

**TANGAZA COLLEGE**  
**CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF EASTERN AFRICA**

**DEPARTMENT OF PASTORAL STUDIES**

**POLYGAMY AND THE AFRICAN CHURCH:  
AN ATTEMPT TO CLARIFY THE PROBLEM OF  
POLYGAMY IN THE ZAMBIAN CATHOLIC CHURCH-  
MANSA DIOCESE**

**BY**

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**FEBRUARY, 2002**

**NAIROBI-KENYA**

# **DEDICATION**

To all African faithful people whom God has called to participate in His Church but cannot do so because they are caught up in polygamous situations. We pray for you and encourage you to remain steadfast in the God whom you love.

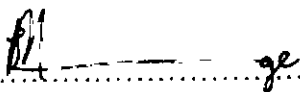
# STUDENT'S DECLARATION

## **POLYGAMY AND THE AFRICAN CHURCH: AN ATTEMPT TO CLARIFY THE PROBLEM OF POLYGAMY IN THE ZAMBIAN CATHOLIC CHURCH- MANSA DIOCESE.**

BY

MUSENGE IGNATIUS, SDB

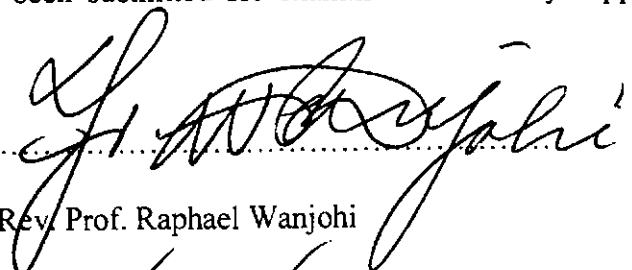
I, the undersigned, declare that this long essay is my original work achieved through my personal reading, scientific research method and critical reflections. It has never been submitted to any other college or university for academic credit. All sources have been cited in full and acknowledged.

Signed.....  .....

Musenge Ignatius, SDB

Date:..... 6-02-2002 .....

This long essay has been submitted for examination with my approval as the College Supervisor.

Signed.....  .....

Rev. Prof. Raphael Wanjohi

(Supervisor)

Date..... 5/12/2002 .....

# **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I give sincere gratitude to my supervisor, Rev. Prof. Raphael Wanjohi, for his dedication and availability in guiding me. I give him thanks for his insights in bringing about the shape of this paper. I thank Fr. George Kocholikali, SDB, for the sincere critical reading of the paper and his suggestions. The same appreciation goes to Fr. Alexandra Ngosa, Conv. for his suggestions. I thank and appreciate Sr. Carmel Powell, FMM for her criticism and proof reading.

Finally, I wish to give thanks to my confreres at Don Bosco Utume community for their suggestions and inspirations given to me during the time of research. To all who, in one way or another, made their contribution. I say thank you very much.

**MAY GOD BLESS YOU ALL**

# ABSTRACT

The topic: 'Polygamy and the African Church' is a difficult one to write on when one wishes to remain faithful to the traditional Catholic teaching on the subject.

In the earliest times of Christianity, if one wished to become a Christian, circumcision was necessary. Circumcision belonged to the Jewish culture. To be a Christian meant to be Jewish first. Christianity was confused with Jewish culture. Today, if a polygamist wishes to be a Christian, monogamy is described as a necessary condition. Is this not a confusion of cultures with Christianity? Can't a Gentile become a Christian without becoming a Jew first? Can't a polygamist be baptized with full responsibilities for all his wives?

Catholicism (Christianity in general) has always considered polygamy as an evil offence and any desire to examine the issue is seen as an influence of the devil. In this work we have concentrated on the foundation of marriage in scripture. We are patient and we know that it takes time for traditions to die and when they die, they die slowly.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>GENERAL OVERVIEW</b>	<b>1</b>
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## CHAPTER ONE

<b>1.0 GENERAL INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>2</b>
1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE ESSAY	2
1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM	5
1.3 OBJECTIVES	6
1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY	6
1.5 SCOPE AND LIMITATION	7
1.6 DEFINITION OF POLYGAMY	8
1.7 CONCLUSION	9

## CHAPTER TWO

<b>2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	<b>10</b>
2.1 INTRODUCTION	10
2.2 PROBLEM WITH REGARD TO LITERATURE	10
2.3 A SHORT SURVEY ON POLYGAMY	11
2.4 REASONS FOR POLYGAMY	13
2.5 BIBLICAL DATA ON POLYGAMY	16
2.5.1 MARRIAGE VIEWS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT (OT)	16

2.5.2 MARRIAGE VIEWS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT (NT)	17
2.6 CATHOLIC VIEW OF POLYGAMY	19
2.6.1 CANON LAW	20
2.6.2 VATICAN II AND THE CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH	20
2.6.3 SOME AFRICAN BISHOPS ON THE ISSUE OF POLYGAMY	21
2.6.4 SOME THEOLOGIANS ON POLYGAMY	22
2.7 NON- CATHOLIC VIEWS ON POLYGAMY	24
2.7.1 LUTHERANS	24
2.7.2 ANGLICANS	25
2.8 CONCLUSION	25

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **3.0 SOCIOLOGICAL AND THEOLOGICAL APPROACH**

<b>TO LITERATURE REVIEW</b>	<b>26</b>
3.1 INTRODUCTION	26
3.2 METHODOLOGY	26
3.3 SOCIOLOGICAL	27
3.4 THEOLOGICAL	30
3.5 CONCLUSION	36

# **CHAPTER FOUR**

<b>4.0 SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>37</b>
4.1 INTRODUCTION	37
4.2 SUMMARY	37
4.3 PASTORAL SUGGESTION	38
4.4 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH	39
4.5 GENERAL CONCLUSION	40

## **SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY**

BOOKS	44
JOURNALS	46

# **GENERAL OVERVIEW**

This long essay is divided into four chapters. Chapter one presents the background of the topic: Polygamy and the African Church. It also presents the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, significance of the study and ends with the limitation of the study.

Chapter two is a presentation of the literature review. A lot of necessary works on the subject have been consulted. The Church understanding of the subject has also been brought forward. In particular, African Bishops' thinking on the issue is as well presented. African theologians have also been taken into consideration.

Chapter three deals with the sociological and theological analysis of the data. The chapter also presents the methodology followed during the research.

Our final section, chapter four, is comprised of the summary, the recommendations for future research and the pastoral suggestions. In the same chapter, the general conclusion closes the whole work.

# CHAPTER ONE

## 1.0 GENERAL INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 BACKGROUND OF THE LONG ESSAY

It was time for first Holy Communion preparation. My friends and I sat in the Parish Hall waiting for registration.<sup>1</sup> The Catechist walked in and began calling our names. It was my turn to register. I registered with a question mark, awaiting an answer from the Parish priest. The question mark was because my parents were separated. The catechist, however, had assured me that there was hope for me to be admitted to the lessons. One of my friends was called forward. He walked up to the catechist's desk and produced his baptism certificate. After a little interrogation, the catechist found out that the boy's father had two wives. The catechist gave back the baptism certificate to the boy and told him that there was nothing he [the catechist] could do to help the situation. The catechist said that the case was very serious and that there was no hope for admission to the lessons. My friend burst into tears as we watched. He stood up with his arms covering his face and walked out of the hall crying. The catechist asked that if there were others with similar cases they were to go out because he could not help them in any way. The sister of my friend stood up and she too burst into tears as she walked out. The rest of us inside were silenced by the situation. Nobody talked, we felt one with our friends outside. As young boys and girls, we looked at our two friends as children of sinners.

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<sup>1</sup> The name of the Parish is St. Mary's in Kawambwa district in Mansa Diocese. This is the Diocese of the author of this work. The Hall mentioned is in one of the Out-stations of the Parish. By then the Parish had 23 Out-stations and now the number has gone up. The Parish is dedicated to the Assumption of Mary. The incident took place in 1986.

From that time, I learned that if a man has more than one wife his children couldn't receive Holy Eucharist.

When all was over, I came out of the Hall, held my friend by his left hand, and walked home as he continued crying. On the way, he asked me why the Bible does not allow the children of polygamists to receive Holy Communion. As a young boy, I answered him giving the example of Joseph who had only Mary as his wife. My answer convinced him and he understood that truly his father was a public sinner. He cried louder blaming himself for having a father who is a polygamist. This incident has not left my mind since. I grew up convinced that having more than one wife was sinful and against the Bible.

Later in my life, I lived near a Church where members always dressed in black suits. The requirement to be a member of that Christian sect was polygamy. A man had to be a polygamist in order to be a full member and share in the Church's activities and duties. If one was not married, he was to have the intention of having more than one wife in future. The people of this sect called themselves Christians. My awareness of the question of one or many wives began to provoke interest in me.

Many years later, when I was living in a parish as a student of theology in the Salesian congregation, I faced a situation which made me recall my past experiences on the issue of polygamy. An altar boy came out of the sacristy crying. He went straight to sit behind the Church. During mass, I watched him with his head between his legs facing the floor. After mass, I called him and asked him what had happened that he couldn't serve that mass. He told me that the priest chased him away from the sacristy. The reason being that the priest had recently discovered that the boy was a son of a polygamist. The tears ran from the boy's eyes as he explained. He further told that the priest warned him never to enter the sacristy until his father would become monogamous. I went up to the priest and asked him whether it was right

to chase the boy away from the sacristy and refuse him to serve mass. My question shocked the priest. The old missionary stared at me as though I had dropped from the moon. He questioned my Christian values and my intention to become a priest, if at that stage I had not understood the basic truth that polygamy is outside biblical virtues and hence sinful. It was a challenge for me. I felt guilty and regretted having asked him. The priest told me that he would make it clear in the Church the following Sunday that no son of a polygamist should join the group of altar boys. He feared that polygamists' boys could spoil monogamists' children. The following Sunday the priest announced that polygamists' children should not be in the altar boys' club.

That same year, a priest narrated to me how he refused to give the sacrament of Anointing of the Sick to a polygamist. The priest asked him on his deathbed to renounce the second wife from whom he had eight children. The man refused the suggestion of the priest. The priest left the house without giving him the sacrament. A day later, the man died. This man was a baptized Catholic who later married another wife and lived with her for more than forty years.

My experience of the issue of polygamy has convinced me that polygamy is certainly an issue to be studied and discussed. What has been said is not enough- there is still room for further research and more reflection. In my experience also, I have observed that many people live a polygamous life hidden from Church officials. Why?

Before Vatican Council II, polygamy was not a popular issue to be discussed in theological reflections. It was presumed that divine revelation had revealed once and for all that monogamy was the only way for a Christian. Just before, and more so after Vatican Council II increased concern about the issue of polygamy has been observed. Some theologians have taken upon themselves the task to redo the theology of marriage and to rediscover at a deeper level, which form of marriage is intended by God. What form of marriage does the Bible

approve? The issue has become hotter than anyone could think before Vatican II. It has become very debatable. At the moment, I do not anticipate that supporters of monogamy will win at last. In our African context, specifically in the Zambian context<sup>2</sup>, common Christians are faithful to the Church teaching that polygamy is incompatible with Christianity. However, many well-known African theologians, like Benezeti Bujo<sup>3</sup>, feel that polygamy, especially traditional polygamy, should be accepted if it is based on love. He also says that the Church should accompany polygamists and give them proper catechesis rather than excommunicating them from sacraments.

## **1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

In the continent of Africa, particularly in Zambia, monogamy is the common form of marriage. However, polygamy exists. In some societies, for example in western Kenya, polygamy is widely practised. What should the Church do when she encounters situations of polygamy? The question is related to the sacraments. Should polygamists be welcomed to the sacraments like baptism and the Eucharist with all their wives? We know, till now, that the Church considers polygamy incompatible with Christian values. Serious problems have emerged. There are problems concerning the theology of marriage and justice in the Church. There are problems concerning pastors especially when they are confronted with the faith of some of those people in polygamous situations.

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<sup>2</sup> Strictly speaking, Zambia is not a polygamous nation. However, cases of polygamy are found in few places.

<sup>3</sup> Benezet Bujo, The Ethical Dimension of Community (Nairobi: Paulines Publication Africa, 1998), 20.

## 1.3 OBJECTIVES

How should the Church in Africa approach polygamy in the light of sacraments? In particular, how should the Zambian Church clear her image of using exclusion from sacraments as punishment for those who do not comply with existing laws? Furthermore, how is the Diocese of Mansa to live her life amidst many 'Blue-moon'<sup>4</sup> Church members who are polygamists? In most cases, these people never go to Church although they keep the Sunday law by not working. The situation is a challenge to the pastors of the Church in Mansa diocese. Thus the objectives of our work include:

1. The actual existence of the problem (Why polygamy?).
2. To investigate whether polygamy is biblically sanctioned.
3. To find out in our pastoral work, the possibilities of admitting polygamists and their children to baptism without divorcing all but one of their wives.

## 1.4 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Is there anything wrong with Christian teaching on polygamy such that some Africans have opted to ignore the teaching? Are the Africans right in their practice of polygamy? Where is the place of Canon Law in the face of Scripture? Answers to such questions will provide us with the significance of our study, namely that the Church in Africa must become a family in which all feel at home and all participate fully.

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<sup>4</sup> We coin this word 'Blue moon' in order to refer to those who go to Church once in a while probably on Christmas Day only. They are conscious of themselves as Christians but since they have more than one wife, they feel guilty and hence keep their distance from the Church. They know that they have broken the Church law but still feel that the Lord is with them and therefore it does not matter whether they go to Church or not.

In short, the Church must be relevant in the everyday life of a Christian rather than remain as a big Sunday Organization.

## **1.5 SCOPE AND LIMITATION.**

We are aiming at creating awareness among Christians to have a positive approach to polygamous situations. Polygamists are struggling Christians just as any other Christian is. In this work, we shall emphasize that just as every coin has two sides, polygamy has its own two sides, the positive side and the negative one. Hence, polygamy should not be disregarded on the sociological level, because of its one side, namely of its negative side. We also wish to find out for our selves whether the Bible considers polygamy sinful.

We are limited in this work in the sense that we will not exhaustively reveal all the issues connected with polygamy. The first contributing factor is lack of time. Another factor is that this paper is prepared for a Bachelor of Arts Research and is limited to 12,000 words or less. Due to the objectives of this work, we will not be able to present the ethical and ecclesiological implications in depth. However, we shall mention them in passing. The women perspective on polygamy has not been researched. We are deeply cautious of the need to present the views of women as a full research by itself. As faithful members of the Church, we ought to submit to the law of the Church that forbids polygamy. Therefore, our discussion here is purely for theological clarity rather than for what can be applied in the pastoral field in the immediate future. The immediate application to real pastoral needs at present in Africa is still far away.

## 1.6 DEFINITION OF POLYGAMY

The word polygamy means many marriages. It is technically known as polygyny if a man has more than one wife at the same time. In the case where a woman has more than one husband, it is called 'polyandry'.<sup>5</sup> What we have observed in our society is the existence of polygyny and no trace of polyandry. However, Kisémbó, Magesa and Shorter (1977) in their research found that polyandry is present among the Lele, Wong and Djembe the people of the Democratic Republic of Congo (former Zaire). They record *Busweswempe* custom among these people as a form of polyandry.<sup>6</sup>

Many scholars, like Eugene Hillman, use polygamy to mean polygyny. We shall employ the same usage in this work. Polygyny is split into two: simultaneous and consecutive (or successive). Simultaneous polygyny refers to more than one wife at the same time. Consecutive or successive polygyny means more than one wife, but one after another usually after divorce.<sup>7</sup> Strictly, consecutive polygyny is no polygyny. No ordinary African person would consider a man to be in the state of polygyny when he is living with one wife although he might have divorced several before. Divorce is wrong for the reasons that will not be discussed in this work. So in this work, we are concerned with 'simultaneous polygyny' which is the real polygamy.

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<sup>5</sup> In the footnote N. Engelbert Kofon, Polygyny in Pre-Bafut and New Moral Theological Perspective ( Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1992), 19. It reads. " Polygamy is from two Greek words *polus* (many) and *gamos* (marriage), literally means plural marriage. Polygyny is from two Greek words *polus* and *gune* (woman) refers to that plural marriage in which women have a common husband. Polyandry is from two Greek words *polus* and *andros* (man) which refers to several men married to one woman."

<sup>6</sup> Benezeri Kisémbó and others, African Christian Marriage (Britain: Geoffrey Chapman, 1977), 63. Note: It should be mentioned already that the *Usweswempe* (young girl) was never married to any man although customarily she offered sexual satisfaction to men whose wives were not in a position to do so for the time being. The emphasis is that she was not married to any. *Busweswempe* therefore cannot be concluded to be polyandry because it was never a married bond. Polyandry involved a married bond. ALSO IN: Festus Asana, "An African Look at Polygamy," Footprints, edited by Nyansako-ni-Nku (Cameroon: Buma Kor, 1992), 85. "The society permitted husbands to visit the girls of *Busweswempe* for sexual satisfaction during periods of abstinence like their wives menstruation... *Busweswempe* saved the honour of the village and its chief by providing sexual satisfaction and sort of restaurant service for passers-by and even honoured visitors." This description cannot be called polyandry. It is closer to prostitution or adultery.

<sup>7</sup> Eugene Hillman, Polygamy Reconsidered: African Plural Marriage and the Christian Churches (New York: Orbis Books, 1975), 10.

Specifically, we shall use the terms polygamy and polygyny interchangeably to mean 'simultaneous polygyny.'

## **1.7 CONCLUSION**

Surely many African people, especially those of my Diocese, are uncertain through their experiences about the issue of polygamy. Is it a scandal objectively? Is it pleasing to God? So this topic on polygamy is aimed at making the Church more relevant to the African people. We will enter the second chapter of literature review with the aim of discovering what some theologians and some pastors have already reflected upon. We shall also look at some quotations from scripture on marriage.

# **CHAPTER TWO**

## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 INTRODUCTION**

This chapter is a review of the influential works that have been written on the subject of polygamy in general. The presentations and the arguments in this chapter do not mean that this author agrees with them. It is only after reviewing them that we hope to have the direction for our own view of the problem. The literature review will also help us to see which side of the coin holds water: the positive side or the negative side. The whole literature review has been divided into themes, as we shall see below.

### **2.2 PROBLEM WITH REGARD TO LITERATURE**

Our literature review lacks sources from Magazines and Newspapers. This is because the author is away from home and did not come across anything on the issue in the Magazines and Newspapers available at the time of writing this work. Therefore, we rely much on books and journals. Our sources in terms of literature are mainly from Tangaza College library. There are numerous works in the line of polygamy, especially those that have treated marriage thoroughly. We could not exhaust them all. Moreover, there is a good collection of journals such as African Ecclesial Review (AFER), Spearhead, and African Journal of Evangelical Theology (AJET), that have reported much about the issue. Again, we could not exhaust them all.

The Salesian community library also had books on our subject matter. Most of them treat different aspects of marriage in which polygamy has been dealt with in passing. Let us now look at a short survey on polygamy as we continue to unfold different themes.

## 2.3 A SHORT SURVEY ON POLYGAMY.

Pope Nicholas I is well known for his pronouncement, "Therefore if one is found to have two wives at the same time, he is compelled (cogatur amittere) to lose one and keep the first."<sup>8</sup> This statement and many others of the same tone, have dominated the Catholic Church throughout her history. Only Augustine saw monogamy to be more in harmony with primitive institution of marriage and more conducive. He affirmed that polygamy is not directly opposed to the nature of conjugal society for it does not exclude the primary end of marriage.<sup>9</sup> Augustine referring to the Patriarchs and their polygamous situation says, " Holy Scripture does not condemn anything the holy men of those ages did that was uninfluenced by lust."<sup>10</sup> Thomas Aquinas, as quoted by Hillman, has also confirmed that polygamy is not against natural law as such and that simultaneous polygamy was not always and everywhere forbidden.<sup>11</sup> However, he concluded that there are cannot be peace in the house where several wives are joined to one husband. Since Christ is one and the Church is one, polygamy contradicts this union. To this

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<sup>8</sup> Francisco Javier Urrutia, "Can Polygamy be Compatible with Christianity?" *AFER*, 23 (5) (Kenya: Gaba Publications, 1981), 277.

<sup>9</sup> Saint Augustine, "Treatise on Marriage and other Subjects," translated by Charles T. Wilcox and others, *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 27 (New York: The Fathers of the Church, Inc. 1955), 58.

<sup>10</sup> Saint Augustine, " Christian Instructions," translated by John J. Gavigan, *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 2 (New York: Fathers of the Church. Inc. 1950), 133.

<sup>11</sup> Hillman, 180. He quotes Thomas Aquinas. " A plurality of wives is said to be against the natural law, not as regards its first precepts[ begetting and rearing of children], but as regards the secondary precepts [fidelity], which like conclusions are drawn from its first precepts. Since, however, human acts vary according to the various conditions of persons, times and other circumstances, the aforesaid conclusions do not proceed from the first precepts of the natural law, so as to be binding in all cases, but only in the majority."

conclusion. Aquinas added that polygamy is in a way against natural law of nature and in a way not against it.<sup>12</sup>

The Council of Trent banned polygamy as an evil practice. According to the Council Fathers, polygamy was inconsistent with Christianity. The Council stated, "If any one says that it is lawful for Christians to have several wives at the same time and that this is not forbidden by any divine law, anathema sit."<sup>13</sup>

Up to date, the Church has stood by this tradition. A polygamous husband is never baptised unless he denounces his wives and chooses only one. The same applies to the wives in the polygamous union - they never receive baptism. Barret has observed very few cases by which the first wife has been accepted to baptism.<sup>14</sup> Talking to many former Catholics who are now members of African Independent Churches, we find that the issue of polygamy is one of the major reasons for their defection. Barret has recorded prominent people who left the Catholic Church because of its polygamy rule. They include Isaiah Shembe of South Africa who had four wives. Joshua Oshtelu, the founder of Aladura (Church of the Lord), had seven wives. Johanne Maranke<sup>15</sup> of Zambia had sixteen wives and founded the African Apostolic Church. The question rises: Why do some African men opt for polygamy amidst this condemnation by the Church? Let us look at some reasons.

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica*, vol.5 IIIa QQ. 74-90 Supplement QQ. 1-99, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Christian Classics, 1948), 2795-2796.

<sup>13</sup> J. Neuner and J. Dupius (Eds.), *The Christian Faith* (India: Theological Publications in India, 1992), 585.

<sup>14</sup> David B. Barret, *Schism and Renewal in Africa* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1968), 117.

<sup>15</sup> Barret, 118-119. Most probably this name and the context is a mistake. It is supposed to be Johannes Marange from Zimbabwe.

## 2.4 REASONS FOR POLYGAMY

Let us begin with some reasons given by John Mbiti. Mbiti talks about polygamy as a generally accepted African practice. Since Africans wish to be remembered after death, children become central to the perpetuation (immortality) of their names. Mbiti sees that one can have many children only by having more than one wife.<sup>16</sup> He also adds that having many children brings a man respect and honour in society.

Mbiti, in another work, writes that a man should take another wife if the first cannot have children and if the case is medically proven. For Mbiti, this marriage should be given the blessing of the Church and the wedding be performed in the Church.<sup>17</sup> Also in the case where the first wife has daughters only, it follows almost without exception that a husband takes another wife. Parrinder also agrees with Mbiti that the desire for children is the main cause for polygamy.<sup>18</sup> It should be remembered that in many African cultures, childlessness is considered a curse. It is shameful. Usually the emphasis is on male children who can perpetuate the family name. Benezeti Bujo gives the same reason adding that Christians also are found in the same situation.<sup>19</sup>

Aylward Shorter points out that polygamy provides a family community with larger progeny and a large work force for cultivation and domestic tasks.<sup>20</sup> According to Hillman, another reason that is accounted for as a cause of polygamy, is the need to establish communion

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<sup>16</sup> John Mbiti, African Religions and Philosophy (London: Heinemann, 1969), 142.

<sup>17</sup> John Mbiti, Love and Marriage in Africa (Singapore: Longmann Singapore Publishers, 1986), 192.

<sup>18</sup> E. G. Parrinder, African Traditional Religion, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (London: Sheldon Press, 1962), 91.

<sup>19</sup> Benezeti Bujo, African Christian Morality (Kenya: Pauline's Publication Africa, 1990), 111.

<sup>20</sup> Aylward Shorter, East African Societies (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), 69. **Similar reasons are found in:** Nancy J. Hafkin and Edna G. Bay (Eds.), Women in Africa (California: Stanford University Press, 1987), 93. Quote: "Labour not Land was a limiting factor of production well into the early colonial period and this contributed to the high social value of polygyny and the desire for numerous offspring."

with other good families.<sup>21</sup> This network among families contributes in making social transactions easy. Everyone relates to everyone on extended family ties.

The most accepted reason for polygamy is the economic one. The more children one has the bigger the field. Shorter, in his contribution in *Spearhead*, concluded that many children lead to the self-reliance of many families.<sup>22</sup> However, this reason is not strong in our times when poverty and demand for education does not require children to be in the fields for many hours.

Masamba M. Mpolo sees widow inheritance as another reason why men choose polygamy. Mpolo writes that it is widely accepted that when the brother or any close relative dies, the wife must be taken care of by way of marriage.<sup>23</sup> A brother who is already married may take up this duty and hence become a polygamist. The term 'marriage' however is not used because most Africans believe that a widow remains "married" to her dead husband.<sup>24</sup> This situation is commonly known as widow inheritance.

Studies done among the Akamba tribe of Kenya by Kivuto Ndeti indicates that polygamy was practised among the Akamba as an adaptive principle which eliminates natural waste and unnecessary sexual tensions in a society. There were 100 males for every 113 females at the time the research was carried out. To avoid prostitution all women have to be married.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Hillman, 92.

<sup>22</sup> Aylward Shorter, "Christian Family Power in Africa," *Spearhead* no. 48 (1977), 25.

<sup>23</sup> Masamba M. Mpolo (Ed.), *Families in Transition* (Geneva: WCC Publication, 1987), 101.

<sup>24</sup> Laurent Magesa, *African Religion* (New York: Orbis Books, 1997), 140. He writes, "A man takes on the widow of a deceased brother or relative to permit the birth of children for the dead man. The children belong to the dead rather than to the living. Nor does the woman consider herself to be married a second time. The dead man remains her husband."

<sup>25</sup> Kivuto Ndeti, *Elements of Akamba Life* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1972), 16.

In cases of a wife's bad health like prolonged illnesses, lameness acquired later in life and other physical and psychological problems, a husband, in many African cultures, would be encouraged to take a second wife. This new wife can help nurse the sick one besides giving motherly support to the children of the first marriage. Bujo, in the same line, found out that polygamy contributed to the stability of marriages - very few divorces and less adultery.<sup>26</sup>

Polygamy can contribute to an increase in female status and economic independence in societies where farming is not the major economic activity and where women are more directly involved in the distribution of goods outside the domestic group.<sup>27</sup> Children are a kind of helping hand to the parents. Furthermore, they are also a kind of security, especially in one's old age. No wonder then, the more women and children one has, the more workers there are to care for the animals and the work in the field.

Polygamy is also practised for reasons of other marital shortcomings. A man may consider a second wife if he finds that his first wife acquires some bad behaviour. In this case, the second marriage saves the first wife from being divorced. Another reason is when a man makes a girl pregnant outside marriage. He is expected to bear the responsibility of the safety and care of both the girl and the child. This responsibility includes taking her as a wife even though he may be married already. Polygamy through this way is, however, rare.

African women are generally known to be practising sexual abstinence from the time they come to know that they are pregnant, up to the time when they stop breast-feeding the child. Sex during this time may be considered as contaminating the child, and may result in its

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<sup>26</sup> Bujo, 111.

<sup>27</sup> Filomina Chioma Steady, "Polygamy and the Household Economy in a Fishing Village in Sierra Leone," Transformations of African Marriage, edited by David Parkin and David Nyamwaya (Great Britain: Manchester University Press, 1987), 211.

death. This period may take two or more years. This situation, in many cases, pushes the husband to have another wife.

The report given by Anderson indicates that 'The National Women's Union' of Tanzania (Ummoja wa Wanawake) during the making of the new marriage law strongly opposed polygamy in the country. They indicated that the ideals of monogamy were not confined to only Christians. The new law now says that no man can marry another wife without the first wife's consent.<sup>28</sup>

## **2.5 BIBLICAL DATA ON POLYGAMY**

### **2.5.1 MARRIAGE VIEWS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT (OT)**

In the Old Testament (OT), the book of Genesis tells us that God created humankind, male and female and joined them as husband and wife making 'one flesh' (Gen 1:26-28; 2: 21-25). He commissioned them to multiply and be fruitful. 'Humankind' in this quotation has to be worked out within the Hebrew word '*Adam*'<sup>29</sup> which points to 'humanity' rather than to a single person called Adam. The first record of polygamous marriage is recorded in the descendants of Cain. Lamech had two wives, Adah and Zillah (Gen 4: 19). Abraham, our father in faith, had Hagar, the slave girl for his wife (Gen 16: 3). He also married Keturah (Gen 25:1). Jacob married two sisters, Leah and Rachel (Gen 29: 23-30). The chosen king David had several wives and concubines (1 Sam 19:11-17; 2 Sam 11:1-26).

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<sup>28</sup> William .B. Anderson, The Church in East Africa 1840-1974 (Nairobi: Uzima Press Limited, 1977), 137.

<sup>29</sup> Willem A. Van Gemeren (General editor), Dictionary of the Old Testament Theology and Exegesis, vol. I (United Kingdom: Paternoster, 1997), 263-266. " When biblical writers were thinking of humanity as a whole or human beings in general, they used the term 'Adam.' An exception is made in Ezekiel who used 'Adam' to mean an individual called Ben Adam" (266).

Solomon had the highest number of wives ever known (1 Kings 11: 1-3). The evil done by Solomon in this passage was not his being polygamous but his turning of his heart to other foreign gods such as Astarte and Milcom (V. 5). The less well known polygamous marriages include that of Elkanah who had Hannah and Peninnah (1 Sam 1: 1-7). Generally, polygamy existed in Jewish culture (Exod 21: 9-11). Exodus 21:7-11 warns a man not to deprive the first wife in case he takes another one. Deuteronomy 21:15-17 indicates that in the case of polygamous marriage, the first-born son had the right of inheritance.

These essential passages from the OT do not tell us of the reaction of Yahweh neither do the passages condemn the practice. What we know is that the OT reports that Yahweh chose and loved polygamists like Abraham, David and Solomon. Of course, God did not love them because they were polygamists but because He loves. In fact, we regard Abraham, a polygamist, as our father in faith. Only in one part of the OT do we find admonition against a king having many wives (Deut 17:15-17). However, there is a tendency towards monogamy in the prophets, e.g. Tobias' marriage. Tobit's advice to his son, Tobias, is to marry a woman from the descendants of the ancestors. There is nothing mentioned against polygamy. In fact, Tobit mentions names of polygamists and says that they were blessed. He does not condemn them. (Tobit 4: 12- 13).

## **2.5.2 MARRIAGE VIEWS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT (NT)**

Blum sums up his discussions on marriage saying:

Our conclusion has been that, despite the lack of explicit biblical statements regarding polygyny or monogamy, there is no evidence to suggest that Jesus and the New Testament writers supported or accepted polygyny... The other exegetes and writers, either presume that monogamy should be the starting point for Christian discussion on marriage; or point to the positive evidence in support of monogamy, as the appropriate form of marriage for Christians.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> William G. Blum, Monogamy Reconsidered (Nairobi: AMECEA Gaba Publication, 1989), 255.

He thus sees the teaching of St. Paul, that “each man with his own wife” (1 Cor 7: 1-3) and vice-versa as a radical alteration of the traditional principle that guided relationships between a man and a woman.<sup>31</sup> Despite his earlier conclusion that there is no explicit biblical statement regarding polygyny or monogamy, Blum ends that monogamy is the form of marriage willed by God from the beginning.<sup>32</sup> Jesus in the NT, it is argued, has restored the will of God from the beginning, that is, one man for one woman and vice-versa (Mt 19:3- 9; Mk 10: 2-12). Mackenzie sees this teaching of Jesus on marriage, as only connected with its indissolubility and not with polygamy or monogamy.<sup>33</sup> For Kasper, these New Testament verses are discussions between Jesus and the Pharisees on the question of divorce and remarriage. The texts are concerned with the unity and indissolubility of marriage.<sup>34</sup> Blum calls the text of Matthew as a call to divorcees not to remarry.<sup>35</sup> These texts also confirm that marriage is an institution of creation. 1 Timothy 3: 2-12 speaks about bishops and deacons marrying only once. Titus 1: 6 speaks about the qualities of a leader. One of the qualities is that he should be married only once. We can say that in these passages there is a warning against leaders taking many wives.

The application of Ephesus 5:22-31, the union between Christ and his bride, the church, as referring to monogamous marriage is highly debatable. The verse emphasises the union, the bond that should exist between wives and husbands rather than its form. Union is not impossible in polygamy.

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<sup>31</sup> Blum, 245.

<sup>32</sup> Blum, 276.

<sup>33</sup> John J. Mackenzie, Dictionary of the Bible (U.S.A: Milwaukee Bruce, 1965), 505-506.

<sup>34</sup> Walter Kasper, Theology of Christian Marriage (London: Burns and Oates Ltd, 1980), 47.

<sup>35</sup> Blum, 270.

The same can be said about St. Paul's teaching on marriage in 1 Corinthians 7:1-6.<sup>36</sup>

We know for sure that the scriptures condemn adultery, divorce, polyandry and consecutive polygamy (Mt 5:27-37; Mk 10: 2-12; Rom 7: 2-3; 1 Cor 7: 2-16). It is clear again that fornication, prostitution and homosexuality are condemned (Rom 1: 24-27; 1Cor 6: 9-12; Eph 4: 19). There is no explicit injunction in the New Testament regarding the form of marriage fit for the followers of Christ.<sup>37</sup>

In the OT, we have explicit examples of polygamists like Abraham being favoured by Yahweh. In the NT, we have an insistence on the unity and indissolubility of marriage based on the relationship that exists between Jesus and His Church. The divine approved form of marriage is not clear in both testaments.

## 2.6 CATHOLIC VIEW OF POLYGAMY

We have already quoted the statement of Nicholas I before, "If one is found to have two wives at the same time he is to be compelled to (cogatur amittere) to lose one and keep the first." John Paul II has reaffirmed today's Church's position on marriage. He wrote:

The first communion is the one which develops between husband and wife: by virtue of the covenant of marriage, the man and woman are no longer two but one flesh... Such a communion is radically contradicted by polygamy: this, in fact, negates the plan of God revealed from the beginning, because it is contrary to the equal personal dignity of men and women who in matrimony give themselves with love that is total and, therefore, unique and exclusive.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> These passages cannot be taken to be complete theology of Paul on marriage. He responds to particular circumstances and questions. For example, in the Corinthian Church, Paul tells men to marry one wife and women to marry one man because of the sexual immorality that prevailed at the time. In fact Paul says that this is not a divine command, but his own concession. What is of divine command is that married people should never divorce (1 Corinthians, 7:10). In the letter to the Ephesians Paul continues with the theme of the unity of marriage. The union and indissolubility of marriage is like the relationship between Christ and His Church. The passages are not teachings on monogamy.

<sup>37</sup> Blum, 263.

<sup>38</sup> John Paul II, Familiaris Consortio (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 1998), 27.

Viewing polygamy as negation of God's plan may lead some people to equate polygamy, as Bujo writes, with promiscuity or concubinage or prostitution.<sup>39</sup>

### **2.6.1 CANON LAW**

The New Code of Canon Law states that if a polygamist wishes to enter the Church by way of baptism, he must dismiss all other wives and retain only the first wife. Furthermore, the Code has allowed a polygamist to maintain any of the wives he prefers (any one of his choice) in case he is unable to return to the first wife. The New Code of Canon Law states:

“When an unbaptized man who simultaneously has a number of unbaptised wives, has received baptism in the Catholic Church, if it would be hardship for him to remain with the first of the wives, he may retain one of them, having dismissed the others. The same applies to an unbaptised woman who simultaneously has a number of unbaptised husbands” [Canon 1148 #1].

Bearing in mind the moral, social and economic circumstances of a place and person, the Code gives power to the diocesan bishop to provide adequate provision in accordance with the norms of justice, Christian charity and natural equity, for the needs of the first wife and of the other dismissed wives and their children (Canon 1148#3).

### **2.6.2 VATICAN II AND THE CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH**

Vatican II, while describing marriage and family in the modern world, observed the increased Christian joy and high esteem for conjugal love within marriage. There is progress being made by fostering the partnership of love and encouraging the reverence of human life. However, Vatican II was aware that the happy picture was not being reflected everywhere.

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<sup>39</sup> Bujo, 111.

Polygamy is recited by the Council as one of the reasons destroying the happy picture of marriage.<sup>40</sup>

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says the following on polygamy.

-In the Old Testament the polygamy of the patriarchs and kings is not yet explicitly rejected. Nevertheless the law given to Moses is aimed at protecting the wife from arbitrary domination by the husband, even though according to the Lord's words, it still carries traces of man's "hardness of heart" which was the reason permitting men to divorce their wives (no. 1610).

-The unity of marriage, distinctly recognised by our Lord, is made clear in the equal personal dignity which must be accorded to man and wife in mutual and unreserved affection. Polygamy is contrary to conjugal love which is undivided and exclusive together (no. 1645).

-The predicament of a man who, desiring to convert to the gospel, is obliged to repudiate one or more wives with whom he has shared years of conjugal life, is understandable. However polygamy is not in accord with moral law 'conjugal' and is radically contradicted by polygamy; this, in fact, negates the plan of God which was revealed from the beginning, because it is contrary to the equal personal dignity of women who in matrimony give themselves with love that is total and therefore unique and exclusive. The Christian who has lived in polygamy previously has a grave duty in justice to honour the obligations contracted in regard to his former wives and his children (no. 2387).

From all her documents, the Church does not support polygamy and little in favour of women.

### **2.6.3 SOME AFRICAN BISHOPS ON THE ISSUE OF POLYGAMY.**

The Synod of African Bishops held in 1980 highlighted that polygamy is one of the most delicate and serious challenges faced by the Church in Africa. Kanyadago (1991) reports that Francis Arinze, by then the archbishop of Onitsha- Nigeria, stressed the need to clarify the doctrine on marriage.<sup>41</sup> Bishop Jean Baptist of Rwanda expressed his disappointment by the implicit but radical condemnation of polygamy in the Synod's lineamenta.<sup>42</sup> Bishop Iteka of Mahenge in Tanzania, on the other hand, said that polygamy breaks the picture of oneness that we read about in Genesis 2:24. He, however, acknowledged that participants in polygamous marriages are not deprived of family values. He affirmed that, "Family values can be very deep

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<sup>40</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 47.

<sup>41</sup> Kanyadago, "Evangelizing Polygamous Families- Canonical and African Approaches," *Spearhead*, no. 116-118 (Kenya: Gaba Publications, 1991), 50.

<sup>42</sup> Kanyadago, 151.

in polygamous families."<sup>43</sup> Iteka went on to describe the conditions for the polygamist in the Church as being 'very hard' and 'sometimes even seen to destroy the security and harmony of polygamous person who seek baptism.'<sup>44</sup> He called this condition an example of serious discrimination against women, for the condition (in Canon Law) requires that a man choose from among his wives one to be baptised with while dismissing the rest. Polygamists have been frustrated and over powered by fear and helplessness because of what they see as the Church's cold and formalistic attitude.<sup>45</sup> Iteka asked the question of whether the exclusion of polygamists and all their wives from the sacramental life of the Church is the only valid approach. He concluded that the community to which a polygamist belongs is the best to discern appropriately and seek evangelical solutions. Archbishop Robert Sarah of Conakry, Guinea, on his side, emphasised the need to condemn polygamy.

Despite the variety of opinions on the issue, those involved in the debate come to one conclusion: It is a delicate issue in evangelisation in Africa. It is one of the biggest problems of the African Church. It remains one of the most important pastoral challenges. Kanyadago writes, "Whereas some bishops call for an outright condemnation of polygamy; some others ask themselves whether the practice is all that immoral."<sup>46</sup>

#### **2.6.4 SOME THEOLOGIANS ON POLYGAMY**

Some theologians, like Karl Barth and Edward Schillebeeckx, do not find enough reasons to forbid polygamy. Barth, while upholding monogamy as the ideal marriage, he leaves room for permitting polygamy in the Church. He finds no explicit condemnation of it in the

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<sup>43</sup> Patrick Iteka, "Polygamy and the Local Church" *AFER*, vol. 23, no. 1-6 (Kenya: AMECEA Pastoral Institute Publication, February -April, 1980), 106.

<sup>44</sup> Iteka, 107.

<sup>45</sup> Iteka, 108.

<sup>46</sup> Kanyadago, 5.

scriptures. He is not sure whether polygamy should entirely be forbidden.<sup>47</sup> Schillebeeckx, writes that there is no any explicit commandment forbidding polygamy.<sup>48</sup> Bujo, at one point, states that marriage ethics in Africa today (as traditionally presented by the Church) does not fall from heaven and that even with regard to polygamy, distinctively Christian conjugal life will become possible for Africans only to the extent that they gradually open themselves to the liberating and renewing message of Christ.<sup>49</sup> He has also called upon the Church to differentiate genuine polygamy and just concubinage. He says that if a man marries out of lust and without the consultation with the first wife, then that marriage should be condemned; or if that man comes for baptism, he should not be taken.

Anderson concluded that polygamy is universally condemned not because it is clearly condemned in the Bible, but because it is against the universal Christian attitude.<sup>50</sup> Anderson understands 'universal attitude' as referring to the missionaries' own expression of Christianity. For him, true Universal Christianity has to be researched. So monogamy is the missionaries' own understanding of Christianity. In *Moral and Ethical issues in African Christianity*, it is stated that it is easier for some people to tolerate the socio-economic exploitation of racism and colonialism than to keep quiet when it comes to polygamy. Mugambi and Nasimiyu-Wasike remind the Church to overcome alienation from vital forces of spirituality in its traditional heritage.<sup>51</sup> Questions arise as to why the Church demands the dismissal of the mother of

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<sup>47</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.4 The Doctrine of Creation, edited by G.W Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1985), 198-201.

<sup>48</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *Marriage: Secular Reality and Saving Mystery*, vol. I ( Great Britain: Sheed and Ward, 1965), 284. **Quotation:** " Nowhere in the New Testament is there any explicit commandment that marriage should be monogamous or any explicit commandment forbidding polygamy."

<sup>49</sup> Bujo, 114.

<sup>50</sup> Anderson, 48.

<sup>51</sup> J.N.K. Mugambi and A.Nasimiyu-Wasike (Eds.), *Moral and Ethical Issues in African Christianity* (Kenya: Initiatives Publishers, 1992), 110.

someone's children in order to embrace baptism while daylight racists and corrupt politicians are, on every Sunday, welcomed to communion.

Bernard Haring, in his later writings, for example, asserts that the Church must relax her rules against polygamy. He wrote:

But I suggest that the Church admit to baptism and full participation in the life of the Church, the polygamous families who find themselves in the socially approved and lawfully contracted marriage of this type when they come to faith.<sup>52</sup>

Haring is however cautious not to allow an already monogamist to enter polygamous state. Some theologians, like Urrutia, stand by the Church traditional view. He has no doubt that the series of Magisterium pronouncements, as well as the constant and uncompromising practice demand by the Church, conveys to the people the use of the Church's conviction that monogamy, to the exclusion of polygamy, is demanded by our faith.<sup>53</sup>

## 2.7 NON-CATHOLIC VIEWS ON POLYGAMY

### 2.7.1 LUTHERANS

According to the report given by Julilus K. Muthengi (AJET, vol. 14, 1995: 69) the Liberian Church in 1951 admitted polygamists to baptism and Holy Communion. A decade later, the chairperson of the Lutheran conference held in Tanzania (1969), gave the following speech:

My plea with the Church and mission is that pre-baptism polygamists should be baptised together with their wives and children without being forced to divorce their wives. They should also be accepted into full membership. The post-baptism polygamists also should not be excommunicated from Church membership because of their wives they married besides the first wife.<sup>54</sup>

Despite this, Lutherans consider monogamy as the ideal marriage. Similar to the Lutheran position is the example given by Bachmann, a Moravia Missionary. As Anderson writes,

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<sup>52</sup> Bernard Haring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, vol.2 (Great Britain: St. Paul Publications, 1979), 538.

<sup>53</sup> Urrutia, 280.

<sup>54</sup> Josaphat Yego, "Polygamy and the African Church: a Survey" *East African Journal of Evangelical Theology*, vol. 3 ((Chicago: American Theological Library Association, 1984), 77-78.

“Bachmann was not ready to condemn polygamy although it was not a Church policy.”<sup>55</sup> Bachmann worked among the Wanyiha people of Tanzania. The Wanyiha are usually polygamist.

### 2.7.2 ANGLICANS

Hastings writes about the Anglican Lambeth conference of 1888. The Anglican bishops agreed never to baptise a polygamist. They have kept this rule up to today. However, as Hastings observed, they agreed that in some cases the wives could be baptised although this became a disputed issue.<sup>56</sup>

## 2.8 CONCLUSION

Our review of the literature tells us that the topic of polygamy in the context of Christianity is still unresolved both on theological and pastoral levels. Monogamy is proposed as the ideal marriage. Genesis 2:18-25 and later Genesis 1:27 are seen as the starting points of monogamy. There is still a lot of work to be done. The new awareness in theology, especially by African theologians, is still to be harmonised with the traditional Catholic teaching.

Let us now turn to chapter three to look at sociological and theological approach to polygamy. We shall take up key points from chapter two and deepen them from the point of view of sociology and theology.

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<sup>55</sup> Anderson, 98.

<sup>56</sup> Adrian Hastings, Christian Marriage In Africa, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Nairobi: Uzima Press Ltd, 1981), 20.

# **CHAPTER THREE**

## **3.0 SOCIOLOGICAL AND THEOLOGICAL APPROACH TO LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this chapter is to offer the sociological as well as the theological implications of some of the essential issues already introduced in chapter two. The sociological analysis will help us to see whether polygamy is of any value in our times. The focus on the theological analysis will once again help us to bring to light the views of scripture on the whole concept of marriage. By doing this we will see the relevance or the irrelevance of the system. Let us see the methodology of our research before we enter our analysis.

### **3.2 METHODOLOGY**

The methodology followed in this work is mostly based on library research. We consulted Tangaza College and the Salesian community libraries for our main research. A small percentage of the methodology is our own experience, observations and reflections. In all the research, we were controlled by a question: what biblical rules accompany Christian marriages in general and polygamy in particular? Our interest in biblical data explains the reason why we did not conduct field interviews. Within library research, we touched upon major works of the Catholic Church, namely the Vatican II documents and the Code of Canon Law. We also made recourse to the sources of the Synod of African Bishops held in 1980 by reading the official AMECEA publication, AFER. Most of these periodicals contain articles written mostly by

African Bishops, especially those of the AMECEA and SECAM regions. We had a further look at reflections of some African and non-African theologians and sociologists. We owe a lot to the reflections of Eugene Hillman whose reflections have been very inspiring during our research. In Spearhead series we took the major contribution by William G. Blum (1989)<sup>57</sup>.

We also had a look at the works of three former students of Tangaza College who wrote on polygamy. Each of them followed the issue in the usual traditional way, namely: Polygamy is incompatible with Christianity.<sup>58</sup> It was not in our methodology to discover why a particular group of people practices polygamy and the other does not. Our concern was whether polygamy should be practised at all, by anyone. If 'yes' then anyone capable can become a polygamist. If 'no' then no one should do it. Let us now turn to our analysis.

### 3.3 SOCIOLOGICAL

There is a myth spread that a polygamist, by his status of moving from female to female, misses the lasting satisfactions of family life. This myth leads to another myth that a polygamous man has little of the tenderness and care that permanent faithfulness to a loving wife provides. He misses the comfort of a life long companion upon whom he can count, no matter what. Furthermore, he does not get the chance to feel part of the flow of the generations as the father of a monogamous family does. He remains scattered.

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<sup>57</sup> Forms of Marriage: Monogamy Reconsidered.

<sup>58</sup> The Problem of Polygamy in African Christianity by Andrew Lujuo from Kenya (1996). The Problem of Polygamy Among African Christians by Kavishe Kasimir from Kenya (1997). A Pastoral of Marriage in Africa (The Case of Polygamy) by Katana Ndamum from Kenya (1997). Kavishe and Lujuo remarked, in their conclusions, that they were not based on scripture. They also accepted the admission of polygamists to Christianity through baptism basing themselves on God's mercy and love. Katana differed from the two. He looked at polygamy as a problem to be solved and hence proposed a 'frank dialogue' to create new atmosphere between African and Christian marriage.

What we have pointed out presupposes that a polygamous man may not even know his children better because he has little or no participation in their growth. He is pictured to grow old alone and lonely without the security from his offspring. If what we have said above hold true then we begin to wonder what other reasons exists as to why polygamy remains a wide spread practice of many African peoples today. What do opponents mean when they say that polygamists do not enjoy the 'lasting satisfaction of family life'? What is comfort in marriage? Why is polygamy present even in communities that uphold monogamy legally? Some African communities have functional alternatives to polygamy such as concubines or what Parkin and Nyamwaya call, 'outside wives.'<sup>59</sup> In the so-called Western world, 'outside wives' are referred to as 'mistresses.' A man with a mistress is a man living with more than one wife although only one is publicly unknown. Although we are calling this behaviour of having many mistresses as a form of polygamy, it is closer to unfaithfulness and adultery than it is to polygamy. In a way, polygamous attitudes are practiced all over the world under different names. In Africa, it is a legal practice distinguished from adultery.

In the present social environment, economic considerations are often paramount in the decision to have more than one wife. Men who cannot sustain one wife economically usually do not go for a second or a third wife. Having said that, we observe that there are many poor men who are polygamous too. In the case of poor men, the economic calculations are left to the women involved. In such cases, women provide for themselves and hence assume independence from the man. The man becomes dependant on his wives. In this case, some women feel free and enjoy the polygamous situation. They are the bosses of their own families. Such women acquire certain status of respect in the community, more than the men do. This is

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<sup>59</sup> Parkin and Nyamwaya, 46.

very true in matrilineal societies. The disadvantages of this type of polygamy is that men, in most cases, become lazy and hence burdensome.

Another consideration in analysing the significance of polygamy in the present sociological atmosphere in Africa is the contrasting approaches of the two main world religions, namely Islam and Christianity. We can say that the Islamic approach towards polygamy coincides closely with the world-view of many African communities. The Koran allows a man to marry up to four wives.<sup>60</sup> On the contrary, Christianity (up to today) views most African practices as paganism. One such condemned practice is polygamy. In some parts of Africa, like Tanzania, these differing approaches to polygamy are at the very heart of the competition of the two religions in order to get followers. In most cases, Islam is favoured. In the situation where Christianity is favoured, converts end up creating their Christian sects rather than embracing monogamy preached in the mainline Churches. Oosthuizen, in *Women in Africa*, has observed that polygamy is a significant feature of Christian sects<sup>61</sup>. We are saying that in places where Christianity strictly observes the monogamous discipline, it invites separatist movements and loses membership to the newer Independent Christian sects. This is true of Kenya where some Independent churches, mostly of Luo origin, have mushroomed as a result of strict monogamy in the mainline churches.

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<sup>60</sup> N.J. Dawood (Translator), *Koran* (England: Penguin Books, 1997), 60. The Koran says, "If you fear you cannot treat orphans with fairness, then you may marry other women who seem good to you: two, three or four of them. But if you fear that you cannot maintain equality among them, marry one only or any slave-girls you may own" (Women 4:1).

<sup>61</sup> Hafkin and Bay, 230.

As a result of strict monogamous rule, something interesting has emerged. Many Christian men, especially the educated ones, keep one 'Church wife' while having many 'private wives.'<sup>62</sup> These private wives are not known by many people except very few close friends. In most cases when the 'Church wife' comes to know about the existence of the 'private wife' of her husband, which usually happens after a very long time, she reports the matter to the Church officials. If she does not report, the matter remains hidden. On the one hand, men show strong opposition to give up private wives. On the other hand, many Church wives show dislike towards the practice. Some women prefer the man to come out openly and declare his intention of getting another wife. A second wife is preferred than a 'mistress.' Some rich African men who are less worried about what the Church teaches on plural marriage, marry a second and a third wife publicly, in agreement with the first wife and the tension within marriage is reduced. Due to this practice of 'private wives,' monogamous marriages exist under more severe pressure than polygamous ones.

### 3.4 THEOLOGICAL

To be a Christian, as the New Catholic Code of Canon Law stands, a married man must have only one wife.<sup>63</sup> On the other side, our research into scripture shows that heroes of faith like Abraham, Jacob, David and Solomon practised polygamy without any explicit divine rebuke. None of the fathers mentioned is said to have had a conversation with God concerning

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<sup>62</sup> Cf. Parkin and Nyamwaya, 251-253. Wambui Wa Karanga in a study case, found this phenomenon very common in West Africa, especially in Nigeria. What we are calling 'church wives', Wambui refers to them as 'inside wives.' 'Inside wife' is usually an elite woman who has been married in the Church or through customary law. Our 'private wives,' Wambui calls them 'outside wives' or 'outside marriage.'

- By 'Church wife', we mean a wife who is recognized by the Church as true and the only one.
- By 'Private wife', we mean the following: A woman not recognized by the Church, but living with a man and share in conjugal life, and in many cases having children recognized by the man as legal children.

<sup>63</sup> Canon 1148. 1.

the form of marriage that could fit them. It can only be presumed that these Fathers did not consider that taking another wife would be an offence against Yahweh.

It is common experience that a man cannot love two wives equally. Whether he likes it or not, there will always be a favourite. This belief is also testified to in the Bible. For example, Jacob loved Rachel more than Leah (Gen 29). Elkanah preferred Hannah in spite of her childlessness (1 Sam 1:1-8). Preference for a particular wife is talked about in Deuteronomy 21:15-17. The scriptures do not say that these men loved one wife and hated the other. Degrees of love, depending on the established relationship, are always normal in any kind of society. Even God is portrayed as having favoured Jacob more than his twin brother, Esau.

God favoured Mary (mother of Jesus) more than all other human beings.<sup>64</sup> It also happens that among the children of the same wife, a man may show love more to one son or daughter than the others. It also happens to the mothers that they have favourites from among their children. Does it make them poor fathers or mothers? Situations of favouring one more than another are always acceptable in as far as the less favoured is not ignored.

On the level of the Code of Canon law, as we have seen, it seems unjust to allow a man to dismiss his other wives when he has lived with them for a long time. Christ's message of love, liberty and justice does not fit in such judgement. This permission within the Law narrows the theology of marriage. All we need is to expand the moral system in an effort to base ourselves on what scripture demands of us. Christ's love must take precedence more than monogamous or polygamous rules. Surely, practices of allowing a man to dismiss other wives

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<sup>64</sup> The angel said to Mary, "Greetings favoured one! The Lord is with you" [From The New Revised Standard Version: Luke: 1: 28]. There is no other human being whom God has favoured to the point of carrying the Messiah in the womb. Only Mary did that. But does God love other people too? Certainly He does, but not on the same level. To some He favours with full grace to love Him.

with their children and leave them to suffer, do not offer much Christian life. The provisions we saw in CCC 2387 (Catechism of the Catholic Church) are not enough.

Polygamy has been equated with a 'pre-Christian culture'<sup>65</sup> as once Cardinal Francis Arinze of Nigeria stated. In this same presentation, Cardinal Arinze (Archbishop of Onitsha by then) admitted that marriage is a complex social institution, which depends very much on the culture of a given place. His own reason to denounce polygamy is his willingness to be bound to the Universal Church. For him, polygamous families consist of our brothers and sisters who have 'fallen from grace.'<sup>66</sup> This is too harsh because St. Paul reminds us that all human beings have fallen short of the grace of God (Rom 3: 9-12). In other words, all human beings have sinned and continue to live under the influence of sin although Christ has redeemed them. If polygamists and their wives are excluded from sacraments because they fallen from grace, then none can be admitted to the sacraments if we follow what St. Paul tells us.

Theologians like J.S. Wright and J.T. Thompson have always found that monogamy is the ideal biblical marriage and not polygamy.<sup>67</sup> The bible gives evidence that the practice had long been an accepted social institution. In the patriarchal era polygamy was regarded as an unquestioned custom. While the bible gives reason as to why Abraham took Hagar for a second wife and, in the case of Jacob, for having Rachel as a second wife, after taking Leah first, it only proves that polygamy was accepted (Gen 16:1-4; 29:23-28). Polygamy was so accepted to the extent that Mosaic Law does not make any critique. Precautions were always provided for. For example, if a man took a second wife, the economic situation of the first wife and her children would be ensured and in case of inheritance, no child of a subsequent marriage was to

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<sup>65</sup> Francis Arinze, "Polygamy and Childlessness," *AFER*, vol. 23, no. 1-6, (Nairobi: AMECEA Pastoral Institute, February-April, 1981), 97.

<sup>66</sup> Arinze, 98.

<sup>67</sup> J.S. Wright and J.T. Thompson, "Marriage," *The New Bible Dictionary*, edited by J. D. Douglas (London: The Inter-varsity Fellowship, 1962), 787.

be preferred over the children of the first wife (Deut 21:15-17). A king in Israel was not required to have too many wives and the priest was required to have only one wife (Lev 21:13; Deut 17:17). Laws against the king seem not to have worked because David had an extraordinary number of wives and Solomon had plenty of concubines (II Sam 3:2-7, 14; 5:13). To David, the prophet Nathan did not denounce the king for taking another wife but was denounced for the means used or rather for taking another man's wife (II Sam 12:7-15).

Although we notice the decline in the practice of polygamy after the exile, it however survived up to the New Testament.<sup>68</sup> Blum thinks that Christ and the Evangelists were quite aware of those marriages and accepted them as legitimate. From this non-interference on the part of Jesus, Luther, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, concluded that he could not refuse a man taking a second wife.<sup>69</sup> So if polygamy was forbidden then it was not sanctioned. It seems therefore that the ban on polygamy is an ecclesiastical discipline rather than a scriptural directive. If this is true, then there must be some room for dispensation in some cases. Hence, the justification of polygamy as an unchristian practice or 'pre-Christian culture' can only be sorted outside scriptures. In fact, monogamy or polygamy is a matter of a particular culture.

The primary goal of marriage is the 'well-being of spouses' and to the procreation and bringing up of children.<sup>70</sup> These goals find room in polygamous unions also. Opponents of polygamy, like Urrutia, argue that polygamy does not achieve true love of spouses which is the primary goal of marriage. They also say that conjugal love can never be realised in polygamous marriage, arguing that conjugal love is only realised when there is full exclusiveness within two

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<sup>68</sup> Blum, 224. He writes, "Several conclusions could be drawn from the silence of the New Testament about monogamy and polygyny. We know that among the Jews of the New Testament cases of polygynous marriage were still found though it seems they were rare."

<sup>69</sup> Hartmann Grisar, Martin Luther: His Life and Work, adapted from the second Germany edition by J. Eble Frank (U.S.A: The Newman Press, 1960), 516. Also J. Neuner and J. Dupuis (eds.), The Christian Faith, no. 1803 (India: Theological Publications, 1990), 583.

<sup>70</sup> Canon 1055.1. Also found in Gaudium et Spes, nos. 48-49.

spouses. These arguments are however mere presuppositions. Here we need only to raise questions to make things clear. Do cultures where monogamy is generally practiced have higher conjugal stability than polygamous cultures? Divorces in monogamous marriages are most often linked with conjugal problems. Whatever form of marriage, we support relationships based on love, commitment, growth, honesty, and the acceptance personal responsibility.

Those who insist that wives in polygamous marriages, in Africa, are there to be enjoyed by the husbands manifest a clear example of 'ethnocentric moralising,'<sup>71</sup> and points to a widespread ignorance about African polygamy. The suffering of women in some communities due to polygamous marriages cannot be universalised or cannot be taken as departures for denouncing the system. In some communities, it is true, polygamy may result in women and their children suffering. But does this suffering arise only in polygamous marriages? Are women in monogamous marriages free from suffering? Or are women in monogamous marriages held on an equal plain with men? There is suffering and oppression of women in either of these two forms of marriage.

In many parts of African communities, familiar to the author, polygamous families are more honest than monogamous in terms of chastity. For example, when the couple cannot have children in a monogamous marriage, there is a tendency to have 'private wives.' There is more of a tendency towards adultery and divorce. It is not uncommon to hear complaints about marriages from people who come from monogamous societies. A friend told me that in his place (Netherlands), marriage life is deteriorating. Some of these hearses make us conclude that problems in marriage are not a result of the form of marriage embraced. If the people in these monogamous societies have embraced the only ideal form of marriage why should the results be contrary?

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<sup>71</sup> Hillman, 182.

Vatican II looks at polygamy as a practice that destroys the happy picture of marriage.<sup>72</sup>

Bishop Robert Sarah, the archbishop of Conakry presented polygamy at the Synod of bishops in 1980 as a situation in which the dignity of a woman is not recognised.

With polygamy, life is only perceived in its earthly exuberance, and a woman is reduced to this fertile and productive earth, without dignity, exactly as the clay which is turned over and over so that it may produce more and more.<sup>73</sup>

He emphasised the need to push back polygamy because it does not fall into the picture of the mysterious marriage between Christ and the Church. This claim is a difficult one as there is nothing in the scriptures ( Ephesians 5) pointing to monogamy as it does to the unity and insolubility of marriage. Women surely are not objects to be turned over and over. Does polygamy look at women as objects? Bishop Iteka in one of his papers which was not presented at the Synod of Bishops in 1980 but included in the AFER journal, pleaded with the Universal Church to make a “ sincere attempt to examine the actual situation in the light of the gospel and the Church’s teaching.”<sup>74</sup> An attempt can be made by looking at the root of the problem: is it due to the teaching of the gospel or does it rise due to law only? In answering this question, the gospel demand must be given priority.

Some pastors evangelise among the polygamous communities. When those evangelised express the need to participate in the sacramental life of the Church, they are refused. What is the purpose of this type of evangelisation? Implicit in this attitude is the understanding, at least from the side of polygamists, that embracing Jesus demands embracing monogamy. This is the message polygamists get when they are refused baptism. The result is the rejection of the

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<sup>72</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 47.

<sup>73</sup> Robert Sarah, “Polygamy,” *AFER*, Vol. 23, no. 1-6, 101.

<sup>74</sup> Patrick Iteka, *AFER* 23, no. 1-6, 107.

gospel message and the unwillingness to know more about Christ because Christianity comes to them as a burden of laws rather than a liberating and loving message.

### **3.5 CONCLUSION**

So far, we have not found in the Bible where polygamy is preached against. We are of the opinion that polygamy is not for everyone just as marriage is not for all. If it is practiced it must be based on biblical principles and lived in obedience to God's will, as any monogamous marriage must be. Monogamy or polygamy must be a lifestyle that provides much love, fellowship, support and growth in one's relationship with God. We shall now turn to chapter four for the summary of the work and general conclusion.

# **CHAPTER FOUR**

## **4.0 SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

Our present effort in this work is not to make people more polygamous but to clarify the myths surrounding this practice. The faithful are searching for the meaning of their Christian faith and for what truly belongs to Christianity. All these are being done in the name of inculturation. In this search, people end up in multiple confusions that result, in many cases, in the rejection of the Church and the message of Christ. In this chapter we will also try to bring to conclusion certain practical ways, based on the scriptures, of how to go about solving the problem so that the Catholic Church may be more relevant to people. We shall present the summary of the preceding chapters. Then we shall give suggestions both for pastoral and further research in future. We shall close our work with the general conclusion.

### **4.2 SUMMARY**

In the preceding three chapters, we introduced the problem and an attempt was made to show through library work and our own observations what causes people to opt for polygamy. We looked at many writings of sociologists, theologians and a few moralists. We quickly went through the scriptures to find out what is said about polygamy and marriage in general.

In chapter one, we gave the general introduction to the whole research. We looked at the background, stated the problem (not much from the women side) and drew up some objectives. We talked about the significance of the study, gave the scope and limitation of our study. Finally we presented the definition of what polygamy is all about.

In chapter two, we highlighted the problems in regard to literature review. We did a short survey of the problem and gave reasons as to why it is practiced. Going through many sources, we realised the amount of research that has already been done and the questions that have been raised. We also discovered the complexity of the problem from the point of view of the Bible, the Church and Canon Law, Theologians and other Christian Churches. There is a lot of cry from the African Church to the Universal Church in order to have a more justice and all-embracing approach to the problem. Our going through the scriptures did not give us any clear indication of the abolition of polygamy.

In the third chapter, we gave the sociological and theological reasoning. It was of benefit to discover that today, more than ever, there is a growing number of exegetes, moral and dogmatic theologians and all theologians who are realising that the Catholic traditional stand on polygamy is a mere ecclesiastical law than it can be said to be a divine law. So far, it seems to us that both monogamy and polygamy are accepted ideal forms of marriage so long they are lived in the Lord.

### **4.3 PASTORAL SUGGESTIONS**

When a polygamist (woman included) comes to ask for baptism his honesty should be presumed. It should be considered a blessing for the Church. Unless a polygamist is a strong believer, he will never dare come forward and ask for the sacraments in a Church that is anti-polygamy. If, on human grounds a polygamist has managed to do all that pertains to love, meaning proper care for the family and responsible education for the wives and children, then baptism must be opened to such individuals without any condition. There is nothing exceptional

the Church will do in accepting polygamists to baptism except that she will fulfill her mission, namely 'to let the oppressed go free' (Lk 4:18).

We suggest that cases of polygamists and even monogamists should be left to the prudence of the local ordinary and his pastors, together with the parish teams, to make the decision. Because of the wide diversity across various societies, concerning both the practice of polygamy as well as the reasons for it, we suggest that each local diocese be given the opportunity to examine its own situation. We are not advocating the universal law of accepting polygamists into the Church. We are saying that there should not be any universal law prohibiting polygamists into the Church, but each local Church should have its own policy.

#### **4.4 SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

We would like to express our sincere support to all research that has been done on polygamy. Our present study recommends that further research will be very much appreciated in order to make the Catholic Church relevant and localised in the African context. We therefore recommend the following for further research:

- 1) A full research based on the women views on polygamy in contemporary Africa.
- 2) Our work dealt with the Catholic and Protestant theologians' views on the problem.  
A research that will deal with the Orthodox theology will be of importance in order to put the Catholic theology on marriage into perspective.
- 3) We confined ourselves to the biblical view, but we feel that research must be conducted that will consult among various communities of Africa, to find out whether the practice is necessary in our times or not.

4) It is our recommendation that further research be done on the background of the present Canons on polygamy to see whether the particular Canons apply universally.

## 4.5 GENERAL CONCLUSION

After weighing the arguments that we presented in this work, taking each point by point, we can conclude that the Catholic Church's attitude towards polygamy is ecclesiastically justified, but not biblically. Therefore, there should be room for dispensation. The local Bishops, Parish priests and the Parish communities should be the competent authority to grant such dispensations. With a new revolution in systematic theology that has interpreted creation in terms of evolution, we are faced with the hard task of believing that from the beginning of creation, marriage was monogamous. In fact, Genesis tells us that God created humankind, "Adam." This humankind is made up of males and females. Theories of Evolution, Polygenesis, based on Biology and Palaeontology which are accepted by many biblical scholars and theologians like Karl Rahner, are in line with the biblical 'Adam' which points to the existence of human beings and not a single person called Adam. Today science teaches us that the first people must have originated from animal parents. So, most probably, humankind emerged from a population rather than a single pair.<sup>75</sup> Here it is a question of reconciling our faith with scientific discoveries that are as well a gift of God. Theologians and Bible scholars cannot just ignore this scientific discovery. In fact, Rahner has explained the theory of Polygenesis as follows:

It is a general principle of Biology that true, concrete, genetic unity is not found in the individual but in the population within which alone many individuals can exist in the same biotope... This biological

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<sup>75</sup> Ernst Mayr, Animal Species and Evolution (Britain: Harvard University Press, 1966), 651.

historical unity can also describe the state of humankind at its origin...without limiting it to a single couple.<sup>76</sup>

All we can conclude about Genesis 2:24 is this that the word 'man' as it is used, does not refer to a single individual, namely Adam as one.<sup>77</sup> Thus monogamy cannot be presumed to have been there since the beginning. In fact, the first chapters of Genesis belong to aetiological historicity.

Without naive interpretation of the Gospels, we can say that Jesus remained silent on the issue of polygamy even when occasion came when he was asked whose wife will she be after the resurrection since she was married to seven of them (Mt 22:24-29). In his response, he just said that there would be no marriage in the Kingdom of heaven. This must have triggered an occasion to condemn polygamy, but it did not. The popular NT quotations, Matthew 19: 1-12; Mark 10:1-12; 1 Corinthians 7 and Ephesians 5: 22-33 are concerned about the permanence of marriage rather than its form. Surely the scriptures mention that marriage should be between male and female and therefore disqualify homosexual marriage (1 Cor 7). The scriptures are concerned about divorce. Divorce should never occur in marriage. Again the word of God insists on union of marriage. We are aware that union can occur between two or more individuals. The biblical picture of 'one flesh'<sup>78</sup> can still take place when more than two people are involved. There is not enough proof to conclude that union is only between two people. The perfect union, The Trinity, is composed of more than two Persons.

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<sup>76</sup> Karl Rahner. "Evolution and Original Sin," translated by Theodore L. Waster. In: Metz Johannes (Ed.), The Evolving World and Theology (New York: Paulist Press 1967), 32.

<sup>77</sup> David G. Maillu, Our Kind of Polygamy (Kenya: Heinemann Kenya, 1988), 44.

<sup>78</sup> Hillman. 154. "It can be said that 'one flesh' signifies community of kinship based on marriage... This would suggest that the expression 'one flesh' in so far as it relates to structure of marriage, refers to the contemporary problem of indissolubility- not to the problem of customary polygamy."

The encyclical *Familiaris Consortio* argues that marriage of more than two people does not respect the dignity and equality of people involved (no. 19). This argument is based on how total love can be possible in polygamous marriage. It takes only a few steps of experience to prove that neither does monogamy guarantee total love for each other in all cases. Love is widely advocated and hardly known. What is love if a monogamist cannot be kind to the wife and children? What is love if he cannot be tolerant, patient and cannot send children to school and cannot provide for the home? If a polygamist, on the other hand, were to do all the above things, should he be considered a failure in love?

Although we discovered that polygamy is on the decline, we equally affirm that the end of it is still very far away. In fact, the new form of marriage of having 'private wives' is increasing. We further discovered that polygamous marriage is not evil. So dismissing other wives for the sake of baptism, keeping in mind the economic situation in many parts of Africa, would be evil and a crime. Evil because the action lacks love for the dismissing and it dehumanises women and places them on the level of objects. Crime, because it negates responsibility - the polygamist acts irresponsibly over those he has dismissed. We agree with Hastings that to separate one wife from others could cause deep injustice and misery.<sup>79</sup>

Let us note some reasons as to why polygamists should be baptised. A man who is married to more than one wife and has children with them has taken upon himself a life-long responsibility. Polygamy, like monogamy, is a face of the reality of marriage. So a polygamist, who realizes the deeper meaning of Christ, admires Christian values, wants to be baptized in the Catholic Faith and wants to live Christian commitments seriously, must not be given monogamy as a condition to show his responsibility.

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<sup>79</sup> Adrian Hastings, Christian Marriage in Africa (Nairobi: City Printing Work Ltd., 1974), 24.

The way Canon Law conditions are given, appear to be more in favour of men than women. 'Pauline privilege'<sup>80</sup> in this case, is more for men's advantage than it is for women. If the first wife is the true wife according to the Church's understanding, how is it that the man should abandon the first and retain any of his choice (cf. Can 1148 .1).

Pastors must reduce their fear that since the Church has been run on monogamous discipline throughout her history, to do otherwise would cause scandal. Is it not already a scandal in our times when we know that polygamous rule on those who wish to be baptised does not promote justice or base itself on scriptures or at least on love? Is it not a scandal that the Church, from Canon Law, makes women objects from which a man can choose which one to be baptised with? When one looks at the whole matter from the perspective of the permanence of marriage, the whole issue of dismissing other wives before baptism becomes scandalous. If in some cases, efforts will be made to admit polygamists to the sacrament and if scandals in those efforts will occur, we think the scandals will be more tolerable than the scandals of colonialism and racism.

We predict that when the economic situation will be all right in Africa, many Africans will opt to have their polygamous marriages rather than cling to monogamy which they view brings about 'private wives,' or 'mistresses' as it is in the so-called Western World. If faithfulness is kept in any kind of marriage, monogamy or polygamy, then the pandemic of HIV/AIDS is not a threat.

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<sup>80</sup> 1 Corinthians 7: 12-14. ALSO Canons 1143-1150.

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