The Church as a Family Model: Its Strengths And Weaknesses

Introduction

In this article I shall present a critical analysis and reevaluation of the Church as Family of God model against today’s ever-changing African understanding of family. Hopefully, this will highlight both the excellence (strengths) and limitations (weaknesses) of the family model in contemporary Africa. Although I do not intend to discuss other related Church models, particularly those advocated by contemporary and outstanding ecclesiologists or theologians such as A. Dunes, Yves Congar, Charles Nyamiti, it should be understood right from the outset that no model is exhaustive. Each model plays a complementary role with other models to give a deep or full understanding of the Church, which is a mystery.

Part one shows the Biblical and Magisterial foundations of the family model. Among other documents, the Pauline Letters of Ephesians and Colossians, Vatican II’s, Lumen Gentium, John Paul II’s Familiaris Consortio and Ecclesia in Africa are given unique and special prominence. Part two highlights both the positive and negative aspects as well as implications of the model in relation to today’s situation and understanding of African family. The article ends with a critical reevaluation of the limitations (weaknesses) of the family model.

Need for further reflection on the Church as Family of God model

The raison d’etre of the Church as Family of God model is succinctly encapsulated in article 25 of the Intrumentum Laboris:

Among the biblical images of the Church enumerated in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium, that of the Church as the House of God (cf. 1 Timothy 3:15), the Household of God in the Spirit (cf. Ephesians 2:19-22) is particularly relevant for Africa… In many answers to the Lineamenta, there is a strong emphasis on the notion of the Church as the family of God among human beings.
According to the Synodal Fathers, the family model is fitting and appropriate for Africa because there is a correlation between the African understanding of family and the Church as family of God. Consequently, the family model has very enriching theocentric, trinitarian, christological, sacramental, ecclesiogenetic, pastoral, and communitarian implications to the life and mission of the Church in Africa during the third millennium.

But, the traditional African understanding of family is subject to multiple and constant changes because of, among other factors, the modern cultural Euro-American (Western) as well as Asian influences. These affect the contemporary understanding of the African family. Such inevitable circumstances may have negative implications on the ever-changing African concept of family and The Church as Family of God model. This is a challenge which cannot simply be ignored or overlooked by contemporary African ecclesiologists, theologians and scholars: There is, therefore, need for an in-depth analysis, scrutiny, and rethinking of the family model, if Africa is to develop a sound African ecclesiology as a useful and effective means toward inculturation and evangelization 2000, and thereafter.

The Biblical and Magisterial Foundations of the Family Model

A. Biblical foundation

(i) Old Testament

The Hebrew terms mispaha and bet (house) in the Old Testament embrace both the narrow and broader notion of family. These could either mean a single family unit or a wider circle of consanguinity (cf. Genesis 24:38), a clan, an ethnic group (a tribe), or even a nation (cf. Amos 3:1-2). The family concept in the Old Testament represented one of the most commonly used models, metaphors, or analogies to expiate in human way the unique relationship between God and Israel.

(ii) New Testament

The Greek term oikia, which means house or a household, is usually used to refer to a family. There is a profound theological and ecclesiological growth of the concept of family in the New Testament literature. Such evolution is marked by continuity and discontinuity. Thus, in the New Testament, particularly in the Pauline ecclesiological letters (Ephesians, 1Timothy, and Colossians), the family metaphor or image expresses the relationship between the Church and the human family. Paul calls the Church a “household of God” (1Timothy 3:15) or “Part of God’s household” (Ephesians 2:19-22). The latter expression is also used by Peter (Peter 4:17). Other New Testament passages or allusions to the household metaphor include: John 4:53, Acts 11:14; 16:15; Colossians 3:18-21; Romans 16:3-5; and ICorinthians 16:19.

B. Magisterial foundation

Basically, the family model or image has always been one of the most central themes of post-Vatican II magisterial teachings. Among others, the following teachings from the Magisterium highlight the understanding of the Church as family of God.
(i) Vatican II
In the Dogmatic constitution of the Church (Lumen Gentium) the Conciliar Fathers employ different images such as the “household of God” metaphor to describe the Church. Lumen Gentium article 6 states, “This edifice has many names to describe it: the house of God in which dwells His family: the house of God in the spirit”

(ii) Familiaris Consortio (1981)
In this Apostolic Exhortation, Pope John Paul II describes the family as a Church:

We must examine the many profound bonds linking the church and the Christian family and establishing the family as “church in miniature” (Ecclesia domestica) in such a way, the family is a living image and historical representation of the mystery of the church.

In a very special way, this Exhortation contains references and allusions to the role and mission of present-day Christian families, both in the Church and the world.

(iii) Christifideles Laici (1988)
The family image or model is not very explicit in Christifideles Laici as in Familiaris Consortio. However, there are some passages in the former (Christifideles Laici) which offer some allusions to the family. In one of the passages, John Paul II maintains that, “Jesus is concerned to restore integral dignity to the married couple and solidarity to the family (Mathew 19:3-9), St. Paul shows the deep rapport between marriage and the Church (cf. Ephesians 5:22; 6:4, Colossians 3:18-21; I Peter 3:1-7)."

(iv) Instrumentum Laboris (1993)
In this working document prior to the Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops (10 April-8 May, 1994), the family model is given special attention. According to this preparatory document:

It is felt that Africans can be more easily enabled to experience and to live with the mystery of the church as communion by utilization to good advantage the Africans’ understanding of the family especially as regards the values of family unity and solidarity.

(v) Ecclesia in Africa (1994)
This is the most recent magisterial document which speaks specifically on “The church as a Family of God.” According to the Synodal Fathers, the “Church as God’s Family” model “emphasizes care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationships, acceptance, dialogue and trust.” It is quite evident, therefore, that the family model highlights the unique and rare human values characteristic of a typically traditional African family.
An African Perspective of the Family of God Model

A. Its excellence (strengths)

(i) The model is theocentric

The family model is profoundly God-centered. It highlights God’s central position in terms of the Church’s divine origin, mission, continuity and care. It also brings to the fore the connection and similarity between the invaluable roles played by a committed traditional African father to his family and God the father to the church. Definitely, this can serve as an important factor toward creating deep-rooted confidence and esteem in Christians.

(ii) It is Trinitarian

The tripartite relationship and intercommunication between the three Persons of the Blessed Trinity demonstrates the profound inner life of the Triune God in terms of perfect unity and the harmonious diversity of persons. According to Professor Charles Nyamiti:

The Son is the perfect image of the Father His exemplar. Each of them is entitled to the uninterrupted and eternal sacred communication in the Holy Spirit whom they breathe out their mutual love and communicate Him to each other in token of their reciprocal love.9

Many traditional African families and clans, especially those in the rural areas, still enjoy close interpersonal ties and relationships. This definitely services as a useful and effective means to promote and enhance sincere relationships and responsibility at various levels of Church life in Africa, thereby accentuating the current theological struggle toward a practical African ecclesia Trinitology. According to Bakole wa Ilunga, the Archbishop of Kananga, Zaire:

The close bond between members of the same family and solidarity that unites a clan are undoubtedly important values of the Africa tradition… This solidarity is undoubtedly a powerful force and the dynamism that pervades it is of fundamental importance for communal life … The need is to take the attitudes and energies traditionally embodied in familiar relationships and to redirect them in broader perspective of present day society.10
(iii) It is Christologico-Sacramental

Jesus founded and established a Church. In this book, *Ecclesiogenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church*, Boff states that, “The Christological foundation of the Church is born of the complex Christological event, with the resurrection and the activity of the Holy Spirit.”\(^{11}\) From the Pauline viewpoint, particularly, in his Letter to the Ephesians, Paul depicts Christ as the “Head of the Church.” He further portrays Christ as God’s instrument of reconciliation and grace. The sacramentality of the Personhood of Christ is a very central idea in Schillebeecks’s Christological and ecclesiological enterprise. According to him, “The church is the visible expression of Christ’s grace and redemption realized in the form of a society which is a sign (*Societas signum*).”\(^{12}\) Such Christology shares certain common aspects with Nyamiti’s “African Christology” inculturated in African milieu and encapsulated in his famous formula “Christ Our Ancestor.” In the same line of thinking, Professor Bujo’s “Proto-Ancestor Christology” echoes and develops the same Christologico-Sacramental understanding by maintaining that:

…many Black African ethnic groups, the presence of the ancestor is visually represented by means of a special tree, the ancestor tree. The tree in question is an ever verdant tree, such as Ficus, which symbolizes the life that never dies. Among the Bahema of Eastern Zaire the Ficus is planted on the grave of the family father. The lying in the grave is not dead at all but shoots forth to new life as a Ficus tree so that he now becomes shelter and vivifying “spirit.” The branches and the leaves of this tree symbolizes the numerous descendants of the deceased … Separated from him they cannot survive … The church as the proto-ancestor is sacrament par excellence in which the faithful encounter Christ as the sacrament of God.\(^{13}\)

Like the Bahema of Zaire, the Chagga of northern eastern Tanzania (whom I hail from) have a very special robust and evergreen ancestral tree called *Isale*. This is usually planted at the grave of the clan ancestor (*mbuonyi*) where all the family sacrificial offerings (*mirumo*) are performed. For the Chagga, the ancestor’s grave is sacrosanct and it plays the role of today’s altar for the Eucharistic Sacrifice. According to the Chagga, the green color signifies a vital and continuous presence of the ancestor as a source of hope and life in the family. Moreover, as an ancestral tree, the *Isale* is also used to reconcile people in feuds, clashes, or quarrels. Last, but not least, the *Isale* is used to ask for pardon for a crime (e.g., murder, theft et alii) committed. Those who know the sacred nature of the *Isale* will automatically grant pardon and clemency. Thus, the *Isale* plays a unique and significant reconciliatory role in the similar way “mutatis mutandis Christ reconciled humanity with God” (Romans 11:15; Ephesians 2:13-14; Colossians 1:20). Such a traditional African ancestral-centered understanding of the family can strengthen the Christologico-Sacramental dimension and roles within the Church in Africa.
(iv) **It is Ecclesiogenetic**
Christ commissioned His disciples to preach the Good News from Galilee to the ends of the earth (Matthew 28:18-20). Consequently, by its very nature and mission, the Church grew and still grows in time and space. Its missionary role is extensively explicated in Vatican II Documents: *Ad Gentes* and *Gaudium et Spes*. A decade later, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* reiterated strongly the Church’s missionary mandate. Such growth does not, however, necessarily or always imply geographical expansion, although this dimension cannot be simply ignored. The Church is the living “Body of Christ” (Romans 12:4-5; I Corinthians 12:12-27), and to use a Petrine metaphor, its members are “living stones” of the same edifice (I Peter 2:5). Such an Ecclesiogenetic dimension of the Church complies with the traditional African concept of the extended family. This can, therefore, be a very effective pastoral means toward Evangelization 2000, especially by and through Small Christian Communities (SCCs). Based on this traditional African concept of family, the Synod Fathers insist that, “These SCCs should be permitted by the universal love of Christ who breaks down the barriers and natural alliances of clan, tribe or other interest groups.”

(v) **It is Eucharistic (communitarian)**
During His last Supper (Banquet), Christ founded and empowered a perpetual Eucharistic community of blood, life and love (Luke 22:19-20, I Corinthians 11:23-27). Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (now Pope Benedict XVI) considers this as the foundation of Eucharistic ecclesiology. The post-Apostolic ecclesial community translated this into koinonia morality. During Nyerere’s presidency in Tanzania, this could have been termed *Ujamaa* morality based on the African values of hospitality and equality. The practice and concept of communal meals, festivals or get-togethers is still quite common, particularly among the traditional African families and clans living in the rural areas. Such meals play a very significant unitive role among members. There is a great resemblance between the Christian Eucharistic Banquet and the traditional African communal meals and festivals. That is why Professor Bujo maintains that:

> The Eucharist should be seen as a proto-ancestral meal with and of Jesus Christ himself... a vital element in the building up of a truly African Church... A theology of the Eucharist not only as a celebration of a proto-ancestral meal which vivifies the church, but also an ecclesiology into this African World of thought.
It is Eschotologico-ecological

There is a profound unity and interconnectedness between the human family and the cosmos. Therefore, humanity shares an integral and sacred interrelationship with the earth. According to Gerald Siegwalt:

… the creation narrative of Genesis 1 is also understood eschatologically in the light if Revelation 21:5: “Behold I, make all things new”

… The history of the earth is “becoming” as the history of Israel. In this context the order of Gen.1 is understood as an evolutionary historical order. The goodness God saw in creation is eschatological. 17

The integral unity and interdependency between human family and the cosmos suggest a holistic and all-embracing ecologico-eschatology which encompasses the traditional Catholic one-sided human-centered eschatological understanding. Humanity and creation are, therefore, to be considered as undergoing a transformative teleological process and a “becoming” (2Peter 3:13, Revelation 21:1).

There is a realized existing unity between humanity, creation and God journeying toward a new heaven and earth in the not yet. Many traditional African societies still have a pantheistic view of creation as clearly demonstrated in their special respect and honor for certain sacred trees, rivers, huge mountains like Kilimanjaro, volcanic mountains such as Oldonyo Lengai in Arusha, Tanzania, which literally means “the mountain of God.” Contacts, communication, and communion with the ancestral community (the living dead) are sometimes performed by and through certain sacred trees which are believed to mediate life. Eschatologic-ecological worldviews are a common phenomenon in traditional African families, clans, and societies, indicating a profound redemptive and eschatological goal.18 Such a traditional African inclusive eschotologico-ecological weltanschauung could have very enriching positive effects, especially against the ever growing environmental and ecological destruction in Africa.
B. Its limitation (weakness)

(i) A negative ecumenical implication

When understood or interpreted from an exclusivistic Catholic oriented or from Euro-American understanding, the family model can have very negative ecumenical consequences. Among others, the following deserve special attention:

1. A Catholic-oriented interpretation of the family model would run the risk of being an obstacle to attaining the target of Christian unity which involves number of Christian churches and ecclesial communities all over the world. Jesus’ prayer in John 17:11,22 was that not only the Catholic Church but that all be “one like us.”

   The post-Vatican II period is markedly characterized by constant striving toward Christian unity. This new ecumenical vision is particularly highlighted in the Decree on Ecumenism (Unitatis Redintegratio), the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium, Articles 1-4), The 1993 Directory for the Application of Principles and Norms on Ecumenism, and in the recent 1995 Papal Encyclical, Ut Unum Sint. Feeling the need and urgency for Christian unity in Africa, the Synodal Fathers clearly expressed this view in the Lineamenta, the Instrumentum Labor’s, and in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation (Ecclesia in Africa) by John Paul II. Such ecumenical visions can be used against the dangers of narrow or Catholic-centered ecclesiological understanding of the family model.

2. Any exclusivistic Catholic-centered understanding of the family model runs the risk of excluding non-Christians such as Muslims and adherents of traditional religions from God’s family. This danger is, however, clearly stated in the Lineamenta, particularly in the sub-titles: “Practice of Ecumenism in Africa”(Art.61), “The Agenda of Dialogue” (Art. 67), and “Problems and Hopes” (Art.68).

3. Any Afro-centric interpretation of the model neglects or excludes a universalistic dimension of the unity of humanity. Today, more than ever before, solidarity among humanity in its entirety is undoubtedly of paramount importance. A credible or sound humano-centric worldview has to go beyond religious beliefs (creed), race, or skin color. A balanced view of the family model should transform our mentalities to create universal perspectives and global human relationships. According to Bakole wa Illunga:

4. Jesus relativises the primacy of familial bonds or subordinates these to other and more basic values (cf. Mark 3:31-35) … When he says by his words and by his actions that every human being can become my neighbor and that there are therefore no boundary line in this area (cf, Luke 10:30-37), he enables me to discover that every human being, and not just the members of my clan is my brother or sister.
G. Martinez’s concept and vision on “The Birth of a Global Church” suggests a universal human-centered ecclesiology. In his view:

The Church’s Social Mission requires a greater awareness … to form a humanistic partnership of peace and solidarity … Vatican II was not only a truly Catholic Council, but a potentially World Council as well. Karl Rahner saw Vatican II as the first official self-realization of Catholicism as world church.20

(ii) A negative implication based on “single parent families”

Today, there is an increasingly ever-growing number of single-parent families in Africa. The Traditional African values and moral ethos which united marriage couples are steadily and speedily being replaced by new destructive values and lifestyles. These include among others, the Euro-American divorce revolution, sexual freedom, modernism, consumerism, feminism, unemployment, polycentrism, relativism, and the crisis of street children. Indeed, the speed is so terrific that, soon, a high percentage of African families, especially those living in big towns or cities, will be single-parent families, either physically or functionally. As a consequence of this, in some cases, for example:

… early childhood experiences with a tyrannical and overly strict fathers are the roots of irrational and disproportionate guilt complexes. Deep-seated rebellion against a feudalistic or paternalistic “father image” of church often goes hand in hand with an overt rebellion against any despotic or outdated exercise of parental authority.21

Contrasts between the traditional African family and the present day African families portray a failure in representing an authentic and correct picture of the Divine Family. Furthermore, the escalating parental irresponsibility not only among single-parent families but also even among families with both parents is also distorting the family model. Again, such a phenomenon displays a defective image of the trinitarian family which has a full and high degree of responsibility and accountability as evidenced in the entire salvation program.

(iii) Negative consequences of the traditional African patrilineal-matrilineal systems and the gender issue

Ninety percent of the traditional African societies are predominantly patrilineal. In these societies there is a tendency to give more favors and privileges to the father and sons at the expense of the mother and the daughters. This segregative and oppressive attitude is clearly evident among the Chagga. Here, boys are given greater opportunities and more chances in terms of education, inheritance, esteem, and in many other sociohuman rights. Such a dichotomy between patrilineal against matrilineal systems and / or vice versa presents an inadequate picture of the family of God model in Africa. As a counter reaction against male chauvinism and superiority, feminist discussions, issues of women emancipation, and gender issues are increasingly becoming the most debatable issues, particularly among Africa’s female elites.
(iv) **The negative implication of African witchcraft**

In many African societies where there are strong beliefs and practices of witchcraft, familial or clan bonds of solidarity become an oppressive phenomenon. Among the Chagga, witchcraft is collectively known as *usawi*. In west African societies, particularly in Nigeria, *juju* is the most common word used to denote witchcraft. Bakole wa Ilunga strongly affirms that:

> …men, women and children fall victim to evil forces unleashed against them by members of their own family who have but one purpose: to harm or even kill others. When we see how obsessed some individuals are by this will to destroy, we may well think ourselves to be in the presence of Satan. Nor may we forget that the very fear of witchcraft paralyses many or prevents their full development and their enthusiasm for numerous understandings.\(^{22}\)

Among the Ngoni of Songea and the Nyakyusa of Mbeya (Southern Tanzania) many educated or well-to-do people are normally reluctant to develop or even to go back home, for fear of being bewitched. They prefer to build permanent houses and initiate development projects far away from their villages, preferably in the big towns or cities such as Dar Es Salaam, Arusha, Mwanza, etc. Undoubtedly, witchcraft poses a serious problem which has far reaching moral and social negative implications and effects which distort the family model as proposed by the African Synod.

(v) **African attitude toward death and its negative implication**

In many traditional African societies, death is often attributed to something or someone. It never understood as a necessary and inescapable human reality. According to Bakole wa Ilunga:

> If someone dies, there will always be reasons or causes given. Often, someone must be at fault, preferably the wife in case of a husband’s death. It is as if family had to find a victim on which it might discharge its hostility in the face of death as if wife had to suffer and thus atone for the death of her husband. Even though Christian husbands as death approaches often express the desire that their wives not be abused and even though the last wishes of a dying person are sacrosanct according to all our traditions, it is not uncommon to see the family event its fury on the surviving wife.\(^{23}\)

Among the Chagga, like in many African societies, the *mfiri wo matanga* (mourning period) is usually four days. But, today some people take these days as a golden opportunity to eat, feast, and drink, regardless of the future economic needs of the bereaved. This is one of the most serious moral problems where family rights and social justice are being violated, thus highlighting the weakness of the family model.
Conclusion

In this article I have pointed out the strengths of the family model as applied in a concrete present-day African family situation, thereby highlighting the similarities between the traditional African family model and the Divine family. This, to a certain degree, is a great help toward a better self-understanding of the Church in Africa. But, there is always danger to over-emphasize or exaggerate the excellence of the African family image. However, from the article it is obvious that the family model as proposed by the African Synod is subject to a number of limitations based on complex and multiple, static and ever-changing conditions which cover a large part of the African spectrum.

However, there is no image or model that is exhaustive. Therefore, the search for a more credible, balanced, and viable model which is relatively closer to Africa’s present-day “Sitz im Leben” has to continue. This is not an easy or a one-day task. It calls for an in-depth and critical research of the entire African sociocultural, theological, anthropological, human, economic, and religious matrix. It has to involve many African scholars and experts from all walks of life. The purpose of this article, therefore, is to provoke African ecclesiologists and theologians to embark on immediate critical and deep reflections bearing in mind the following questions:

With such concrete divergences and dichotomies, how does the family model really correspond to the present-day pseudo-African situation? Could there be possibilities of preserving today’s African families from the devastating Euro-American and Asian influences or forces particularly in the AMECEA country? Do African ecclesiologists and theologians foresee the pastoral moral and ecclesial implications of the family model and their negative consequences, particularly in connection to inculturation and Evangelization 2000?

Success toward a credible African interpretation ecclesiology should not simply be a purely humanistic endeavor. In this inquiry, the role of the Holy Spirit through prayer and sacrifice is of paramount importance.
ENDNOTES

1. Instrumentum Laboris, Article 25 (Vatican City, 1993).
3. The family or household model is a resonant quote in Vatican II Lumen Gentium Article 10 and in Acta Apostolicae Sedis 68 (1976): 60.
7. Instrumentum Laboris (Vatican City, 1993), No. 25.
22. Wa Ilunga, B., 163.
23. Ibid., 162.
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