“WHAT GOD HAS JOINED TOGETHER” (Matt 19:16):
THE IGBO CHRISTIAN FAMILY AND THE RESPONSIBLE PARENTHOOD
(Being a Reflection presented to the Igbo Catholic Elites, Families and Community in Atlanta
Georgia, USA today January 1, 2007,
at the Hyland Centre of the Archdiocesan Cathedral of Christ the King, Atlanta)

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1. INTRODUCTION: WHERE TWO OR THREE ARE GATHERED IN MY NAME (Matt 18:20): OUR ANNUAL RE-UNION

Today, January 1, 2007, celebrates the beginning of the New Year and the end of the octave of Christmas of 2006, with the solemnity of Mary Mother of God. Mary is the mother of God, mother of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, mother of the Church and Christians and indeed the mother of Christian families.

The bible presents Mary as a woman with unique identity and mission in the world. This uniqueness is confirmed by the angel message: “Hail Mary full of grace the Lord is with you” (Luke 1:28); by Mary: “I am the handmaid of the Lord” (Luke 1:38); by Elizabeth: “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb! How be it that the mother of my Lord will visit me?” (Luke 1:42-43); by Joseph: who knew his wife and never wanted to discredit her (Matt 1: 18-21); by the Church in her teachings and devotions and names of Mary by individuals, Churches, apparitions, intercessions and as sacramentals etc. Mary presents to us the image of a woman that cherishes the family (see miracle at Cana- John 2:1-12); that loves her child (see the search for Jesus-Mark 4:31-34; Matt 12:46; Luke 8:19) and interested in family peace.

Dear friends in the Lord, we have gathered today for our annual re-union as Igbo Christian families on this unique and first day of the year dedicated to mother Mary. Our Lord confirms this gathering with his loving paternal presence and exhortation: “Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there in their midst” (Matt 18: 20); and also: “I am with you always till the end of time” (Matt 28:20). This day is made by the Lord let us rejoice and be glad.

I thank God who has made this day possible. I thank God for our families, our relatives both here and home in our country, Nigeria. I thank God for our status (some with citizenship, Green Card, other Visas etc). I thank God for your jobs which contribute to the life and joys of the family. We pray to God for those still experiencing problem either in status, in securing better jobs, in family stability and progress.

Finally I thank Fr John Paul Ezeonyido, Dr Ifeanyi Anikpe, the Black Catholic Ministry of the Archdiocese of Atlanta and the officials of this noble community for making my visit here possible. Our message is on this theme: “What God has Joined Together” (Matt 19:16): The Igbo Christian Family and Responsible Parenthood. This message is intended through the grace of God and intercession of Mary to restore genuine peace, love and reconciliation in Igbo Christian communities (and all families) here in foreign land besieged with all sorts of predicaments and mentalities, viz. choice of true partner and the ability to live out the requirements of responsible parenthood; economic problems; socio-cultural inhibitions; formation of the children; legal separations and divorce; and inability to fulfil one’s obligation and responsibilities in the family (Chiegboka, 2001:89-102 & 2005: 222). On these family predicaments, Pope John Paul II (1981: FC 6), observed,

On the one hand, in fact, there is a more lively awareness of personal freedom and greater attention to the quality of interpersonal relationships in marriage, to promoting the dignity of women, to responsible procreation, to the education of children.... On the other hand, however, signs are not lacking of a disturbing degradation of some fundamental values: a mistaken theoretical and practical concept of the independence of the spouses in relation to each other; serious misconceptions regarding the relationship of authority between parents and children; the concrete difficulties that the family itself experiences in the transmission of
values; the growing number of divorces; the scourge of abortion; the ever more frequent recourse to sterilization; the appearance of a truly contraceptive mentality.

Included in these predicaments continued the Holy Father are also “The spread of divorce and of recourse to a new union, even on the part of the faithful; the acceptance of purely civil marriage in contradiction to the vocation of the baptized to be married in the Lord”; the celebration of the marriage sacrament without living faith, but for other motives; the rejection of the moral norms that guide and promote the human and Christian exercise of sexuality in marriage” (John Paul II, 1981: FC 7).

Our focus is an attempt to respond to these predicaments based on authentic teachings of the Church and the values in our culture and society.


*The Dignity of Christian Family*

The family remains the nucleus of human family and the cell of the human society and sources of the members of the Church (John Paul II, 1982: 172; Pontifical Council For the Family, 2000: 17, 9). However, suffice it to say with the Council Fathers that the unique dignity and identity of family is variously presented as the “domestic Church” (Vatican II: LG 11; AA 11; GS 52 John Paul II, 1981:FC 21, 13 & 1995: EIA 92, 95 & 1992: CCC 1656, 2333); the school of deeper humanity and profound human enrichment, social virtues and social living (Vatican II: GS 52; GE 3, John Paul II, 1981:FC 37); the community of love and persons and the setting or theatre for intimate and interpersonal relationship (John Paul II, 1981: FC 18; see also FC 21, 37; Okeke, 1998: 400); the privileged place for evangelical virtues, heralding of faith and sanctuary of life (John XXIII, 1960: 65-66, see also John Paul II, 1992 CCC 1656 & 1995: EIA, 92). In essence, the family is the foundation and future of the Church, the world and human civilization (John Paul, 1981: FC 75, & 1995: EIA 80).

*The Birth of Family through Marriage*

The family is inaugurated by marriage (Vatican II: GS 47, 48; John Paul II, 1981: FC 3, 13), which is guided by Divine, Canon and Civil laws (can 1058), and even cultural norms. Marriage is a sacred institution that is both natural to man and divinely established and ordained by God from the very foundation of the human race. The constitutive principle for the birth of marriage is consent lawfully (cann 1057; 1095-1107) and legitimately (cann 1108-1123) manifested by legally capable heterosexual persons. This is the constant teaching of the Magisterium of the popes evident in the Second Vatican Council (GS 48) that affirmed unequivocally that, marriage is

An institution confirmed by divine law and receiving its stability even in the eyes of society, from the human act by which the partners mutually surrender themselves to each other; for the good of the partners, of the children, and of society this sacred bond no longer depends on human decision alone. For God himself is the author of marriage and has endowed it with various benefits and with various ends in view: all of those have a very important bearing on the continuation of the human race, on the personal development and eternal destiny of every member of the family, on the dignity, stability, peace and prosperity of the family and of the whole human race.

Hence before its celebration the legislator disposed that “it must be established that nothing stands in the way of its valid and lawful celebration” (can 1066) and as such the Christ’s faithful people have the obligation “to reveal to the parish priest or the local Ordinary...
such impediments as they may know about” (can 1069). The preliminary investigations ensure:

- that the parties are really free from Impediments, viz: Age (can 1083); Impotence and not sterility except in the context of deceit (can 1084); Previous bond or ligament (cann 1085; 1071, §1, 2°); Disparity of Worship/Cult (can 1086); Sacred Ordination (can 1087); Public Perpetual Profession (can 1088); Abduction (can 1089); Crime (can 1090); Consanguinity (can 1091); Affinity (Can 1092); Public Propriety (can 1093) and Adoption (can 1094);
- that they are legally and naturally capable for marriage, viz: capacity to place a human act, i.e. lack of sufficient use of reason (can 1095, 1°); capacity to make a critical evaluation of the object of the human act and to choose this object with freedom proportionate to the object (i.e. sufficient knowledge and sufficient internal freedom- Grave lack of discretionary judgment (can 1095, 2°); capacity to fulfil or assume the essential obligations of marriage (can 1095, 3°).

**Marriage within Igbo-African Context**

In our context, as Africans and Igbo people, marriage has cultural, social, economic and religious dimensions. Marriage is necessary, natural and sacred to the African life. In Africa, we identify these different forms of marriage which include: Monogamy (marriage between one man and a woman witnessed highly in African encounter with Western Christianity); Polygamy (as polygyny, i.e. marriage between one man with more than one woman or rarely as polyandry, i.e. marriage between one woman with more than one man); Levirate (marriage between the bereaved widow with the brother of the deceased husband); Woman marriage (whereby the woman marries a widow for the deceased brother or for herself or even for her deceased husband), etc.

The unique character of African societies is its community solidarity heritage and the fundamental purpose of marriage which is for procreation, progeny or prolongation of the family lineage (Mbah, 1993: 16, also 10). This communal character presents marriage also as a family affair (i.e. an alliance between two families or clans) and not solely or even a private matter of the spouses. Thus confirmed Cyriacus Mba, (1993: 9; see also M’Tsanda, 1981:36; Mbiti, 1973: 44; Urrutia, 1989: 9; Atado, 1998: 109)

In the African Traditional marriage system, marriage was not only an alliance, a bond or a covenant between two individuals, a man and a woman but also an alliance between two family groups or kindred communities. This element contributed immensely in holding the nuclear or primary families together and insuring the stability of marriage even when and where the partners were ill-suited and/or ill-disposed for a stable, enduring and lasting union-a value which every normal bride and bridegroom would pray and hope for ardently on their wedding day.

In line with these trends of thoughts, the Bishops of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM: 1981:370-361) affirmed clearly that the African traditional marriage system has three essential aspects: that is, apart from being open to life (fecundity), personal and principally communitarian, it also involves series of dynamic steps and rituals. These stages or steps are so essential, valuable, and constitutive part of the gradual elaboration of the marriage bond (Urrutia, 1989: 12-13), and constantly provoke the need for the integration of these essential and indispensable traditional rites with the Christian wedding ceremonies so as to avoid duplication of rites and experience of cohabitation or even pregnancy before the Christian wedding as Hilary Okeke (1993: 416; also Urrutia, 1989: 6-7; Ojemen, 1993: 25) added:

The lack of integration becomes evident in the marriage rites and practices of marriage. No matter the educational background of the people. Nigerians adhere to the traditional marriage rites to which they may add the statutory/Church wedding. For them, the traditional
marriage rites brings into being the marriage, while the civil or Church wedding is a dispensable addition. No wonder then if marital cohabitation is installed after the traditional marriage. The society accepts this as normal and the absence of it as abnormal. Nigerian Christians deep in their conscience see nothing wrong with this practice, even though they may defer to the Church which insists on a Church wedding. Practice is the best index of the degree of internalization of this rule. The majority of couples coming for a “white” wedding have lived together as husbands and wives have begotten children or the brides are already pregnant. Most visibly pregnant brides in flowing white gowns and veils coming for Church weddings are not uncommon sight. This shows that the symbolism of white and veils are lost to such people. The problem lies with the view of marriage operative in the community.

The local Church therefore endeavour adopt a procedure whereby these traditional rites will be integrated with the ecclesial rites so as to avoid this confusion or degradation of the matrimonial celebration which remains the forum for the legal manifestation of consent (c. 1108). John Paul II (1991:214 also 1996, no 7: 240; GS 58, 44; AG 15, 22; Paul VI, 1975: EN 20; John Paul II, 1981:FC 10; John Paul II, 1995: EIA 59, 78; John Paul, 1990: RM 52) truly acknowledged the impact of culture in marriage partnerships when he said: “precisely because it is a reality that is deeply rooted in human nature itself, marriage is affected by the cultural and historical conditions of every people. They have always left their mark upon the institution of marriage. The Church, therefore, cannot prescind from the cultural milieu.”

However other element worthy of mention in the constitution of marriage bond and the contribution of the various families is the alliance and bond created by the bride price (Akpan, 1993: 82). It is precisely because of this established family alliance and bond that death does not end the African marriage as witnessed in the Christian ritual and teaching on marriage. This is because the individual woman is married and sealed with the family and not so much with the spouses. This is one of the reasons for the existence of the levirate form of marriage.

In addition, even though divorce is allowed especially in situation of legal or ritual abomination but this is not common. In the African societies there are in built systems and procedures of conflict resolution that draws various extended families in an effort to stabilize the families (Mbah, 1993: 10-11).

The Essence or Goods of Marriage

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (John Paul II, 1992: 1640; also Vatican II, 1965: GS 48; cann 1055, 1061, 1134) presented a doctrinal summary of the Church’s position on marriage bond in these words:

Thus the marriage bond has been established by God himself in such a way that a marriage concluded and consummated between baptized persons can never be dissolved. This bond, which results from the free human act of the spouses and their consummation of the marriage, is a reality, henceforth irrevocable, and gives rise to a covenant guaranteed by God’s fidelity. The Church does not have the power to contravene this disposition of divine wisdom.

The essence of marriage is seen in the goods of marriage and the essential rights and obligations of the spouses. These include: the three traditional goods of children, sacrament (or property of indissolubility), fidelity, and now the fourth good of marriage which is the good of the spouses; the property of unity and the sacramental dignity.

The Christian parents, therefore, are obliged to unity, indissolubility, exclusivity and equality (cann 1056; 1134; 1135) of conjugal marital relationship open to new life (children) accepted with joy under the principle of responsible parenthood (Gen 1, 28; Vatican II: GS 58; can 1055, §1; 1101; Paul VI, 1968: HV 11, 16), and responsible education of children in Christian faith.
3. LOVE ONE ANOTHER (John 15:12): MARRIAGE A PROJECT FOR CONJUGAL PARTNERSHIP, LOVE AND SEXUALITY

The good of the spouses is acknowledged as the fourth good of marriage (Wrenn, 1998: 204; Prieur, 1999: 535) and involves three specific but directly interrelated areas of conjugal partnership and interrelationship; conjugal love and perfection and conjugal heterosexuality. These belong to the essence and essential elements of marriage and belong to those things which the spouses have right to (Mendonça, 1994: 188; Mendonça, 2000:55, 61, 63, 64; Gramunt-Wauck, 1988:166).

The Demands of Conjugal Partnership and Interrelationship

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council in various expressions and ideas affirmed the essential element of partnership in marriage when they disposed that (Vatican Council II, 1965: GS 48, 49), the intimate partnership of life and love constitutes married state and through their conjugal love which permeates their lives, they enrich each other daily. These expressions are taken up and repeated in a generic form in the new Code (John Paul II, 1983: cann 1055, §1; 1057, §2) that disposed that, marriage is a covenant, of heterosexual persons (a man and a woman) aimed at establishing between themselves (inter se-can 1055, §1) or each other (sese-can 1057, §2), a conjugal partnership (consortium coniugalis, cann 1055, §1; 1096, §1), i.e. a sharing, fellowship and participation.

The good of spouses calls for mutual help as expressed in the book of Genesis (Gen 2: 18-25) since “to be human means to be called to interpersonal communion” especially in the marital community” (John Paul II, 1988:1653ff). Hence, the good of the spouses concern the sum total of all the goods within this interpersonal and intrapersonal relationship and integration. It concerns all that is necessary to maintain, establish and fulfil a true and a healthy conjugal life. It implies true friendship, companionship, capacity and willingness to love, trust, relate, communicate, mutual understanding and authentic conjugal self gift etc (Mendonça, 1994:514-515).

The Importance of Conjugal Love and Perfection

The conjugal love and perfection of spouses have been the constant teaching of the Church. This aspect carries further the requirements of interpersonal relationship and community of life to a more concrete level in the lives of the spouses. Conjugal love is wholistic and enriches the spouses. It is the means through which the spouses share concretely the goods proper to marital bond. In the constant teaching of the Magisterium this love should be free, equal, full, human, noble, honourable, heterosexual, conjugal, personalistic, exclusive, open or creative of new life, unitive, total and integral self gift, faithful and irrevocable (Leo XIII, 1880: 385- 402; Pius XII, 1930: 548-549; Vatican Council II, 1965: GS 48-50; Paul VI, 1968: HV 8-12; John Paul II, 1981: FC 11, 14, 18, 20, 22, 29-30; Doyle, 1984: 447-469; Lawler, 1995: 233).

Love is indispensable in human community life, like marriage and family. Love gives life to families and reflects truly the family identity as community of persons (John Paul II 1981: FC 18). In his first encyclical, John Paul II, declared: “Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it” (John Paul II, 1979: RH 10/279).

Within the canonical doctrine and jurisprudence conjugal love do not have an essential juridic role in the sense that it is not the constituent element of consent and as such need not be present at the time of consent (Paul VI, 1976:207; also Taylor-Becker, 1985: 2). Marriage survives even where the spouses experience difficulty in their marital relationships, since suffering is part and parcel of human existence (John Paul II, 1987:1457; Mendonça, 1994:147).
The Element of Conjugal Heterosexuality

The issue of conjugal heterosexuality draws from both the nature of human person, the act of consent and the invitation to conjugal love and interrelationship. God is love (1 John 4:1; Benedict XVI, 2005: DC 1) and has called man created in his image to the natural vocation of love and communion. This is both natural and fundamental to the human person (John Paul II, 1981: FC 11). The original solicitude of man and the creation of another self gave rise to the unity and complementarity of the human person (communion of persons) and the imperative to cooperate with God in the transmission of life through their unique heterosexual identities as male and female (John Paul II, 1981: 43-49, 66, 73, 107), that is persons who are sexually determined and characterized. Thus expressed by the Roman Congregations: “It is from sex that the human person receives the characteristics which on the biological, psychological and spiritual levels, make that person a man or a woman and therefore largely condition his or her progress towards maturity and insertion into society” (Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, 1975:3) and “Sexuality is a fundamental component of personality, one of its modes of being, of manifestation, of communication with others, of feeling, of expressing and of living human love” (Congregation for Catholic Education, 1983: 3-4).

In effect, sexuality is an essential dimension of every creature but achieves a unique dimension in the human person. In human person sexuality is deeply personal and informs his entire personality. In lower animals the exercise of their sexuality is for reproduction, which is accomplished through the means called copulation, mating or servicing, but in the human person the conjugal act is called intercourse and it is unitive, procreative and for the finality of marriage which is the good of the children and the good of the spouses themselves. This human sexuality achieves uniqueness in that it is a commitment, an experience of donation and acceptance that is characterized in conjugal acts and conjugal self gift (John Paul II, 1983: cc. 1057, §2; 1061, §1).

Owing to the uniquely personal and heterosexual dimensions of human sexuality, it goes beyond mere genitality or simply biological or solely for procreation but touches the core of the human personality and assumes a laudable value of a profound experience of human conjugal sharing, communication, commitment and bond of communion. Pius XII (1951:434; also Vatican Council II, 1965: GS 49; John Paul II, 1981: FC 11; John Paul II, 1992: CCC 2332, 2361-2362; John Paul II, 2001: 262), clearly emphasized these personalistic values, which was later endorsed in the Council in these words:

To reduce the cohabitation of married persons and the conjugal act to a mere organic function or the transmission of the germ of life would be to convert the domestic heart, sanctuary of the family, into nothing more than a biological laboratory....The conjugal act in its natural structure is a personal action, a simultaneous and immediate cooperation of the parties which, by the very nature of the actors and the peculiar character of the act, is the expression of that natural self-giving which, in the words of Holy Scripture, effects the union “in one flesh”.

This experience of the gift of love, of their persons and unity in one flesh in the conjugal sexual expressions remain not only source of joy and pleasure (Pius XII, 1951:433), but also endows them with the dignity of being co-operators and interpreters of life to which this love must remain open to (Paul VI, 1968: HV 9; John Paul II, 1981: FC 11-14, 20; John Paul II, 1983: cc. 1061, §1; 1055, §1; John Paul II, 1992:CCC 2362; Gramunt, 1991:376-377) and to equal dignity of the man and the woman in marital community.

God created the human person with ontological sexual and gender distinctions as male and female; endowed them with equal dignity as persons and with inalienable rights and responsibilities proper to each (Gen 1:27; Gal 3: 26, 28; Vatican II: GS 49, §2; John Paul II, 1992: CCC 2334, 1605, 357, 369- 372 & 1981: FC 22 & 1988: MD 6-8 & 1995: EIA 82). The Church teaches equality of all Christians (can 208) and spouses in marriage (can 1135). The Church, therefore, condemns inequality or the instrumentalization or depersonalization of

We aware of the lived experiences of the Africa women where in the past and still in some places they are victims of mentality (see John Paul II, 1981: FC 25; SECAM, 1981:373; Okeke, 1993:416-417) that see them as a thing instead of a person (i.e. as an object of sexual pleasure, means of commerce for parents and families etc); as ritually impure because of their innate biologically nature to emit blood during menstruation (i.e. as menstruants) and child bearing; and valued to the extent that he prolongs the progeny by giving birth to a child (and a male child for that matter). In summary women are always victims of adultery, polygamous trends (even where the husband is impotent or sterile); expulsion where he fails to give the husband a male child (even where the gender determination depended on the male partner); as helper to an old man (where he is married not on the bases of establishing equal conjugal life and love but to serve as a cook and maid to an elder already advanced in age and old enough to be his father); as wife even to a man who is clearly incapable of marriage because of certain evident psychic and psychological factors (with an aim that such a marriage venture will help the mental imbalance of the male partner); as second class citizens (where he hardly makes a choice of partner, or contributes to the life of the family in terms of decisions or be capable of inheritance of the husband property); or in some places denied the right to inherit the properties of her deceased husband (and worst for the woman, if she is childless).

In conclusion, we wish to observe that the women that suffer these predicaments are women who have played for men genuine roles as wives, sisters, mothers and in-laws. The involvement of women in enhancing this awful predicament especially during widowhood and childless marriage situations is highly regretted. The situation is further worsened by the fact that women have been socialized into accepting this dehumanizing, unjust order as normal. Nevertheless, the Christian gospel has made significant impact and inroad to the current lived experiences of the women in some parts of Africa and therefore, “deplores and condemns to the extent that they are still found in some African societies all the customs and practices which deprive women of their rights and the respect due to them.” (John Paul II, 1995: EIA 121; see also John Paul II, 1981: FC 24; AMACEA, 1995: 20; Okeke, 1993, 404).

4. PARENTS LOVE YOUR CHILDREN (Col 3:21):
CHILDREN AS THE CROWNING GLORY OF MARITAL LOVE

The good of the Children is yet another important end and essential element of marriage partnership and conjugal bond. The Council (1965: GS 48, also John Paul II, 1981: FC 14) disposes that “By its very nature the institution of marriage and married is ordered to the procreation and education of the offspring and it is in them that if finds its crowning glory” In their own way and as living members and persons in the family, children contribute to “the sanctification of their parents” (Vatican Council II, 1965: GS 50), and their conjugal loving self gift.

In order words, conjugal love must be open to life and there should be no impairment to its fecundity or fruitfulness. This is proper and natural mission of parents in marriage. The parents in transmitting human life or by giving life to a new human person are as it were co-operators with God and interpreters of the love of God. In this way writes John Paul II (1981:FC 13), “The couple, while giving themselves to one another, give not just themselves but also the reality of children, who are living reflection of their love, a permanent sign of conjugal unity and a living and inseparable synthesis of their being a father and a mother. When they become parents, spouses receive from God the gift of a new responsibility” (see also Paul VI, 1968: HV 12; John Paul II, 1990: CCC 2366; John Paul II, 1994: 878). This
calls for responsible parenthood in its various dimensions of responsible procreation and responsible education of the children.

**Responsible Procreation and Spousal Consciences**

Responsible parenthood, demands greater responsibility on the part of the parents as co-operators with God in the transmission and nurturing of life to make a judgment in conscience and liberty according to the dispositions of God and the Church (to whom rests the duty to interpret God’s laws and to provide authentic moral principles based on the dignity of the human person). In essence, it refers (Paul VI, 1968: HV 10, see also GS 51), “to the objective moral order instituted by God, the order of which a right conscience is the true interpreter. As a consequence the commitment to responsible parenthood requires that husband and wife, keeping a right order of priorities, recognized their own duties towards God, themselves, their families and human society.”

The spouses should never proceed arbitrarily in this sector, but should be guided by a complete mastery of themselves and their emotions in the light of free conscience that respects the ends of the marital community which is an ordinance of God directed to goods of the spouses, their children, the human family and society (Vatican Council II, 1965: GS 48, 50; Paul VI, 1968: HV 10, 21). In their words on dignity of moral conscience the Council (1965: GS 16, & 15; Paul VI, 1963: 76) stated:

*Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid evil, tells him inwardly at the right moment: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. His dignity lies in observing this law, and by it he will be judged. His conscience is man’s most secret core, and his sanctuary. There, he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths. By conscience, in a wonderful way, that law is made known which is fulfilled in the love of God and of one’s neighbour.*

The human conscience is to be exercised freely but not arbitrarily and absolutely. Our consciences are limited by the demands of God and ecclesiastical laws and our obligation to others (Vatican Council 11, 1964: DH 8; John Paul II, 1983: c. 223). Responsible parenthood calls for responsible collaboration and judgment before God and for the good of the spouses, children, family and society. The Church has received form the Lord the mandate to interpret the deposit of divine revelation and natural law in the light of the gospel (Vatican Council 11, 1964: DV 7; John Paul II, 1983, cc. 747, §2; 1075; John Paul II, 1995: EV 70-71). This is all the more imperative in the sacred institution like the marriage which should not be left in the private hands at the risk of subversion of its sanctity through moral relativism, unlimited freedom and evident modern human experience of relaxation of morals (Paul VI, 1968: 18; John XXIII ,1960:62-63; John Paul II, 1984: 217; John Paul II, 1981: 169; Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, 1975: 4; Pompedda, 2000: 9).


*From the moment of conception the life of every human being is to be respected in an absolute way because man is the only creature on earth that God has “wished for himself” and the spiritual soul of each man is “immediately created” by God; his whole being bears the image of the Creator. Human life is sacred, because from its beginning it involves “the creative action of God” and it remains forever in a special relationship with the Creator, who*
is its sole end. God alone is the Lord of life from its beginning until its end no one can, in any circumstance, claim for himself the right directly to destroy an innocent human being.

This is a fundamental truth of the Christian anthropology of life which should be at the judgments of parents. The Church accepts within the ambient of responsible cooperation when spouses judge to have no more children or to postpone having them even indefinitely (either because of physical, psychological, social, economic and eugenic reasons). However, the Church proposes the use of means that is in accord with nature, divine law and objective norm of morality. Hence, the Church accepts and endorses the use of natural method of family planning which operates periodic continence based on self observation and use of infertile periods or takes advantage of natural circle or rhythms immanent in reproductive system. These means actually endow the spouses with the natural dignity as (John Paul II, 1981: FC 32), “ministers of God’s plan and the benefit from their sexuality according to the original dynamism of ‘total self giving, without manipulation or alteration.”

The Church, therefore, opts for natural method and condemns instead the use of artificial means of birth control since, (Paul VI, 1968: HV16), “in the former married couples rightly use a facility provided them by nature. In the latter they obstruct the natural development of the generative process.” These forbidden means that interfere with procreative dynamics and process either before, during or after the sexual act include: (Okeke, 1993: 69), “pills, injectables, the coil, loop, condom, diaphragm, spermicides or by coitus interruptus (the withdrawal method) are forbidden. Direct sterilization of woman and direct abortion are also forbidden.” The other consequences of artificial means of birth control and contraceptive mentalities include: a case against life through abortion even for therapeutic purposes (Vatican Council II, 1965: GS 47, 51; Paul VI, 1968: HV 14; John XXIII, 1963: 259-260; John Paul II, 1995: EV 58); opening the way for marital infidelity which is contrary to the good of the children; lowering of moral standards; creating danger to health; ensuring eclipse of God, moral relativism, hedonism and instrumentalization and depersonalization of women for pleasure, efficacy and utility; (Okeke, 1993: 60-64) declining birth rate and population.

Related to artificial birth control is the practice of artificial reproduction or insemination which the Church considers to be morally unacceptable (John Paul II, 1995: EV 14);“since it separates procreation from the fully human context of the conjugal act” and contrary to responsible procreation which should be the “fruit of marriage” (Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, 1987:23); and also experimentation on human embryo or fetuses which remains a crime against life and the dignity of human person (John Paul II, 1983:37; John Paul II, 1995: EV 63). All these tendencies are contrary to the good of children and threaten the survival of civilization (John Paul II, 1994: 920).

The parents should be aware that the political authorities (GS 76 and social order are subordinate to divine natural and positive laws and moral principles which the Church enjoys the privilege to interpret and proclaim (can 747; DV 7; GS 74;EV 70, 71). This is all the more necessary when state authorities are championing legislations against life in abortion, euthanasia, aggressive population policies and use of contraceptives/artificial means of birth control, experimentation on human life/embryo, homosexual unions and divorce. On these bases the Church continues to witness a threat to life and civilization; a growing culture of death instead of the culture of life and worst still this odious agenda is financed by tax payers money. John Paul II (1995: EV 101, also EV 70; John Paul II, 1994:920; Paul VI, 1977:711-712) could not but exhort:

A society lacks solid foundations when, on the one hand, it asserts values such as the dignity of the person, justice and peace, but then, on the other hand, radically acts to the contrary by allowing or tolerating a variety of ways in which human life is devalued and violated, especially where it is weak or marginalized. Only respect for life can be the foundation and guarantee of the most precious and essential goods of society, such as democracy and peace. There can be no true democracy without recognition of every person’s dignity and without
respect for his or her rights. Nor can there be true peace unless life is defended and promoted.

The civil authority should recognize the dignity and their obligation to serve the common good among which is right to life and stability of the Christian family. While the faithful are exhorted to obey, respect and pray for the political authorities (cf. 1 Pet 2:13f; Rom 13:2-5; 1 Tim 2:2) and to pay taxes (Mark 12:13-17; Rom 13:7), however the state cannot take the place of the conscience of the individual or replace moral order. The political authorities should realize that when the citizens are obliged to obey them it is in essence “God the provident Creator of all things, whom they reverence, since he has decreed that men’s dealings with one another should be regulated by an order which he himself has established” (John XXIII, 1963: PIT 50).

**Responsible Procreation and Progeny/Fecundity**

Marriage continues to endue even where children are lacking. The good of children only concern right to conjugal act open to procreation (John Paul II, 1983: c. 1061, §1) and never right to offspring since life and child are gifts from God. The Congregation for Doctrine of Faith (1987:33) has this to say: “On the part of the spouses, the desire for a child is natural: it expresses the vocation to fatherhood and motherhood inscribed in conjugal love. This is desire can be even stronger if the couple is affected by sterility which appear incurable. Nevertheless, marriage does not confer upon the spouses the right to have a child, but only the right to perform those natural acts which are per se ordered to procreation.” Continuing, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (John Paul II 1992: CCC 2378, also Prieur, 1999:527-535) confirmed this point in these words: “A child is not something owed to one, but is a gift… A child may not be considered a piece of property, an idea which an alleged ‘right to child’ would lead”.

This gives spouses an option for other services to life and children through legal adoption. This message is necessary for Africans (Igbo people) where the purpose of marriage is not love but for the child (especially male gender) and progeny (i.e. prolongation of the family lineage). Refer SECAM, 1981:370-376; Gbuji, 1993:22; Mbah, 1993:10, 16; Ojemen, 1993:36; Urrutia, 1989:14-15).

**Responsible Education**

Responsible parenthood demands in addition an obligation to educate the children. This education of the children is a natural end of marriage and a fundamental right to every child (UNO, 1959; 1989; Holy See, 1983:78-86; Anderson, 1984:364-378; Martino, 1990:2). The child should be lovingly received and nurtured in growth through adequate and integral human education. In effect natural law links the education of children to marriage and exalts it as an inalienable right of parents and as an end of marriage in the new Code (John Paul II, 1983:c. 1055, §1). The constant teaching of the Church is rightly articulated by John Paul II (1981:FC 36; see also Vatican Council 11, 1964:GE 3, 6; John Paul II, 1983:cc. 226, 793-794, 1366; John Paul II, 1992: CCC 1653), when he exhorted:

> *The right and duty of parents to give education is essential, since it is connected with the transmission of human life; it is original and primary with regard to the educational role of others, on account of the uniqueness of the living relationship between parents and children; and it is irreplaceable and inalienable and therefore incapable of being entirely delegated to others or usurped by others.*

The content of this education is not only the formal instruction and teaching (John Paul II, 1983:c. 796), or Christian or Catholic education (John Paul II, 1983: cc. 226, §2: 794, §1) but wholistic and integral formation of the human person, that is, involving physical, moral, intellectual, social and religious education (1964: GE 3;1965: GS 48; John Paul II,
1983: cc. 233; 774, §2; 835, §4; 851, 2°; 855; 867; 890; 914; 793; 795; 798; 1136; John Paul II, 1981: FC, 21, 26; John Paul II, 1995: EV 92) and instruction on Responsible Parenthood (i.e. formation for future parental status and necessary issues of sex education). The parents are required to “give their children clear and delicate sex education that is truly and fully personal as enrichment of whole person, body, emotion and soul and sign of sincere and authentic conjugal love and self gift” (John Paul II, 1981: FC 37; John Paul II, 1995: EV 97).

Finally, in the midst of need to meet up economic demands of the family, some of the parents are no more at home. Women have declared the equality in extreme to be always on the road doing more than one job. The desire for wealth and capitalistic opportunities of the country we are living in are sources of tensions in our lives, divisions in our family and empty future for our children. The results are evident in the lives of children that suffer neglect of parental presence. Do you have time to stay with your children, to assess the content of the education they receive from the School? Are the contents in line with Igbo cultural values and Christian faith, or are they contrary to our natural identity? Have you considered the option of sending your children for secondary school education in Nigeria at least to rescue them before their maturity from the excessive Western influences that is clearly and openly contrary to our authentic cultural values and sound Christian morals? Let us remember the advice from the words of Ben Sirach (Ecclesiastes 3:1ff), “There is a time for everything....”

AN INVITATION TO SINCERE FRATERNAL SOLIDARITY

In Africa, as well as in Igbo land, we have marked value of community solidarity, community identity and community security (Onwubiko, 1988: 21-22). These values of community solidarity and community life are reflected still today in the extended family networks of mutual sharing, caring and love. The individual receives his identity and reason for existence in the community and in the family. This is also clearly recognized by the magisterium that called on all Africans to preserve this community fraternity heritage as priceless wealth and never to succumb to individualism that is alien to their cultural traditions (Paul VI, 1967: AT 12; Okeke, 1998:403). Furthermore, these values are demonstrated in the care for others, the warmth in human relationships, in marriage affairs and the training of children. The nuclear family and extended family see it as their joint responsibility both in ownership of the wife and training of children. We witness expressions of “our wife” and “our children” among members of the nuclear family to show their collective responsibility and solidarity towards all members of the family (Mbah, 1993: 14, 17; Ogbalu, 1963:19: “The training of children is everybody’s responsibility and every person is expected to correct a child whether they are related or not. A child is a child of all”).

For us Igbo citizens, we have also in addition to the above, marked characteristics of noble cultural heritage, committed industry and struggle for survival, and deep religiosity. The Igbo person is committed to exploiting all avenues anywhere to accomplish these immanent and inherent motivations in life. The Igbo man is known to operate more than two homes, i.e. in the village and in abroad. In relation to religion and our Christian faith, we should show greater solidarity by being part of our monthly Igbo Mass and re-union and not only the annual first day of January get-together.

We are well aware that the grand geometric exodus of the Igbo citizens and other Nigerians in 80s till now, were occasioned by the severe economic predicaments and quagmire of our nation, Nigeria, which were necessitated by our corrupt leaders operating misguided polices and legislations. We recall the celebrated publication of Chinua Achebe in 1983 where he remarked very truly that the trouble with Nigeria is leadership that is “the unwillingness or inability of leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal
example which are the hallmarks of true leadership” (Achebe, 1983: 1; see also Chiegboka, 2006: 25-31).

This sojourn of ours to the West brought the good, the bad and the ugly in our cultural fabrics and cherished identity. The western world have made its good impacts in the areas of economic promises, improved human resource development through education and technological knowledge. However, we must add that the individualism, excessive freedom and over-centration on wealth and value of jobs rather the dignity of the human person have left severe scars in our community solidarity and family stability.

The Igbo Christian families today are besieged by lots of crisis and tensions which are specifically man made and avoidable. Owing to the witnessed situation of women earning better salaries more than their husbands and the added trends in liberty and equality, the leadership of the husband in the family is questioned. In addition, some husbands are not even open to accept the improved situations of the status of their wives or permit their wife to extend charity to his in-laws (remember that our culture operates these values: ogo bu ikwu ato and ogo bu chi onye).

The Igbo Associations are not exempt in this turmoil as divisions are experienced along villages, towns, States and different other affiliations with greater demonstration of unthinkable intrigues, character assassinations and establishment of parallel unions. I will not say that this phenomenon is absent in our Church assemblies. In addition, certain individuals are also affected fundamentally either because of wrong option for the evil rather than the good (i.e. for 419; OBT, credit card fraud; other crimes which are clear to you all); or because of the wrong approach to the credit card/mortgage systems of a capitalistic western/US environments (NB this is contrary to Igbo industry and orientation unto capacity to act-Ozuome), or acceptance of life contrary to sound morals, sincerity, and faith in God because of an extremely free and open western societies marked with relativism and subjectivism. We must all remember that in spite of our status, as citizens, or with green card or R’s visas, etc., we are not yet fully accepted and incorporated in the system, since we are still considered always as visitors, that do most of the jobs Americans will not do (and of course other discriminating experiences which you know better than me).

Dear brethren, Jesus, the source of our salvation (Acts 4:12), and to whom all knees bow (Phil 2:10) exhorts us thus: “Let your heart not be troubled” (John 14:1), to keep Lords day holy and to be perfect as our heavenly Father (Matt 5: 48; 1 Thes 4:3; can 210, LG 39). And St Paul advises us also: “Let there be no divisions among you” (1 Cor 1: 10) and let the peace and word of the Lord in all its richness find a place in your homes (Col 3: 15-16). And finally, with St Paul, (Phil 4:4-9), I conclude:

Rejoice in the Lord always, I say it again: rejoice and may everyone experience your gentle and understanding heart. The Lord is near: do not be anxious about everything. In everything resort to prayer and supplication together with thanksgiving and bring your requests before God. Then the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers and sisters, fill your minds with whatever is truthful, holy, just, pure, lovely and noble. Be mindful of whatever deserves praise and admiration. Put into practice what you have learned from me, what you heard from me or saw me doing, and the God of peace will be with you.

THANK YOU AND GOD BLESS YOU ALL
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