

Case Report

Reception of *Gaudium et Spes* in Africa: The Challenges of Marriage and the Family

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This paper examines some of the challenges of marriage and family life, using *Gaudium et Spes* as a document that does not seek to pass judgments on man's activity but rather to reveal the truth of man to man. The necessity of a dialogue, such as the one profoundly expressed in *Gaudium et Spes*, is important, of great assistance and supportive to the church in her ministry to feed the flock of Christ.

Keywords: *Gaudium et Spes*, Africa, marriage and the family

INTRODUCTION

Fifty years have gone by since the Church's decision to enter into dialogue with the modern world. Fifty years since the release of *Gaudium et Spes* – A Vatican II document which emphasizes that the followers of Christ live and move on earth, here and now, and so experience the joys and the hopes, the grieves and the anxieties of the men of this age (*Gaudium et Spes* Paragraph 1). As these followers of Christ await injoyful hope for His return, their true life is to be united in love rather than taken away from this world. Therefore, they live in this world, interacting and scrutinizing the signs of the times as they bear witness to the substantial identity of what is sacred and what is secular. The necessity of a dialogue, such as the one profoundly expressed in *Gaudium et Spes*, is obviously more relevant, of great assistance and supportive to the church in her ministry to feed the flock of Christ.

In the preamble of the second part of this remarkable document, the Council Fathers enumerated some problems of special urgency(*Gaudium et Spes* Paragraph 46) and expounded on these problems in subsequent chapters. It is no surprise that issues relating to the nobility of Marriage and the Family are the first to be discussed for their ever growing urgency. Today, the proliferation of ideologies such as divorce, single parenting and “cold wars” within marriages are evidence of the importance to address these challenges. The derogative nature of these challenges to the divine institutions of marriage and the family have only resulted to increase grief and the anxiety. It is not in the church's tradition to instrumentalize solutions to ideal marriage but rather to point out relentlessly, and even to the point

of death, the narrow path through which Christians should journey in hope of finding joy. This, the Council Fathers did, so beautifully in six paragraphs(*Gaudium et Spes* Paragraphs 47 – 52) highlighting the will of the Creator and the dignifying response expected of man without ignoring some of the obstacles that befall man in relation to marriage and family life.

According to Massimo (2012), the Church in Latin America, Africa and Asia did not observe a polarized view over *Gaudium et Spes*, as was the case in Europe, between Augustinian and Thomist Theologians. On the Augustinian point of view, *Gaudium et Spes* is seen as a “surrender” to excessive optimism about the modern world with naïve confidence in nature and the world. Whereas to the neo-Thomists, the document is seen as one expression of the church's desire to be united in love with the world. Faggioli reminds us of the relevance of this ideological difference and its importance over a generational difference amongst catholics. He offers that the document works as a major evidence of the multiculturalism of globalized Catholicism and calls for a study of the reception of Vatican II locally and globally. Such studies deepen our socio-cultural awareness and promotes our unity in diversity.

This paper examines the teachings of *Gaudium et Spes* on the nobility of Marriage and the Family, within the context of the local Church in Cameroon – Africa. The historical metamorphosis of four main issues are studied: gender inequality, divorce, single parenting, and “cold wars” within marriages. The challenges of these rapid changes within marriage and the family could be seen as a deficiency of true Christian love or as an

opportunity for more Christians to be saved. The paper hopes to give its readers some background with which the teachings of Gaudium et Spes were received in Cameroon. It strives to highlight some striking and prevailing issues regarding marriage and the family, which are peculiar to Cameroon as well as to Sub-Saharan Africa. The paper equally presents an assessment of the impact of Gaudium et Spes within the Cameroonian context and states some concerns for future study.

Background

The history of the Catholic Church in Cameroon can never be told without commending the work of the St. Joseph's Missionary Society of Mill Hill. In a fine book published during the centenary celebrations of the evangelization of Cameroon, Robert J O'Neil recounts the experiences of the Mill Hill missionaries in Cameroon and captures the impact of the Vatican II council in the following excerpt:

An energetic and youthful missionary, Bishop Peeters was also a man whose leadership was determined in part by the timing of his appointment as Bishop of Buea. Throughout his brief term he endeavored to carry out the reform and renewal encouraged by the Vatican Council for the whole church. The Second Vatican Council was for Catholics the Council of renewal.

Bishop Peeters felt strongly that in Cameroon the Mill Hill Missionaries "were invited" to take over from others in 1922 and [Mill Hill Missionaries] had truly been "formed by the Cameroonian people."

Bishop Jules Peeters inherited a diocese which had been "tilled" by German missionaries, who had equally planted "the seed" before their deportation, after World War I. This "seed" had been nurtured by Monsignor Campling and Bishop Peter Rogan, and had begun to take root in the years of the Second Vatican Council. In this light, the teachings of the Council, particularly those of Gaudium et Spes and its contribution to the formation of Catholic post-conciliar moral theology, were some of the teachings received by the priests trained in the first regional major seminary – St. Thomas Aquinas Major Seminary in Bambui – Cameroon.

The influence of Gaudium et Spes on the moral teachings of the Church in Cameroon are therefore pivotal and can be experienced in most sermons delivered during Sunday and daily Masses across the nation. These sermons are characterized by the enlightenment of the Christian approach to day-to-day troubles, re-echoing the dialogue between the Church and the modern world. The Church's respect for some aspects of the local culture, such as the need for the celebrations of traditional marriage; and Her stern frown and open criticism at other aspects such as the quest for a life void of daily troubles are all indications of that

continual dialogue initiated by Gaudium et Spes. The reactions and interactions of the local Church run through the social, economic and political lives of Cameroonians and particularly their marriage and family lives.

The educational history of Africa and particularly Cameroon in the last century, holds a rich depository of trends in gender inequality. In 1913, there were 151 catholic primary schools in Kamerun with 12,532 pupils (Rudin, 1938). Most of the teachers in these schools were male, mission trained Catechists. Even the secondary schools that were opened the seventies (1970s), were predominantly for boys only or had shocking gender statistics. In O'Neil's book, one of the schools managed by Father Simon Staats was reported to have 146 boys and 11 girls. The first Catholic secondary school that was opened in Cameroon – St. Joseph's College Sasse – was for boys only. The lone attempt made to transform this school to co-educational failed and for 75 years has never been re-attempted. Such trends in gender inequality can equally be observed in the educational history of other parts of Sub-Saharan Africa.

Fifty years ago, the proliferation of polygamous marriages in Cameroon perpetuated by the Chiefs and their kinsmen, was an integral part of the culture, despite its unpleasant character. Remarkably, the polygamous ideologies had grown to a point where, in some cultures, the husband and wife (first wife) will go out in search of younger, energetic and potentially fruitful wives for their families. The word divorce was diminutively known in Cameroon before the second Vatican Council and even in the years that followed. However, the concept was stigmatized and termed "runaway wives". It was only with the institution of civil courts of justice that the term divorce gained some popularity yet the bureaucratic and administrative processes in courts as well as the literacy level at the time made Cameroonians to settle more for separation, on the basis of mutual understanding or a kind of "cold war" between spouses. The story of the Mill Hill missionaries in Cameroon contains various encounters and clashes with locals regarding their teachings against polygamy.

Peter Ham was a pioneer missionary who is still held in high esteem by the Bakossi people for his achievements. But during his tenure at Baseng he and his colleagues, according to government reports, continuously interfered with chiefs, the native authority and the native courts "which were the cornerstone of British Colonial administration." In this controversy the policy of indirect rule and sacredness of the native authorities seemed to be constantly at odds with the Catholic missionaries' stand on issues such as polygamy.

Today, such practices are not popular in Cameroon. Who knows how they would have evolved without Gaudium et Spes?

The next two sections of this paper dwells on some of

the challenges that befall marriage and family life and how they are increasingly being redeemed by the teachings of Gaudium et Spes.

The Challenges of Marriage and the Family

The challenges faced by the Divine institutions of Marriage and the family in our days are numerous and interrelated. The Council Fathers ear-marked some of these disfigurements of marriage (Gaudium et Spes paragraph 47) as the blemish to the excellence and the brilliance of marriage. Thanks to the teachings of Gaudium et Spes, some of these defects such as polygamous marriages and gender inequality are gracefully and gradually being blotted out. Notwithstanding, disfigurements such as separation and divorce have undergone metamorphosis to form new scars (single parenting), with seemingly very logical and convincing justifications of their existence in the modern world.

The traditional concepts of dating; courtship; friendship and marriage have suffered grievous deformation in our time. The rapid changing socio-economic structures seems not to offer sufficient time for society to reflect on her actions and building relationships is now governed by the circumstances rather than by sincerity. These changes poses challenges which can be examined under the following categories: Gender inequality, Divorce, Single parenting and “Cold wars” in Marriages.

1. Gender inequality

Self and peer pressure resulting from desires, jealousy and sometimes envy pushes boys and girls into various kinds of relationships. This often occurs in miss-informed meetings (Socially Engineered Meetings) as opposed to structured meetings of the past (Small Christian Community Meetings, Family-Friends gatherings and clan meetings). Within this context, being gallant and being tactful are misconstrued as well as being attractive and being lighthearted. An inequality is established which promotes unhealthy competitions amongst the gender and diminishes ones understanding of the complementary role of the Genders.

In juvenility, the young boys and girls are drawn to one another based on face value and in an environment void of practical wisdom. The flaws of such a setting could cause physical and emotional wounds or act as a shaky foundation for courtship. At this point, in order to survive, manipulation is used to sustain a character which one does not possess and there follows deception, betrayal and deeper psychological wounds. This fundamental change in view from complementary to competitive of the genders, poses a gigantic challenge in building relationships, marriages and in family life. It is in the poverty of such mind frames that most friendships and even some marriages are built today and the evidence is

seen in the fruits of divorce, single parenting, and cold wars in marriages.

2. Divorce

In shedding clearer light on the church doctrine of conjugal love (Gaudium et Spes paragraph 48), the Council Fathers situate the covenantal role of conjugal love in marriage and put marriage out of any legal framework. As an irrevocable consent which can therefore not be retracted, it can only be guided by the kind of love preached by Jesus Christ. Without special grace that comes from God, the mutual self-giving in conjugal love and marriage becomes subjugate, to be negotiated and abused rather than donated and appreciated. Distressingly, legal frameworks have operationalized marriage with the help of a tool (contract) in an attempt to address human conditionalization of integrity and love.

In the last few years, within the context of marriage, the focus has been on this tool – the civil contract. Many have looked up to this document as a support for spouses and shamefully in a protective light. The rapid changing socio-economic circumstances of today, in conjunction with digital media, have capitalized on this to intensify our justification for divorce. Society turns to see divorce as the normal way out of an un-cherished situation rather than as a porous hole through which trust, integrity and love in marriage can be lost.

3. Single parenting

Marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordained for the good of the spouses and toward the begetting and educating of children (Gaudium et Spes paragraph 50). Sadly, the shaky foundations of disguised courtships have led to the begetting of children outside the institution of marriage either consciously or unconsciously. The fear of being lonely for life and the focus on quick short-term solutions to this fear are some of the justifications advanced for begetting children outside marriage. There is equally the disgust towards the opposite sex, a consequence of previous physical, emotional and psychological experiences which have led to some sort of misogamy and a strong “I can do it myself” attitude or phobia for in-laws.

The strength of the temptations found on the journey to marriage has been enhanced by the weaknesses of our verbal and non-verbal communications. This sometimes obscures our purpose and objective for undertaking this journey and, giving-in to these temptations have become habitual, resulting to treacherous routes, which guarantee bruises for sojourners and seldom lead to marriage. The danger of single parenting lies in perpetuating the idea of an alternative to covenantal marriage or baring false witness to the truth about marriage. It equally challenges the sacredness of conjugal love and promote uninformed

courtship as a way of life and maybe even as a school of taught for the younger generation. Sociology has shown that single parenting has some negative effects on today's society.

4. **“Cold wars” in marriages**

As couples, without that inward grace, that flows from the sacrament of marriage and which is strengthened by prayers, the wounds sustained on the journey to marriage can never truly be healed but grow as skepticism, distrust, utilitarianism, fear and in some cases hatred. The divine institutions of marriage and the family are thus manifested as ones to be managed rather than to be cherished.

A growing concern is how marriage is perceived in and out of families by children. These days, it is not uncommon for children to observe their parents disrespect each other, use abusive words on one another, blackmail each other even to their children in an attempt to justify themselves. Besides the deep emotional, psychological and even physical wounds that these words and actions inflict on the parents, they have a lasting impression on the children and their view on the institution of marriage. In this light, the family is transformed into a cold war battle ground where threats are made and strategies for dealing with them are designed, developed and perfected.

The next section of this paper looks into the impact of the enlightenment of *Gaudium et Spes* and how the tragedies of single parenting, divorce and “cold wars” are constantly being redeemed within the church in Cameroon.

Impact of *Gaudium et Spes*

In his paper titled “*Gaudium et Spes: Atheism, Culture and Christian Faith*”, Gregory Coulter beautifully brings out the problem of modernity as a fundamental imbalance whose course lies deep in the spiritual deformity of human sinfulness (Coulter, 2005). He reiterated the view of the Council Fathers that the absence of or loss of religious faith is a prime cause of the personal and social imbalances experienced in the modern world. Building the Catholic religious faith in Cameroon benefited immensely, and continues to benefit, from the teachings of *Gaudium et Spes*. Particularly the teachings of the doctrine that we are all members of a single human family (*Gaudium et Spes* paragraph 32); that we must respect those who think, believe and act differently, even in political and religious matters (*Gaudium et Spes* paragraph 28) and the teaching of the dignity of marriage, procreation and family life (*Gaudium et Spes* paragraph 48). Despite the misconceptions and misinterpretations of some of these teachings, their continual impact on the Church in

Cameroon dispels the darkness of gender inequality, polygamous marriages and divorce.

Africa has, from ancient History, and till this day, been known for Her stand on the domestic role of a woman. Sadly this stand has often been blindly supported or sheepishly criticized with little or in some cases no reflection in the light of the teachings of the Church. The gender statistics in most primary, secondary and tertiary educational institutions in Cameroon today can attest for the tremendous progress Cameroon as a nation has made in addressing issues of gender inequality (World Bank Data accessed 2014). The relation between this giant leap and *Gaudium et Spes* can only be understood when one considers the paradigm shift in the Cameroonian mentality towards the girl child. Although the Mill Hill missionaries opened girls' secondary schools in the fifties in Cameroon, it was only in the years after the second Vatican Council that the enrollment in these colleges became outstanding. Nice family stories are told of girls, who after their education, supported their parents in sponsoring their siblings. A thing that was unimaginable prior to the Council.

The deficiency in polygamous marriage is its inability to promote the kind of oneness taught by *Gaudium et Spes* – Oneness between husband and wife; Oneness between Parents and Children; Oneness between families in the society; and Oneness amongst cultures of different nations. Such oneness, the Council Fathers taught is a true reflection of the oneness in the Trinity and the oneness between Christ and the Church. Irrespective of the common fatherhood of polygamous families, it fails to foster unity amongst the wives and amongst the offspring but rather promotes the view that every action is based on favoritism and thus insinuates jealousy and subsequently envy. This insight of the implications of polygamous marriages together with a deep understanding of the capabilities of an envious heart, instilled in early Cameroonian Christians a cautious attitude not only towards their choice of marriage but also towards their choice of a spouse.

This cautiousness in choice of a spouse, may some times be interpreted as a refusal to answer the call to the married life (contentment with half a loaf of bread) or as a desire to remain celibate. On the other hand, this cautiousness can be interpreted as an interplay between the Augustinian and Thomist theological views.

The Joys of being married is in the deep sense of communion with another, as a prefiguration of communion with God. The gift of oneself to the other is one of those rare gifts that cannot be received without the receiver offering a similar gift of self. In this light, the spouses die to their pride and selfishness to live in humility, generosity and gratuity.

The four challenges of marriage and the family examined in this paper give rise to four further concerns of worthy examination:

1. The emancipation of woman and the evangelization of men.
2. The development of an unwarranted interface between physical and spiritual matters. Is man falling victim to his own designs – the legal system?
3. The issues and consequences of engaging in conjugal love outside marriage.
4. The propagation of the Christian faith alongside Capitalism and the appropriateness of Economy of Communion (EoC)

CONCLUSION

The reception of *Gaudium et Spes* in Cameroon is ingrained in the history of the Catholic faith in Cameroon. This same history tells us that meddling with the matters of this world and forgetting to stay focused on the here-after would only increase our attachment to the things of this world and might obscure the truth that our home is beyond the skies. The quotations below from O'Neil's book reminds us of this.

... Following the directives of the Second Vatican Council the laity were encouraged to take a more active part in church life: ... One can detect, in correspondence between Mill Hill, London and Buea in 1966 – 67, the signs of change upsetting some of the missionaries in Buea Diocese.

Since the fall of man, man has degenerated from a being with deep sense of his need for grace through acceptable sacrifices to a philosophical being and more recently to a technician. Notwithstanding, God's love for man and His desire to be with man remains. Yet a response of indifference from man will be the highest form of atheism (*Gaudium et Spes* paragraph 19). To remain faithful to marital vows is one way of showing some love in response to the unmeasured love which Christ has shown us. The Honors is for married couples to bear witness in such a way as to inspire the younger generation and for the younger generation to acknowledge and stand by the truth (*Gaudium et Spes* paragraph 49).

Our Lord Jesus was willing to enter into dialogue with the woman at Jacob's well and see how fruitfully insightful and beneficial the dialogue turned out to be for the inhabitants of a pagan town (The Gospel of John Chapter 4). Yet Christ did not remain there. He moved on doing the will of the Father. In the same way, had the church not entered into dialogue with the modern world, She would not have provided such deep insights into the signs of the times as food for the flock of Christ. See how beneficial and fruitful the dialogue has been in fifty years. Even to a nation like Cameroon.

As regards the nobility of marriage and Family life, St. Paul puts it well in his first letter to the Corinthians and so do the Council Fathers. Marriage is an aid, a union between one man and one woman ordained by God with a decisive purpose. However, to remain focally stock on

the aid without transcending to that goal for which the aid is aimed at is a kind of poverty which can only be redeemed through prayers.

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