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## Spotting the Chick: An Essay on Formation in the Context of Church as Family

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## **SPOTTING THE CHICK: AN ESSAY ON FORMATION IN THE CONTEXT OF CHURCH AS FAMILY**

*L'auteur présente un modèle d'Église comme « famille de Dieu » émise par le Synode Africain (1994) et propose, après en avoir décélé les implications, que nous la regardions à la fois comme un principe d'organisation et de formation des communautés religieuses. Faisant la distinction entre la famille de Dieu et la famille ordinaire, il présente la famille comme le fondement de la vie dans la communauté. Une congrégation religieuse a le devoir et la responsabilité de prendre soin et d'assurer la croissance de ses jeunes membres. A cause de nos diversités culturelles, l'auteur propose l'intégration de diverses orientations humaines qui constituent la famille. Ainsi, une critique de l'expérience traditionnelle de la famille, avec ses tendances négatives, s'avère importante. Se lamentant sur la subordination des femmes aussi bien dans l'Église que dans la société, l'auteur appelle à une égale participation de tous, statuant sur l'importance de développer un sens d'appartenance et d'encourager la conversion à l'intérieur de la vie consacrée. L'auteur met en lumière la formation comme étant un instrument clé en vue de faire des gens des membres responsables de l'Église et de la société comme un tout.*

*The writer presents a model of the church as 'family of God', concept adopted by the African Synod (1994) and suggests after having considered the implications, that we look at it as a principle both of organising the church as well as forming religious communities. Differentiating between 'the family of God' and the ordinary family he discusses the family as a foundation of life in the community. A religious congregation has the duty and responsibility of nurturing the growth of its younger members. Because of our cultural diversities the author proposes the inclusiveness of the various human orientations that constitute family. And so a critique on the traditional experience of family with its negative tendencies is important. Lamenting the subordinate role of women in both church and society, he calls for equal participation of all, stating the importance of developing a sense of belonging and encouraging conversion into consecrated life. The author highlights formation as a key tool for moulding people into responsible members of the church and the society as a whole.*

An African proverb says 'a chick that will grow into a rooster can be spotted the day it hatches'. This proverb evokes the striking image of a mother-hen and her chicks which seems so fitting in the context of forming the church as family: nurturing life, a reassuring warmth, tender protection, genuine discernment and sustained growth in those 'households of God' which are religious institutes in the church.

### The question

In Matthew 16:15 Jesus put a simple question to his disciples: 'Who do you say I am?' We might adapt the question and ask: 'what do you say the church is? How would you describe it to someone interested in knowing about the church? What were we taught in the catechism many years ago? Is the church still that monolithic, unchanging edifice - as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be?

### The synod's response

Ten years ago, in May 1994, bishops, priests, religious, lay people from all over the continent of Africa met in Rome to examine the nature, meaning and identity of the church in Africa. They asked with one voice: 'Church of Africa; what must you now become?' Their unequivocal response was: 'Family'. The Synod made a fundamental option for *church as the family of God in the service of society*.

### From model to principle

The two ways of looking at 'family of God' are: *model* and *principle*. The former is more popular in the literature dealing with the theme of church as family. Normally a model has two basic characteristics: it is complete and closed. When you have a model of something, to move from the model to what you want to create all you need to do is scale it up. Everything is given in the model; one only needs to upgrade it in order to replicate or reproduce it on a grander and permanent scale. The problem with this approach is that if we consider 'family of God' as a model we may simply be drawing from our African experience of family. We then try to scale it up to the level of church, with the difficulty that we reproduce the reality of life in the family. But we add nothing new to our understanding and experience of church.

When church as the family of God was proposed in 1994, it was intended primarily as an idea: 'a guiding idea for . . . evangelization in Africa' (*Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 63) was how the Synod understood it. The Synod then invited theologians to develop the meaning: 'It is earnestly to be hoped that theologians in Africa will work out the theology of the Church as Family with all the riches contained in this concept, showing its complementarity with other images of the Church' (*EA*, no. 63). What has happened since then is that because of our experience of family, we have been content simply with translating this idea of church into our idea of family. Of all the texts focusing on family as model of the church that I have studied, with the exception of my *The Church as Family*, only one short essay actually examines the sociology of the modern-day African family. All the others simply take for granted an African conception and experience of family, recognisable across all African cultures. The main criticism aimed at my approach is that it is too sociological. But if the church opts for a sociological reality as a 'suitable expression' for the mystery of God and the church in Africa (*Propositions of the Synod*, no. 8), theologians have got to accept the methodological exigency of paying attention to the actual situation and dynamics of the family in Africa.

There is another way of looking at church as the family of God: as a principle of ecclesial organisation, what the Synod called a guiding idea. Here the objective is not to reproduce a model, but to create something entirely new. Church as the family of God does not mimic family; it creates a new kind of family, drawing on our indigenous knowledge, traditional practices, local resources and understanding of family life, but it also challenges, enriches and transforms them.

### Paradox of family in Africa

As Africans we hardly define ourselves apart from family. The family occupies a preeminent position in how we conceive life and how we envisage and experience our position in the universe. 'One is a person because of one's relatives'. Consider the following typical example: an obituary in a newspaper reads: 'We regret to announce the death of our beloved father, husband, brother, uncle, cousin. . . .' The person is defined as belonging to a family. Every important thing one needs to know about the person is expressed in the context of family.

<sup>1</sup> Agnes P. Zani, "The Family in its African Socio-Cultural Context," in Patrick Ryan, ed., *The Model of 'Church-as-Family'*, CUEA, 1999, 46-55; see also A. E. Orobator, *The Church as Family*, Paulines, 2000).

Family in the African understanding is the foundation of life in community and society. The African loves and values life and shares a vital link not only with those who inhabit our immediate environment, but with potential members (unborn) and spiritual progenitors (deities and ancestors) of our cosmic existence. Family is the place par excellence for the practice of solidarity.

The worst ills that we experience in Africa today register their deadliest and most disruptive impact at the very heart of the family. Think of the scourge of HIV/AIDS - families decimated, family structure distorted (grandparents caring for children and grandchildren, orphaned children heading homes), families impoverished, etc. In some parts of sub-Saharan Africa marriage has become the condition that exposes women most to the risk of HIV infection. Think of the plight of refugees, poverty; the family is no longer the same. So we desire an ecclesial principle of reconstruction and rescue of the family. In expressing our ecclesial commitment we celebrate human freedom awakened and empowered by grace. Paul speaks of a Christian as an adopted daughter or son of God. We choose to actualise this adoptive grace; it is not simply foisted on us by some divine, benevolent force. After these preliminary considerations, we note two points: the proposed formation is *something to do*, not a given. Also formation has to be *radically counter-cultural*.

### **Formation in the context of the church as family of God**

Calling the church the family of God generates and affirms certain basic principles. As we attempt to formulate the meaning of formation in this context, these are the principles to which we should refer. So in considering the title of this essay (formation in the context of church as family), I understand it as a way of taking 'family of God' as the guiding idea for formation in Africa. If we examine the documents of the Synod (*Message, Propositions and EA*) we discover that this approach conforms to the Synod's intention. The documents make numerous references to what formation would look like in the church as family. Characteristically, this idea of formation is expressed as a project, a goal to be achieved. So we can see that the Synod too would prefer 'family of God' as principle rather than as model. I would like now to identify, propose and develop some principles which I believe are central to the conception and practice of formation in the context of the church as family.

## An inclusive community of solidarity

The idea of the church as family suggests an inclusiveness which accommodates a diversity of orientations. No one family is exactly like another, and there are clearly defined roles and responsibilities in any given family. This does not preclude tension and conflict. But at moments of tension the family remains a place of welcome, reconciliation and hospitality. Alienation can undermine the health of the community. If one member is alienated, it affects all of the community. The first goal of formation in the context of church as family is to welcome and to include. Every child born into a family carries a promise; so too in the church. In the family we name the child; in the church we rename the child, hoping that it will grow to fulfill the promise which the name bears. What do we do in consecrated life? We welcome and include the novices into our family, and expect and demand that sooner or later they will share in the promise, hope and mission that we bear as a community. Young religious in formation are not passive recipients, but active participants in this process of growth. This will presuppose honest *dialogue* and ongoing *consultation* - wide enough to *listen* to and *include* the expectations and respect the sensibility of the person in formation. Formation in the context of church as family carefully teases out the promises borne by each person, gently nurtures the talents inherent in each and firmly challenges her or him to assume responsibility for the future and growth of this family or congregation in the church and society.

Family may mean communion, but certain parochial tendencies can undermine inclusiveness. As one of the Synod's participants vividly reminded us, 'blood is thicker than water'. Family exhibits certain divisive tendencies which thrive on tribal, ethnic and clannish sentiments. A church or congregation that is uncritically modelled on this expression of family will naturally assume that only one class of people, one tribal or ethnic group is fit to assume leadership and exercise authority. It will find it hard to accommodate divergent opinions and legitimate dissent; it will undermine the practice of dialogue, consensus and palaver found in the pattern of leadership in certain African contexts.

Formation in the context of church as family is diametrically opposed to the divisive tendencies of tribe and clan. Geneticists have long established that inbreeding has long-term destructive consequences for the family. The family has always laid down rules to avoid inbreeding by

fixing degrees of consanguinity which are also very familiar in Canon Law. The conscious promotion of diversity is the hallmark of the church as family. The same applies to formation. If the congregation is populated with ethnically homogenised groups, it will very likely suffer from a severely constricted vision of life and ministry. Its outlook will always be limited by local, trivial, atavistic feuds. In the context of church as family, preference belongs to a formation policy that encourages the admission of candidates from various backgrounds. The practice of diversity enriches the quality of life in the family, church or congregation, expands the horizon of its apostolic vision and secures its future in a way that would never be possible if it admits and forms only people of the same ethnic and tribal background. Sadly, judging by some anecdotal evidence, the hydra-headed monster of favoritism and tribalism is alive and well in our formation schemes.

### **A pro-woman formation**

It is impossible to discuss the issue of women in the Church without first of all examining the cruelty that women experience in society. The Church, generally speaking, does not perceive women any differently ... [from] society at large; that is to say, the Church itself does not escape the temptation to discriminate against women, although perhaps never quite so overtly as the rest of society ... A woman is a victim of violence from all sides and in her many roles: first in her family as a child then as a young woman; in her marriage as wife and mother; and finally in her social environment as worker or colleague. She suffers violence at the hands of man or because of man ... Violence affects her body and her spirit - to paraphrase one African nun.

'The quality of our Church-as-Family also depends on the quality of our women-folk, be they married or members of institutes of the consecrated life' (*Message of the Synod*, no. 68). This was the boldest and most revolutionary declaration made by the Synod. Strangely, it has gone largely unnoticed. As the proverb goes, 'A family without a woman is like a hut without supporting posts'. According to the Synod, women are the backbone and stability of the family; they have important rights and duties in building up the family of God, particularly by participating at all levels of decision-making, taking the initiative in dialogue and initiating special ministries according to the needs and circumstances of the time.

The wider society is not kind to women; the church, as we know it today, is in many instances not exempt of this attitude towards women. In the church as family the institutes of consecrated life ought to take the side of the gospel and resist the temptation to throw more stones at our already badly traumatised women.

Formation in the context of the church as family ought to focus on changing the precarious situation of women in church and society. It does this by setting a prophetic and counter-cultural example. If the society denies education to a woman, formation in the context of church as family should guarantee quality educational opportunities for the consecrated woman. If our church relegates women as theologically and physiologically unfit for positions of leadership, formation in the context of church as family should be providing the requisite tools to enable the consecrated woman to create zones of influence where she can positively bring her gifts to bear on church and society. If society exploits women as expendable objects of pleasure, formation in the church as family should empower the consecrated woman to discover her dignity and independence, to take pride in herself as a person created in the image and likeness of the most high God, not an offspring of a lesser divinity. Is it not ironic that we have built up a reputation for the church in the field of education but sometimes are reluctant to allow our consecrated women a chance to pursue academic formation in diverse fields of study? The Synod also made another bold declaration: we are convinced that to educate a woman is to educate a people' (Message, no. 67). This is a lesson for formation in the context of the church as family of God.

One of the shocking realities of life in situations of social crisis such as HIV/AIDS, refugees and poverty is that when faced with a difficult situation many women are prepared to take appalling risks to ensure the survival of their family. I hesitate to extrapolate any broad or general conclusion from this, but I would like to underline that our formation programmes should never place consecrated women in situations where they have to adopt risky survival strategies. It is risky for a consecrated woman to seek private financial and material support for her education from a priest, a lay man or an ecclesiastic. An ambitious, resourceful and industrious woman is an asset to a congregation in a society and church where her chances for growth, self-confidence and self-fulfillment



are severely limited by prejudice, discrimination and harmful stereotypes. Her qualities need to be appreciated and channelled in a positive direction for her good and for the good of the congregation and the church. She should never be seen merely as a stray, a threat to the superior or a bad influence on younger members of the family. This calls for dialogue and openness, core qualities of the church as the family of God.

One question which has exercised my mind recently is this: who are our women's models? What kind of women do we form our sisters to become? One hears a lot said about Teresa of Avila, of Calcutta or of the Child Jesus. But none of these 'Terasas' has had to study for an exam in the darkness of incessant power cuts; none has endured the indignities of riding spreadeagled on the back of *okada* or *boda boda* (motor-bikes); none has suffered the harassment of Islamic *Sharia* extremists and lived to tell the tale. Family stories always contain tales of past heroes and heroines. We are good at telling the stories of others, including mother-foundresses and father-founders. What about our indigenous models of sanctity and gospel values? It is the task of formation in the church as family to empower women to begin to construct and tell their own stories - stories of their models, heroines and saints. This point applies equally to the formation of consecrated men.

### **Collaboration, process, socialisation and integrality**

Formation in the context of church as family is a *collaborative process of integral socialisation*.

**Collaborative:** it takes a whole village to train a child. It takes a whole congregation, a whole church to form a person. The identification of one or two people as novice director/directress or formation delegate does not absolve the rest of the congregation or family from the duty and responsibility of nurturing the growth and keeping oversight of its younger members. Formation is a mission for the entire family, church or congregation. We can recall here how older generations of Africans were brought up (and how children continue to be brought up in many parts of Africa today): each adult member of the family had a duty of both care and discipline. Each member had a duty of presenting a positive role-model for the child. Hence we say 'if a person dances badly in public, the family feels the shame'. To push this point a little further, I believe that we should make more room for lay people to have input in the formation in the

context of church as family. After all, they know better what it entails to raise a family, manage and struggle in a family. Our formation programme could benefit from their stories, wisdom and experiences.

*Socialisation* is about finding your place in the family - discovering your role, developing your expectations, moulding your personality, etc. The end result of a well-integrated socialisation is a confident sense of *belonging*, that is belonging to a family. I have heard it said repeatedly that religious life is not a family and we should not expect it to be a substitute for our biological family. I agree. But I would like to add that we should never underestimate the power of family as a functional symbol of integrated life in religious communities. Jesus-Christ, who is the source, model and foundation of consecrated life, was clearly a family person, and he intended his new community to embody something of what it means to be family (see Mark 3:31-35; Matthew 18:15-17; Luke 17:4). The image of church as family 'emphasizes care for the other, solidarity, warmth of relationship, acceptance, dialogue and trust. It shows how authority is exercised as service in love' (*Proposition*, no. 8). Who would not want to belong to a family where these virtues are practised? I would like to think of my religious order as my family: as the place where I discover an essential link with other family members; where I find a home, not a temporary hostel or a comfortable hotel. It is the task of formation in the context of church as family to inspire, nurture and test the candidates' sense of belonging. Do they feel sufficiently settled in this family to pitch a tent with the other members and contribute to its apostolic goals in a way that is open for all to see; judge, appreciate and emulate? Have they found people in this family with whom they are prepared to spend the rest of their lives? Are they ready to grow in love of this family to the point of being prepared to sacrifice, personal agenda and inordinate attachments for the sake of the congregation? I believe that these questions will provide a better test of a person's level of internalisation of the congregation's charisms and degree of 'groundedness' in its way of life than demanding proof of knowledge of its constitutions and decrees.

A formation set in the context of church as family cannot exclude the involvement and participation of one's family. A person's vocation is unique and first and foremost a matter between that person and God. But I would hesitate to be content for too long with a situation in which a

religious is estranged or alienated from her or his family. I would also consider it very wise and desirable to solicit, encourage and welcome the family's support for the religious in formation in moral, material or financial terms. I would equally encourage a liturgical practice where the family ritually presents the religious to the church and congregation at times of reception, profession and ordination. The simple principle is that we cannot exclude the valid contribution of the family in a pattern of formation developed in the context of church as family of God.

**Process:** Becoming a full-grown member of a family entails a series of stages. The presupposition is always in favour of gradual, ritualised initiation through carefully monitored experiences, trials and rituals. It is not about assimilating a body of pre-packaged information; it is about inviting creativity, fostering adventure and demanding verifiable deeds of maturity. There is a difference between imparting knowledge and inspiring in an individual a passion for the tools of knowledge. From the perspective of church as family the kind of formation envisaged here implies a conversion. The question to be asked about a religious in the course of formation is not how well they have assimilated the information proposed, but to what extent have they undergone conversion? How much have they developed a sense of responsibility for the broader apostolic goals of the community and overcome the allure of narrow personal interests? To what extent have they been weaned away from ties of particularities and exclusivities to broader ties of openness and inclusiveness? In the words of the Synod this kind of formation 'overcomes all particularism and excessive ethno-centrism' (*Proposition*, no. 89; *EA*, no. 63).

**Integrity.** Growing up in a family is never about one thing only. It is an initiation into a complex world of events and experiences. Each step in the process of socialisation helps to equip the person for growth. There is no such thing as wasted knowledge. Those in formation have to 'receive an integral human formation, as well as one which is solid in its spiritual and doctrinal, apostolic and missionary, biblical and theological dimensions. This formation is to be faithfully and regularly updated down through the years' (*EA*, no. 94).

## Contextualised formation

Family creates a context, informed, influenced, challenged and threatened by diverse factors. A contextualised formation responds to the demands of a constantly changing environment. It aims at forming 'people who are truly human, well inserted in their milieu and who bear witness therein to the Kingdom which is to come' (Message, no. 49). Formation in the context of church as family is not about isolating people but inserting them into their milieu. Family is a social reality; it is open, not closed. The people who come into our family or congregation should be formed to see the bigger picture - that our family is one of many families and that there are serious issues which threaten the very survival of our family, church and society. To paraphrase the gospel story of the crafty steward (Luke 16:1-8), anyone who is too weak to dig or too ashamed to beg for the cause of our family and for the survival of our society need not apply. Formation in the context of church as family is about strengthening the capacity of consecrated persons to face the challenges of life in a world tormented by poverty, ignorance, disease, corruption, religious intolerance, etc.

A formation set in the context of church as the family of God presents the consecrated life into which we wish to initiate others in a radically new light. It enriches how we understand and live the vows that we profess. Consecrated chastity is not lamentable sterility or barrenness depriving us of our productive capacity. On the contrary, it means passionately committing the deep reserves of our energy, talent and creativity to the mission, goals and ideals of the congregation or family in the church and in society. Remember, in the family witches are people who drink the blood of others to guarantee and protect their own vital forces alone. Evangelical poverty is not a pitiable state of destitution that craves the sympathy of passers-by and onlookers. Rather, it is a genuine, prophetic and tireless commitment to create and share wealth and resources in the name of our congregation or family for the good of the people of God in the church and in society. Remember, in the family, a witch is a person who hoards the resources meant for the good of the entire community. Apostolic obedience is not a passively-endured tyranny that breeds double life or inauthentic living. Positively it is an unlimited capacity to imagine and undertake apostolic possibilities guided by the discerning wisdom and caring concern of the one who stands in the place of Christ in

the service of love. Remember, in the family a witch is a person who thwarts the collective objective of the family and undermines the voice of wisdom and authority exercised by elders on behalf of the community.

To conclude, formation in the context of the church as family entails something of the unknown. We say a chick that will grow into a rooster can be spotted on the day it hatches. A woman can give birth to her skin but not to her heart, says another proverb. Formation always involves risks, but that is the nature of every good investment. And formation is the art of investing resources wisely in people. As the proverb goes, 'A person who feeds a child with dog food should not be surprised to see the child behaving like a dog'. The best results can only come with the best resources; it is always for good, even if not for the immediate benefit of the congregation. Even if one decides to leave, as surely some will do, there is no denying the value of a well-formed person for the common good of society. Formation in this context of the church as family allows for risk; it adopts the favourable presupposition that, given the right conditions, this woman, this man will hatch and grow into a responsible, creative and dedicated member of our family, the family of God.

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