionaries was that of polygamy. For them, this marital regime was in sharp contrast to the one they knew in Europe. In the mentality of the time, Christianization and Westernization went almost hand in hand. The pastoral care that would be implemented, through the process of mass catechization, would essentially focus on the fight against polygamy.

Moreover, there was a real fear of letting the family structure plunge into a form of instability, not to mention the blow to the freedom and dignity of women. “A Christian community can only be built in a stable and solid way on Christian homes.”

Monogamous marriage was therefore a requirement for being or becoming a Christian, even if it meant disrupting the traditional social order that accommodated polygamous practice well. For the missionaries, as we can read in the writings of Léon Lejeune, “polygamy is an enslavement of women and, as such, has a profoundly immoral character”.⁷

In this perspective, overall, the missionaries did not establish a pastoral care to support people in polygamy. The prohibition of polygamous practice was the only possible rule. On this subject, Father George Crocinzi, an American national who worked for nearly 40 years in the East African region, had to vigorously defend his colleagues who were wrongly accused of turning a blind eye to polygamy, which was considered an indefensible pagan practice.⁸

5.2 SECAM and polygamy

Pope Paul VI’s visit to Kampala in 1969 marked a significant turning point in the thinking, discourse, and actions of the African Church. The Church gradually moved away from conformism and ventured out into the open sea. The Pope’s speech asserted, on the one hand, the universality of the Church and, on the other hand, the legitimacy of a pluralism which admits the possibility of an African Christianity and Africa’s responsibility in the mission:

⁶ ALBERT-JOSEPH MALULA, quoted in LÉON DE SAINT MOULIN, *Complete Works of Cardinal Malula*, vol. 7: *Texts concerning the family, theatre and songs*, Catholic Faculties of Kinshasa, Kinshasa, 1997, 63.

⁷ LÉON LEJEUNE, *In Congo. Women and the family*, «Le correspondant» (1900).

⁸ Cf. <https://www.aciafrique.org.news>.

The expression, that is, the language and mode of manifesting this one Faith, may be manifold; hence, it may be original, suited to the tongue, the style, the character, the genius, and the culture, of the one who professes this one Faith. [...] And in this sense you may, and you must, have an African Christianity.⁹

It is in this dynamic that missionary pastoral practices will be reread by the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM). This is the case with the pastoral care of the family, which, from its inception, has been one of the concerns of SECAM. Thus, from 1969 to 1985, it published a dozen documents, including one on inculturation. All the others deal with social problems, thus reflecting a socio-pastoral commitment. The concerns of the Episcopates of Africa are essentially focused on two sectors: justice, development and peace, on the one hand; marriage and family life, on the other.¹⁰

The reflection on the family will be an opportunity to discuss polygamy. This will be discussed during the 6th SECAM Plenary Assembly on the family. The SECAM Fathers called for the promotion of the monogamous dimension of marriage by opening up to the teaching of Scripture on the unity and indissolubility of marriage. For the Fathers, there must be no possible ambiguity. In this first intervention, the SECAM Fathers want to be reassuring: there is no need to prevaricate with the official doctrine of the Church: “the pastoral attitude towards polygamists [...] must avoid anything that could appear as a recognition of polygamy [...] by the Church”.¹¹ Do we not find here the intransigence of the first missionaries and the firmness of John Paul II in his post-synodal exhortation on the family?

In the post-synodal exhortations *Ecclesia in Africa* and *Africae Munus*, the family will be discussed extensively, but not polygamy, which is a concern for pastors on the ground. Perhaps they do not dare to take an official position on this very delicate subject. On the other hand, in 2014, during the preparation of the first stage of the Synod of the Universal Church on the Family, SECAM recommended greater attention to individuals and their situations. The document recalled that “the practice currently proposed consists of choosing a wife”. Furthermore, this time, greater attention is recommended to those who experience polygamy: “certain cases would require special and courageous attention from pastors called, following the Apostle Paul, to exercise the power that Christ has entrusted to them to discern and find more appropriate responses to these situations”.¹²

To prepare for the second session of the Synod on the Family, SECAM met again in Abidjan. It only briefly returned to the issue of polygamy, which was considered one of the major challenges facing the Church in Africa. However, in the spirit of the future post-synodal exhortation *Amoris laetitia*, the emphasis is placed neither on the law nor on punishment, but rather on the accompaniment that testifies to the tenderness of God, to which Jesus and his Church wish to be witnesses: “This challenge invites the Church to provide pastoral support to polygamists and to be a witness to divine mercy alongside them while exhorting them to conversion”.¹³

⁹ PAUL VI, *Homily* (Kampala, Uganda, 31 July 1969): *AAS* 61 (1969), 577.

¹⁰ Cf. JAN VANKRUNKESVEN (Presentation of), *The socio-pastoral discourse of the Church of Africa*, Bobo-Dioulasso, CESA0, 7.

¹¹ SCEAM, *Recommendations on marriage and family life for Christians in Africa*, «Catholic Documentation» (1981), 1021.

¹² SCEAM, *The Family Our Future*, SECAM/SCEAM Publications, Accra 2014, 24.

¹³ SCEAM, *The Future of the Family. Our Mission*, SECAM/SCEAM Publications, Accra 2015, 42.

The seventeenth SECAM plenary assembly was held in Luanda from July 18 to 25, 2016, following the publication of *Amoris laetitia*. It focused on the family. In the assembly's final declaration, polygamy is one of the urgent challenges facing the pastoral work of the Church-Family of God in Africa.

5.3 Four pastoral practices

From these various experiences and reflections, pastoral practices were born, sometimes at the discretion of the pastor and his context. Today, there are three pastoral practices most widespread on the African continent, relating to the treatment of cases of polygamy.¹⁴ It is about:

- On the choice of the first/favorite wife or wife
- From the status of permanent catechumen
- From the baptism of the first wife
- “Veiled polygamy”

5.3.1 Choosing the first wife/or favorite wife

Several dioceses use this practice. When a polygamist, baptized or not, requests full integration into the Church and access to the sacraments, he is asked to choose one of his spouses. However, the man must provide the spouses who were not chosen and their offspring with what they need for survival. This is a matter of doing justice to the women who were not chosen and their children, while the Church offers forgiveness to the polygamist for his sins and “opens the door of faith” (*Acts 14,27*) and sacramental grace.

5.3.2 Propose the status of “permanent catechumen”

Another pastoral practice proposes to give the polygamist the status of “permanent catechumen”. In this case, the accompaniment is done through catechumenal formation that does not conclude with the sacrament of baptism, but with the granting of an official document that recognizes the individual as a candidate for baptism. In this sense, he is accepted into the community and remains a catechumen, given the impossibility of breaking the marital bonds of polygamy and the obligations towards children and wives that these bonds imply.

This pastoral measure does not provide access to the sacraments. It offers accompaniment and gradual integration that allows the polygamist and his family to participate in the life of the community, but without being fully integrated by the sacraments, because his marital situation violates the Christian understanding of monogamy. Indeed, welcoming only one member of this polygamous relationship would mean receiving all and integrating them into the life of the Church and its sacraments.

On the other hand, this polygamous family can request the baptism of their children, receive the sacramentals offered by the Church, and lead a life of Christian witness. Moreover, it is generally women in polygamous relationships who approach the Church with their children to request baptism. Men stay away from this type of approach.

¹⁴ LOUIS BIRA, *For a Christian polygamy* (26 August 2015), <https://afrique.xaveriens.org> (accessed 6 February 2024).

5.3.3 Baptizing the first wife in the polygamous relationship

Finally, the third pastoral practice considers it legitimate to propose baptism to women who are “victims” of a polygamous relationship, in the event that the man marries a second or several wives without the consent of the first. If the latter requests baptism, the procedure is to allow the converted party to be admitted and integrated into the Christian community, even if living with a pagan husband. It is important that the family be accompanied and that every opportunity be offered to decide for the faith.

Since the converted party is not obliged to withdraw from the marital relationship, a new path opens up for them. They now have the responsibility and important mission of living according to the faith in an unconverted family environment. For this reason, it is important to establish a family ministry that assists polygamous couples.

5.3.4 “Veiled polygamy”

The “veiled” polygamy mentioned earlier corresponds to permissive behavior in men or women who have lovers, people with whom they maintain free relationships. The process of Christian initiation is then organized and oriented not towards the couple, but towards the person requesting baptism, which results in the baptism of a woman who has children, but no husband. This situation is harmful to society and the Church, even if it does not pose a doctrinal problem. The main difficulty lies in the fact that the woman is traditionally considered the mother of the married man’s children and that her life separated from the father of her children is frowned upon in society and in the Christian community. On the other hand, children need the care and affection of their father. Hence the need to form to Christian maturity not only those who are taking the initiatory journey, but also the entire Christian community, so that it may accompany those who seek to know the Gospel and live by it.

THEOLOGICAL EVALUATION OF PRACTICES

An important question raised by the practices presented above is the relationship between baptism and the other sacraments, especially the Eucharist and reconciliation. It is this question that has led to the practice of the “permanent catechuminate”. While the status of permanent catechumen allows one to live the Christian life without the sacraments, there is a risk of a minimalist interpretation of the sacraments as not being important for living as a Christian. On the other hand, the value of the sacraments as a place of healing and invigoration of the Christian life is impoverished, because it is possible to live and bear witness to the Christian faith even without the sacraments.

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 which transforms us into the image of Christ. It is constitutive of the Christian life, so much so that the configuration to Christ which it signifies bears an indelible character which marks the whole of one’s life and brings about a profound transformation which, by making the baptized person pass from the old man to the new man (cf. *Rom* 6,6), consecrates his participation in the death and resurrection of Christ, the New Adam (cf. *Rom* 6,3-4).¹⁵ Therefore, like the other sacraments, it not only presupposes faith, but it nourishes it, strengthens it and expresses it (Sacrosanctum Concilium, no. 59). In this sense, faith becomes a constitutive and constituent element before, during and after the administration of baptism.

The profession of faith in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as well as the renunciation of sin on the occasion of the liturgical rite of baptism, express a total adherence to the will of God contained in his Word, deepened by Tradition and taught by the Magisterium. Baptism is therefore an objective and subjective confirmation of this faith and this adherence.

This is to say that the Christian life inaugurated by baptism involves a decision in faith. It has its imperatives which, far from being a burden, constitute paths to perfection of dignity and salvation for man. And monogamous marriage is one of them.

Furthermore, the strength of the baptismal character is a precious help for the baptized person which brings him a permanent disposition to grace and opens to him eternal salvation.

In fact, anticipating the administration of baptism to a polygamist in the process of catechumenal preparation would mean configuring to Christ a person who has not yet decided to live in the Spirit of Christ and according to the radicality of the Gospel, in an authentic conversion. Also, this anticipation could create, for an indefinite period, an irregular situation (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 74, § 2) where a baptized person objectively lives in a marital condition with sexual intercourse, but outside the sacrament of marriage. Thus, baptizing a polygamist who will continue to remain so would give every appearance of legitimizing this irregularity and could distort or even devalue baptism of its substance as the first sacrament of Christian initiation. In addition, this would call into question a century-old family pastoral care that has already proven itself and borne fruit in our Churches.

¹⁵ Cf. INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *Communion and Service. The Human Person Created in the Image of God* (2004), nos. 11-13.

In fact, thanks to the incessant call to conversion through the proclamation of the Word of God, most people receive baptism at school age, well before the age of marriage. In addition, most polygamists are baptized, so the question arises rather in terms of the regularization of their situation and the baptism of their children. For this, they are always welcomed, listened to and accompanied by the Church, case by case. Those who are not baptized are constantly exhorted to prepare themselves to receive Christ and his Word for a new life that involves the choice of abandoning polygamy.

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 with character, it would be preferable if it were not anticipated for polygamous catechumens who request it. To do so would create more problems than it would solve, especially considering the rights that flow from baptism, including the right to receive the other sacraments. It would be incomplete to cross the threshold and maintain the status quo, without progressing toward the other sacraments. The Christian is called to make further progress in the sacramental life. Furthermore, it would not be fair to thousands of baptized people who have accepted the Gospel and abandoned polygamy to mark their conversion and faith in Christ.

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 on the basis of a promise or who will continue to be so, even after receiving this sacrament.

Ultimately, there is no anticipation of the sacrament of baptism for polygamists, but a need for support in the perspective of a pastoral care of inculturation, which opens paths to a pastoral care of polygamy.

FOR A PASTORAL RESPONSE TO POLYGAMY

7.1 Pastoral action is constitutive of the mission of the Church

The Church does not exist for itself, but according to its mission to proclaim Jesus Christ so that the reign of God in humanity may be accomplished. In this mission the Church exercises a triple function: the prophetic function with the proclamation of the kerygma and the denunciation of all that opposes the life that God offers; the liturgical function allows the Church to celebrate the gift of God, the sanctification of the people of God; the royal function or *diakonia* which is manifested in the service rendered to the human community as a witness to the charity of God who loved the world in his Son Jesus Christ. This triple function is realized in the way in which the Church responds to the challenges encountered in the proclamation of the Gospel. It must be present in the response given to the challenges of polygamy experienced in African societies.

The fundamental question for pastoral care since the beginning of the Church's life has been how to present the faith in a given social and cultural context. As Comblin rightly noted,¹⁶ the problem of evangelization and pastoral care today, as always, is not in the definition of doctrine, or in the content of the truth proclaimed. The way in which the proclamation is made will have implications for the reception of the doctrine and the truth proclaimed. This is a pastoral concern, intrinsic to the Church and not an option. It is a mediation to respond to the different challenges of the different eras of human life. Certainly, any response that is given will not be definitive; it will have to be reformulated, reinvented. It is a requirement of the historical dimension of the faith and the mission of the Church.¹⁷ This is why, in our days, the different responses given throughout the ages must be appreciated and can be reformulated.

7.2 Pastoral care of proximity, listening and support

Thus, today, we can affirm that the best way to respond to the challenges of polygamy is a pastoral approach of proximity, listening and accompaniment. A pastoral approach that opens up to others, without judging them, by announcing the truth contained in the Gospel, which is life for every believer (cf. *Jn* 14,6) and which is celebrated in the sacraments and the witness of life.

By being close and listening, it will be possible to perceive that polygamy is not a normative condition, even in societies where it is legalized. Indeed, "Bantu marriage" appears as institutionally monogamous and permissively polygamous, one pursues the monogamous Ideal, and one implies the primordial value of monogamy,¹⁸ the accompaniment of couples, families and individuals in their encounter with the Gospel and in their process of seeking greater fidelity to their conscience.

This pastoral care leads to the reception of people, allowing them to meet the Christian community, to listen to the word of God, to be integrated into the catechumenate and to participate in the life of the community. It is a process of evangelization of the family, as Saint John Paul II so aptly

¹⁶ Cf. JEAN COMBLIN, *Vaticano II ontem e hoje*, «Vida Pastoral» (Novembro/Dezembro, 1985), 2-10.

¹⁷ Cf. SERGIO CONRADO, *Pastoral da Igreja: necessária ou superflua?*, in M. GARNZER – P. K. IWASHITA (ed.), *Teologia e cultura: a fé cristã no mundo atual*, Paulinas, São Paulo 2012, 231-243.

¹⁸ RAUL RUIZ DE ASÚA ALTUNA, *Cultura Tradicional Banta*. 2a ed., Paulinas, Luanda 2006, 347.

put it, “the evangelization of the African family [...] in view of the evangelization of families through families” (*Ecclesia in Africa* [EA], no. 80). Accompaniment will maintain the family in its polygamous model, because the spouses cannot break away from the acquired bonds, but it will allow a better understanding of the marital vocation, of its aspect deeply linked to the mystery of Christ and the Church, of God and humanity and of its prophetic character.

In this sense, it will be easy to understand that some members of the family meet the conditions for full integration into the Christian community through the reception of the sacraments (the first wife and the children who are members of this family), while the polygamous man and the other women will be invited to live their faith in a penitent manner and in the hope of full integration into the community of Jesus’ disciples. Although “the proclamation of the word of God has Christian conversion as its aim: a complete and sincere adherence to Christ and his Gospel through faith” (EA, no. 73), those who, for reasons beyond their control, cannot receive it, “but who live in harmony with their conscience according to God’s law, will be saved by Christ and in Christ” (EA, no. 73). It is a matter of living the faith, adherence to the Gospel, of remaining in the state in which the grace of God has found them (cf. *1 Cor* 7,24).

7.3 Polygamy among baptized couples

Polygamy among the baptized is also a pastoral challenge. It is often motivated by reasons of permanent illness or the need for biological offspring, without which it is difficult to maintain a home in many African cultures. What is central to polygamy practiced by the baptized is the very understanding of marriage, which, for an African culture, has its essence in biological fertility, whereas, for Christian marriage, biological fertility is not part of the essence of marriage, being simply open to the life that can be born from this union.

This is where rigorous preparation for marriage and pastoral care are needed, so that spouses may live faithfully to the truth of the faith proclaimed by Christian marriage. The pursuit of biological fertility is a value of African culture and spirit that must be cultivated in a perspective of giving and service. It is important to understand Pope Benedict XVI, according to whom the truth of Christian marriage, marked by unity and indissolubility, does not derive from the definitive commitment of believers, but from the intrinsic nature of the bond established by the Creator. To speak of unity is to evoke exclusivity (one man for one woman) and the perfect union of the two, called the consortium of all life.

Indissolubility refers to a union of a permanent nature, “so that they are no longer two, but one flesh” (*Mt* 19:6). It is a bond that represents, for the spouses, the justice of the love that God realizes in them.¹⁹ It is this same love of God, which is realized in Christian spouses who, framed vertically as a gift and horizontally as a service, a task and a mission to be carried out,²⁰ becomes and manifests itself as a sacrament, as is the will of the Savior. Procreation is a pure gift of God in this relationship which unites two persons or two families, and cannot be used as a justification to blur the nature of the sacrament. In the Christian family, there is no place for polygamy, which is incompatible with the

¹⁹ Cf. JOSÉ SILVIO BOTERO GIRALDO, *La Teología del Matrimonio Cristiano en el pensamiento de Benedicto XVI: Nuevas Perspectivas*, «*Studia Moralia*» 46/1 (Maio-Junho, 2008), 132-133.

²⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, 142.

unity of marriage by “separating what God has joined together, by turning married life away from his most excellent gift” (*Gaudium et spes*, no. 50).

Life is a gift from God and goes beyond the purely biological dimension. Pastoral care for the family must help us grow in understanding this vocation, in the care of life, in order to integrate other forms of fruitfulness into marriage for the fullness of the mystery revealed there.

7.4 A pastoral care that values women

This pastoral outreach must also aim to enhance the dignity of women. Like Mary, the mother of Jesus, she is the first on the path of an inculturated pastoral approach to polygamy. It is true that women choose polygamy, either for cultural reasons or for personal gain. Thus, in some countries, the constitutional choice in favor of polygamy has been endorsed not only by men, but also by women who found it in their interest. But does this choice correspond to the plan of God who created man and woman, different and equal?

Indeed, from a biblical and theological perspective, despite the patience and tenderness of divine pedagogy, polygamy does not promote the development of women as intended by God. So, what pastoral care should be put in place to help Christians, and especially Christian women, adhere to monogamous marriage? What pastoral care should be put in place for those who cannot or do not want to evolve towards this ideal? How can biblical dynamics help to transform from within the perspective of the conception of women, which is not necessarily that conveyed by culture or immediate feeling? These situations of polygamy are experienced in a more or less harmonious manner. But above all, it once again raises the question of equality between men and women:

In his post-synodal exhortation on the family, *Familiaris consortio*, Pope John Paul II draws strong attention to the dignity of every person in the family, and especially that of women. For her, the communion that characterizes family life must translate into a high respect for the dignity and rights of each person, especially those of women. She remembers that all were created equal and received the same mission in the diversity of their vocations: “Male and female he created them” (*Gen 1,27*). The emphasis is placed on the dignity of women within the family:

Above all it is important to underline the equal dignity and responsibility of women with men. This equality is realized in a unique manner in that reciprocal self-giving by each one to the other and by both to the children which is proper to marriage and the family. What human reason intuitively perceives and acknowledges is fully revealed by the word of God: the history of salvation, in fact, is a continuous and luminous testimony of the dignity of women.²¹

The dignity of women is also exercised in society, with the right to access the same functions as men, but also in the Church. Indeed, “with due respect to the different vocations of men and women, the Church must in her own life promote as far as possible their equality of rights and dignity: and this for the good of all, the family, the Church and society”.²² It is in the name of this dignity, that due to women, that the exhortation casts a critical eye on polygamy. It rejects it, relying on Scripture and experience:

²¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Familiaris consortio*, 22 November 1981, no. 22.

²² *Ibid.*, no. 23.

Such a communion is radically contradicted by polygamy: this, in fact, directly negates the plan of God which was revealed from the beginning, because it is contrary to the equal personal dignity of men and women who in matrimony give themselves with a love that is total and therefore unique and exclusive.²³

Polygamy may be linked to the fragility of the woman's moral and socio-economic situation. Thus, levirate marriage is supposed to provide security to the widow and her children, who are now without protection. It is true that the practice is tending to disappear. Moreover, it even happens that the woman has the possibility of taking the brother of her choice. But, whatever its form, is not levirate marriage a kind of infantilization of women? Or even a reification, the woman becoming like a commodity that can be exchanged for another, especially when she and her children are relieved of the deceased's assets?

This is why pastoral care for widows must ensure their material and moral security to prevent them from falling almost automatically into polygamy. The SECAM refers to this fragility of women linked to widowhood:

Since marriage in Africa involves at least two family lines, widowhood in the life of one spouse also affects all families. This community dimension undoubtedly constitutes an advantage in managing the issue of loneliness inherent in this painful separation. But because of the limitations of African traditions, this situation of widowhood often becomes a burden for women, who are often forced to adhere to ritual prescriptions that do not respect their faith and even their human dignity. Men, on the other hand, are treated less restrictively.²⁴

To counter this, Bishop Théophile Mbemba asked not only to defend widows, but also to help them break their silence, to give them a voice, to encourage them to get involved in the Church and in society, to transform the death of a loved one into true Christian resilience, thus allowing them to rebuild their existence, as they wish, without submitting to cultural demands or socio-economic contingencies.

Indeed, as Paul recommends: "The wife remains bound to her husband as long as he lives, but if the husband dies (if God himself separates them), she is free to marry whom she wishes, but only in the Lord (let her marry religiously)" (*1 Cor 7,23*). But the widow can also invest herself in the Church and society through informal ministries, such as those proposed in the Pastoral Letters (cf. *1 Tim 5,3-16*). Thus asked Bishop Théophile Mbemba:

Why should we not see the birth of a widows' confraternity in our country, which would promote their spiritual life and – why not – work to improve the material conditions of many widows! Christians in their respective communities and parishes could set up such a confraternity where the widow would find the climate of prayer and moral – even material – support of which Saint Paul speaks in his Letter to Timothy.²⁵

7.5 The experience of faith and the reception of the sacraments

These various experiences show that pastoral care leads to a deep living of adherence to the God of Jesus Christ the Savior and to participating in a different way in the sacramental life. Indeed,

²³ *Ibid.*, no. 19.

²⁴ Cf. SCEAM, *The Future of the Family. Our Mission*, cit., 31.

²⁵ THÉOPHILE MBEMBA, *The conditions of the widow. Pastoral Letter for Lent 1971*, Brazzaville 1971, 1st part.

faith is the fruit of the action of the Spirit who makes possible for the believer “the obedience of faith” (*Rom 1,5*), received by the grace of Christ (*Rom 3,24; 1 Cor 1,26*). Faith is a gift, proper to the gratuitousness and freedom of divine action. It is a human response in the acceptance of the gift, which requires to be cultivated in order to grow and produce the fruits of faith.

It is lived within a believing community, so that ecclesial faith is the norm and criterion for the personal act of faith. It is the ecclesial community that is the cradle of our way of believing; it sustains the faith of the faithful. The reception of the sacraments obeys ecclesial faith and, without minimizing the importance of the sacraments in Christian life, it is necessary to affirm that the experience of the Gospel is not limited to the sacraments and their reception. Thomas Aquinas (S.Th. Part III, q. 61, art. 1) affirms that “God does not bind his grace to the sacraments” (*Deus non alligatur sacramentis*).

This statement is not intended to deny the important place of the sacraments in Christian and ecclesial life. The sacraments are linked to Christian life, where faith and life are integrated into the practice and witness of grace. Participation in the community that celebrates the sacraments unites all men and women in the act of sacramental grace. Even without the objective reception of the sacrament, it is hoped that each person, united in common faith, will be helped to achieve true spiritual communion with the One who is celebrated, our Lord Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION: A PASTORAL CARE OF INCULTURATION

In short, polygamy continues to be a reality in African societies today. Its existence and spread, however, vary according to the policies of each state, the predominant religion, and traditional cultural influence. In this context, the proclamation of the Gospel and its proposal to adhere to a monogamous marriage relationship sometimes encounters certain resistance justified by cultural reasons.

Throughout the history of evangelization, attempts to admit people living in polygamous relationships into the Christian community have had different models, sometimes varying from one diocese to another, from one episcopal conference to another, yet within the same sociocultural space. At a time when the Church intends to live fully its synodal character, in the communion and participation of all, it becomes urgent for the Church in Africa to share these models and to evaluate them doctrinally and pastorally, and, where appropriate, to propose other paths, with the aim of offering to all the possibility of an encounter with Christ and his Gospel.

The pastoral action of the Church in Africa in accompanying polygamous couples, which asks to be welcomed into the Church, appears as an attempt to be faithful to the Church's understanding of marriage and that of a Christian family. The need to welcome and accompany individuals and families is becoming increasingly evident, so that they can respond more clearly to the call made to them by the truth revealed by the Gospel on the vocation and mission of the family in the Church and in society. Hence the urgency of having a pastoral approach of proximity and attention to help understand the sacrament of marriage not as a social convention, but as a gift for the sanctification and salvation of spouses. As a vocation and mission, it is received as a gift.