

The NATURE and MISSION of the CHURCH.
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Nairobi Study Group.

THE IMAGE OF THE CHURCH AS A FAMILY:
African Christian Ecclesiology

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Introduction

In Africa after the 1994 Synod the development of ecclesiology has been marked by a return to the sources: scripture...¹ There are a good number of models used in theology to depict the church. The family is one of the new models or images used to refer to Christ's body, the church in Africa.

The communion of the family is at the heart of African anthropology, social and economic life, moral and religious existence. The African family becomes useful for the understanding of the church. This image brings African people together for a common transformative goal. The family is indeed a visible and lived experience of this communion in Africa. In African ecclesiology, this expression develops further to become 'the church as an extended family. This designates the universality of the church. Thus the African church as a family of God is both local and universal.

African Image of the Church as a family

¹ Karl Rahner (Ed)., *Encyclopedia of Theology: The concise Sacramentum Mundi*, New York, The Sea Bury Press, 1974, S.V., Ecclesiology. P..209

The Church in Africa cannot take the Image of clan or tribe because all these are exclusive. But the image of family is very inclusive and unity oriented.

The extended African family is the most important reality in life and brings up deep feelings. The family is the place where the deep African value of life comes to be, is protected and nourished, a place of belonging where sharing and solidarity are at the heart of daily life and where each one feels himself or herself to be truly at home. It is the life-giving experience and the true African values of African family life that the Synod wants us to bring into the life of the Church.

The aspects of solidarity, unity and communion form the difference between family as a merely human institution and the church as a church-as-family. When the African Synod used the latter image, it sought to eliminate any elements that circumscribe, and therefore limit, the extent, depth and quality of unity and communion that characterise human families. Quite distinct, or really different, from the understanding of the structure and functioning of human families, the church-as-family embraces everyone irrespective of class, gender, race or ability. This means that the church-as-family is a universal communion in which humanity, fully common to all human beings, is the basic and most important element or measure.

The qualities that constitute true community are, dialogue, trust and concern, these can never be dispensed with. Many church documents, as well as the African Synod, (E. Af 65-6) have stressed this point and it hardly calls for further emphasis here. Dialogue, trust and concern express solidarity, and solidarity is what the church should be: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic. Dialogue is a pivotal element of accountability; of the whole church to God, and of each and every member of the church to one another in the church's daily life.

The value of co-operation and expectation of help from relatives is inherent in African societies. Drawing on cultural values of African solidarity and the necessity to help each other, not only in the nuclear family but also in the extended family, prompts individuals to call upon other family members in times of need.

When we look at the scriptures, the book of Acts presents us with an authentic picture of the life of the early Church. They owned everything in common. They sold all that they had to ensure that none of them suffered want (Cf. Acts. 2:44 - 45, Acts. 4:32 - 35). The first five chapters of Acts are full of such illustrations of the community that acted as a caring family and is worthy emulating by all other communities that carry the name Christian.

This common sharing was not without some challenges and lack of co-operation. A case in point is the fraud of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts. 5:1 - 10). Ecclesialogically, sharing of goods guaranteed the necessary material and social support so that the spiritual dimension of the church could be realized.² So the choice of the Image of the Church as a family can also be traced in the early Church.

Church-as-family is about loving and trusting relationships between all members of the Church. The lifestyle of the Family of God is dialogue. Dialogue means talking to each other, facing and solving issues together as a family and this makes the Family of God to grow.

Biblical Foundations of the Image of the Church as family

² Clement Majawa, "Theological Assessment of The Church As Family of God in Ecclesia In Africa", *African Theological Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2001), P.42

The African Synod explicitly termed the Church as God's family as its guiding idea for evangelization in Africa (*E in Afr* 63). This was inspired by the teaching of the second Vatican Council. The inner nature of the church is made known to us through various images as found in the books of the prophets (LG 6). Family life and marriage is one of the prominent themes among the prophets especially Hosea and Isaiah. It is a good basis for understanding the church as family.

Ecclesia in Africa made use of the Holy Scriptures as the basis of the argument regarding the domestic church. The Church is the house of God in which his family dwells. It is also the household of God in the spirit (Ephesians 2:19, 22). The church too is the holy city that is seen by John as it comes down out of heaven from God when the world is made anew, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband -Apoc 21:17 (*E in Afr* 61).³ The Church is also referred to as 'our mother' (Gal. 4:26) and the spotless spouse of the lamb (Apoc. 19:7; 21:2, 9:22:17). In elaborating this marriage theme further, St. Paul expresses that it is she whom Christ loved and for whom he delivered himself up that he might sanctify her (Eph. 5:26).

The image of the Church as family fits very appropriately to the nature of the Church in Africa. It emphasizes the care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationships, acceptance, dialogue, and trust (*E in Afr* 63). It encourages true communion between different ethnic groups thus promoting solidarity and mutual sharing.

The family is termed as the domestic Church. It means therefore that in every Christian family there should be found aspects of the Catholic Church (*E in A* 63).⁴

The family in the Creator's Plan

The family is presented in the Creator's plan as the basic cell of the society. It is the cradle of the society and the expression of the nature of the church. Pope Pius XI said, "We are of the spiritual lineage of Abraham Spiritually we are all Semites because God's plan from the beginning has always encompassed the whole family of man."⁵

Our founding parent, Adam, represents the entire human family. In his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, Pope John Paul II made the point that at the time of creation God established a covenant with all of humanity. He sees this as the foundational covenant from which all of the others in Scripture spring- culminating in the New Covenant sealed by Jesus, whereby God's original covenant plan is fulfilled and renewed. Citing Eucharistic Prayer IV, he describes Christ's accomplishment: "He and he alone satisfied that fatherhood of God and that love which man in a way rejected by breaking the first Covenant and the later covenants that God 'again and again offered to man.'"⁶

The church is the mother of Christians with God as the Father, "For if we continue to love one another and to join in praising the Most Holy Trinity - all of us who are sons of God and form one family in Christ - we will be faithful to the deepest vocation of the Church."(CCC. 959)

³ Clement Majawa, "Theological Assessment of The Church As Family of God in Ecclesia In Africa", *African Theological Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2001), P.53

⁴ Clement Majawa, "Theological Assessment of The Church As Family of God in Ecclesia In Africa", *African Theological Journal*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2001), P.61

⁵ McNulty, J.L, *The Bridge*, 1955, 12.

⁶ *Redemptor Hominis*, Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1979, 17. Also Cf. *Dives Misericordia*: "This Covenant, as old as man – it goes back to the very mystery of creation – and afterwards many times renewed." (v.7)

God called Adam to share in his blessing in the marriage with Eve (Cf. Gn 1:26-2:3). God pledged to Noah to keep him and his household safe through the flood, and then promised never to wipe out the human family that way again (Cf. Gn 9:8-17).

God promised Abraham the Promised Land where his natural descendants might be blessed and all the families of the earth would be blessed through him and his seed (Cf. Gn 12:1-3; 22:16-18).

Baptism and the Eucharist Create the Family

The sacramental bond of baptism reflects a family bond, which Christ has established as the New Adam, the founding father of this new family. And this bond is perfected and strengthened when we receive the flesh and blood of the Father's firstborn Son, the Passover Lamb of the New Covenant, in the power of the Spirit.

What is it that unites people as members of one family? Flesh and blood and a common name. Accordingly, the members of God's universal family, the Church, are united in the sacrificial family banquet we call the Eucharist-Christ's flesh and blood. Similarly, just as a common name unites a family, we as Church are united through baptism, rebirth and adoption into God's family in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In Jesus Christ, the Eucharist serves as a sign of the New Covenant, making God's family truly universal. So Christ's kingdom is not restricted to any one group of people. All human beings are now called to become members of this universal family of God in order to serve as instruments in the Father's work of Salvation and Unity through the Son and by the Spirit. Human power alone is incapable of such a task.

Trinity and the Family

The Trinity is the eternal and original family. As Pope John Paul II writes: "God in His deepest mystery is not a solitude, but a family, since He has in Himself fatherhood, Sonship and the essence of the family, which is love."⁷

The Trinity is the eternal source and perfect standard of the family. God's family has become universal and everlasting in and through his Son, Jesus. From the beginning, the Father planned that Adam and Eve would be the first members of a worldwide family drawn up into the eternal love of the Trinity

Importance of the family in God's plan

God intended to found the human family right from protology when he created Adam and Eve as the progenitors of the human race. He created them in his own image and likeness (Genesis 1:27). He also established a loving companionship between them (Genesis 2:18-24). The community so established by God was completed in a greater manner when He granted them offspring therefore forming a family (Gen 4:1). The human family progressed both in numbers and physical development in spite of the human sin.⁸

⁷ Pope John Paul II, Puebla, Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1979, 86. Especially the line that reads: "This Subject of the family is not, therefore extraneous to the subject of the Holy Spirit

⁸ Raymond Brown., et al. Ed, The New Jerome Biblical commentary, Bangalore, Theological Publications in India, 1994,P.13

The family is presented, in the Creators plan, as the primary place of humanization for the person and society and the cradle of life and love.⁹ The family is treated as a school of love and faithfulness to the Lord (Exodus 12: 25-27, 1:8, 14-15, Deuteronomy 6:20-25, 1 Sam 3:13). It is in the family where the first lessons on virtues and practical wisdom are taught (Proverbs, 1:8-9; 4:1-4, 6:20-21, Sirach, 3:1-16; 7:27-28). Because of this. God himself is the guarantor and protector of family life. Thus, the church as family can be traced to the Old Testament foundation.

Image of the Family in the New Testament

The human family was elevated and transformed by the mystery of incarnation when the Son of God was sent into the world and took the human form. The Son of God was born in a concrete human family. He conferred upon the family the highest dignity by making it a sacrament of the new covenant (Cf. Mt. 19:3-9, John 2:1-11) It is in this new perspective that the couple finds the fullness of its dignity and the family its solid foundation.

Jesus Christ was born and lived in a Nazarene family accepting all its characteristic features. He was a God sent messenger in a long line of other messengers. He however, occupied a special place among them since he himself is God and man

(Heb 1:1-4). Jesus grew in stature and wisdom (Luke 2:52) in the context of the human family. This demonstrates the importance of the family as a preparation for Jesus' ministry. He gave a new orientation to the people of Israel but they did not heed.

One of the strongest images that Jesus gives alluding to the church as family is one of bridegroom. His presence among his disciples is like that of a bridegroom who brings in a festive mood among his friends (Mk. 2:19-20, Mt. 9:15, Mt. 22: 1-12, 25, 1-13, John 3: 29). The church is his bride that will be brought to a new age of deeper union with its master in the second coming of the Lord.

Image of the Family in Pauline writings

The New Testament theology of the church as family of God is expressed in many passages. Many of the Pauline epistles make specific references to the early ecclesial communities in the context of familial relationships.

Thus, Pauline terms such as "house", "household of God" and the "family of God" are a clear reference of these Christian communities (Romans 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Eph 2:19; Col 4:15; 1 Tim 3:5; Phil 2.)

The Church is God's household. In this house we have God's children and therefore the concept of the Church as family gets clear (cf. Gal. 4:4 - 6, Heb. 2:10; 2 Cor. 6:16-18). As Christians we have the right to address God as 'Abba' Father and have right of inheritance too. Paul says that the image of a family represents a good transformative relationship between God and his people.¹⁰ For Paul, Christianity is not so much a doctrinal system, a moral code or a set of rituals, but a dynamic relationship between God in Christ and the human race.¹¹ One of his major preoccupations was the unity between the Jews and the gentiles, the poor and the rich into one large Christian family.

⁹ Pontifical Council for the family, Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, Nairobi, Paulines Publications Africa, 2004 p.19

¹⁰ Clement Majawa, "Theological Assessment of The Church As Family of God in Ecclesia In Africa", African Theological Journal, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2001), P.34

¹¹ Anthony Tambasco, In the Days of Paul, New York, Paulist Press, 1991, P.111

Image of the Family in Early Christian Community

The gatherings of the first Christians had elements that characterized them as family based Churches. This indeed adds weight on the perception of the Church as family right from the earliest era of the Church. These characteristics are:-

i. Gathering in Private Houses/families: The first converts to Christianity used to meeting in private houses as the only alternative left after they were ejected from the Temples and Synagogues. These came to be called the 'house Churches.' We get a number of personalities in whose homes/families the Christians met. There are for example the houses of Aquila and Priscilla in Ephesus(1 Cor16:19).

ii. Sharing Meals: Sharing of meals was a clear symbol of solidarity and unity. The same applies today. Jesus shared meals quite often with people of different backgrounds as part of his ministry. (Mk 2:13 - 17; Luke 7:36 - 50; 19:1 - 10). The early Church carried on with this table ministry with the most striking redemptive element being the fact that Christian Jews and Gentiles could share meals at the same table (Acts 2:42 - 46; 11:19 - 30). Other references to such gatherings of ecclesial commensality are found in Phil 2, Rom 16:5, and Col 4:15, Acts. 2:42, 5:42,12:12, 16:15,31.

Conclusion

The church as family of God should encompass all people. The church as family should always be engaged in searching and propagating the truth incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ (John 14:6). This is therefore a rich ground for the understanding the Ecclesiology of the church as family of God.

In the New Testament, the Christians quite often referred to one another as brothers and sisters. This kind of solidarity brings in the idea of a new family of God. The leaders of the earliest church preached against racial or gender discrimination in ecclesial communities. Among the Christians there is no Jew and no Greek, no slave and no free person and so on. All become brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. Thus, membership of the church as God's family implied a departure from those restrictive ties of consanguinity or kinship. The emphasis was on faith in the risen Lord and the universal mission of the church.¹²

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¹² Clement Majawa, "Theological Assessment of The Church As Family of God in Ecclesia In Africa", African Theological Journal, Vol. 16, No. 2 (2001),P.45