

## Family Catechesis towards Sustainability and Development of the Home

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### **Abstract**

The Second Vatican Council in its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World states that: “The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well” (GS n. 1). This should be the right attitude and concern in a society that has individualistic tendencies. The quality of the ideal family and what it ought to be also reflects the quality of the society. -Unfortunately this fact is often forgotten by social institutions. The factors which undermine the family are many and these may include economic, social, philosophical, etc, and they often profoundly interlinked in a sense. As a result, diverse forces can attack the institution of family, sometimes causing great disruption and in some cases even its very disintegration. Undoubtedly, the family is instituted by God and shall continue to survive despite all odds because of His grace and special care for it. Hence marital harmony and family cohesion is a spiritual principle only gained from one's trust and dependence on the power and divine will of God. The Lord ordains the family to represent on the planet earth as a virgin, mother and teacher. This article discusses the empirical disposition of the family made one in the image and likeness of God through the sacramental teaching of matrimony and posits that it is only by living out its call as mother and teacher within the Christian principles that she saves human society from disintegration.

### **1. Introduction**

There are a lot of insights about families. Books written from the Christian perspective readily incorporate developments from the fields of sociology, psychology, anthropology, and other human sciences in understanding

how families operate. We have in a sense become absorbed in suggesting and proffering solutions for families to function effectively and we have lost sight of their theological foundations.

The origin of family is from God and therefore it is a matter for theological discourse. The institution of marriage, one must not forget, is not one designed by the will of the parties. The parties enter into the institution by an act of self-donation which certainly requires free will; but they do not define the institution. The institution of marriage, like all of *what is*, is entirely dependent on God the Creator, the God who is the "author of marriage" and who "endowed it with various benefits and purposes. When for instance saint John Paul II challenged families to "become what you are" in his apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 17, he intended that they would become increasingly aware of the spirit of God which is the impetus and source of family fulfilment. The family as an institution founded by God is today plagued by many negative factors. However, despite such negative factors, we know that many marriages survive as an institution and many people are happy in their marriages.

This paper as a reality check explores some of the foundations of the Christian family, from an examination of Church documents, in order to formulate a theology of family catechesis. The tradition of the church has consistently acknowledged the family as a unique societal unit. John Paul II (2006, p. 99) terms it as "the sanctuary of life" and "the first and fundamental structure for human ecology".

## **2. The Home as the First Moral School of the Child**

The Nigerian child today according to Unimna and Okoli (2008, pp. 191-201) has a more crisis-laden life style to battle than his predecessor. Almost three-quarter of the children raised today come without a proper preparation for the transition from the traditional system of thought to the Westernized one. There are many indicators to show that modern children experience greater difficulties than did those of 1960-80s (ibid). For instance, juvenile delinquency, teenage pregnancy, drug or substance abuse, school dropout, exposure to pornography, school violence, child abuse, and prostitution are on the increase. These issues and problems pose great challenges for families especially parents.

The first historical situation in which every person finds himself or herself is the home. It is there that the individual begins his earthly pilgrimage by first

absorbing the attitudes, mannerism and reactions of his parents who constitute his first visible world. A child's education therefore starts at home. Our homes are the best educational institutions that children can ever attend. Parents' attitude to one another is a guiding factor and is of fundamental importance to a child's upbringing. Most of the impressions children get from their own homes are imprinted permanently in their systems and lasts with them for a lifetime. If we look back at our own childhood we will find that this is true (Unimna&Okoli 200). The pattern begins the moment the baby's eyes start to focus on his immediate environment which is when the parents become role-models for a child's blank mind.

By the time a child is old enough to go to school, the essential pattern of learning has already been set. A teacher can only build on the foundation laid which is a psychological cast that has been permanently moulded deep into a child's mind. Parents always provide the raw material or the general make-up of that mould. Expensive schools may well be the answer to a child's bright future, but we must admit, it is a materialistic future that we are talking about. If a child grows up to develop bad relationships with friends and colleagues, it is not as a result of his school education but his upbringing which ultimately points to the home.

When we say that a certain child has no manners, we readily blame the parents and rarely the school which he attends. The attitude of always blaming other parents for their child's bad behavior exposes our own failures unconsciously. Does the sending of a child to an expensive school, a psychological reaction, to try to divert the potential blame for the bad upbringing of the child? Such Parents may well later say, "I don't know what went wrong. I sent him to the best school I could afford". It is an age-old virtue that money cannot buy good manners. The kind of person your child grows up to be depends a lot on you. Parents effectively carry out the role communicating religious and moral values to their children not just by word of mouth and by example but by the way they structure and interpret the various events that shape their children's life. This is because a child's idea of right and wrong is initially formed from the way parents react to what he or she does within and in the neighborhood.

Benedict XVI concurs that Parents must be always free to transmit to their children, responsibly and without constraints, their heritage of faith, values and culture. The family, the first cell of human society, remains the primary

training ground for harmonious relations at every level of co-existence, human, national and international. Wisdom suggests that this is the road to building a strong and fraternal social fabric, in which young people can be prepared to assume their proper responsibilities in life, in a free society and in a spirit of understanding and peace (2010: 51-52). Parents therefore need to pay a lot of attention to their children as they are growing up. These days a lot of external factors can influence a child to go the wrong way but if the atmosphere at home is healthy and parents are able to guide their children well, there is little possibility that they will go wrong.

### **3. Catechetical Documents on the Family**

To understand catechesis as the duty of parents by word and example, a few documents and pronouncements of the holy mother Church and Teacher will be examined.

#### **a. Ecclesia in Africa**

The African Synod Fathers launched an explicit appeal for each African Christian family to become a privileged place for evangelical witness, a true domestic church, a community which believes and evangelizes, a community in dialogue with God and generously open to the service of humanity. It is in the heart of family that parents are by word and example the first heralds of the faith with regard to their children. It is here that the father of the family, the mother, children and all members of the family exercise the priesthood of the baptized in a privileged way by the reception of the sacraments (Eucharist and Confession), prayers and thanksgiving, the witness of a holy life, self-denial and where active charity is greatly lived. Thus, the African home is the first school of Christian life and human enrichment. Parents are to see to the Christian education of their children. With the practical help offered by strong, serene and committed Christian families, dioceses could develop a program for the family apostolate as part of their overall pastoral plan. It is there also that they should be involved in preparing programs for further education of children in parishes. The Christian family, as a domestic church built on the solid cultural pillars and noble values of the African tradition of the family setting is called upon to be a powerful nucleus of Christian witness in a society undergoing rapid and profound changes (EA no. 92). The Synod considers the urgency of this challenge given the pastoral issues facing the stability of families. To face the challenges of our time, the parents of tomorrow need to be adequately trained in the path of sacrifice, self-control and discipline.

**b. Catechesi Tradendae (Catechesis in our Time)**

This document teaches that family's catechetical activity has a special character, which is in a sense irreplaceable. The special character has been rightly stressed by the Church, particularly by the Second Vatican Council. Education in the faith by parents, which should begin from the children's tender age, is already being given when the members of a family help each other to grow in faith through the witness of their Christian lives, a witness that is often without words but which perseveres throughout the day-to-day life lived in accordance with the Gospel. This catechesis is more incisive when, in the course of family events (such as the reception of the sacraments, the celebration of great liturgical feasts, the birth of a child, bereavement) care is taken to explain in the home the Christian or religious content of the events. But that is not enough: Christian parents must strive to follow and repeat, within the setting of family life, the more methodical teaching received elsewhere. The fact that the truths about the main questions of faith and Christian living are thus repeated within a family setting filled with love and respect often makes it possible to influence the children in a decisive way for life. The parents themselves profit from the effort which is demanded of them, for in a catechetical dialogue of this sort, each individual both receives and gives. Family catechesis, therefore, precedes, accompanies, and enriches all other forms of catechesis. Furthermore, in places where anti-religious legislation endeavors even to prevent education in the faith, and in places where widespread unbelief or invasive secularism makes real religious growth practically impossible, "the church of the home" remains the lifeline where children and young people can receive an authentic catechesis. Thus, there cannot be too great an effort on the part of Christian parents to prepare for this ministry of being their own children's catechists and to carry it out with tireless zeal. Encouragement must also be given to individuals or institutions who through person-to-person contacts, through meetings, and through all kinds of pedagogical means, help parents to perform their task: the service they are doing to catechesis is beyond price (CT no. 68).

**c. Gravissimum Educationis (Declaration on Christian Education)**

This document recognizes unequivocally that since parents have cooperated with God in giving children their life, they are bound by the most serious obligation to educate their offspring and therefore they must be recognized as the primary and principal educators. This role in education is so important that even with difficulty it should be supplied where it is lacking. Parents are the ones who must create a family atmosphere

animated by love and respect for God and man, in which the well-rounded personal and social education of children is fostered. Hence the family is the first school of the social virtues that every society needs. It is particularly in the Christian family, enriched by the grace and office of the sacrament of matrimony, that children should be taught from their early years to have the knowledge of God according to the faith received in Baptism, to worship Him, and to love their neighbors. Here, too, they find their first experience of a wholesome human society and of the Church. Finally, it is through the family that they are gradually led to a companionship with their fellowmen and with the people of God. Let parents, then, recognize the inestimable importance that a truly Christian family has for the life and progress of God's own people and for peaceful development of the society (GE no. 3).

#### **d. General Directory for Catechesis**

Pastors should remember that in helping parents and educators to fulfill their mission well, it is the Church that is being built up. Moreover, it is an excellent occasion for adult catechesis that guarantees the sustainability of the Christian community.

The witness of Christian life given by parents in the family comes to children with tenderness and parental respect. Children thus perceive and joyously live the closeness of God and of Jesus made manifest by their parents in such a way that this first Christian experience frequently leaves decisive traces which last throughout lifetime. This childhood religious awakening which takes place in the family is irreplaceable. It is consolidated when, on the occasion of certain family events and festivities, care is taken to explain the Christian or religious content of such events in the home. It is deepened all the more when parents comment on the more methodical catechesis which their children later receive in the Christian community and help them to appropriate it. Indeed, "family catechesis precedes, accompanies and enriches all forms of catechesis" (GDC no.178, 226).

Parents should fervently remember that they have received in the sacrament of Matrimony "the grace and the ministry of the Christian education of their children, to whom they transmit and bear witness to human and religious values. This educational activity which is both human and religious is a true ministry, through which the Gospel is transmitted and radiated so that family life is transformed into a journey of faith and the school of Christian life. As children grow, exchange of faith becomes mutual and in a catechetical dialogue of this sort, each individual both receives and

gives. It is for this reason that the Christian community must give very special attention to parents. By means of personal contacts, meetings, courses and also adult catechesis directed toward parents, the Christian community must help parents assume their responsibilities which is particularly delicate today, especially that of educating their children in the faith. This is particularly pressing in those areas where civil legislation does not permit or makes the freedom of education in the faith difficult in which case, the domestic Church is virtually the only environment in which children and young people can receive authentic catechesis.

In this light, the General Directory for Catechesis acknowledges that parents are the primary educators in the faith. Together with them, especially in certain cultures, all members of the family play an active part in the education of the younger members. It is thus necessary to determine more concretely the sense in which the Christian family community is a locus of catechesis. The family is defined as a domestic Church, that is, in every Christian family the different aspects and functions of the life of the entire Church may be reflected, namely: mission; catechesis by witnessing; prayer, etc. Indeed, in the same way as the Church, the family “is a place in which the Gospel is transmitted and from which it extends”. The family as a locus of catechesis has a unique privilege: transmitting the Gospel by rooting it in the context of profound human values. On this human base, Christian initiation is more profound, that is the awakening of the sense of God; the first steps in prayer; education of the moral conscience; formation in the Christian sense of human love, understood as a reflection of the love of God the Father, the Creator. Indeed, it is a Christian education that has more to be witnessed to than taught, more occasional than systematic, more on-going and daily than structured into periods. In family catechesis, the role of grandparents is also of growing importance. Their wisdom and sense of the religious is often times decisive in creating a true Christian climate.

**e. Familiaris Consortio (The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World)**

The document (nos. 39, 53& 60) identifies parents as the first and foremost educators of their children. Their role as educators is so decisive that scarcely anything can compensate for their failure in it. The right and duty of parents to give education is essential and sacrosanct.

The sacrament of marriage gives to the educational role the dignity and vocation of being really and truly a ministry of the Church at the service of

the building up of her members. So great and splendid is the educational ministry of Christian parents that Saint Thomas has no hesitation in comparing it with the ministry of priests: "Some only propagate and guard spiritual life by a spiritual ministry: this is the role of the sacrament of Orders; others do this for both corporal and spiritual life brought about by the sacrament of marriage, by which a man and a woman join in order to beget offspring and bring them up to worship God" (FC no. 38). The Synod too, taking up and developing the indications of the Council, presented the educational mission of the Christian family as a true ministry through which the Gospel is transmitted and radiated, so that family life itself becomes an itinerary of faith and in some way a Christian initiation and school of following Christ. Within a family that is aware of this gift, Paul VI (EN no. 71) writes that at the family level "all the members evangelize and are evangelized".

The ministry of evangelization carried out by Christian parents is original and irreplaceable. It assumes the characteristics typical of family life itself, which should be interwoven with love, simplicity, practical exercise of virtues and family values in daily witness. The concrete example and living witness of parents is fundamental and irreplaceable especially in educating their children to pray. Only by praying together with their children can a father and mother exercise their royal priesthood, penetrate the innermost depths of their children's hearts and leave an impression that the future events in their lives will not be able to efface. It is by so doing that the future of humanity is passed on by way of the family.

#### **f. On The Apostolate of Lay People**

The document teaches that although it is the responsibility of all members of the family to promote the development and potential of each member at every age, it rests with parents to prepare their children from an early age, within the family circle, to discern God's love and call for all men and women which is why Okumu (2009, p. 19) espouses "every family should be a training centre for good manners, especially avoiding certain excesses". They will teach them above all by their example to have concern for their neighbors' needs, both material needs and spiritual way of life should be emphasized. The whole family, accordingly, and its community life should become a kind of apprenticeship to the apostolate. Hence, no one can replace parents as they are universally the most important teachers in the life of a child.

**g. Canonical Obligations of Parents as Religious Educators of their Children**

Vatican II changed the perspective of the Code of Canon Law of 1917 where the role of parents in the religious education of their children was a largely inactive one. Vatican II calls emphatically that parents accept their role as primary educators of their children. Since Vatican II, catechesis is no longer seen as a responsibility reserved solely to ordained priests. It came to be seen as a shared responsibility of Christ's faithful and a duty and right given first and foremost to parents because of their unique and intimate relationship with their children. Therefore, it is an irreplaceable and inalienable right of parents rooted in both natural and divine law and which is resounded in scripture as it speaks to the religious legacy that parents are to pass on to their children. The rights and responsibilities of parents are rooted within the context of the marital union. Our current Code of Canon Law emphasizes that marriage is ordered to both the procreation and education of children and the two are intimately intertwined with education as a continuous and natural progression from procreation. In fact, the procreation and education of one's children is viewed by the Church as so important that it is seen as one of the essential elements that is linked to marriage by natural law.

Saint Augustine in his write up *educatioprolis* (education of children), defines the procreation and education of children as a *bonum* of marriage (good of marriage). This *bonum*, according to Saint Augustine is not limited to the act of procreation only but includes the care and raising of offspring, as well as their spiritual education. The education of offspring is seen to be two-fold: first, providing for the physical needs of the offspring and secondly, guiding their moral and spiritual development.

The basis for all canons on parental rights and duties is found in Canon 1055, the first of the canons on marriage; its placement establishes it as a norm key for interpreting the canons on parental rights and responsibilities toward children:

*#1 "The sacramental covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life and which is ordered by its nature to the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring, has been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament between baptized."*

The role of parents in the comprehensive education of their children is a recurring theme in the current Code of Canon Law in Books II, III and IV under the rights and obligations of the Christian faithful, the teaching office, marriage and sanctifying office respectively. Parents are the first catechists in the lives of their children and are primary responsible for both cultivating and passing on the faith to them. The canons in our current canonical legislation identify parents as the primary educators of their children; this right is emphasized and encouraged in the canons on catechesis especially in **Canon 226, §2** which clearly states a basic right of parents:

*“Since they have given life to their children, parents have a most grave obligation and possess the right to educate them. Therefore, it is for Christian parents particularly to take care of the Christian education of their children according to the doctrine handed on by the Church.”*

The following canons should be taken into serious consideration regarding the issue of education of children by parents in spite of their busy schedule:

**Canon 1136** repeats the exhortation, *“Parents have the most grave duty and the primary right to take care as best they can for the physical, social, cultural, moral and religious education of their offspring.”*

**Canon 774, §2** states that parents above others are obliged to form their children by word and example in faith and in the practice of Christian life.

**Canon 776** tells us that it is the pastor who must provide for the catechetical formation but that he is to promote and foster the role of the parents in the catechetical formation of their children.

**Canons 759, 795, 211, 793 and 1136** explain how bishops, pastors and parents together share the responsibility for catechesis.

The catechetical documents issued by the Holy See, along with the 1983 Code of Canon Law, all emphasize the role of parents in the sacramental preparation of their children and in the initial assessment of their children's readiness. Proper preparation of the child is essential to ensure the child's preparation for the reception of the sacraments. A series of canons from our canonical legislation speak of this reality:

**Canon 835, §4** states that parents have a special share in the office of sanctification by seeing to the Christian education of their children;

**Canon 890 and 914** speak on the sanctifying mission of parents in the Christian education of their children;

**Canons 212, §2; 213; 529, §1; 226, §2; 793, §1** explain other rights that pertain to parents who want to 'home-catechize' their children and other duties of local pastors.

#### **h. Evangelii Nuntiandi (Evangelization in the Modern World)**

One cannot fail to stress the evangelizing role of the family in the evangelizing apostolate of the laity. At different moments in the Church's history and especially in the Second Vatican Council, the family is accorded with the beautiful name "domestic Church". This means that there should be found in every Christian family the various aspects of the entire Church. Furthermore, the family, like the Church, ought to be a place where the Gospel is transmitted and from which the Gospel radiates. In a family which is conscious of this mission, all the members evangelize and are evangelized. The parents not only communicate the Gospel to their children, but from their children they themselves can receive the same Gospel as deeply lived by them. Such a family becomes the evangelizer of many other families, and of the neighborhood which she is part of it. Families formed as a result of mixed marriages also have **the duty of proclaiming Christ to the children in the fullness sense and based on common Baptism**; they have moreover the difficult task of becoming builders of unity (EN no. 71).

#### **i. Catechism of the Catholic Church**

The fruitfulness of conjugal love extends to the fruits of the moral, spiritual, and supernatural life that parents hand on to their children by education. **Parents are the principal and first educators of their children** in the sense that the fundamental task of marriage and family is to be at the service of life.

In our own time, in a world often alien and even hostile to faith, believing families are of primary importance as centers of living, radiant faith. For this reason the Second Vatican Council, using an ancient expression, calls the family the *Ecclesia domestica*. It is in the bosom of the family that parents are "by word and example ...the first heralds of the faith with regards to their children" (CCC: 1653).

The fecundity of conjugal love cannot be reduced solely to the procreation of children, but must extend to their moral education and their spiritual formation. The role of parents in education is of such importance that it is almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute. The right and the duty of parents to educate their children are primordial and inalienable.

Parents have the first responsibility for the education of their children. They bear witness to this responsibility first by creating a home where tenderness, forgiveness, respect, fidelity, and disinterested service are the rule. The home is well suited for education in the virtues.

**j. Gaudium et Spes (The Church in the Modern World)**

The family is a kind of school of deeper humanity which if it is to achieve the full flowering of its life and mission, needs the kindly communion of minds and the joint cooperation of spouses, as well as the painstaking cooperation of parents in the education of their children. Both the active presence of a father and the care of a mother are highly beneficial to the formation of children. Children need the care of their parents at home. Children should be so educated such that later as adults they can choose their state of life and pursue their vocation with a mature sense of responsibility. Vocation here includes both the priestly and religious state, as well as the marital state. If they marry, they can establish their family in favorable, moral, social and economic conditions. Parents or guardians should provide prudent advice and guidance to their young with respect to establishing a family or a home and the young ought to listen gladly. At the same time no pressure either directly or indirectly should be put on the young with regards to their life partner or to coerce them to enter into marriage. Thus, the family in which the various generations come together and help one another grow wiser and harmonize personal rights with other requirements of social life, is the foundation of society. Therefore, all those who exercise influence over communities and social groups should work efficiently for the welfare of marriage and the family. Public authority should regard it a sacred duty to recognize, protect and promote their authentic nature, to shield public morality and see to the promotion of family life. The right of parents to beget and educate their children in the bosom of the family must be safeguarded. Children too, who unhappily lack the blessing of a family should be protected by prudent legislation, various undertakings and also duly assisted (GS no. 52).

**k. Lumen Gentium (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church)**

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council observe that the family is, so to speak, the domestic church. In it, parents should be by word and example, the first preachers of the faith to their children; they should encourage them in the vocation which is proper to each of them, fostering with special care a vocation to a sacred state of life that bears fruit in plentiful.

Where Christianity pervades the entire mode of family life, it gradually transforms it; one will find there both the practice and an excellent school of the lay apostolate. In such homes, husbands and wives find their proper vocation in being witnesses of the faith and sharers of the love of Christ to one another including the children. The Christian family loudly proclaims both the present virtues of the Kingdom of God and the hope of a blessed life to come. Thus, by its example and its witness it accuses the world of sin and enlightens those who seek the truth (LG: 11, 35). In this light, St. Francis of Assisi admonishes that we preach the gospel at all times and if necessary we use words.

**4. Marriage is more than a Bond between Man and Woman and more than living happily together**

Christian marriage is a mystery and unless those who enter into it see it that way, they are likely to feel disappointed in their expectations. As a mystery, it is deeper than the mere bond of husband and wife. It has as its model the eternal unity of Christ with his church (Cf, Eph 5:21-33). The unity established between husband and wife reflects the unity of the Church to Christ. Hence, it is not only a bond between one man and one woman, according to Arnold (2002, p. 58), it is sealed by the greater bond of unity with God and his people. The bond must always come first and is the same bond that we pledge at our baptism and reaffirm at every celebration of the Holy Eucharist. By placing their loyalty to Christ and his church, married couples assume a different and sacred dimension. Both partners must recognize that the unity of faith is more important than the emotional bond of their marriage. Hence if our first allegiance is not to Jesus and the church, who is it to? (Cf. Lk. 9:57-60).

If marriage is to be truly healthy and enduring, it must be according to the order of God, founded on unity of spirit, one heart and soul. In the New Testament, marriage is reflected as a symbol for the unity of Christ with the church, his bride. In the Gospel of Saint John, Jesus is compared to a bridegroom (L'Osservatore Romano 2010, no. 52), and in the book of

Revelation we are told that “the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready” (Rev. 19:7-9). It is not without significance that Jesus changed water into wine at the wedding at Cana to clearly show the joy in marriage. According to Johann (2002, p. 16), it is equally clear that to Jesus, marriage is a holy matter. He takes it so seriously that he speaks about it with uncompromising sharpness against even the slightest step toward its destruction: “therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Mt. 19:6-9). This goes further to show that, whenever the bond of marriage is broken, love and the unity of spirit and soul between the two is broken and shattered which also affects their relationship with God.

In the present day culture, the institution of marriage is facing a lot of challenges. In many instances, much of what is called love is nothing but selfish desire. Many people think that fulfilment can be found without sacrifice, commitment, and faithfulness. Even though many live together happily, they are nevertheless afraid to love each other unconditionally. Johann (2002, p. 17) further observes that “faithfulness between a husband and wife is a reflection of God’s eternal faithfulness, for it is God who brings every true bond together”. In God’s faithfulness, couples find the strength to let love flow through their lives, and to let their gifts unfold for each other.

## **5. Remote Potholes to Healthy Christian family**

In the late twentieth century, marriage began to face renewed challenges as roles and expectations of persons who go into marriage began to change. There are many factors involved here, be it social, religious and economic, to mention but a few. The following are some reflections on some identifiable negative influences, factors and forces that act against the marriage covenant:

### ***a. Sex outside Marriage and Children out of Wed Lock***

According to Laumann (1994, p. 503) men and women who are virgins at marriage have dramatically more stable marriages than those who have nonmarital or extramarital sex before marital union which according to him is largely due to the fact that those who abstain from nonmarital sex are also more likely to be religious and have a strong commitment to lifelong marriage. In most traditional societies, women more than men, have been more likely to be virgins at first marriage. In recent decades, however, the percentage of women who wait until they are married to have sexual intercourse has plummeted. A majority of women who married in the 2000s first had intercourse five years or more prior to marrying (Laumann, 1994, p.

504). What this implies is that more women are having children outside wedlock and they don't marry the father of their child / children. Childbearing outside marriage negatively affects a woman's chance of forming a successful marriage in the future. Subsequently, once a lady has had a child outside of marriage, her chances of marrying the man of her dream drops dramatically. According to a recent study (Laumann, 1994, p. 504), that chance is almost 40% lower for those who had a first child outside of marriage and 51% for women who do not marry the biological father of their child within six months of birth. By the age of 35, only about 70% of all unwedded mothers are married compared to 88% of those who have not had a child (ibid). This analysis suggests that family virginity is at great risk of losing the pattern of healthy perception of life.

### *b. Cohabitation*

Although many young people believe that cohabitation will improve their chances for having a lasting marriage, there is no evidence to support such belief. On the contrary, a substantial body of evidence suggests that cohabiting couples are more likely to breakup after marriage than those who do not live together before marriage. Compared to marital unions, cohabiting unions are also associated with poorer communication, lower relationship satisfaction and self-esteem, less support from family and friends, and higher level of domestic violence. Cohabiting couples lead more separate and independent lives than married couples. They experience more ambiguity and uncertainty about the level of commitment and investment in the relationship. Partners who live together are more likely to be sexually unfaithful, and thus more prone to suspicion and violence.

Much of the scholarly debates over cohabitation focus on why people who cohabit are at a higher risk for these negative outcomes and particularly the higher risk of divorce when they marry. Part of the risk is attributed to "selection effect", commonly referred to as trial marriage or begetting children before marriage, the fact that cohabiters have different characteristics from non-cohabiters. For example, people who are less religious, divorced, high school dropouts, or have experienced childhood sexual abuse, high levels of marital discord or parental divorce during childhood are more likely to cohabit. However, not all of the negative effects of cohabitation are due to the selection effect. Some research suggests that cohabitation itself reduces commitment and esteem for marriage, especially among those who have more than one cohabiting experience.

Though cohabiting unions may look a lot like marriages, they are very different in their formation and orientation to commitment. Cohabitation is an agreement reached privately. Marriage is an event celebrated publicly. Cohabitation is entered into informally, sometimes casually. Marriage is entered into with all kinds of formal rituals and ceremonies. Cohabitation is a nonbinding commitment for an indeterminate period of time. Marriage sets forth a clear statement as to the binding nature and expected duration of the commitment.

Adversely Stanley (2005) observes that cohabiting couples may “slide” into marriage rather than “decide” to marry. In other words, they may fail to undergo the transition from the contingent commitment of a cohabiting partnership to the permanent commitment of marriage. By carrying a “cohabiting mindset” into marriage, they are then at greater risk for divorce.

### *c. A Culture of Divorce*

The tendency of divorce can be traced to the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve acted independently and blamed each other for the respective predicaments. In primeval Africa precisely, marriage was so revered, married couples were cherished and viewed to be the most responsible people in their communities or societies. Sequel to this, advice on public issues was sought from married couples / persons. On the other hand singles were not always regarded or consulted when it pertains to serious issues.

However, the wake of the 21<sup>st</sup> century marks another epoch in the concept, nature, definition and understanding of the marriage institution not just in Nigeria but the world at large. There are more and more orientations and movements springing up. For instance, gay marriage, multiple wedding, co-habitation, white wedding, free union and court wedding amongst others all of which have many implications for the marriage Institution.

Besides the aforementioned global malaise, the spate of divorce in Nigeria has soared as high as an eagle in recent times. A situation whereby a man and a woman tie the knot before God and man today then opt for divorce in the court less than an hour as a result of unfaithfulness, misunderstanding and suspicion is now common. Other factors facilitating broken homes in Nigeria are so numerous to mention but a good number of them are triggered as a result of the quest for materialism, marrying for economic

reasons, women emancipation, sexual dissatisfaction, parental / family or third party intrusion, barrenness or sterility, provocation and brutality, suspicion and infidelity.

The widespread social implications of the culture of divorce have led to other attitudes and behaviors. Furthermore, the fear of divorce also threatens confidence in the permanence or indissolubility of Christian marriage. People who worry a lot about the possibility of divorce are more likely to limit their investment in marriage and evaluate their satisfaction in marriage on the basis of a short-term satisfaction. Furthermore, researches have shown that divorcees are prone to lack of concentration, loss of job, drug addiction, smoking, prostitution, sickness, suicide or untimely death even as their children often end-up on the streets and engage themselves in other social vices such as hawking, begging, and unruly behavior which Psychologists term as products of "lack of parental love and care".

#### *d. The Rise of Hyper-individualism*

Cross-national studies on cultural trends point to the pervasive effects of a modern form of individualism that places high value on individual expressiveness, privacy, autonomy, and freedom from institutional controls over sex and family life. To a large extent, the value of personal freedom in private life overrides concerns for child development, family stability, and kinship loyalty. Even economic self-interest takes a back seat in the quest for independent selfhood. As Wolf (2004, p. 176) observes that people will sacrifice a degree of economic well-being to achieve the autonomy and privacy that accompany independent living. This pervasive form of individualism has negatively affected Christian marriage and family life in different advanced western societies. This trend has equally influenced the change in family setting due to urbanization and pursuance of personal satisfaction.

#### *e. Some Practical Therapy*

One critical area where the church, the bride of Christ can help is proper preparation for would be couples and by this I mean the church should insist on the participation in well organized and well prepared pre-marital courses and seminars. This is not an anti-marriage attitude, attempt or approach, but the recognition that too frequently many couples simply do not understand what they are getting into. A rushed marriage preparation is prone to a lot of problems and issues. For instance, many don't consider the financial implications of marriage, the cost of housing, their roles in the home, expectations, etc.

Another area that needs special attention is human sexuality. In order not to spend time flogging a dead horse, it is a fact that only a few catholic moral theologians are writing about sexuality and marriage (Shannon, 1990, pp. 19-20). Therefore, sexuality is not adequately treated in the seminaries and houses of formation which often leaves pastoral agents ill prepared to handle marriage issues. More time should be given to human sexuality formation in all spheres of church life. The church has the resources for that. The sacramental nature of the church itself is rooted in the body of Christ; the church has been a great patron of the arts and the celebration of embodied human reality and she recognizes that marriage is a critical dimension of the building up of the kingdom of God. The church desperately needs the freedom to develop these realities in a positive way.

The church also needs to come to terms with the reality of the experience of married couples. If the church is a community of the faithful, then the faithful need to have their experience heard, listened to and appreciated. In this dimension, I am thinking particularly of sexuality and the need for the church to be open to fruitful discussions on marital issues. The laity should be allowed to contribute meaningfully on matters of family life.

## **6. Conclusion**

It must be acknowledged that no marriage is perfect in all ramifications. Nevertheless, it should not scare new comers. Each party has its limitations. It is equally wrong to idealize marriage as to underestimate its potentialities. Couples of this treasured institution should be convinced that their marriage, with its particular difficulties, is also a field in which lies buried the pearl of maturation in holiness. The Holy Family, the beacon of true love, is to be contemplated in every family situation so as to draw light, strength and consolation. This is because to be committed to the reality of marriage in and with Christ raises significantly one's chance of finding and growing in a mature love. True spirituality in marriage means that partners are no longer victims of fads and choices out of tune with their commitments. To be faithful to their commitment, couples must not fixate on what worked in the past as that will make them immobile. It is in and through creative fidelity, a marital consecration gains in strength and flexibility to move forward in spite of all odds. It can bend with the winds of change without breaking. Being faithful does not mean being encapsulated in the past; it always implies openness to the surprises of daily life. In all circumstances, loyalty to Christ and his church provide the necessary foundation on the rock that can resist the tides of daily challenges.

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