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CROSSING THE THRESHOLDS OF *FAMILIARIS CONSORTIO AND AMORIS LAETITIA IN AFRICA*

Christian Okeke, SJ[♦]
Hekima University College, Nairobi

Abstract

Invaluable treasures exist in the gift of marriage and family life despite the challenges that are increasingly shaking up the foundations of human society. The Church has maintained its voice in all of this. Its Magisterium recognises what is at stake and is leading and opening up formal conversations on this; it is also issuing exhortations that highlight different insights and perspectives for deepening and upholding the treasures of family life. As the debate continues, responding to the need of an appropriate pastoral response provides several tools and opportunities for pastoral agents. This response and responsibility is inevitable. In such a context, the demand to consider possible socio-cultural values in convergence with the Christian tradition, in order to have a fruitful pastoral approach, is welcome. It reflects an African proverbial union of salt and red oil (in this context, it means two things that fit each other). This study will focus on the sub-Saharan African context in the light of Christian faith tradition, highlighting certain common patterns and challenges of African marriage and family life, with few illustrations wherever necessary.

Keywords: Africa, Church, Family, Life, Pastoral Care, Marriage

♦ **Christian Okeke, SJ**, a Jesuit Scholastic from Nigeria, is currently studying Theology at Hekima University College, Nairobi, Kenya. His academic background is in Law and Philosophy. He has experience in ADR (Alternative to Dispute Resolution) proceedings, either leading or participating in various formal mediation, arbitration, conciliation and out-of-court settlement sessions involving individuals and corporations. The author has previously published some articles on the same issue. Email: christian.okeke@hekima.ac.ke

Introduction

The situation of marriages and families in Africa and across the world cuts across several experiences, from the most wonderful to the most challenging. Battle swords are drawn from several sides with many possible questions, different opinions and answers, from the settled to the unsettling to the obscure. The storm continues to blow, especially following the two synods on the family and the publication of *Amoris Laetitia*. An African proverb says that if a child cries while pointing fingers to a direction, then it is likely that either of the parents is in that direction. This indicates where a common issue or cause of interest can be identified.

The conjugal situation is in everyone's interest as everyone shares, directly or indirectly, in its blessings and burdens. For highlighting these, the papal Exhortations *Familiaris Consortio* (FC) and *Amoris Laetitia* (AL), amongst others, offer some insights for engaging with Christian families and marriages in the modern world. One concern here is the relevance and contextualisation of the Exhortations to certain aspects of the family life. In particular, are there possible considerations that will inform a pastoral approach in an African context, in the light of her customs and traditions vis-à-vis the Christian faith? Certainly, all the relevant issues will not be covered here considering the framework of this study.

The Mind of the Church

While recognising that marriage and family uniquely face many profound and rapid changes, the Church expresses her desired orientations in the respective Exhortations. The following are the three main desires of FC concerning values of marital and family life:

1. To support those living or seeking to live it faithfully;
2. To enlighten the uncertain, the bewildered, the doubtful or those searching for the truth;
3. To assist those facing different challenging conditions of injustice.¹

The Church cherishes the place of marriage and family as constituting one of the most precious human values; for this she cannot but speak and offer her help to everyone regardless of where they find themselves.² In particular, she intends to present new horizons to the youth who are beginning the journey towards marital

¹John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (November 22, 1981), 1, accessed April 20, 2018, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.html.

²John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 1.

life. There is no doubt that new couples and youths in Africa and elsewhere can truly benefit from the beauty of the marital and family vocation.

In AL, the Church celebrates the joy of love experienced in families; thus, regardless of the challenges, the constant vibrant desire of the youth to get married and form families inspires the Church. The Church's response to this desire is that: "the Christian proclamation on the family is good news indeed."³ The desires and targets of AL reinforce those mentioned in FC. Firstly, "it represents an invitation to Christian families to value the gifts of marriage and the family, and to persevere in a love strengthened by the virtues of generosity, commitment, fidelity and patience."⁴ Secondly, "it seeks to encourage everyone to be a sign of mercy and closeness wherever family life remains imperfect or lacks peace and joy."⁵ This theme of joy of love is unique. It is a bold statement for awakening all to an ever-fresh Divine gift in families. The joy of love is the joy of life and the beauty of love is the beauty of life. Pope Francis draws on this theme as the signature opening statement in AL in order that all may embrace its beautiful and challenging reality, whether it is fully or partially experienced in families and marriages or is difficult or even impossible.

In all of these circumstances, the Church recognises the important role of Christian families in treasuring the values they possess; a loving perseverance supported by Christian virtues will be necessary, especially where the expectations and demands of marital and family life have become a dream. Cardinal Sarr writes on why pastoral care in an African context must keep the faith and love of the family at heart:

Like life, and together with it, the family is the thing that an African holds most dear, in his specific culture, in the sense of his way of seeing the world and of recognising himself and developing in it. Outside of his family and his more or less extended social environment, an African generally finds his way with great difficulty. When he ends up elsewhere, disorientation and anonymity may get the better of his humanity.⁶

³ Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (March 19, 2016), 1, accessed April 21, 2018, https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf.

⁴ Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 5.

⁵ Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 5.

⁶ Adrien Cardinal Sarr, "The Challenges of Mixed and Interfaith Marriages," in *Christ's New Homeland: Africa. Contributions to the Synod on the Family by African Pastors*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015, 127.

Reading FC and AL from this perspective, the combined intentions of any pastoral orientation must be to support, to enlighten and assist families and marriages towards the goal of joy and peace and life. This perspective is necessary for any pastoral approach in all cases, despite the real and countless challenges; otherwise, the discourse on the state of families and marriages, let alone the task of devising and implementing meaningful pastoral plans, would simply become an abstract enterprise.

Walking together with a Common Voice

It may be necessary to assess the contribution of the African Church to the two last Synods on family. The African demographic picture is marked by its diverse customs and traditions which seem more or less pronounced on questions about marital and family life. What is the chance of determining the common conscience of the Church in Africa on these matters? Did the Bishops from Africa and other representatives speak with one voice? Was their voice heard on the issues raised? Laurenti Magesa sums up some possible answers. Firstly, the African Bishops and the African Church at large generally accepted the proposals of AL because its major sense of direction is primarily pastoral and not so much doctrinal in nature. Secondly, and most significantly, AL “offers no more than a passing reference,”⁷ and is thus loudly and largely silent, “about marriage in the context of cultures of the African continent which now contains one of the fastest growing Christian populations in the world.”⁸ Such issues relate to polygamy, marriage from a community perspective, dowry and the love of Africans for posterity. Magesa suggests that this silence possibly reflects the failure of the African Bishops in articulating Africa’s particular concerns.

For this reason, assessing the contribution of African prelates may depend on their responses and reactions to the key issues which are apparently given more attention in AL: divorced and remarried Catholics, civil marriages, cohabitation, and same-sex relationships amongst some others. It is either that the Bishops were perceived as the defenders of truth of marriage or they were taken as outdated conservatives.⁹ According to Magesa, such sentiments present contradictory signals: “one is elation and praise, the other of despair

⁷Laurenti Magesa, “The Conscience of the African Church in the Synod on the Family and *Amoris Laetitia*,” *INTAMS Review, Journal for the Study of Marriage & Spirituality* 22, 2 (Winter 2016) 167.

⁸Magesa, “The Conscience of the African Church,” 166.

⁹Magesa, “The Conscience of the African Church,” 168.

and frustration.”¹⁰ Can such a controversial outcome be considered a healthy tension capable of leading to a brighter future or an unnecessary distraction from the issues at hand? It seems more disconcerting and unfortunate when the issues that touch on the basics and vitals of human society and human civilisation are subject to a winner-loser competitive affair. In any case, what is crucial is to direct attention and effort towards what will contribute to families and marriages for all humanity. The hope remains that Christian families will be better and more strengthened through the opportunities and challenges that arise.

It is obvious that the Church in Africa prepared herself, just like others, to participate in the Synod. In several preparatory forums, leading African prelates discussed various issues which included, but were not limited to, the following as areas of concern: pastoral care, indissolubility of marriage, cohabitation, separation, polygamy, divorce and so on.¹¹ The extent to which the positions of the prelates in given areas featured in the Synod and the final document is a different matter altogether. In any case, Cardinal Arinze summarises the public essays presented by several African prelates, which recapitulate the common attitude of Africans concerning marriage and the family in this way:

Africans see the family as a community of love between a man and a woman, with a loving opening to children. Marriage is the entry. It comes from the creating hands of God, and so no human being has the authority to try to reinvent it. A marriage in Africa establishes a link between families of the man and the woman, with each side ready to help to make it a success. Appreciation of the complementarity of man and woman and of the divine origin of marriage and the family cuts across cultural, linguistic, and religious frontiers. To ignore the order established by the Creator in marriage and the family is to invite problems and sufferings on people and on the society as a whole. The African prelates see the family as a place where the elders are highly respected, the link with the ancestors is appreciated and the virtue of filial piety is extolled.¹²

This summary represents some common elements of Africa’s diverse cultures and traditions, which converge with some aspects of the teachings of the Magisterium. The Magisterium understands the Christian family as “a community of love,” a “domestic church” or as

¹⁰Magesa, “The Conscience of the African Church,” 157.

¹¹Others are remarriage, mixed marriages, inter-faith marriages, monogamy and polygamy.

¹²Cardinal Arinze, “Preface,” *Christ’s New Homeland: Africa. Contributions to the Synod on the Family by African Pastors*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015, 7.

“the first and vital cell of society” which is actively involved in the act and process of evangelization.¹³

Pope Saint John Paul II in *Ecclesia in Africa* (Art 43) observes that: “In African culture and tradition the role of the family is everywhere held to be fundamental. Open to this sense of the family, of love and respect for life, the African loves children, who are joyfully welcomed as gifts of God. ‘*The sons and daughters of Africa love life.*’” Pope Francis appreciates that various parts of Africa, despite the force of secularism, still retain the traditional values that forge strong bond across wider family lines and provide the foundation for mutual respect for family life and its permanency, with clear-cut mechanisms for handling various problems and conflicts.¹⁴ Most importantly, he explains why this African cultural witness discloses an important value for appreciating the Church’s effort to guide families and marriages in love: it will “inspire a positive and welcoming pastoral approach capable of helping couples to grow in appreciation of the demands of the Gospel.”¹⁵ Granted that certain positive values can be found as treasures in Africa, a different picture will highlight numerous challenging and difficult areas that call for attention and pastoral action.

Considering Other Situations of Families and Marriages

FC and AL respectively consider certain situations that marriages and families face in our time. There is an increasing awareness about personal freedom, quality of interpersonal and interfamily relationships in marriage, dignity and equality of women, responsible procreation and education of children. However, other alternatives and lifestyles exist as well: individualism in marriages, non-sacramental and civil marriages, single parenthood, polygamy, normalisation of divorce and abortion.¹⁶

Besides these, African families, like others in similar socio-economically challenged countries, also face particular pressures of survival due to material poverty, unemployment, and lack of basic living amenities. In this category, the realities of injustice, corruption,

¹³Cardinal Arinze quotes from these Vatican II documents: *Gaudium et Spes* (47), *Lumen Gentium* (11) and *Apostolicam actuositatem* (11) respectively to explain the point. “Preface,” 8.

¹⁴Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 38.

¹⁵Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 38.

¹⁶Others include the contraceptive mentality, consumerism the throw-away culture, same-sex unions, addictions, poor communication in marriage, forced migration, sexual abuse of minors, loneliness, weakened faith, narcissism, and prostitution. John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 6; Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, Chapter 2.

wars and other external factors mount enormous pressures, threaten and cause damages to families. John Paul II considers these challenges which leave real indelible marks on families as the “interplay of light and darkness.”¹⁷ The 2014-2015 Synods on the family perceive the cultural decline which does not promote love and is not self-giving in families and marriages as the symptom of the “culture of the ephemeral.”¹⁸

Each of these situations affects families and marriages differently: some find real support or deal with them their own way while others suffer a lot in carrying their burdens with no helpful solution at hand. There are limitations to the solutions that can be offered to marriages and families by advancements in humanities, science and technology. Before considering some principles for pastoral approach, one example will illustrate how one challenging issue may affect an African marriage and family.

The Context of Childlessness in Africa

It has been shown that the Magisterium recognises and appreciates some common positive values that are generally found in African families. But it is necessary here to pay close attention to the issue of childlessness and the immense suffering that childless couples go through.¹⁹ Granted that Africans have the “sense of the family, of love and respect for life” and rejoice in welcoming children as God’s gifts, a second look at such an orientation will reveal how it can be misguided, misinterpreted, and misapplied. Emmanuel Wabanhu considers the social meaning of childlessness and African sexual ethics in a traditional African sense:

In this case, a childless person is worthless, of no use to himself or herself; and more importantly he or she is of no use to his or her entire community... [S]ex is for procreation: in Africa fertility rather sex is at [the] heart of traditional African sexual ethics and the worst death for most indigenous Africans is to die childless.²⁰

This challenging reality, as with many others, gives a hint on the nature of the heavy burden carried by a childless couple. In such situations, the couple and their families suffer, but it is the women that often suffer most, because the fact of childlessness can be a direct

¹⁷John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 6.

¹⁸Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 39.

¹⁹Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 178.

²⁰Emmanuel Wabanhu, “Socio-ethical Ways of Safeguarding Families in Africa in Light of *Amoris Laetitia*,” in *The Echo of Amoris Laetitia in Africa*, Nicholas Segeja and Emmanuel Wabanhu, ed., Nairobi: CUEA Press, 2017, 159.

or subtle cause of other marital challenges: separation, divorce, polygamy, adultery, domestic violence and psychological abuse, and more. With procreation taken as the principal objective for marital union and as the means for perpetuating posterity, any pastoral approach to any of the other related challenges arising would require extraordinary measures to be fruitful.

In recognising this reality, Pope Francis admonishes parents to be courageous enough in considering adoption and foster care as an alternative way of fulfilling marriage experience, even despite the cases of infertility.²¹ This offers some solution for fulfilling the genuine and legitimate desire of parents to have their own children. It is necessary to remember that Christian marriage retains its inherent, distinctive and characteristic sacramental bond in a “whole manner and [in] communion of life, [it still] preserves its value and indissolubility.” The Pope reminds all that the gift and meaning of “motherhood is not a solely biological reality”²² and that children are not a piece of “property” which parents must possess. This is one area, amongst others, where the teaching of the Church can engage or rather critique some African traditional beliefs and practices. A fitting pastoral action which is transformational, and thus leading to conversion, is necessary in response to such beliefs and practices. Indeed, while pastoral care should not ignore them, it must be made clear that an awareness and appreciation of one’s cultural values must, in the light of the Gospel, include the unequivocal condemnation of their burdensome defects.

Possible Considerations for Pastoral Approach

The topsy-turvy of marital and family situations is not just about the African experience, nor about the Christian faith and belief alone; it is an issue for all human families. A pastoral approach is of utmost necessity because responding to the burning questions by rule-and-proof-texting by itself alone will not work. This goes for the common passionate and public theological and canonical battles fought over marriages and families. To whom shall the Church go and what possible method can be adopted? As the marital and family institution is neither an invention of the Church nor of the state, what should guide the Church while she engages with all the related questions and challenges?

Certainly, the cultural crisis, the crisis of faith and the crisis of family have no respect for national boundaries and are connected by

²¹Wabanhu, “Socio-ethical Ways of Safeguarding Families,” 180.

²²Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 178.

some common thread. But the way and life of the Church is anchored in the strength of hope and faith secured in Christ. That is why Saint Pope John Paul II reminds all that “the future of the Church and the future of humanity pass by way of family.”²³

A Theological-Anthropological Principle

Stan Chu Ilo explains why the Pope’s reminder contains a theological-anthropological principle that fits an appropriate pastoral approach. Firstly, Christianity, as a revealed religion, carries “the seeds of the Word,” which is fully manifested and fulfilled in Christ. It is the light of the Gospel message that every culture is invited to embrace. The Gospel of Christ is not bound by the winds of socio-cultural experimentation of any age; otherwise, it can become empty, without form, without truth, without life, and without God’s eternal vision. Nevertheless, even though the Church cannot simply close her eyes, refuse to learn, and avoid the influence of cultural forces and traditions in addressing the conjugal and family situations, she cannot, in faithfulness to Christ and His Gospel, allow herself to be blinded and imprisoned by them.²⁴

The position of the Church on marital and family life is not solely a product of cultural consensus or of theologically-aligned social changes. Although elements of truth exist across all cultures, they are limited and do not contain the whole truth. The Church in Africa can look within the African cultural milieu in order to gain insights and perspectives while recognising that any pastoral approach to be adopted is not merely to become one amongst many other cultural subjects. According to Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator, “we need to pay close attention to the unique elements within African cultures that allow the church in Africa to engender innovative pastoral solutions to family life and marriage with sensitivity to local needs and traditions.”²⁵ Paying such attention includes openness to invaluable universal ideas and to criticism of unjust local practices and beliefs respectively.

Seeking the Common Good

Ilo refers to the link between marriage, family, human ecology and the common good. Pope Francis affirms this in his speech in the Rio 2013 World Youth Day:

²³John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 86.

²⁴Stan Chu Ilo, “*Amoris Laetitia* and Ministry of Mercy in an Illuminative Church in Africa,” *The Echo of Amoris Laetitia in Africa*, Nicholas Segeja and Emmanuel Wabanhu ed., Nairobi: CUEA Press, 2017, 138.

²⁵Quoted in Magesa, “The Conscience of the African Church,” 167.

There is neither real promotion of the common good nor real human development when there is ignorance of the fundamental pillars that govern a nation, its non-material goods: *life*, which is a gift from God, a value always to be protected and promoted; *the family*, the foundation of co-existence and a remedy against social fragmentation.²⁶

Human ecology fits with natural law by which the common good, human well-being, the good of creation, and the necessity of preserving human life are rooted, in this context, in family life. It is the goodness of life that is perfected in Christ, and is carried on across all cultures, families and Church traditions across all ages. The relevance of any pastoral approach may be measured or critiqued by whether it promotes the goodness of life and the goodness of creation by promoting and protecting the goodness of families.²⁷ Such a standard presents an opportunity and challenge for the Church in Africa.

Wisdom in Inculturation

Inculturation is a key concern and challenge in contemporary African Catholic theology. In a reciprocal relationship, the Gospel message incarnates and distils into the culture which in turn enters the life of the Church. The seeds of the Word of God meet the people of God in the seeds of their culture. FC enjoins Episcopal Conferences to be pastorally diligent in considering inculturation,²⁸ which can extensively be applicable to the context of marital life. The lack of technology is not an obstacle to the abounding wisdom in cultures and their profound moral values which will enrich the Church towards a complete awareness of truth and especially towards restoring relationship with Christ, who is the Wisdom of God.²⁹ Similarly, AL refers to the value of the diversity of cultures in each country or region; hence, sensitivity to suitable solutions regarding respective traditions and local needs is necessary. The inculturation of such general principles should be respected and applied.³⁰

²⁶Francis, "Passages from the Pope's speeches at the World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro," (accessed: April 25, 2018) <http://archivio.traces-cl.com/2013/09/passagesfromthe.html>.

²⁷Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 44.

²⁸The Instruction on Rite of Marriage goes as follows: "Among peoples where the marriage ceremonies customarily take place in the home, sometimes over a period of several days, these customs should be adapted to the Christian spirit and to the liturgy. In such case the conference of bishops, according to the pastoral needs of the people, may allow the sacramental rite to be celebrated at home," Paulinus Odozor, "Thoughts on African Christian Theology of Marriage and Sexuality," *Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology* 6, 2 (1994) 63-64.

²⁹John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 10.

³⁰Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 3.

One key challenge, for instance, which new Christian couples face in Africa is the dichotomy between civil marriage, traditional marriage, and sacramental marriage. Each of these adds certain expectations and obligations on the couple and can discourage or drive the youth away from the Church. A likely effect of such prohibitive demands and costs of marriage celebrations may mean that the couple, even after finalising traditional marriage, will still be considered by the Church as living under sinful concubinage. If the couple continues to live together and begin to have children, other consequences will follow, as they are not considered to be in full communion with the Church.

Indeed, the Church in Africa has not lived up to its expectations in this direction in resolving or dissolving these unnecessary dichotomies. Paulinus Odozor rightly critiques the Church in Africa for this failure as the directive given to the episcopal conferences has not borne much fruit: "African churches must also share the blame for the current situation. Christ did not institute a marriage rite. The Church did... What is needed is the courage to act. We should not be waiting for Rome to provide all the answers especially where a directive such as the above exists."³¹ This is a likely area where the wisdom of inculturation can be helpful, considering that the present form of celebrating sacramental marriage is more of Roman civil custom than of biblical heritage. John Paul II demanded that implementing inculturation should be in faithfulness to two principles: it needs compatibility with the Gospel, and it has to be in communion with the universal Church.³²

Communitarian Dimension

Any meaningful pastoral approach must not ignore what is generally considered as the core characteristic element of African traditional marriage. One is that marriage is a relationship beyond the two individuals; it involves the two families, and in some places whole communities and clans. For this, the consent of the two persons involved and that of their families are properly taken into account. The personal right to choose one's partner is important but the family and societal support towards such discernment and choice is also helpful, although the latter can sometimes be unduly influential, over-bearing or even abused.

³¹Odozor, "Thoughts on African Christian Theology," 63-64.

³²John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 10.

Again, the communitarian dimension in family life entails a community of persons, an extended family system with its multitudes of patterns of relationships, the whole community and even the ancestors.³³ Since family life is both institutional and relational, pastoral responsibility would have to reflect the boundaries between the traditional and the ecclesial. The community of faith has crucial roles to play in pastoral care to families and marriages; this sets the space for a reciprocal and mutual support between the experience of faith and the experience of marital and family life in the community. In both African and Christian-faith traditions, little or no boundaries exist between the sacredness of marital and family relationship and the sacredness of marital and family institution. Thus, an effective and flourishing pastoral responsibility to families and marriages which will continue to honour such orientation concerns everyone.

A Life-Time School of Learning

Friedrich Nietzsche's suggestion that marriage is a "long conversation" calls to mind the responsibility to be constantly ready for such a lifetime adventure. Both FC and AL call for adequate preparation towards family life. They also dwell on the great importance of educating children holistically. In contemporary culture and practice, part of the bane of many a marriage is the fire-brigade approach to preparation for family life. Ilo reflects on how he preaches at wedding celebrations: "The first is that I start with a very honest apology. As an unmarried priest I am not an expert in marriage. But most people even those who have been married for more than fifty years will tell you the same thing. That there are no experts in the affairs of the heart and marriage is a mystery."³⁴ This creates the need for patience, humility and sober discernment in dealing with all categories of cases. The family is an endless school of learning about life and relationship where no one graduates.

Hosffman Ospino critiques the contemporary reductionism of learning and even the complex experience of human life to just measurable results. In his view, "to be human is to journey in search of a deeper understanding about our own selves, others, the world, and God. The search begins from the very first moments of life and

³³ Mbiribindi Bahati Dieudonné, "Family in the Context of Evangelization. Challenges and Opportunities from Sub-Saharan Africa," *The International Journal of African Catholicism* 7, 1 (2015) 28.

³⁴ Ilo, "Amoris Laetitia and Ministry of Mercy," 144.

extends until the time we die. If we look at our human experience as a lifelong journey, then education is an important exercise of accompaniment on that journey.”³⁵ The pastoral responsibility towards accompanying families requires a lot of diligent planning and modelling for a long-term fruitful educational formation.

Indeed, the education of moral conscience and wisdom are needed today more than ever, and wiser people, as echoed by Vatican II, must be forthcoming for this purpose.³⁶ FC exhorts all persons to “recover an awareness of the primacy of moral values, which are the values of human persons as such.”³⁷ Hence, the Church recognises that the one great task of our time is the renewal of our societies for recapturing and rejuvenating the ultimate meanings and fundamental values of life in families.³⁸ What attitude of pastoral accompaniment can be useful in situations where people seek spiritual or moral explanations as common in the African socio-cultural and spiritual milieu? What principle of teaching and learning can be greater than that exemplified in the Divine *kenosis*, God stooping low for participating in the human story? Can there be a continuous transformation of Christian marriage outside of the example of Christ, in whom the fullness of humanity and relationship is manifested?

Integrating Mercy in Family Pastoral Care

One opportunity and challenge that stands before pastoral care is the element of mercy and compassion in responding to every challenge. The Synod Fathers invite all to gaze upon Jesus who “looked upon the women and men whom he met with love and tenderness, accompanying their steps in truth, patience and mercy as he proclaimed the demands of the Kingdom of God.”³⁹ Integrating mercy is necessary for responding to marital and family situations especially for the hurting and the wounded. Pope Francis in writing about the “the logic of pastoral mercy,” balances the absolutist and relativist perspectives as follows:

³⁵Hosffman Ospino, “Theological Horizons for a Pedagogy of Accompaniment,” accessed April 21, 2018:2, http://old.religiouseducation.net/proceedings/2009_Proceedings/13HosffmanOspino.pdf.

³⁶Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: *Gaudium et Spes*” (December 7, 1965), 15, accessed April 25, 2018, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

³⁷John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 8.

³⁸John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 8.

³⁹Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 60.

To show understanding in the face of exceptional situations never implies dimming the light of the fuller ideal, or proposing less than what Jesus offers to the human being. Today, more important than the pastoral care of failures is the pastoral effort to strengthen marriages and thus to prevent their breakdown.⁴⁰

As the Church in Africa still has a lot of influence over her members, there is no alternative to the attitude of mercy in paying attention and listening to every person, especially to those hurting and wounded in marriages and families. The threshold of the Christian conjugal and marital life thrives or breaks down with the standard of mercy, love, compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation. Jesus offers life and in its abundance to all (Jn 10:10). Upon such standards lies the meaning of the Gospel message. And none in the Church is exempt from living up to these standards. All the rules and their application will be less helpful if this is forgotten. This does not obviate the need for standing for the truth and justice as each case demands.

Odozor includes the central importance of given standards alongside the foundations in Christ and the gospel, while learning from the witnesses of the saints and deposits of wisdom from African ancestors and African cultures and traditions, amongst others, for any meaningful discourse about what is truly Christian and truly African.⁴¹ In this light, the truly Christian and truly African marital and family situations and the requisite pastoral approach cannot but be grounded and sustained in these principles. Critiquing every cultural belief and tradition in which the joy and beauty of marriages and families are diminished can be meaningful in the light of the Christian heritage alongside all life-giving and life-supporting human cultures and traditions.

Concluding Remarks

As noted from the start, the foregoing points are not exhaustive of the subject matter. Only some areas are highlighted for general consideration with few illustrations as considered necessary. The light and joy of the gospel of life in the gospel of family has to be rekindled everywhere. Pope Francis points out that “families are not a problem; they are first and foremost an opportunity.”⁴² This is an

⁴⁰Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 307.

⁴¹Paulinus Odozor, “An African Moral Theology of Inculturation: Methodological Considerations,” *Theological Studies* 69 (2008) 607-609, accessed May 4, 2018, <http://cdn.theologicalstudies.net/69/69.3/69.3.5.pdf>.

⁴²Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 7.

opportunity for creativity in pastoral engagement. The Papal Exhortations contain thresholds and offer insights that are helpful to the Church in Africa and elsewhere. African families can immensely benefit from their teachings, especially if the various opportunities for pastoral care are carefully implemented. Since what touches the nose equally touches the mouth, as an African proverb professes, then a universal call towards common pastoral responsibility to families is a necessity. African Church leaders, theologians and the faithful can learn and continue to learn more towards realising the goals of *Familiaris Consortio* and *Amoris Laetitia* in Christian African marriages and families.