

Polygamy in Africa in the light of the Catholic theological thinking on marriage

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Abstract

Polygamy has been a longstanding practice in Africa, predating the introduction of Catholicism. It has served essential functions within various cultural contexts on the continent. However, Catholic theological teachings emphasise monogamy as the ideal form of marriage, viewing it as a sacrament ordained by God, as emphasised in the Gospels and the writings of St. Paul. The Church maintains that no human power can change this. Despite this, some scholars do not agree with the Church's stance against polygamy and its condemnation, particularly in Africa, where they believe it still has a role to play. They argue that the Church's teachings on marriage fail to appreciate the values of polygamy in Africa. This paper critically reflects on the arguments in favour of polygamy in Africa, focusing mainly on their ability or inability to promote gender equality and human dignity within marriage. Ultimately, the paper concludes that Catholic theological thinking on marriage is more conducive to mutual self-giving, love, equality, and respect among spouses than polygamy. The methodology employed is hermeneutical-critical reading of existing literature on the subject matter.

Keywords: Polygamy, Marriage, Catholic Church, Africa, Equality

Introduction

Marriage is considered the oldest social institution. It cuts across all societies, traditions, races, and religions. It brings about intimate and lasting partnerships between two or more persons. Traditionally, it has been understood and practised as a union between a man and a woman or, in the case of plural marriages, between a man and some women, some men and a woman, or a group of men and another group of women. However, nowadays, some societies have recognized and legalised marriages between people of the same sex. In addition, in the past, most marriages lasted a lifetime because the partnership was *ab initio* understood as permanent, and the spouses were willing to sacrifice their personal preferences for the good of the other and the family. Today, however, most marriages end in divorce, especially in the West, where freedom and sexual autonomy are emphasised over and above perseverance, endurance, and patience in marriage.

Whatever the case, marriage is fundamental to the formation of society because it legitimatises sexual relationships between men and women for procreation and perpetuation of the human race. Each society has its way of ritualising marriage alliance and cementing the relationship between married couples with attendant rights, privileges, and responsibilities. Marriage brings together and unites previously unrelated individuals, families, and races. Because of its unique feature, people, nations, and families have used marriage alliances to settle disputes and reconcile differences. Through marriage, people who are total strangers and enemies end up being the best friends with trust and confidence in one another.

Different forms of marriage have existed in different societies at different times. Polygamy, as a form of marriage, has also existed in different societies and is still in existence today on different continents. In this paper, we shall study polygamy as it exists in Africa. Our examination of polygamy will centre on a critical assessment of its proposed values within the culture, especially in the light of the teachings of the Catholic Church on marriage and polygamy, as well as principles of justice, equality, and fairness.

African understanding and practice of marriage

Africans regard marriage institutions as the most basic form of organization that forms the bedrock of society. Every young man or woman aspires towards marriage as an essential stage in life. "Failure to get married under normal circumstances," Mbiti (1969, p. 133) observes, "means that the person concerned has rejected society and society rejects him in return". Through marriage, relationships and alliances are formed not just between the spouses but, more importantly, between families from within and across tribes and religions within the continent and beyond. Marriage is an affair between two or more persons and between two or more families. It unites a man and a woman, a man and many women, or a woman and a woman, as the case may be, as much as it does their families. In effect, the union between the two parties brought about by marriage gets its meaning from the kingship tie between the families involved.

In many African communities in the past, marriages were pre-arranged for the spouses by their parents. However, the practice has become rare with the combined influence of Christianity and modernity. Even though the parents

still suggest to their children whom to marry, there are fewer occasions where they dictate the choice, even in rural areas. The young boys and girls of nowadays are often faster than their parents in this area, so before their parents know what is happening, they are already presenting an intending suitor to them (Magesa, p. 2004).

The marriage ceremony is not a one-off event. It happens over a period punctuated with rituals to mark critical stages during which individuals and groups within and outside the families involved play significant and irreplaceable roles. Traditionally, it is a young man who, accompanied by a significant person or persons in his family or kindred, usually makes the first official move by visiting the girl's family to make his proposal known. Tying the knots involves payment of bride price, ranging from cash, food items, animals, or services, depending on the prevalent culture in a given area.

Different forms of marriage exist in Africa. It could be monogamous or polygamous, levirate, sororate, or woman-to-woman marriage. In social science discourse, while monogamy is a marriage between two persons (traditionally, a man and a woman), the form of marriage in which one person is married to more than one other person is referred to as polygamy. Without, however, discountenancing other forms that polygamy may assume – like same-sex polygamy – we note that there are two most common traditional forms of polygamy: polygyny and polyandry. Polygyny is a situation where a man is contemporaneously married to more than one woman. Polyandry, on the other hand, is the form whereby a woman has more than one husband. Though instances of polyandry have been reported in some societies in Africa, like the Lele, the Wongo and the Djembe people of Democratic Republic of Congo (Kisembo, Magesa, and Shorter, 1999, pp. 85-86), polygyny is the type that is widespread in the continent. In popular usage, polygamy is often restricted to polygyny, and our usage of polygamy in this work will be so restricted.

Sometimes, people tend to confuse polygamy with levirate marriage, even though the two are entirely different practices. Levirate marriage is where a married or unmarried man takes over the procreative function and care of a widow of his late brother or relative (Mbiti, 1969, p. 144). It is not regarded as a new marriage, especially as the man is not required to pay any other bride price before assuming such a responsibility for the widow. Moreover, the fact that any child born of the relationship, with few exceptions in some societies, belongs to the deceased shows that the second person is not “really” married to the widow. In some societies, levirate marriage also involves the parents of relatives of a deceased person marrying a wife for him if he died unmarried. The idea behind this is to ensure “the dead man is not cut off from the chain of life” (Mbiti, 1969, p. 144).

This is also the idea behind sororate marriage, practised by few African societies. Sororate marriage is a form of marriage where the husband of a deceased or childless wife marries one of the wife's sisters (the sister here is not just from the same mother but has an extended sense within the kinship system). In both levirate and sororate marriages, we see evidence of the group supplying a lack perceived in a member to maintain the corporate existence because the individual's actual existence is realised within the context of the group.

Just like sororate marriage, woman-to-woman marriage is another form of marriage that is not widely practised in Africa. The Igbo people of southeast Nigeria practice this form of marriage. It involves a woman referred to as a “female husband” marrying another woman and assuming control over the wife and her children (Krige, 1974, p. 11). It has all the features of regular marriage, and the “female husband” has to go through all the customary marriage processes, including the payment of bride price. Woman-to-woman marriage is different from lesbianism because there is customarily no sexual relationship between the two. In her study of Nnobi women, Adadiume (1987, p. 7) maintains that it would be “totally inapplicable, shocking and offensive to Nnobi women” to interpret woman-to-woman marriage as lesbianism.

Conditions that may necessitate a woman becoming a “female husband” include (a) barrenness of a married woman or difficult situations a widow finds herself in; (b) desire for elevation in social standing by wealthy women (c) desire for a daughter-in-law in marriages without a male child; (d) the desire to get a son for the father in a family without one (Cadigan, 1998; Adadiume, 1987). Even though the “female husband” acts as the husband, the sexual responsibility towards her wife is performed by any of her paternal uncles or relatives.

The respect accorded marriage stems from Africans' regard for the family, which is the basic unit of society, the establishment of which marriage forms an indispensable part. For the Africans, all social ills or progress can be traced to the family. Therefore, caring for and promoting the family is necessary for a better society.

Polygamy in Africa: Arguments in favour of its existence

The percentage of polygamous households is higher in Africa compared to what it is universally. La Rosa (2022) reports that in 2019, while about 2% of the world's population lived in polygamous households, in Burkina Faso, more than 1 in 3 people lived in a polygamous household, including 24% of Christians. In Mali, 14% of Christians find themselves in polygamous households. In Chad, it is 21%. Altogether, as noted by La Rosa, "there are six African nations in which at least 10% of Christians live in a polygamous household, and another six in which at least 5% of Christians live in a polygamous household".

The persistence of polygamy in this era shows that it still has some significant roles to play in society and that people still feel its relevance. Even in those communities where it is much fewer than monogamous unions, the vestiges of polygamy, to a considerable extent, still dictate the tone of marital relationships even in monogamous households. We shall discuss some arguments adduced by scholars in support of polygamy and the roles they attribute to it within Africa.

Minimisation of prostitution and promiscuity: Polygamy, Kitembo, Magesa and Shorter (1977) argue that polygamy, among other things, helps to minimise the possibility of prostitution or promiscuity in marriage. They agree with Gachuhi (1972) that prostitution is caused by two factors, both of which arise from undue institutional restrictions on sex in marriage. The first factor, they state, is women's desire to escape male dominance or control of sex in marriage. The second is men's quest for extra-marital sexual outlet or satisfaction. Polygamy, they argue, helps to satisfy this need for sexual outlet in men by providing them with alternative and legitimate sexual partners. The outlet, they point out, is especially needed after the birth of a child because, according to the tradition operative in many African communities, it is taboo for a man to have sex with his wife during the period of lactation after delivery.

Moreover, such abstinence can last for quite a long time since breastfeeding, in most cases, spans two years. Polygamy, they argue, therefore, offers a husband an opportunity "of always having a legitimate sex partner at hand" (Kitembo, Magesa and Shorter, 1977, p. 94). Basden's (1966, p. 99) findings among the Igbo people corroborate this observation.

A follow-up argument made by Kitembo, Magesa, and Shorter (1977, p. 94) clarifies the gender injustice involved, which they neither acknowledged nor questioned. According to them, by providing the husband with a legitimate alternative, polygamy also helps to solve the problem of an "ageing, unattractive or sick wife."

Solution to childlessness: Many argue that polygamy has always served as a remedy for childlessness in marriages. Because marriage and procreation form a unit in Africa (Mbiti, 1969, p. 133), the birth of children is often proof of successful marriages; childless marriages often lead to indignation and frustration. "To die without getting married or without children", Mbiti notes, "is to be completely cut off from the human society" (p. 134). In Africa, for a man not to have a child, especially a male child, is often compared to his not having existed because that would mean the end of his lineage, which is primarily patrilineal (Muonwe, 2016). It also means people's memory of him will soon be gone because it is through the male children that he could be venerated as an ancestor and accorded his due honour when he dies (Oduyoye, 1994). "Unfortunate, therefore, is the man or woman who has nobody to 'remember' him (her), after physical death... the worst misfortune and punishment that any person could suffer" (Mbiti, 1969, p. 134). Therefore, a man who has many female children could still feel unfulfilled and consider his marriage ill-fated and incomplete. That explains why many such people often marry a second or more wives. What he cannot achieve with the first wife could be possible in his second or more marriages.

A better alternative to divorce: It is also argued that polygamy provides a better alternative to divorce. It is discovered that divorce is not rampant in societies that practise polygamy because any other woman married after the first is likely to provide what the first lacks. The husband can keep her in the house while having a second wife. When a wife is barren or is in a situation where she can no longer satisfy the sexual needs of the husband or take adequate care of her children due to her health conditions or as a result of an accident, marrying another wife can solve the problem and prevent the possibility of divorce or the husband's illegitimate affairs with other women.

Proper care of the husband: Another reason for polygamy, which Basden observes among Igbo people, is to ensure regular feeding of the husband. In Igbo culture, just as in most African societies, women are in control of the preparation of household meals. They often use this weapon against their husbands by refusing to cook. In order, then, to avoid, as Basden (1966) puts it, the insult of having to retire for the day without supper, some men get into polygamous unions to become more confident of being served at each meal by at least one of their wives.

Enhancement of status in society: Polygamy also serves as "an important status indicator" for men (Uchendu, 1965, p. 86). It is a way of announcing a man's economic standing and influence in the society. This is the case since the bride price paid to marry a wife is often very high in some communities. To show their economic and financial strength, kings and chiefs in the past usually married up to twenty wives or more. Besides, some essential traditional titles are reserved only for people with many wives. Such titles give them more prestige and the opportunity to assume more societal leadership roles (Ogonna, 2014, p. 97). Before the advent of Christianity, Igbo culture, for instance, lacked the concept of celibacy (Nnabugwu, 2006). Though unmarried men (that is, those who have reached the age of marriage) were not pressured into marriage just as their female counterparts were, society did not place them on par with other men who were married. They were pejoratively referred to as "women" and pitied as victims of economic woes (Uchendu, 1965). The Igbo word for an unmarried adult male tells it all – *oke okporo* (literally, "male woman"). To be a "real" man is to have a woman (wife) at your service, and in most traditional communities, not just one but as many as possible. Basden (1938, 228) states, "a man who can multiply his wives rises automatically on the social scale."

On the other hand, however wealthy a man might be, if he failed to accumulate as many wives as possible, his social and political position suffered greatly (Ayandele, 1966). Moreover, it was perceived as an excellent achievement for a man to meet the social and financial obligations of child upbringing and upkeep of wives and children from such a large family. The more dependants and subordinates (wives and children) he acquired, the more respect and prestige he gained in society (Uchendu, 1965, pp. 54-55; Nasimiyu-Wasike, 2006, p. 104).

This observation has a crucial causal connection with many married men keeping girlfriends in contemporary Igbo society. Smith (2001) submits that men get involved in this because it is regarded among male peers as a way of showcasing their masculine skills and economic achievement. Hence, they would always boast about their affairs with such girls, the number they keep, and how best they provide for them in their male peer groups. This way, the resilient polygamous mentality succeeds yet in guiding monogamous unions. By using the number of women around them to enhance their social ambition, these men already speak volumes about their regard for women. No wonder Smith's observation that men call such women friends "handbags," implying those under their control and manipulative reach.

Furthermore, because the respect and position accorded wives depends to a great extent on that of their husbands, some women in the past would quickly pressure their husbands into marrying more wives. The more wives the husband married, the more secure and socially significant they felt. Many women saw being the one and only wife as degrading because it portrayed their husbands as poor. It was also the case that some women who had the means did sponsor such marriages. Having junior wives also allowed them to enjoy the enviable position of being the first wives, with the privileges attached to it, coupled with the respect the latter wives should ordinarily accord them. It is also known that such respects often did not come, especially if any of the younger wives won the husband's heart. This situation usually bred tension, quarrelling, and jealousy in the family (Ayandele, 1966; Basden, 1938; Chuku, 2005; Uchem, 2002). However, since getting married forms part of the desire of an average Igbo woman, it mattered less for many of them the number of wives any man already had than remaining at home unmarried.

Historical argument: Some Christians argue in favour of polygamy by referring to the Old Testament times when polygamy was widely practised among the Jews. They refer to well-known Jewish patriarchs who married more than one wife, like Abraham, Esau (Gen 26:34; 28:6-9), Jacob (Gen 29:15-28), King David (1 Samuel 25:39-44; 2 Samuel 3:2-5; 5:13-16), King Solomon (1 Kings 11:1-3), and the high priest, Elkanah (I Sam. 1:1-18), to mention but a few. Besides, there is no place in the Old Testament Scripture where polygamy is condemned. Deut 21: 15-17 gives instructions on managing the tension in a home with two wives. It advises that the inheritance rights due to the first son be given to him regardless of whether he is born by a man's hated wife or beloved one. The Hebrew people continued their practice of polygamy right into the second century AD (Coogan, 2010).

More workforce in the family: Having large families also helps people accomplish some tasks that could not have been accomplished if the families were small. In traditional farming societies in Africa, children born from polygamous unions are assets to the father of the house in taking care of his extensive farmlands, rearing some other domestic animals and carrying out domestic chores that would have been difficult for fewer people to accomplish. According to Mbiti (1969, p. 143), the "duties are made lighter when there are many people in the family to share them or do them jointly in the spirit of a team".

How defensible are the arguments in favour of polygamy?

In what follows, some of the arguments for polygamy just discussed will be critically examined to see how they favour or disfavour all or any of the parties involved in marriage.

Historical argument: That polygamy worked for the Jewish patriarchs thousands of years ago does not mean it will work for the people of today. Circumstances have changed. At the time of the Jewish patriarchs, women were largely invisible, and their rights and welfare were lightly considered. It would be anachronistic to wish that the same continues in our present society, given humans' evolution in knowing who we are and what society should be. Besides, as Kaczor (2016) notes, the polygamous lifestyle of the Jewish patriarchs provides us with warnings on what to avoid instead of being examples to imitate. This is because such marriages proved the dangers of polygamous marriages, which include rivalry among co-wives, hatred among half-siblings, deceit, and war in the family, as well as inheritance disputes.

Promiscuity argument: From the arguments proffered in support of this line of thought, one observes that Kisembo, Magesa, and Shorter (1977) spent their effort trying to show how polygamy addresses only the second of the two factors they endorse as responsible for promiscuity in marriage, namely men's desire for a sexual outlet outside of marriage. They failed to show how the first factor, which is women's desire to escape men's control of sex in marriage, is addressed by polygamy. It is not a surprise because polygamy increases male control of sex in marriage. After all, it offers men the opportunity to use sexual deprivation to punish any of their wives while gratifying themselves with the other wife or wives. This lacuna in their argument immediately casts some doubt on the validity of their conclusions. Moreover, it lends some credence to anyone who might argue that polygamy is solely designed to favour men.

The authors have failed to make any attempt to ask questions as to why the sexual needs of the wife are not also taken into consideration by polygamy. It is true, as medical experts have made us aware, that the level of women's sexual desires falls a few months postpartum owing to several reasons (Alder, 1988; Hyde et al., 1996; Reamy & White, 1987), but these experts have not told us that it remains the same several months afterwards, or that it is altogether extinguished for about two years postpartum. Therefore, one might argue that it is a mark of insensitivity to keep married women secluded from their husbands for so long a time while the husband enjoys the company of other women (legitimate or illegitimate) who satisfy his sexual needs.

Moreover, following Gachuhi's theory, which Kisembo, Magesa, and Shorter employ, one could also argue that polygamy encourages women's promiscuity since it increases men's dominance and control of sex in marriage. This is the case, especially as the husband remains the master who controls and decides which wife he meets, when, and how. He will most likely devote more attention to his favourite wife while neglecting the other or others. Satisfaction of the wives' sexual desires is left to his whims and caprices. In this connection, Umorem (2016) argues: "Polygamy in effect denies women the human right to undivided love of a husband. While the wife cannot share her love with other men, the man can share his with other women in the system. It turns women into an appendage."

Concerning the argument of utilizing polygamy to solve the problem of ageing of wives or replacing unattractive ones, what is worthy of note is that, in many African cultures, husbands are generally older than their wives. As such, they usually age faster. This being the case, one would ordinarily expect that the wives should be more inclined to look for younger men who are more eye-catching than their husbands. However, this would not be allowed in African society. It is, instead, the men who are allowed to look for extra wives. Moreover, for a husband to be culturally allowed to marry another wife (to satisfy his sexual needs) simply because his wife is ageing and, as such, seems no longer attractive or because she is sick patently shows the lop-sidedness in marital relationships in African culture, where much more significant burden of satisfying the needs of one's marriage partner is borne by women. Women's needs appear not to matter much.

Moreover, there is also a paradox to the whole issue. In today's African society, polygamy has been identified as a factor that breeds a mentality that favours the husband's promiscuity or extra-marital sexual relations, even in monogamous unions. This factor is what Okeke-Ihejirika (2004) calls "polygamous incursions" into monogamous unions in her study of the Igbo society of Nigeria, which she insists persists even among elite circles. Though she observes that childlessness remains a vital factor that drives men into allowing the "incursions", she also admits that many elite men are drawn into extra-marital sexual relations whether or not they are childless. Those men would often assert that African men are naturally not meant to stick to a woman. This "polygamous mentality" dictates their relationship with their wives and their search for other sexual partners without marriage commitment.

Okeke-Ihejirika (2004, p. 47) affirms that such men "would often declare a monogamous status even as they engage in extra-marital relationships as part of their macho African identity." She concludes that, in the contemporary Igbo culture, polygamy still serves as an avenue for subjugation of women. The way it makes its subtle incursions into supposedly monogamous unions is such that "a good number of married women would not completely vouch for their husbands' innocence of extra-marital affair" (p. 48). It is good that Kisembo, Magesa, and Shorter (1977, p. 100) somehow capture this too, though without critically assessing its implication for married women, when they note, "Polygamous mentality demands that wife be faithful to her husband, but it allows the husband to court an unlimited number of other women with a view to marriage. The husband's extra-marital sexual interests can always be justified in this way."

Barrenness argument: No doubt, getting a second wife creates more chances for men who are childless to beget children and those with only female children to beget male children. Nevertheless, this would be the case if the cause of childlessness was the wife and not the husband. If the man is, for example, impotent or has any other health challenge that makes it difficult to beget children, marrying more wives may not likely be a solution. Moreover, it is regrettable that, in such cases where the problem is from a man, African culture appears slow in helping the wife to legitimately find a way of getting children from another man. The fact is that in matters of childlessness, it is always the interest of men that is considered, and the fault is often heaped on women. Moreover, men often offer stiff resistance to medical checks so as not to give in to the possibility of bearing the blame.

Regardless of where the fault comes from, a childless woman more than a childless man is derided. Hers "is to conceive, bear and raise children" (Chiegboka & Udemba, 2021, p. 98). About the middle of the last century, this was ritualized in some parts of Igbo society at the funeral of a childless woman by slitting her abdomen before her burial to show her failure "to fulfil her function in life; and this mutilation of the corpse is the token of her failure; her name is blotted out forever" (Basden, 1966, p. 313). In their desperation to beget children and avoid such ignoble and disdainful treatments, many women are known to have resorted to being unfaithful to their husbands (Chiegboka, 2009).

Moreover, that some men had to marry more wives because of the desire for sons and not just for children says much about the gender bias in the culture. One hardly sees a man getting a second wife simply because he has only male children, who are often the preferred sex for obvious cultural reasons.

Proper care of husband: Here again, one discovers that the interest of the husband is the issue. Having more wives assures him of more comfortability but deprives women of their weapons of defence (food deprivation to the husband) because co-wives can always step in. This deprivation gives the husband more edge and control over the wife or wives. If the husband views the wife as resisting being subjugated and ordered around, he can marry other wives to show her that she can always be dispensed with (Uchem, 2002). In addition, there is more probability that the husband will be taken care of once there is more than one wife since the co-wives will compete to win his favour.

More workforce argument: An Igbo proverb goes thus, "*ka ite ha ka oku a na-akwanye ya ha*" (literally, the fire prepared for cooking depends on the pot's size). The more one accumulates wives, the bigger one's problems are: taking care of the wives, settling disputes and rivalry between co-wives, feeding and properly training of children. Besides, the more the children, the less likely the husband could know them personally. Besides, children from polygamous families are likely to grow up in an environment of competition and the absence of the father's proper attention because of the difficulties of attending to his vast household adequately. So, the increment in the workforce also means an increment in the demands and problems created for the head of the family, and he will be less likely to attend to them adequately than when the family size is smaller.

Catholic theological thinking on marriage and polygamy

The Catholic Church understands marriage as a perpetual, complementary, and covenantal union of a man and a woman in mutual love geared towards the good of the spouses, procreation and education of children. It is perpetual because it is a partnership of the whole life established by the spouses between themselves (can. 1055 & 1). It is complementary because marriage entails reciprocal integration and love between a man and a woman.

Even though marriage is understood as an earthly reality between humans, in the Old Testament, God's relationship with Israel is compared to that between husband and wife. To the Prophet Hosea, the Lord specifically communicated how to mirror God's relationship with Israel in his marriage with Gomer: "When the Lord began to speak to Hosea, the Lord said to him, 'Go and take yourself an adulterous wife and children of unfaithfulness

because the land is guilty of the vilest adultery in departing from the Lord" (Hos 1:2). The command was therefore a way of illustrating to the people how unfaithful they had been to Yahweh (Henegar, p. 2001).

Similarly, in the New Testament, St. Paul uses marriage to express the intimate love which unites Christ and the Church, the new Israel. St. Paul even presents the love which Christ has for the Church as a model for the kind of love that the husband should have for his wife: "Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her" (Eph 5:25). This way, married couples are challenged to work towards the realization of the sacrificial love of Christ for the Church and his commitment to her in their marital obligations and relationships. In other words, the sacrament of marriage is intended to bring them closer to God as "a living sign that truly communicates and participates in the union of Christ and the Church" (West 2012, p. 19.).

The Catholic Church regards marriage as one of the seven sacraments which are "efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, through which divine life is dispensed to us" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1131). Marriage is, therefore, a channel of grace, divine revelation and manifestation for the spouses. It is a door for the spouses to enter into a living relationship with God made manifest in their self-gift to each other.

The Church (can. 1056) puts forward two essential properties of marriage, which are unity (*unitas*) and indissolubility (*indissolubilitas*). Unity entails exclusive love in marital relations and partnership of the whole life between a man and a woman, thus excluding polygamy or adultery. It calls for lifelong fidelity to one's partner. The following biblical passages are often used to support the exclusivity of marital love between a man and a woman: Gen 2:24, Eph 5:31-35, Mt 19:3-9; Mk 10:1-12, and Lk 16:18. These passages uphold the teaching that marriage involves a man and a woman coming together and becoming one flesh. It is usually on this basis that the Church has traditionally considered polygamy as going against the divine law and negating the unity which marriage brings about between the spouses.

The Council of Trent was outright in its rejection of polygamy and its promoters when it asserts that whosoever teaches that "it is lawful for Christians to have several wives at the same time, and that it is not forbidden by any divine law" should be anathematized (Denzinger, 1802). The anathema entails the removal of the person from ecclesial communion. The Vatican II (1965, no. 47) classifies polygamy alongside the wave of divorce in the West and what it describes as "free love," describing both as distortions of the true meaning of marriage. Cardinal Arinze (1981) was in complete agreement with the stand of the council sixteen years after the council when he stated clearly and unmistakably that polygamy "should be roundly condemned." According to John Paul II (1981, no. 19), polygamy radically contradicts the communion of love, freely given by the grace of Christ to two couples in marriage. Besides, it "directly negates the plan of God 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".

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (no. 2387) also condemns polygamy unequivocally. It gives about five reasons for this condemnation: it is against the moral law, negates communion which marriage promotes between married couples, negates their equal dignity, contradicts the mutual and exclusive love they should have for each other, as well as goes against the plan of God for creation from the beginning. Even though the Catechism shows understanding as regards the predicament of a previously polygamous man wishing to become a Christian and is required to repudiate one or more of his wives, as the case may be, it nevertheless considers it a worthy practice to repudiate them, without prejudice to the obligation of the man to take care of his former wife or wives, and children.

The property of indissolubility means that Catholic marriages are unbreakable once validly contracted and consummated (*matrimonium ratum et consummatum*). The property of indissolubility is divinely instituted when Christ told the Pharisees, "They are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, let no human being separate" (Mt 19:6). Because this is a divine law, the Church cannot go against it, even when the prevalence of divorce in secular law and society has become a serious threat to it. Vatican II (1965, no. 48) observes: "The intimate union of marriages as a mature giving of two persons, and for the good of children, demands total fidelity from the spouses and requires an unbreakable unity between them".

Consent, which must be mutually given by a man and a woman to each other, is the essence of Catholic marriages. Thus, the Code of Canon Law (no. 1057) states, "The consent of the parties, legitimately manifested between persons qualified by law, makes marriage; no human power can supply this consent". It is vital for the validity of marriage because it brings marriage into existence. Through consent, the spouses express their freedom to marry

without any compulsion. That is why it must be pronounced with complete freedom, full conscience, and total presence of mind. Consent can only be validly expressed to one person and not to two or more persons unless the first marriage has ceased to exist through the death of any of the partners or is nullified by a judicial act.

Conclusion

Polygamy persists in Africa because it serves as a solution to some marital problems and family challenges. Those who argue in favour of polygamy put forward such arguments as its being a solution to barrenness, men's promiscuity and divorce, as a way of promoting more workforce in the family and proper care of husbands. Some also support their stand by referencing the Old Testament polygamous patriarchs. However, from the discussions in the paper, it is discovered that these arguments are more tailored towards serving the needs of men than those of women who, in the relationship, are most often treated "like slaves working to enrich their husbands and masters" (Nasimiyu-Wasike, 2006, p. 105). This is part of the reasons the Catholic Church is against it, but more importantly, because it goes against the divine law, according to which marriage is instituted as a partnership of the whole life between a man and a woman, involving mutual self-giving, exclusive love and commitment. Though more African families are monogamous today, this polygamous mentality still operates and makes men subjugate their wives, denying them access to legitimate enjoyment of equal rights and dignity due to them in their conjugal union and family life.

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