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ON WOMEN IN THE FAMILY: AMBIGUITIES OF CONCILIAR AND POSTCONCILIAR MAGISTERIAL TEACHING

Joseph Loic Mben, SJ[♦]

Institute of Theology of the Society of Jesus, Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire

Abstract

The present essay centres around magisterial teaching on women's role in marriage and in the family. The author surveys the conciliar pastoral constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, the apostolic exhortations on the family, *Familiaris Consortio* and *Amoris Laetitia*, documents from the two African synods of 1994 and 2009, as well as a local African book on marriage preparation. What appears is an ambiguous discourse, which on the one hand proclaims the equal rights of women, the legitimacy of their social aspirations, and the rejection of discrimination and inhuman treatment against women; and on the other hand, seems to equate women's role and personality to domestic duties. One can also discern the association of women's place in the family with women's condition in the social realm. In the conclusion, the author argues for a robust use of social analysis and social sciences that will correct some limits and will ground the teaching in the concrete experiences of people.

Keywords: Africa, Family, Magisterium, Marriage, Women/Wife, Women's Role

♦ **Joseph Loic Mben, SJ** is a Jesuit from the West African Province. He obtained a PhD in 2018 at Boston College (U.S.A.). Prior to that, he served as parish priest and taught sexual ethics for three years in Abidjan (Cote d'Ivoire). He has contributed book chapters in a couple of books on Cameroonian philosopher Fabien Eboussi Boulaga, and on Cameroonian theologian Engelbert Mveng, and has co-authored a book on reconciliation within a parish. He is presently editing a book on Cameroonian theologian Jean-Marc Ela. Email: loicmben@yahoo.com

Introduction

“The place of women in society flows primarily and almost essentially from the prevailing conception of marriage.”¹ This bold statement, made by a Catholic married couple soon after Vatican II council (1962-1965), captures well the connection between the domestic and social condition of women.

The present essay focuses on women’s roles and gender dynamics in marriage and family as portrayed in magisterial teaching since Vatican II. I limit my survey to influential documents (*Gaudium et Spes*, *Familiaris Consortio*, and *Amoris Laetitia*). Since my target is the Church in Africa and in Cameroon in particular, I also bring the two synodal apostolic exhortations *Ecclesia in Africa* (1995) and *Africae Munus* (2011), pastoral documents from Cameroonian bishop and finally I look at a book used in Cameroon for marriage preparation.

There are both positive and ambivalent insights and statements in Church official teaching that account simultaneously for the renewal as well as the status quo concerning women’s role and place within the family. I want to show how this double take is carried out throughout in the various documents. I leave issues around procreation out of the scope of this essay.

1. Recent Papal Magisterium on Women in Marriage and the Family

This section starts with *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) given its importance in renewing the Church’s theology and pastoral approach on marriage. I then proceed to present *Familiaris Consortio* (1981) and *Amoris Laetitia* (2016). I have limited my analysis to these three documents given their importance and impact on local churches’ documents. This does not prevent me from referring to other documents.

1.1. *Gaudium et Spes*

Before looking at the specific approach of *Gaudium et Spes* (henceforth GS) on women in marriage and family, I will offer the novelty and continuity of the document vis-à-vis the Church’s tradition.

The novelty in GS is noticeable at various levels, of which I will consider only three aspects. The first novelty is in the method, which not only pays more attention to history, but also emphasizes the

¹Fr de Baecque and G. de Baecque, “La mission de la femme dans le monde à la lumière de ‘Gaudium et Spes’: Réflexion d’un foyer,” in *L’Eglise dans le Monde de ce temps, Constitution pastorale “Gaudium et spes”, Tome III: Réflexions et perspectives*, ed. Y. M.-J. Congar, O.P. and M. Peuchmaurd, O.P., Unam Sanctam, Paris: Cerf, 1967, 91.

Christological, ecclesial and biblical foundations of the Church's social mission.² This marks a departure from the neoscholasticism that dominated pre-Vatican II papal social encyclicals.³ The second area of novelty is the abandoning by the Church of its confrontational stance toward the larger society. In fact, the conciliar fathers acknowledge the mutual influence and interest between the 'world' and the Church.⁴ The third area of novelty is the new understanding on human dignity simultaneously grounded on the *imago Dei* and on the Incarnation and the paschal mystery.⁵

However, this novelty comes simultaneously with points of continuity. GS 16 reaffirms not only the presence of an inner law in the individual and the existence of objective norms of morality, but also that "[h]uman behavior must strive for 'full conformity with human nature.'"⁶ The reality of sin at the individual and social levels is affirmed (GS, 13, 37).

Marriage and family are critical for the person's well-being (GS, 47). GS targets issues that plague marriage and family in the contemporary world without including domestic/intra-familial abuses. The term 'contract' is abandoned in favour of covenant.⁷ Marriage is first of all a covenant rooted in "irrevocable personal consent" (GS, 48). GS mentions the traditional ends of marriage,

²Stephen J. Pope, "Natural Law in Catholic Social Teachings," in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching, Commentaries & Interpretations*, ed. Kenneth R. Himes OFM, Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2005, 54. For more on method see Gilles Routhier, "Vatican II: Relevance and Future," *Theological Studies* 74 (2013) 537-54.

³Pope, "Natural Law in Catholic Social Teachings," 54-55; David Hollenbach, "Commentary on *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World)," in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching, Commentaries & Interpretations*, ed. Kenneth R. Himes OFM, Washington, D.C: Georgetown University Press, 2005, 279; Bernhard Häring, "Part II Chapter I," in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, trans. W.J. O'Hara, vol. V, New York, NY: Herder and Herder, 1969, 244. If the church was willing to engage the social and economic sphere, it was done within the framework of a "purely static doctrine of natural law" (Bernard Häring, 244) influenced by "ahistorical continental rationalism" (Pope, 55).

⁴Vatican II Council, *On the Church in the Modern World, Pastoral Constitution Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, para. 44, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

⁵Vatican II Council, GS, 12, 22; Hollenbach, "Commentary on *Gaudium et Spes*," 274.

⁶Pope, "Natural Law in Catholic Social Teachings," 55.

⁷Bernhard Häring says that three reasons explain the move: (1) to show that God is the ultimate guarantor of marriage; (2) to correspond to a perception of marriage as a community of life and love where there is mutual self-giving; (3) the use of juridical language is found as "neither pastoral nor conducive to discussion with the world." See Häring, "Part II Chapter I," 233.

procreation, and the good of spouses, but unlike in the past it abandons the language of primary and secondary ends.⁸

There is a much positive view of sexual intercourse and a clear affirmation of mutuality between husband and wife (GS, 49). “Conjugal love is fully human, personal, and total,” and it “is not regarded one-sidedly as limited to the marital act, but as pervading the whole life.”⁹

However, women are hardly mentioned in GS in general.¹⁰ GS does not devote much space to the problems, needs, and expectations of women.¹¹ They are generally referred in the context of family or in connection to other issues. GS strongly affirms the “equal dignity of wife and husband” (GS, 49), and that “the legitimate social progress of women” (GS, 52) should not be hampered on account of their role as mothers. In the meantime, gender roles seem to be static since mothers should stay at home to take care of their (younger) children and “[t]his domestic role... must be safely preserved” (GS, 52). If the “active presence of the father” is recognized as beneficial to the children’s formation, he is never required to remain at home.

1.2. Women’s Roles in *Familiaris Consortio*

Familiaris Consortio (henceforth FC) continues the historical perspective inaugurated by GS by highlighting the promotion of the dignity of women among the positive signs of contemporary families.¹² There is a positive outlook on sexuality by “which man and woman give themselves to one another” in the marital act, and sexuality “is by no means something purely biological, but concerns the innermost being of the human person as such” (FC, 11). FC emphasizes unity and complementarity between husband and wife, and reaffirms “the equal personal dignity of men and women,” following GS (FC, 19, 22). Likewise husbands and fathers are called to uphold their wives’ equal dignity (FC, 25).

⁸Vatican II Council, GS, 48; Häring, “Part II Chapter I,” 234; Norman P. Tanner, *The Church and the World: Gaudium et Spes, Inter Mirifica*, Rediscovering Vatican II, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005, 51–52.

⁹Häring, “Part II Chapter I,” 237.

¹⁰Rosemary Goldie, “Un point de vue ‘féminin’?,” in *L’Eglise dans le Monde de ce temps, Constitution pastorale “Gaudium et spes”, Tome III: Réflexions et perspectives*, ed. Y. M.-J. Congar, O.P. and M. Peuchmaurd, O.P., Unam Sanctam, Paris: Cerf, 1967, 96.

¹¹de Baecque and de Baecque, “La mission de la femme,” 89.

¹²John Paul II, *On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World, Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris Consortio*, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1981, para. 6, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html.

FC, 22-24 focus specifically on women. FC, 22 states that the equal dignity and responsibility of women with men is achieved through the unitive and procreative ends of marriage. The equal dignity of women is rooted in their creation in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26), and endows them with “inalienable rights” (FC, 22). FC, 23 is in tune with GS when it teaches on the one hand that women’s social promotion is legitimate and should be encouraged. On the other hand, it also insists that women’s maternal and family role should be recognized and protected. Furthermore it appears that FC, 23 clearly prefers that women remain at home, and that society should create conditions to make it feasible. If the social encyclical *Laborem Exercens* recognizes the economic value of domestic labour,¹³ FC affirms its “irreplaceable meaning” and “value” (FC, 23).

Pope St John Paul II condemns discriminations and offenses against women’s dignity, such as slavery, prostitution (human trafficking), pornography, oppression, wages inequality, unequal opportunities in education or employment, and social and cultural practices detrimental to childless wives, widows, separated or divorced women, and unmarried mothers (FC, 24). Furthermore, “a wrong superiority of male prerogatives which humiliates women... inhibits the development of healthy family relationships” (FC, 25).

FC also affirms the “different vocations of men and women” (FC, 23). Where GS simply spoke about women’s nature,¹⁴ FC, 23 calls it “femininity” or “true feminine humanity” without clearly fleshing out what this entails. This is clarified by *Mulieris Dignitatem* (henceforth MD). St John Paul II states that man and woman are united and share in the same common humanity, and are called to a community of love.¹⁵ Human beings are called to exist for others “in accordance with the special qualities proper to each” (MD, 7). He frequently refers to ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ qualities (MD, 7-8). *Mulieris Dignitatem* highlights motherhood and virginity as two important dimensions of the vocation of women (MD, 7). He roots discrimination and the oppression of women in the Genesis creation

¹³John Paul II, *On Human Work, Encyclical Laborem Exercens*, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1981, para. 19, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html.

¹⁴The conciliar fathers state in paragraph 60 that women should assume “their proper role in accordance with their own nature” without fleshing out their understanding of women’s proper role or nature, see Vatican II Council, GS, 60.

¹⁵John Paul II, *On the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the Occasion of the Marian Year, Apostolic Letter Mulieris Dignitatem*, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1988, para. 7, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_15081988_mulieris-dignitatem_en.html.

narratives, especially in Genesis 3 (MD, 9-10). Sin implies “the disturbance and loss of the stability of that fundamental equality” (MD, 10), which both man and woman possess. Scripture does not condone the oppression of women. To the contrary it indicates that it is “the inheritance of sin,” which every generation and every human being should oppose (MD, 10). St John Paul II reiterates that “the matrimonial union requires respect for and a perfecting of the true personal subjectivity of both of them. The woman cannot become the ‘object’ of ‘domination’ and male ‘possession’” (MD, 10).

1.3. *Amoris Laetitia* on Women’s Role in the Family

Pope Francis in the apostolic exhortation *On Love in the Family, Amoris Laetitia* (henceforth AL) offers additional insights and a fresh appraisal of sexuality within the couple, which partly takes inspiration of St John Paul’s theology of the body.¹⁶ Francis affirms that the marital act is an integral part of the divine gift of marriage (AL, 62). Moreover, sexual union is “a path of growth in the life of grace of the couple” (AL, 74). He goes on to devote some paragraphs on the “erotic dimension of love.” This positive take of *eros* follows Pope Benedict XVI’s reconciliation of erotic and agapic dimensions of love in the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (2007).¹⁷ Francis acknowledges the erotic dimension of love as a “marvelous gift” (AL, 150) and enrichment of the spouses’ relationship (AL, 152). Nonetheless, he affirms the possibility of sexual abuse within the married couple, and the fact that sexuality can turn into an experience of suffering (AL, 154).

Francis clearly rejects “every form of sexual submission” (AL, 156) within the married couple. He condemns unacceptable practices against women like domestic violence, genital mutilation, lack of equal access to dignified employment, the use of surrogate mothers, and the commodification and exploitation of the female body (AL, 54). Moreover, he emphasizes consensual dialogue and the respect of the dignity of the partner (AL, 222).

Francis affirms the importance of motherhood both for the family and for the world at large (AL, 173). He also calls fathers and

¹⁶He mentions him specifically in Francis, *On Love in the Family, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Amoris Laetitia*, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016, paras. 150–152, https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf.

¹⁷Benedict XVI affirms the intrinsic unity and complementarity between *eros* and *agape*; moreover, the link between both is vital because human beings are soul and body, see Benedict XVI, *On Christian Love, Encyclical Letter Deus Caritas Est*, Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005, paras. 5, 7, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html.

husbands to the task and reminds them of their duty of being involved in their families, and being present to their wives and children (AL, 176-177). Concerning specific gender roles, Francis shows some flexibility. Indeed, “masculinity and femininity are not rigid categories” (AL, 286). Likewise, performing domestic chores is not contrary to masculinity or exercising leadership adverse to femininity (AL, 286).

If Francis recognizes women’s emancipation movement as “working of the Spirit” (AL, 54), he rejects gender theories and feminisms that negate sexual differentiation between men and women, and make them arbitrary (AL, 56). Women’s prestige is made manifest through their “feminine genius” and “specific feminine abilities” (AL, 173).

Francis acknowledges the legitimacy of women’s aspirations to study and work (AL, 173). At the same time, children need their mother’s presence. Paragraph 49 of *Amoris Laetitia* takes as an example of challenge the single mother forced to work outside of the home, leaving her children exposed to all kinds of dangers. This observation ignores the reality that working mothers have to put up with domestic work.¹⁸

2. Women’s Role in the Family and Marriage in African Churches

I will focus on the bishops’ propositions and apostolic exhortations of the 1994 and 2009 African Synods. These documents in general tend to lack originality and heavily rely on papal magisterium. Still, they are valuable appropriations of papal teaching at the local level.

2.1. The 1994 African Synod

The main issue of the synod was inculturation and the African bishops produced sixty-four propositions.¹⁹ Proposition 48, devoted to women, denounces practices and customs that deprive women of their rights.²⁰ Bishops recommend that local churches defend the rights of women in case of widowhood, the bride price,²¹ during

¹⁸For instance in Cameroon, figures show that employed women spend more hours on domestic chores than unemployed women, see Institut National de Statistique du Cameroun, *Annuaire statistique du Cameroun, recueil des séries d’informations statistiques sur les activités économiques, sociales, politiques et culturelles du pays jusqu’en 2010*, Cameroon: Institut National de Statistique, 2012, 136, <http://www.stat.cm/downloads/annuaire/2012/Annuaire-2012-complet.pdf>.

¹⁹Maurice Cheza, ed., “Les 64 propositions,” in *Le Synode Africain: Histoire et textes*, Paris: Karthala, 1996, 241.

²⁰Cheza, “Les 64 propositions,” 262.

²¹The bride price in African ethnic group is a compensation in form of gifts and/or money offered to the bride’s family by the bridegroom and his family. Prior to the arrival of Western colonizers this used to be the only existing form of marriage

pregnancy and child delivery, and single mothers. Proposition 61 encourages Christian communities to safeguard women's dignity against the degrading images channelled through mass media.²² One key feature of that synod is the understanding of the Church in Africa as the family of God.

The apostolic post-synodal exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa* (henceforth EA) adds other considerations. The family is described in either traditional terms (fundamental and foundational role in society, analogy of the relationship between Christ and Church),²³ or as inspired by GS (dignity of man and woman, mutuality) (EA, 82-83). The family is perceived positively and as a school of virtues and an agent of evangelization (EA, 85, 92). EA points out that "the African loves children, who are joyfully welcomed as gifts of God" (EA, 43). However, such an affirmation is dissonant with the crude reality of aborted fetuses thrown in dumpsters, abandoned or street children, or discriminations against daughters. On another note, there is a plea to safeguard the African family against contemporary assaults (EA, 80, 84). EA displays an uncritical stance toward the traditional African family that ignores its patriarchal and hierarchical nature,²⁴ and treats it almost as a perfect model.

The synod affirms the "fundamental" equality and complementarity between man and women, while condemning customs and practices that "deprive women of their rights and the respect due to them" (EA, 121). The paragraph does not name any harmful custom or practice, leaving it open to interpretation.

2.2. The 2009 Synod on Africa

The 2009 synod centred on the issues of peace, justice and reconciliation, and produced 57 propositions. Proposition 47 focuses on women, and reiterates the condemnations of the previous synod against inhuman actions and injustices against women, and it

among the majority of Africans. Although the colonial era introduced civil and religious marriage, the bride price – now the customary marriage – remains the first step toward those two.

²²Cheza, "Les 64 propositions," 267-68.

²³John Paul II, *On the Church in Africa and Its Evangelizing Mission, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Ecclesia in Africa*, Yaoundé, Cameroon: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995), para. 43. 50. 80. 83., http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_14091995_ecclesia-in-africa_en.html.

²⁴Anne Nasimiyu points out that this patriarchal model of family gives the upper hand to male members and treats women as mere commodities or assets, see A. Nasimiyu-Wasike, "The Missing Voices of Women," in *Catholic Theological Ethics Past, Present and Future: The Trento Conference*, ed. James F. Keenan, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2011, 110.

commends women for their contribution to family, society and church.²⁵

The post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Africae Munus* (henceforth AM), is more incisive in recognizing that women should “take their full place in the world,”²⁶ “occupy a place in society equal to that of men,” and that the Church has the obligation to work for “the recognition and liberation of women” (AM, 57). All should “combat all acts of violence against women, speaking out and condemning them” (AM, 56). AM clearly denounces the oppression of women perpetrated in the name of ancestral traditions (AM, 56) without naming them like the previous exhortation.

AM hails women as defenders of the family (AM, 58), and laments that the essential contribution of women to the family and to the larger society has not been “fully acknowledged and appreciated” (AM, 56). The “specific character” (AM, 57) of each gender is reiterated, as well as the “specifically feminine gifts” (AM, 59).

It is worth noticing that the central place of the family is reaffirmed and threats to its integrity identified: distortion of the very meaning of marriage and family, devaluation of maternity, trivialization of abortion, easy divorce, and relativism (AM, 43). It seems surprising that domestic and child abuse are not mentioned as threats, while they negatively impact millions of women and children on the continent. AM also gives some healthy signs of family life: justice and love between brothers and sisters, the role of authority expressed by parents, loving concern for the vulnerable members (young/old age, illness), mutual help, readiness to accept and to forgive (AM, 43).

3. In the Church in Cameroon

I want to look here at the Cameroonian bishops’ teaching on women in the family, and Jean-Pierre Foti’s book on the preparation for marriage.

²⁵Synode des évêques pour l’Afrique, “Les 57 propositions pour l’Afrique, document du synode des évêques,” *La Documentation Catholique*, no. 2434 (November 15, 2009) 1052. Among the various categories of women, proposition 47 mentions the disinherited daughters, genital mutilation, gender violence, and women victims of sex trafficking. It recommends among others the creation of shelters for mistreated women.

²⁶Benedict XVI, *On the Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Africae Munus*, Ouidah, Benin: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2011, para. 55, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20111119_africae-munus_en.html.

3.1. Cameroonian Bishops

Marriage and family have been among the key concerns of the episcopal conference of Cameroon,²⁷ which has released pastoral letters on induced abortion (1979), and on responsible parenting (1991), two pastoral guides on family and marriage in 1981 and 2004, and specific declarations (1974, 1980, 1981, 1983-1985).

I will focus on the pastoral letters and bishops' declaration because the two pastoral guides do not offer anything significantly new from the magisterium. The 2004 pastoral guide focuses on canonical and juridical dimensions, while the 1981 pastoral guide presents marriage preparation and marriage spirituality inspired from magisterial documents.²⁸

In their 1974 final declaration the bishops' conference lists "misunderstood" equality between man and woman among the various imbalances.²⁹ They wish that the Church helps in implementing civil law that recognizes the woman's dignity and the fact that she is not the property of her family in-law.³⁰

Their 1981 final declaration indicates the necessity of a comprehensive ministry of family and marriage that should reach out among others to abandoned mothers, widowers and widows, infertile couples, single-parent families, and divorcees.³¹ They also assert the necessity of upholding constant values such as the respect of the woman as source of life and honour of the family.

The 1983 final declaration paints a bleak picture of the family with the degradation of living conditions (collapse of parents' authority, alcoholism, filthy living conditions), malnutrition, and disharmony between spouses (cohabitation, infertility, immaturity, practice of contraception).³² It blames it on the lack of quality time among spouses and between spouses and their children.³³

One difference between Cameroonian bishops and papal magisterium is the grounding of their teaching. Far from a romantic vision, they address issues related to marriage and family in society. The main issue is the lack of follow up. It is not sure that they put

²⁷ Président de la Conférence Episcopale Nationale du Cameroun, ed., *L'enseignement social des évêques du Cameroun 1955-2005: lettres pastorales et messages, communiqués et déclarations, approche analytique*, Yaoundé: AMA-CENC, 2005.

²⁸ *L'enseignement social des évêques du Cameroun 1955-2005*, 57-101, 245-92.

²⁹ *L'enseignement social des évêques du Cameroun 1955-2005*, 307.

³⁰ *L'enseignement social des évêques du Cameroun 1955-2005*, 309-10.

³¹ *L'enseignement social des évêques du Cameroun 1955-2005*, 344.

³² *L'enseignement social des évêques du Cameroun 1955-2005*, 352-53.

³³ *L'enseignement social des évêques du Cameroun 1955-2005*, 354.

concrete strategies to solve the issues they identify and they evaluate their impact afterwards.

3.2. Jean-Pierre Foti

Jean-Pierre Foti's book is aimed at ordinary people and can be used by priests and any other person preparing for marriage. Foti's book is more dynamic, contextualized, and creative. The author, a diocesan priest, includes personal narratives, local sayings, Cameroonian law, issues and topics pertaining to the local environment. Foti elaborates his guide from the concrete issues people are facing.

He rejects the image of the stay-at-home wife. He derives more ideas from concrete experience and local culture. His material is organized around the life of the (married) couple and their family. Of course, theological assumptions guide his work. Foti's method is perhaps a more concrete way to read the "signs of the times," and to adopt a pastoral attitude that takes experience into account.

He clearly takes a strong stand vis-à-vis the local practices by affirming that Christians are not to be ruled by local cultural customs.³⁴ He addresses extensively for instance the practice of the bride price,³⁵ and he clearly states that the latter is not mandatory for marriage according to civil law. Good Christians should not demand it for their daughter(s) although they could still receive it. Moreover, the consent of both spouses should be explicitly visible during this ceremony where generally the rituals and discussions take place between the heads of families.

He deals also with the issue of polygamy under the title "choice of matrimonial regime." If he remains open to bride price as long as it is not subject to abuses, he rejects polygamy on different grounds than those of papal magisterium, which simply dismisses it as a perversion. For him, most of the reasons put forward by those who contract polygamous marriage – Polygamy is a valid form of marriage in Cameroon recognized by civil and common law – are no longer valid in the present world.³⁶ Moreover, polygamous marriages create imbalance in marital relationship at the expense of the wife who is considered as an economic asset, and whose emotional needs are not always met. In most cases, these families really struggle to survive, and children suffer mostly from it because they do not receive proper care.

³⁴ Jean Pierre Foti, *Préparation au mariage: quelques grandes lignes*, 3rd ed., Bafoussam, 2006, 27.

³⁵Foti, *Préparation au mariage*, 26–37.

³⁶Foti, *Préparation au mariage*, 38–39.

He does not deny the involvement of the extended family, but the married couple should be free of its negative influences.³⁷ Foti says that domestic chores should be decided through dialogue.³⁸ The role of women is not to cook, to stay at home and to do the laundry.³⁹ In addition, a housewife should not be taken for granted since it would take at least three paid workers to do her job.⁴⁰ He advocates financial autonomy for women, because overdependence does not foster personal growth.⁴¹ He rebukes domestic violence not only against the wife but also the children, but does not go to the extent of suggesting that the husband or the parent perpetrating violence should be sued or prosecuted.⁴² He nonetheless maintains gender stereotypes,⁴³ and affirms that the husband is the head of the household without referring to Ephesians.⁴⁴

Evaluation and Conclusion

There are some clear trends identifiable in this survey of documents. Since Vatican II, the Church has clearly condemned all types of discriminations against women and has made it clear that within the family there is equal dignity between husband and wife. In addition, there is sensible evolution in the understanding of the role of the father and the husband within the family. There is also increasing awareness of the reality of domestic abuse and violence. Finally, the discourse on women's role in the family is always linked to the condition of women in the social realm.

However, the discussion on gender roles in the family reveals ambiguity in magisterial teaching. There is on the one hand the recognition of the importance of domestic work, and on the other hand, a tendency to exclusively associate this work with women. Christine Hinze thinks that attributing solely domestic activity to mothers is a mistake.⁴⁵ Hence, valuing and insisting on the importance of reproductive labour "can be fused with a feminist affirmation of

³⁷Foti, *Préparation au mariage*, 89-91.

³⁸Foti, *Préparation au mariage*, 79.

³⁹Foti, *Préparation au mariage*, 79-80.

⁴⁰Foti, *Préparation au mariage*, 42-43.

⁴¹Foti, *Préparation au mariage* 42, 44, 70-71.

⁴²Foti, *Préparation au mariage*, 68, 71, 83-84.

⁴³Foti, *Préparation au mariage*, 83.

⁴⁴Foti, *Préparation au mariage*, 80-81.

⁴⁵Christine Firer Hinze, "Bridge Discourse on Wage Justice: Roman Catholic and Feminist Perspectives on the Family Living Wage," in *Feminist Ethics and the Catholic Moral Tradition*, ed. Charles E. Curran, Margaret A. Farley, and Richard A. McCormick, Readings in Moral Theology 9, New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1996, 525.

the rights and dignity of women to produce an adequate valuation of women's traditional contribution without circumscribing opportunities for women in workplace and professions."⁴⁶

Another issue to look at is complementarity, which is articulated according to the following outline: equal dignity-difference-partnership.⁴⁷ Complementarity is primarily about differentiation, diversity of sexes, and it means that we are embodied beings, and we interact with our environment as sexual beings.⁴⁸ Complementarity intervenes at the level of partnership, because this is where each spouse or family member is supposed to work in respect to his or her 'masculine' or 'feminine' qualities to use official Church language. However, it is not easy – apart from physiological and anatomic features – to pinpoint what these qualities are, given the diversity of cultures, places, experiences and people.⁴⁹ The issue with complementarity arises because of problematic assumptions embedded in Church's official statements. Papal teaching seems to entail a lack of wholeness and completeness on the issue of complementarity.⁵⁰

One way forward is to supplement the teaching of the Church on gender roles with a robust social analysis. So far, "papal teaching on the nature and role of women still demonstrates a romantic pedestalization of women."⁵¹ Social analysis will help shed a light on the reality of domestic work and the toll that it takes on women especially in places like Sub-Saharan Africa.

⁴⁶Christine Firer Hinze, "Women, Families, and the Legacy of *Laborem Exercens*: An Unfinished Agenda," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 6, 1 (2009) 83–84.

⁴⁷de Baecque and de Baecque, "La mission de la femme," 75; Walter Kasper, "The Position of Woman as a Problem of Theological Anthropology," in *The Church and Women: A Compendium*, ed. Helmut Moll, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988, 53–64.

⁴⁸Kasper, "The Position of Woman," 58–59; de Baecque and de Baecque, "La mission de la femme," 90.

⁴⁹de Baecque and de Baecque, "La mission de la femme," 90.

⁵⁰Gudorf rightly stresses that the teaching on celibacy illustrates the inconsistency of this teaching, since complementarity is barely invoked in the case of consecrated celibates, see Christine E. Gudorf, "Encountering the Other: The Modern Papacy on Women," in *Feminist Ethics and the Catholic Moral Tradition*, ed. Charles E. Curran, Margaret A. Farley, and Richard A. McCormick, Readings in Moral Theology, No.9, New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1996, 75.

⁵¹Gudorf, "Encountering the Other," 70.