Revisiting the Admission of Persons in Polygamous Marriages into the Church from a Renewed Understanding of Faith, Sin, and Salvation

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> God created humankind in his image,
> in the image of God he created them;
> male and female he created them.
> God blessed them, and God said to them,
> Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth
> (Gen.1:27-28).

The Church's notion of the sacrament of marriage is based on the divine mandate. However, actual marriage practices and customs can vary across cultures, as they differ according to social norms and beliefs. At times, the marriage bond can be restricted to monogamous relations, or its definition can be so broad as to include polygamy, polygyny, or even polyandry.

Many African cultures have a long history of diverse marriage practices and customs. To date, some countries in Africa have legalized monogamy and polygamy, while others only recognize monogamous marital relationships. In my home country, Cameroun, the legislation allows a couple to choose between polygamy or monogamy.

Given this context, Africa's re-introduction to the Christian faith brings with it serious theological and pastoral

concerns concerning the admission of persons in polygamous relationships into the Church. Generally, there has been a set of specific requirements for individuals who want to be baptized. One of those prerequisites is the obligation to commit oneself to only one partner and live in a monogamous relationship. Consequently, other forms of union with more than one companion are considered to be against the Church's teaching.

However, suppose all prospective converts in traditionally polygamous societies would be required to renounce polygamy to become a Christian. What would become of those who, for one reason or another, cannot break away from such relationships without causing serious pain and harm to the other parties? Can we then ask: is there any possibility of an exception in the Church's position? Are there some limiting cases that can challenge such a rule? How can we approach such specific cases from a theological and pastoral standpoint?

A Case Study from Cameroun

To give a concrete picture of such a situation, we present here the case of a man who is prevented from becoming a Christian by his polygamous marital situation.

Coming from a polygamous family, 68-year-old Mr. Lucas Saa is the Chief of a village in the western part of Cameroun. At the age of twenty-five, Mr. Saa married his first wife, Moche Marie Brigitte. Six years later, his younger brother died unexpectedly, leaving behind a widow with two children. To comply with the family and his culture's demands, Mr. Saa had to take his deceased brother's widow as his second wife and her children as his own. For this, he had to sacrifice his own interest and work harder to take care of his two wives

and their children. Eventually, the second wife would bear him three more children, but this was far from the end. A few years later, his father passed away, and he was chosen to be his successor: the family heir. Consequently, he became the village chief and received another wife as a gift according to their custom. Thus, he now has three wives and sixteen children and enjoys a happy and harmonious family relationship.

Three years ago, before I left my country to go back to the Philippines, he shared his desire to become a Christian. He was discouraged when I told him that if he wants to become a Christian, he should divorce two of his wives and remain with only one. He explained to me that he ended up in this situation because of the tradition and that it is now somehow too late to change this situation for a good reason. First, to send away his brother's widow would be perceived by the whole village as an inhumane act. Sending away a widow would be leaving her and her children without all the social protections that marital status would provide them. Furthermore, taking care of the third wife would make him appear as a responsible Chief. On the other hand, sending her away because of his newfound faith in Christ will be potentially detrimental to Christianity in the village because people will think that Christianity leads to irresponsibility. This might even lead to his revocation as the village Chief by the tribe, thus imposing on him the shameful fate of disgrace. Last but not least, the innocent children will suffer most from the consequences of such a decision, ending up deprived of enjoying the loving presence of both parents. Thus, he asked: "who is this God who divides people instead of uniting them?"

Polygamy in the Sacred Scriptures and in the Church's Tradition

Mr. Saa's polygamous situation is neither new nor unique. We see the presence of polygamy in both Sacred Scriptures and the Tradition of the Church. The first instance of polygamy in the Bible is in the book of Genesis (Gen 4: 23) with Lemec, son of Cain. Another account of polygamy is found in the same book with Esau who married two pagan women (Gen 26: 34). The father of the prophet Samuel was also polygamous (1 Sam 1: 1-7). Even David, who was called by the Lord himself as his faithful servant, had many wives. This practice is also mentioned in Deuteronomy, where God himself speaks about polygamy without condemning it (Dn 21, 15). Undoubtedly, the polygamy of patriarchs and kings is practiced unquestionably in the Old Testament.[1]

In the New Testament, Jesus never mentions the word polygamy in his preaching. When he speaks about marriage, he refers to the first purpose of marriage, which is to make the husband and wife one flesh, although he also appears to be stricter than Moses in his prohibition of divorce. Meanwhile, Paul reserves some functions in the Church such as those of deacons and bishops to those who have only one wife, as we see in his first letter to Timothy (1 Tim 3: 2, 12) and letter to Titus (1: 6). This can imply that polygamous unions were accepted to some extent within early Christian communities.

Nonetheless, after the Council of Nicea, the Church would begin to exclude polygamous couples from the Church[2] and

1 CBCP-ECCE, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Definitive Edition Based on the Latin *Editio Typica* (Manila: ECCCE and Word & Life Publications, 1994), no. 610. Henceforth referred to as *CCC*.

2 Christian Classics Ethereal Library, "Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers," http://www.tertullian.org/fathers2/NPNF2-08/Npnf2-08-206.htm (accessed January 2, 2018).

this negative position towards polygamy has more or less been maintained since then. The Fathers of the Church also had a very negative view of polygamy. Justin[3] and Tertullian[4] were among the first to criticize those who were using the matrimonial life of Jacob in the Bible as a precedent to justify their polygamous state.

The Church teaches the unity and indissolubility of marriage and claims that from the beginning man and woman were made to become one flesh (Gen 2: 24). In fact, "The unity of marriage, distinctly recognized by our Lord, is made clear in the equal personal dignity which must be accorded to man and wife in mutual and unreserved affection"[5]. Vatican II declared that the Church is against polygamy because this is contrary to God's plan of unity, which is manifested in "the equal personal dignity of husband and wife, a dignity acknowledged by mutual and total love."[6] In the same vein, John Paul II reaffirmed this position of the Church by saying that polygamy is against God's plan from the beginning, since "it is contrary to the equal personal dignity of men and women who in matrimony give themselves with a love that is total and therefore unique and exclusive."[7]

3 Christian Classics Ethereal Library, "The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeaus, Ante-Nicene Fathers," http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/ecf/001/0010595.htm, (accessed January 2, 2018).

4 Philip Schaff, "Fathers of the Third Century: Tertullian, Part Fourth; Minucius Felix; Commodian; Origen, Parts First and Second," http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf04.iii.v.i.ii.html, (accessed January 2, 2018)

5 *CCC*, no. 1645.

6 GS 49 Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the World (Gaudium et Spes),* December 7, 1965, Vatican Archive, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (acessed August 18, 2020), no. 49. Henceforth referred to as *GS*.

7 John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation on the Role of the Christian Family in the Whole World (Familiaris Consortio)*, November 22, 1981, Vatican Archive, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/

However, it is worth noting that while the Church's opposition to polygamy may appear to be unequivocal, there have been instances when the Church addressed specific issues related to polygamy in a practical, case-to-case manner. For example, the regional council of Catholic Franconia, with the approval of the archbishops of Bamberg and Würzburg, decided on the 14th February 1650 to permit laypeople to take two wives but only within the next ten years. This position was justified by the need at that time to replace the male population destroyed by war, plague and famine.[8]

The topic of polygamy was more recently discussed in the 1980 Synod of Bishops, which focused on the family. In their interventions, each bishop addressed polygamy according to the context of his specific apostolic region. In general, all of them maintained the current stand by rejecting polygamy despite the difficulties encountered. Cardinal Arinze, for instance, insisted on the Christian ideal of marriage as involving one man and woman, thereby excluding polygamy in all its forms.[9]

Nevertheless, the Church is conscious that there are persons with a sincere desire to live as Christians who find themselves in a prior polygamous situation. At the same time, it maintains that those who have been practicing polygamy before their conversion should be gradually led to accepting the ideals of Christian marriage. Thus, a strict demand of monogamy remains a condition for admission into the Church, with due consideration in charity and justice to all

hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.html (accessed August 18, 2020), no. 19. Henceforth referred to as *FC*.

8 Cairncross John, After Polygamy was made sin: The Social History of Christian Polygamy (London: Routledge, 1974), 74.

9 Francis Arinze, "Polygamy and Childlessness," African Ecclesial Review (Feb-Apr 1981): 97.

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polygamous families.[10] The same position has been maintained by the conference of bishops in Cameroon.[11]

We shall now attempt to take another look into this situation by revisiting our understanding of faith, sin, and salvation.

Revelation and the Notion of "Implicit Faith"

Revelation is the process by which something that has been hidden is revealed.[12] From a theological perspective, it denotes God's self-communication to the human race and the people God has created. Since divine self-communication is universal, a revelation in its primary and original sense is universal: it has a history that coincides with the whole history of humanity.[13] Thus, divine self-communication is meant not only for a specific category of people but for everyone, regardless of one's origins. By creating all humans in his own image and likeness out of love, God initiates this self-disclosure process to each and every human person.

Hence, although the full and authentic interpretation of revelation is found in Christianity, the possibility of responding to God's self-revelation is not confined within the Christian religion. While those who have not only heard but have also accepted Christian revelation are said to have the divinely imparted disposition of "explicit faith," a person who is yet unable to embrace Christian doctrines and its true interpretation of revelation but has been open to God's self-communication may be living an "implicit faith," even if

10 Ibid., 98.
11 Card Christian Tumi, "La polygamie, l'enfer dans nos familles," in Guide Pastoral Pour le Mariage Catholique Conférence Episcopale Nationale du Cameroun (Presses de L'UCAC, Yaoundé , 2000), 24.
12 Emil Brunner, Revelation and Reason (London: SCMP, 1947), 22
13 Richard P. McBrien, Catholicism (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 270.

one is unaware of its implications, As Rahner says, a person living in a state of grace and justification, but has not yet come in contact with the explicit preaching of the Gospel can be said to live an implicit Christianity.[14]

A person's faith is one's response to God's self-revelation. Out of love for every creature, God reveals himself to everyone and gives us an innate openness to his grace that allows us to respond in love to this self-communication, even if our response is always imperfect and remains incomplete. In the above case study, although Mr. Saa found himself prevented from joining the Church owing to his polygamous situation, his desire to convert to Christianity can be counted as a real sign that he is already open to some extent to God's revelation.

Original Sin Present in the Structure

Original sin can be defined as "the state in which we are born as members of the human race. We are thus situated in a sinful history that affects our capacity to love God above all, to become our true full selves, and achieve our destiny."[15] It is called 'original' as it dates from the origins of the human race as something we are born into.[16] This term might be summarized as the general sinfulness of the world that goes back to our human origins, which we inherit by being born into this sinful world and in turn, gives rise to our human weakness.[17]

In this way, sin can become institutionalized and systematized in the structures, laws, and customs of a society.[18] This

14 Karl Rahner, "Observations on the Problem of the 'Anonymous Christian,'" in *Theological Investigations*, trans. David Bourke (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 394.

15 ECCE-CBCP, *Catechism for Filipino Catholics* (Makati, Philippines: Word and Life Publications, 2005), no. 383.

16 Albert Nolan, *God in South Africa: the challenge of the Gospel* (London: Mambo Press, 1988), 90.

17 Ibid.

18 Nolan, *God In South Africa*, 43.

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is called structural sin, which is is slightly but significantly different from social sin. Structural sin is the objectification of sin whereby it becomes embodied in social structures and cultural entities. Such objectification is thereby empowered to be self-perpetuating, becoming a kind of cultural domain where sin is fostered and the virtue inhibited.[19]

The case, as mentioned above of Cameroonian polygamous cultural practice, can be understood as a vivid example of original sin becoming embodied as a social structure in which certain deviance has been widely practiced to the point of being institutionalized. Thus, the personal sin in which the polygamous person finds himself or herself is also the result of the structure into which he or she has been born.

In the specific case of Mr. Saa, his experience can be perceived as that of a person who has inherited a system. It was present even before his birth, and he cannot escape being born into it. Thus, the system began to affect his agency since his childhood—being himself born from a polygamous family. As he was growing up, the structure influenced the formation of his conscience, leading him to normalize the status quo since the constitution of his nation even recognizes polygamy. He was socially molded by it. In this way, original sin has been mediated to him through the social structure and existing cultural norms.

19 John Paul II, *On the Twentieth Anniversary of Populorum Progressio (Sollicitudo Rei Socialis),* December 30, 1987, Vatican Archive, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis.html (accessed August 18, 2020), no. 36. Henceforth referred to as *SRS.*

The Church and the Salvation of Non-Christians

Following Jesus' mandate, the Church has been entrusted with the mission to spread God's love and mercy worldwide. Thus, the Church does not bring new teaching different from the one brought by Jesus himself. Therefore, the Church's mission is to make the kingdom of God accessible to everyone and everywhere. In fulfilling her mission, the Church is called to announce and denounce whatever is a hindrance to building God's kingdom.

Consequently, one of her primary tasks is the humanization of all people, to build a just society where there is neither man nor woman since all are one in Christ (Gal 3: 28). With respect to polygamy, the Church sees it as a threat to human dignity because the unitive aspect of marriage is put at stake.[20] The Church therefore defends the unity and indissolubility of marriage whereby one man is given to only one woman and the two of them become one flesh with the same right and dignity.[21]

Nevertheless, for a pastoral and theological approach, it is worth noting that while full communion with the Church is a necessary step in Christian conversion, God's plan of salvation goes beyond the Church. While the Church teaches that Christ's salvation is mediated through her, she acknowledges some exceptions for those who, through no fault of their own, find themselves unable to embrace Christianity.[22]

In light of this, it can be argued that a person who is willing to convert to Christianity but is unable to join the Church owing to significant cultural constraints such as one's

20 *FC*, no. 19
21 Ibid.
22 *CCC*, nos. 846-847.

matrimonial state, may still be saved on account of implicit faith in the form of a good disposition manifested in acts of love, peace, and unity in one's family[23] which are otherwise impossible without the grace of God. Following Yves Congar, we can argue that Mr. Saa and those in a similar situation can be saved by virtue of one's intention, which is ordained to God and his plan of salvation in a very real even if unconscious way, under the form of dedication to an absolute value as it can be known and recognized by one's conscience.[24]

Conclusion

This synthesis paper aimed to revisit the Church's position on persons in polygamous marital situations who want to become Catholics and propose a pastoral and theological approach to accompanying them. Although the Church's position is clearly against polygamy and requires prospective converts to embrace monogamy before baptism, the case presented here showed that there could be reasonable motives that make it genuinely difficult for a prospective convert to separate from the other spouses in certain situations.

In the same way, the bishops in Germany allowed polygamy in their country due to the peculiar need that they faced at that particular historical period. In comparison, the church in Africa in general and Cameroon, in particular, could likewise be more open to new ways of addressing polygamy on a case to case basis in the pastoral accompaniment of people

23 Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium),* November 21, 1964, Vatican Archive, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (accessed August 18, 2020), no. 16. Henceforth referred to as *LG.*

24 Andrew Meszaros, "Yves Congar and the Salvation Of Non-Christians," *Louvain Studie*s 37 (2013): 204.

in traditionally polygamous societies. As the Church today allows debate regarding the possibility of ordaining married men to the priesthood, finding new ways to address these pastoral concerns for persons in polygamous relationships who want to become Catholics remains a frontier pregnant with opportunity. It would certainly send out a joyful message if the Church began to recognize reasonable exceptions in particular cases for such persons and open the possibility for their admission to the fold.