

**Address of  
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Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa  
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**The Family as a Subject of the New Evangelization**

*The Path of the Synod*

My Dear Brother Bishops, Friends,

This Plenary Assembly of the Conferences of the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA) is being held on the eve of the Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops this coming October which is dedicated to “*The Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelization.*” As you know, this Extraordinary General Assembly is the first part of a family-oriented synod process whose second part, the Fourteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod, will be held in October, 2015. The theme of the second part will be “*Jesus Christ Reveals the Mystery and Vocation of the Family.*”

Without going into detail about the new approach that Pope Francis wants the synod process to take, I emphasize to you that the Holy Father is asking that the themes be considered broadly and with the participation of all. He wanted to set the synodal reflections in motion himself with a two-day discussion of the subject during the February, 2014 Consistory for the Creation of new Cardinals. After that, he saw to it that the views of all the episcopal conferences and a significant number of other institutions or individual members of the faithful were solicited by means of a detailed questionnaire.

The *Instrumentum Laboris* that the Secretariat of the Synod presented last June 26 contains an extensive synthesis of the responses that were received. The results of the work of the Extraordinary Synod, which will be attended by the Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences, Heads of the Curia Dicasteries, and a number of experts, will be studied by the Episcopal Conferences during 2015 in preparation for the Ordinary Synod in October, 2015.

I think it is very important that we examine this long process that is uniting the whole Church in a consideration of marriage and the family. I must say first that the Synod on the New Evangelization considered the question of the family in a significant way. At first, however, as the *Instrumentum Laboris* was being prepared, the family was not even mentioned. Cardinal Antonelli, at the time President of the Pontifical Council for the Family, raised the point and the omission was corrected with the addition of three sections about the family. Then, during the Synod discussions, the bishops spoke of the family as a “subject of the New Evangelization” more than a hundred times. After that, when Pope Francis met with the Synod Secretariat to decide on the theme of the upcoming Synod, he saw that there was widespread agreement on the need for a general consideration of the family. It was evident to him that the close connection between the central role of the family in the New Evangelization and the everyday reality of family life called for special consideration. That realization led to his decision to hold a two-stage Synod on the family.

I think it is also important to emphasize that Pope Francis is not seeking just a theoretical reflection. He wants a consideration of the reality of family life today, of the circumstances in which families find themselves on the different continents, all for the purpose of sharing in their joys and sufferings, their hopes and fears. From this point of view, the *Instrumentum Laboris* is extremely valuable, precisely because it reveals the difficulties that families are facing today, and it is from this realistic perspective, rather than from a theoretical one, that we must begin in order to decide on the approaches that will help our families rediscover the power and the vocation that the Lord has entrusted to them. There is no doubt that we are facing significant and extremely delicate challenges that involve both the Church and civil society, and for this reason we need great courage and great boldness—in a word, great love for our families. And it is for this reason I am happy to participate in this Assembly and offer my thoughts on the family’s task in the New Evangelization.

## *A Paradox*

The current family crisis gives rise to a paradox. On the one hand, great value is given to the bonds of family, to the point of considering the family as the key to happiness, a place of safety, refuge and support in the lives of its members. On the other hand, in the family we see every type of human frailty: bonds are broken, families lose their way, they split up, they form new unions, and at the same time families are so much harder to form and to keep together that many prefer to simply “live together” in no-commitment unions.

There are problems in Africa too, notwithstanding the fact that the African family has not yet abandoned its great values. In Africa the family is still the foundation of society, the place where cultural and spiritual values are learned and transmitted. The extended family teaches its children the attitudes and behaviors of the whole community. The traditional African family retains a profound sense of the culture of life. Life is sacred because each life is a gift from God. These values are beautiful and are clearly described in the 1995 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*: “In the culture and traditions of Africa, the role of the family is universally considered as fundamental. Open to this understanding of the family, of love and of respect for life, Africa loves children and welcomes them joyfully as a gift from God. The sons and daughters of Africa love life....Practices contrary to life are nevertheless imposed on them by economic systems that serve only egoism and money.” (N. 43)

The observations of Professor Albert Tévoédjrè in his book *Le bonheur de servir, Réflexions et Repères* are worthy of consideration: “for lay Christians, in an Africa tossed about by different currents, defending the family as God himself desires it is not only an act of conformity with their faith...it means the saving of the very foundations of society and of all true development. The threats to the family in Africa today are legion: the breakdown of morals, the attacks on the unity of marriage, the dissolution of family ties, and the increase in *de facto* unions, as well as poverty, and increased unemployment that makes it impossible for parents to fulfill their responsibilities. This position is confirmed in N. 42 of the 2011 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Africae Munus*: “By reason of its capital importance and of the threats it faces, the distortion of the notion of marriage and of the family itself, the devaluation of marriage, the easy availability of abortion and divorce and the relativism of a “new ethics,” the

family must be protected and defended so that it can render to society the service that society expects of it, that is, to give it men and women who can weave a social fabric of peace and harmony.”

I know that several African Episcopal Conferences are organizing seminars and meetings on the family. Last week I participated personally in the General Assembly of the Association of the Episcopal Conferences of Central Africa (ACERAC) in Brazzaville, Republic of the Congo, which dealt entirely with the African family and the challenges that it is called upon to face. But there was also a Family Conference in Libreville, Gabon, a meeting organized by the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SCEAM) in Bénin at the John Paul II Institute from June 14<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> which had as its theme “*Africa Prepares for the Synod on the Family*,” in Gabon, in Cameroon, in Kenya and many other countries as well. These meetings are ideal occasions to discuss and foster new ideas and new visions of how to answer with mercy the expectations of children, young people, adults and the elderly (who these days are no longer, when they die, like libraries destroyed by fire, as the well-known author Amadou Hampâté Bâ described them, but who are rather a burden to be laid aside). And we know how much the elderly are the memories of a country or a continent. Our mission as shepherds who know the hurts and sorrows of our flocks convinces us that there is a great need to weave strong relations among the generations, a thread of solidarity between children, young people and the elderly in Africa, to avoid the generational crisis that exists in Europe and elsewhere.

We are not unaware that external forces are acting on families in Africa—the ideology and theory of gender, the use of contraceptives, abortion—are great problems for the families that look to us for guidance. But there are also pressures that come from within Africa, the burden of dowries for example, and the problems that arise from polygamy, as well as an overly ethnocentric view of society. I have had occasion to reflect on the affirmations of the political scientist Achille Mbembe from Cameroon, who said in an interview in *Le Messager* that, “The family and the educational system constitute, for me, the two critical questions we must reflect on. In many families, children are not helped to prepare themselves for advancement, for the challenges and the call to responsible citizenship that life offers. Prisoners of their own life path, forced into line by village histories, family jealousies, inheritance disputes, useless rivalries based on ignorance and credulity...we all know of people who attribute every difficulty in their

lives to the sorcery of an evil uncle or a spell cast on them by a neighbor. This kind of attitude will clearly not be what allows us to rise above our victim mentality and take our place in a competitive and globalized world...even within families individualism assumes the most insidious forms. Some use group behavior to advance their own personal agenda...in many families parents who are ill get only the most limited attention, even a hospital visit is too much trouble. But once they die, everyone mourns loudly. To that we can add that violence against women and children is commonplace.” The philosopher continues: “It’s enough to see the violence of the hidden conflicts between parents and children within families or even the breakdown of married life. No need for statistics to measure how great the disaster is. Because parents themselves sometimes had no reliable guidance, many young people grow up in families that don’t prepare them to take on the two principal responsibilities of life, namely the formation of a true relationship with a spouse in the formation of a stable family, and the nurture of children teaching them a work ethic and the virtues of love and respect for others...divorce rates in Africa remain relatively low because they are not well recorded but also because of economic, sociocultural and religious pressures.

*Globalization and “individualization” of society*

The question of marriage and the family is to be considered in the light of the “individualization” of contemporary society. Over the last several centuries, we have seen the rise of subjectivity, which is in some ways a positive development because it has made possible the affirmation of the dignity of the individual, but excessive attention to the individual takes society down a dangerous path. It seems that the “*me*” is everywhere prevailing over the “*us*,” and *individual* over *society*. Likewise, the rights of the *individual* take precedence over the rights of the *family*. It thus becomes normal, even sensible, that in an individualist culture “living together” is preferable to marriage, and individual independence is preferable to committed interdependence.

The meaning of “family” is turned completely upside-down; rather than being seen as the “basic cell of society” it has become the “basic cell of the individual.” Each of the two spouses thinks of the other only in terms of his or her own self. In affluent societies, the false but

unfortunately common belief is that marriage brings with it a painful renunciation of the marvelous possibilities that single life can offer. In marriage, each partner seeks his or her own self-realization rather than the creation of a “plural subject” that goes beyond itself and creates an “us” to build a future together. “Me,” the new ruler of reality, becomes a dictator in marriage and the family as well. The Italian sociologist Giuseppe De Rita speaks of “egolatry,” a genuine worship of “*me*.”

It is obvious that in such a context the family no longer has a home, and still less is its strength and dignity respected. But the weakening of the “culture of the family” brings with it a weakening of society itself. In effect, in our contemporary megalopolises, men and women no longer rely on “being together” to survive, rather, their strategy is “keep separate.”

Proof of this troubling trend is the growth in Europe and United States of “monopersonal” families made up of only one person. If on the one hand we witness the breakdown of the so-called traditional family (father, mother, children, grandparents, grandchildren), on the other we see an increase in families made up of only one person. This means that the decrease in religious and civil marriages has not been offset by an increase in other forms of living together such as the do-called *de facto* unions or same-sex couples, but rather by an increase in the number of persons who choose to live alone. Why is this happening? The choice to live alone is based on a belief that bonds of commitment are unbearable, are too burdensome. And the result of such choices is a society ever more “non-family” made up of individuals who, if ever they get together, do so without any lasting commitment. Marriage “forever” has become an alien in contemporary culture.

### *The need for “Family”*

Still, in the depths of our being we long for the lasting affective ties that make it possible to overcome life’s difficulties. All scientific studies bear this out, and when contemporary culture advances the notion of absolute autonomy for the individual, it plays us false because it proposes an objective that is not good, and that in any event—and worse yet—fails to prepare us to meet the stresses and sacrifices that every true and lasting relationship encounters. The trick that contemporary culture plays on us is the fruit of superficial ideologies, the latest of which,

product of the sexual revolution, is among the most pernicious, and its effects are dramatic. What depths of pain and loneliness there are in our cities! It is a genuine dictatorship of individualism, a force that destroys affection, bonds and responsibility, and it helps no one. Indeed, it digs pits of sorrow, above all for those who leave each other, or grow apart and fight, and the negative consequences are devastating for those who are weakest. Stability, the desire for which is at the very root of the human spirit, is cut down as soon as it appears. The dominant culture does not protect stability, rather, today's culture rejects it and tosses it aside.

But let me repeat: the need for "family" has not disappeared. It defines the human person in his inmost being. We are made for communion, not loneliness, and the Bible story of the creation of man and woman bears this out. In Genesis 2:18, after God created man, he realized that his masterpiece was missing something: "It is not good for man to be alone," he said, and he fixed that situation by creating woman, a strong companion who was also "like unto him." The heart of that story is clear: men and women are not called to solitude but rather to communion—just like God for that matter. God is not alone. God is three Persons, different from one another but each needing the other. With humans, it is the same. To be complete, each of us has need for "the other" and alone we can't exist.

In the story in the first chapter of Genesis (Gn 1:27) the sacred writer emphasizes this notion of communion: "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them." From the very beginning, the human person is always a "we," never just a "me." "I" and the "other" are complementary to each other. The "I" without the "other" is not fully the "image and likeness" of God. That "image and likeness" is fulfilled in the "we"—the complementary union of man and woman. In all of creation, nothing is self-sufficient. The need for an "us," for communion, is everywhere, and the family is the highest fulfillment of that need. I believe it is our task to tell the whole world that in spite of all the difficult trials to which the family is subject, it remains the irreplaceable genome of human society.

### *The family as the basis of society*

If we want a solid society, we must start with the family. Humanity's "we" begins and grows in the family, and the mutually supportive relationships that are the hallmark of healthy families must be spread to the worldwide family of peoples, and there is a sort of golden thread that unites the nuclear family with global ones. "Family" is a great challenge to the anonymity and individualism of contemporary societies and urban sprawl. The Church, the "family of God" and Christian families are called to a noble task, to become a ferment for the family in cities, in countries, in continents, in the peoples of the earth. Weakening of the family means becoming ruled by sentiment and by sentiment's instability and uncertainty. It wasn't by chance that Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI linked the disappearance of the family in contemporary society to the disappearance of God himself.

Globalized society will be able to find a solidly civilized future if and to the extent that it is able to promote a new culture of the family. In fact, no other form of living can produce those relationship benefits that the family creates. The family is unique in its ability to create human relationships, those between man and woman, between parents and children, and among members of the extended family. Cicero defined the family as follows: "*familia est principium urbis et quasi seminarium rei publicae*" ("The family is the foundation of the city and, as it were, the seed-bed of the commonwealth.") (De Off. I, 17) It is in the family that we first learn about "us" and as adults lay a foundation for the future through the generation of new life. Pope Francis never misses the opportunity to speak of the family as "*the place where we learn to love, the natural focus of human life. It is made up of faces, of persons who love, who speak to each other, who make sacrifices for others and who defend life, especially the life that is the most fragile, the weakest. We can say without exaggeration that the family is the engine of the world and of history.*"

If we go back to the biblical image that I just mentioned, we find ourselves today at an extremely sharp divide. On the one hand, we have the biblical affirmation that "It is not good for man to be alone" (the origin of the family and of society itself) (Gen. 2:18), but on the other we hear the exact opposite "it is good for individuals to go it alone" (the source of social and economic individualism).

## *The Gospel of the Family*

In such a context, the Church has the serious and urgent task of witnessing the Gospel of the Family. It must affirm that the family is a Gospel for our globalized and individualized society. When the Apostle Paul tied marriage to that “great mystery” that is the relationship between Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:32), he wanted to make clear that marriage and the family was in integral part of God’s saving plan for all of humanity. The Church, the Christian community, holds in trust that extraordinary “treasure” that is marriage and the family it produces. It is a treasure whose source is the very mystery of the Trinity, in that “Us” that is love, relationship and gift. St. John Paul II wrote, *“God is love (1Jn 4:8) and lives in Himself a mystery of personal communion of love. When He created humanity in His image and as He continually keeps it in being, God gave man and woman the vocation, and therefore the ability and the responsibility, of love and communion. Love is thus the basic and inborn vocation of every human being.”* (*Familiaris Consortio*, II) We can affirm that matrimony is a “primordial sacrament” in the plan of creation and it becomes a “sacrament of grace: in the plan of redemption.

We must be aware of this great treasure of love that God has given to his Church. It is not so much a doctrine as it is a gift to be welcomed. It is crucial that Christians, especially married couples and Christian families, live this treasure and make it shine forth as a beautiful and captivating reality. In a world marked by loneliness and violence, marriage and the Christian family must be a “good news” that supports that new humanism that the world so needs today. The moment is ripe, not because the joy of this Gospel comes easy, but because this Gospel is the only answer to the crying need, all over the world, for love.

Christian families, with all the weaknesses they might have, still can tell many stories of faithfulness, sometimes heroic, to God. These family stories animate the world and the Church, literally from generation to generation. They show that the call to marriage and the family creates the space for an extraordinary alliance in which mutual attraction gives rise to the transmission of the gift of life and the commitment to protect it, nurture it and accompany it with love. Every time a baby is born, the family reveals to society the time and place to experience interpersonal friendship and benevolence anew.

In the words of Archbishop Oscar Romero spoken in a homily he delivered at the Funeral Mass of a priest assassinated by death squads: *“Vatican II asks all of us to be martyrs, to give our lives for others, just as, for example, a mother does when a child is conceived in her womb. She protects it for months, she gives birth, she nourishes it and helps it to grow. This mother is a martyr because she gives life to her child.”* I believe that the Synod we are preparing for must above all give homage and appreciation to the many, many families who are living out, with all their weaknesses, this witness of love.

### *The Christian community and the family*

The family, in its turn, needs help to maintain itself, to keep itself alive. Just as “it is not good for man to be alone,” it is also “not good for the family to be alone.” There is a risk that in a family individualism leads it to isolation. We must without fail promote a culture of love as a gift that flowers into service for others. The family cannot live for itself alone, it must live for something beyond itself. *“For this reason a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife.”* (Jn 2:24) The love that is in the heart of the family urges us to go beyond our limits. And the family has a precious gift besides: it is the Church. The family has need of the Church, of the *communitas*, so as not to be tossed about by the waves of individualism. In a certain sense, the Church is the rock on which the family is built, and all we have to do is read the Gospel to see the limits a family faces when it does not reach beyond itself. Making Christians aware of the relationship between the family and the Church is one of the key tasks of pastoral care for families.

St. John Chrysostom made this clear when he spoke of the relationship between the family and the Christian community, between the “Church in the home” and the “Church of the city.” Each needs the other, and both are given strength by that love that leads them to go beyond themselves. Today’s new cultural contexts with their many as yet unresolved problems, lead the Church to preach the lofty message of marriage and the family with courage and boldness, by example but also with vigorous pastoral and cultural action. There is an urgent need to renew family pastoral care in all its aspects, and I will list a few.

I would like to begin with “Christian initiation.” This is the first task of the family as a subject to the New Evangelization. Heretofore, we have developed pastoral programs for sacramental preparation, but we have not made similar progress with respect to passing on the faith and educating in it. Indeed, we are creating a sort of generation gap in this regard, and it is difficult to pass on not only the faith itself, but also faith culture and traditions. Christian families must re-learn about Christian initiation. We must no longer close off children from the community after they are baptized. Rather than simply preparing children for their sacraments, we must “initiate” them in the faith, that is, immerse them in the life of the community and help them “grow in wisdom, age and grace” like Jesus. In this context the family’s attendance at Sunday Mass, the family’s reading of the Bible, and the family’s care for the poor and needy take on a key role in the life of the family.

In a renewed approach to family pastoral care, associations and movements that help families live their Christianity take on special importance, as do the activities of the lay faithful. It is particularly important that during the work week families have the support of these organizations, and that assistance is available from them for all phases of life, from infancy to old age.

Clearly, in this context, preparation for marriage takes on particular importance, particularly education of young people with respect to the nature of Christian marriage and the Christian family. All too often ignorance in this area is harmful to both love and marriage stability. In addition, the religious dimension of family life is extremely important and should receive much greater attention than it usually does. Likewise, young families need assistance in their first years. Often young couples are left to their own devices, especially if they move far away from the places where they grew up. And if we think of large cities where being alone is the norm, we understand how important this network of relationships is.

In the local churches we need to develop richer and more welcoming pastoral programs for families and to staff them with persons who are trained in accompanying families in their many and varied circumstances. It is my hope that the Synod will make it a priority to recommend an increase in the number of priests, religious and trained couples who take on this activity.

*The Christian community, the family and society*

It will be crucial to begin a dialogue with contemporary society. I am thinking, for example of the greater awareness that men and women have of their own individual worth today, and of a greater understanding of the contribution of women in the life of the Church. We can't simply be passive in these matters however; we have to offer a richer culture of marriage and the family to a society that risks breaking itself apart in regrettable individualism. In addition, there are a number of cultural and political questions that we cannot avoid, for example gender identity, that is, what does it mean today to be a man or a woman. We need to be able to give a clear and convincing response to the elimination of sexual differentiation that is being proposed by the new "gender" culture prevailing today in all international contexts. There are other topics as well that need to be included in a pastoral care for families that is responsive to contemporary reality, from individual rights to the rights of children to be born, grow and live in love and dignity throughout their lives, to the right to die without being killed, to the rights of the sick to adequate medical care, to the right to a dignified and secure job, to the right of families not to be exploited by a dictatorship of financial gain, to the right to adequate rest and to be not enslaved by working conditions geared only to increased production.

We are dealing with broad and complex reality that demands cultural and political, as well as spiritual, involvement, that gives rise to new wisdom and new energy that promote and defend marriage, the family and life. If we are able together to begin this effort to protect and defend marriage and the family, we will be able to involve the other religious traditions, beginning with Judaism, and humanists of good will, so that this common heritage of humanity can assist peoples to become families where persons of differing cultures are able to live in peace.

My dear brother bishops, dear friends, what I propose is difficult and complex but cannot be put off. We need a new alliance between the family and the Church to show the beauty of the "us" to a world that lives in the sorrow of its shortsighted pride. The Lord has entrusted to us a task that is both worthy and fascinating, but he will not deny us His help in carrying it out.