



The Challenges of involuntary Childlessness to the Pastoral Ministry of the Catholic Church in Western Kenya

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Abstract

Infertility in marriage is generally viewed as something unfortunate by many cultures. Each community desires to have itself perpetuated through the birth of children. The traditional Luo society strived toward its perpetuation and in cases of infecundity, solutions such as polygamy and sororate marriages were employed. Such solutions are however incompatible with the teachings of the Catholic Church. This incompatibility of cultures leaves the childless Catholic Luo couples in a dilemma since the Church condemns cultural practices such as polygamy. The findings are part of a larger study that was done in Western Kenya, through a cross-sectional field research. The study targeted Catholic childless couples, Priests, Catechists and Small Christian Community (SCC) leaders. Samples for the study were drawn from these target groups using snowball (for childless couples), purposive (priests and catechists), and, systematic sampling (for SCC leaders). Data was collected through in-depth oral interviews and Focus Group Discussions. The study indicates that couples who are childless result to various traditional remedies to beget children. The teachings of the Catholic Church conflict with the traditional Luo worldview on involuntary childlessness. Whereas the Catholic Church does not see any problem with involuntary childlessness, the Luo cannot withstand this since children are important for the cementing of the marriage. The childless couples face many socio-religious challenges like social alienation, stigmatization, loneliness, being despised among others; such challenges may interfere with their participation in the Church. Such a scenario interfere with the pastoral ministry of the church since these couples may engage in what the Catholic Church term as 'irregular unions'. This may lead some members to join NRMs which would accept them and others will avoid Church marriages. There are cultures that appreciate voluntary childlessness however such a phenomenon is strange among the Luo of Western Kenya. They expect that a marriage ought to be fruitful. The author explores some of these challenges that involuntary childlessness pose to the pastoral ministry of the Catholic Church.

Key words: Involuntary childlessness, Marriage, Luo, Catholic Church.



Background

Pastoral ministry has been an issue of great concern for the Catholic Church. This is evident in the Second Vatican council (1965) how it discussed the pastoral concern in the modern world (*Gaudium et spes*). In this session, the church was concerned with the modern influence on the people and how to care for the souls of people amidst such influences.

The church in Africa has been key to the life of the Catholic Church in matters of pastoral ministry. This was culminated by the unprecedented convocation of the synod of the African Catholic bishops in Rome (1994). The primary goal of the synod focused on the evangelization and pastoral concern for the African church and how to make Christianity relevant to an African person. The synod was meant to make the gospel relevant to the African cultures. After the African synod, Pope John Paul II published an exhortation "*Ecclesia in Africa*" which gave an insight on the pastoral activity of the church in Africa. In this exhortation, the pope expounded on the importance of the church in Africa and its evangelizing mission (*Ecclesia in Africa*, p. 5).

In order for the church to grow, the care for the souls is paramount. In the face of many New Religious Movements, the Catholic Church should renew its pastoral strategies so as to enable the members to feel comfortable and safe within the church.

Scholars have established that in Africa certain cultural issues affect the pastoral ministry of the church. Ndung'u (2008) opines that African culture is a major challenge to the church in Africa. He calls for a paradigm shift in the church's work of evangelization. This can be achieved by grounding the gospel in African cultural values.

Kato (2008) concur that one of the challenges of evangelization in Africa is the traditional African customs. He argues that the Catholic Church ought to put up proper pastoral strategies to effect evangelization. It is therefore important for the church to re-look into the cultural issues which affect the work of evangelization. Banzikiza (1995) corroborates that the church should engage in proper pastoral approach to African values of marriage and fecundity. This he says will enable the African Christians to appreciate Christianity and to live authentic Christian lives.

This study reveals that involuntary childlessness affects the pastoral ministry of the Catholic Church in Western Kenya. This calls for the church to re-evaluate its pastoral strategies among the childless couples with the intent of helping them appreciate Christianity and to live authentic Christian lives.



Methodology

The findings for this article are part of a study conducted from October 2011 to February 2015 among the Luo Catholic childless couples in Kisumu, Kenya. The target population was Catholic childless couples, Priests, Catechists and Small Christian Community (SCC) leaders. Samples were drawn from these target groups using snowball (for childless couples), purposive (priests and catechists), and, systematic sampling (for SCC leaders). Data was collected through in-depth oral interviews and Focus Group Discussions. This generated qualitative data that was transcribed, coded, analyzed thematically and presented in descriptive form and verbatim narratives.

The study findings

The study established that involuntary childlessness influenced the pastoral ministry of the Church of Kisumu diocese. Kemdirim (1996) concurs that childlessness causes a serious pastoral problem in Africa, he says that childless couples ask themselves many questions like why me? Why is God not listening to my prayers? All the Parish Priests and the Chief catechists interviewed consented that childlessness has challenged the pastoral ministry of the Church. This is because when these couples opt to follow the traditional methods of solving childlessness, then as Christians, they end up going against the church's teaching and in turn their faith is interfered with. The catechist of Rang'ala Parish observed that some of the people who go for these methods have become weak in their participation in the Church. This is because most of these methods that they take recourse to are not acceptable to the Church. This concurs with what Macpherson (1970) a CSM missionary to Kenya had earlier observed and he gave the example of African customs which were considered to be unchristian like ancestral veneration, sacrificial systems, magic, polygamy and traditional dances among others. He argues that these are at variance with the Christian principles.

The priest of Rang'ala Parish corroborated the above argument when he pointed out that childlessness has challenged the pastoral ministry of the Church. He said that:

Marriage creates a bond that cannot be reversed yet childlessness poses a challenge because if others realize that they are not able to get forth children, they don't consider of great value the bond and so some go for second marriages, third marriage, men leave women and women leave men because they are not able to get children, so they try elsewhere (oral interview on 3/2/2012 at Rang'ala Church).

The priest saw this as a great threat to the teaching of the Church with regard to the sacrament of marriage. The catechist of Aluor Parish concurred that childlessness could lead to polygamy which is a very big challenge to the Church in Africa. It may lead to polygamy which affects the sacramental life of the family. He argued that:

Some people after entering into polygamous marriages, they end up ignoring their spiritual lives, some even stop going to Church. They stop active participation in the Church activities (oral interview on 21/11/2011 at Aluor Church).



The priest of Nyabondo Parish supported the above argument when he observed that the greatest problem that childlessness brings is polygamy which contradicts the Christian values. He said that:

This is a pastoral challenge. There is nothing we can do much but to help the couple to understand and accept the Christian values with their deeper meaning compared to the tradition (oral interview on 22/1/2012 at Nyabondo Church).

The SCC leaders from all the sampled parishes admitted that polygamy is against the Church's teaching and retards the development in the work of evangelization. In other FGD's of Rang'ala SCC leaders, it was observed that childlessness would affect the pastoral ministry of the Church. This is because childlessness may open room for things like polygamy which would affect the faith life of the couples involved. The above argument is supported by Burnett and Panchal (2008) who in their study discovered that the problem of infertility may affect the faith of the couple in that they may feel neglected by God. This is because they may feel that their prayers are not answered by God. This they said may make the couple feel helpless and to look like failures. Kemdirim (1996) also argues out that infertility may be a possible cause of loss of faith.

In their search for a child, childless couples will leave no stone unturned. They may have to consult a spiritualist, a traditional medicine doctor (herbalist) or an orthodox doctor, and in most cases, without the desired results. They engage in ritual activities to deities and divinities whom they feel are responsible for their unfortunate condition and could help them out of their plight. In their desperation to have a child of their own, the couples will do anything even if it means backsliding in church-practice and getting initiated in occultism (p. 240).

The SCC leaders observed that the Church has not developed proper guidelines on how to deal with polygamous families. The SCC leaders of Ojolla Parish had the following on polygamy:

Polygamy is against the Church's teaching and so this affects the pastoral ministry since the Church has not yet developed any guidelines to help or evangelize the polygamous families and to incorporate them into the Church life. The Church teaches against infidelity between the couples, childlessness would lead couples to infidelity and this becomes a big problem to the Church (FGD on 27/3/2012 at Ojolla Church).

The above argument was supported by the priest of Ojolla Parish who said that childlessness poses a great challenge that needs to be addressed. He said this:

It interferes with the peace of the family, a lot of suspicion and blame game between the couples. It paves way for infidelity; the woman tries another man outside and the man also may go for another woman. Once it opens for infidelity, it may open an avenue for HIV/AIDS which may bring down the family. It may also lead to divorce (oral interview on 10/1/2012 at Ojolla Church).

The SCC leaders concurred with the priest that childlessness would lead to infidelity and this is contrary to the teachings of the Church and God's Commandments (Exodus 20:14). When the couples have been involved in infidelity then the Church has failed in her work of



evangelization. Infidelity is condemned in the Ten Commandments, thus such couples would be breaking God's Law. This would be a drawback for the Church since her major work is to lead people to know and keep the Laws of God. The Rang'ala SCC leaders also observed that childlessness may lead to infidelity which will be against the Commandments of God. The SCC leaders of Aluor concurred with the above and they said that childlessness challenges the Church's work of evangelization because of the fact that it may lead to polygamy and other illicit sexual unions.

The catechist of Aluor Parish observed that in most cases some families may end up not living peacefully. He said that:

Most couples who do not have children have quarrels and blames. They feel that they have something missing in their family. This leads to counter accusations where one feels that the other is the cause of their misery. This is often between the couples who are not even ready to go for medical examination to seek professional help (oral interview on 21/11/2011 at Aluor Church).

He said that the priests and the catechists find it extremely difficult to minister to these couples because of the cultural tag which is attached to childlessness. Approaching the couples and talking about their childlessness would not be that easy; this therefore becomes quite challenging. Majority of the Church ministers would therefore opt to be silent and even avoid talking to the couples about their situation since they may not offer much help.

From the study findings, this situation cannot entirely be blamed on the childless couples. In as much as some would not open up and talk about their problem, there are a majority who would still open up and talk. If the study could find some who would open up and be interviewed, then it would not be difficult for the Church ministers to reach these affected couples. The blame could partly be on the Church; from the study findings some Church ministers did not know the actual number of the childless couples in their parishes. They did not have any particular programme for the affected couples. If the Church could come up with modalities of knowing them and reaching out to them, then they can feel that the Church is concerned about them and their problem. Otherwise they may not be going to the NRM. Apparently the NRM may be showing concern to those who have particular problems and even intercede for them by offering special prayers. These findings show that the Catholic Church is not doing much for these childless couples.

The priest of Ojolla Parish observed that another challenge is that childlessness opens avenues for the couples to go for witchcraft to seek solutions. Witchcraft and magic are some of the things that the Bible condemns and thus they are against Christian teachings (Deuteronomy 18:10, Leviticus 19:26-31, 20:27, Isaiah 8:19). To resort to diviners for such help is therefore going against Christian principles. The priest of Aluor Parish concurred with the priest of Ojolla Parish and he admitted that there are enormous pastoral challenges that comes with childlessness, he pointed out a case that he is currently handling. He narrated the following:

I have a case in my office whereby a woman told her husband to allow her to receive the Holy Communion because the man was no longer able to function. And the man told her that if that is her reason to be allowed to receive Holy



Communion, then he is not going to sign any document. The man asked the wife to be patient with him that may be one day God will relieve him of his problem and be able to function. The man is still living in hope that one day he would be able to function as a man (oral interview on 21/11/2011 at Aluor Church).

The priest of Aluor Parish advised that these people need to be given hope. They should also be encouraged to seek medical aid since many couples are still ignorant of medical attention. He observed that due to childlessness, women even go to the extent of *por* (the art of going out with other men) to get a child and then come back. The husband now becomes a foster father. This he said is challenging since the women are exposed to HIV and AIDS, there is also the moral aspects of the act since it is an act of infidelity as the woman is already married.

The greatest challenge that faces the Church according to the priest of Aluor Parish is the difficulty of finding young couples wedding without cohabitation or trial marriage. The same challenge is observed by the SCC leaders of Nyabondo Parish who said that childlessness makes some people not come and wed in the Church since Church wedding will tie them in case they have no children, they feel that they can still have certain options of marrying another person. The Church teaches that cohabitation or "trial marriage" is a sin; but there are no young people who would want to marry a young woman without an assurance that she will be fruitful. This is why they cohabit before formalizing their marriage.

Paul II (1981) wrote against trial marriage and said that there can be no question of experiment and that the Church cannot approve it. Sexual intercourse is the only way in which partners give themselves to each other in a very intimate way. The Church understands trial marriage as a mere experiment of marriage but according to Bujo (2009) he clarifies that African marriage is a process where the two who are destined to marry are gradually introduced to a life already decided upon by them and the community too. The Church rejects this African model of marriage because for Catholics a marriage must be a sacrament.

Majority of young people would want to prove if the partner is capable of bearing children before final commitment. The couples would lack trust which would make it difficult for many of them to solemnize their marriages in Church. This was supported by the priest of Nyabondo Parish when he observed that:

It is hard to find people entering into marriage before having one or two children. Luo's would enter into marriage only after having children and paying dowry to make sure that the partner meets their expectation (oral interview on 22/1/2012 at Nyabondo Church).

Bujo (2009) argues that the Church considers African marriage as concubinage because of the sexual intimacy before marriage. This has made many African Christians to have nothing to do with the Church weddings. He expresses the ideas of Lufuluabo and Mpongo who support the African model of marriage in stages. These personalities confirm that only a few Africans can accept an infertile marriage. This makes many Africans to have several sexual experiences with an intended partner in order to verify the fertility of the couple, especially of the bride before they make final decision. They say that Christians would always marry according to the



traditions of the ancestors and when the marriage works out then they go to the Church to solemnize their marriage.

The African model of marriage in stages ensures stability of the marriage covenant. Bujo further says that Lufuluabo raises pastoral concern that if the wedding takes place in Church before the couple has sexual intercourse, it can lead to an unhappy marriage if the couple is found to be infertile. Meanwhile the challenge would be that these Christians who are married under the traditions of the ancestors are excluded from the sacraments for some time. The same observation is made by Cardinal Joseph-Albert Malula, that there are many young African Christian couples living in a traditional African marriage without the sacraments. He observes that: *"The danger would be that they may become indifferent to the sacraments and get on with their lives since even outside the Church they would still feel that they are really married"* (Bujo, 2009, p. 115).

Both the catechist of Nyabondo and Ojolla Parishes agreed that it is challenging working with such kind of couples. The work of the Church is that of faith, these people have proved clearly that they lack faith. Their actions they said are acts that are retarding the faith of the Christians and alienate them sometimes from the sacraments and also from the Church community. In his working experience the catechist of Ojolla Parish observed that some would decline any responsibility in the Church especially in the lay council or being leaders of the Small Christian Communities claiming that they are busy.

The SCC leaders on their part observed some other challenges that childlessness pose to the work of evangelization. They observed that when families do not have children, then this would affect the Church which is also part of the society. There will be no new members to join the Church through birth and baptism. They added that this in turn will lead to lack of priests and religious men and women to minister to the people. The SCC leaders of Ojolla Parish had the following observations on the challenges of childlessness on the pastoral ministry of the Church:

When families do not have children, this impacts greatly to the Church because there are no future new members and also it would cause lack of priests to minister to the people (FGD on 27/3/2012 at Ojolla Church).

Above sentiments were also shared by the SCC leaders of Nyabondo Parish who said that childlessness would hamper the growth of the Church in terms of new members and thus no people to be administered sacraments to. Another FGD of Ojolla SCC leaders observed that childlessness really poses a big challenge to the pastoral ministry of the Church because those who are childless would tend not to be active in the SCC since when people meet for weekly prayer meetings, they may not attend because they would be always worried about their homes and what they have left behind since they do not have anyone to attend to them. They have observed that some of the childless couple may not accept the SCC leadership due to their low self-esteem. Others who accept may also be ridiculed because some may doubt their leadership abilities. Childlessness therefore may lead to laxity and not being active and this would affect the work of evangelization.



Field data indicated that another challenge is that some Catholic childless couples leave the Catholic Church to seek help from other churches. Some members of the Church may opt to leave the Church as they look for other methods that could help them have children since most of the solutions used by the Luo traditional society are not accepted by the Church. Monica Awino (from Ojolla) had the following to say:

I have really suffered because of being childless. I have prayed to God but nothing has happened. Now I leave it for Him. Many people have even advised me to leave the Catholic Church but I have refused because I cannot leave my Church (oral interview on 12/12/12 at Ojolla, Kapuonja).

This was supported by the priest of Aluor Parish who said that:

Sometimes the Church faces a great challenge of losing her members to the new movements and denominations which often preach what appeals to the problems of the people. These couples would leave the Catholic Church to seek help from these churches since they preach instant solutions to people's problems (oral interview on 21/11/2011 at Aluor Church).

Gyandu (2007) corroborates this when he said that most couples in Nigeria and Ghana who are childless join New Religious Movements (NRM) or Independent Churches which promise instant help. He observes that majority of those who visit these Pentecostal or Charismatic churches are women who seek healing services hoping to have biological children. He points out that most of the founders of these African Initiated Churches come into the limelight because of their ability to pray for the gift of children. The argument by Gyandu (2007) is supported by Togarasen (2006, p.165) who observes that many people are attracted to the Pentecostal Churches because of the ability of the founder to deal with childlessness. He says that: *"Ezekiel Guti of Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA) was initially known to deal with childlessness"*.

It can be concluded that so long as the Church is ignoring issues related to childlessness, it would still be a great source of challenge to the pastoral ministry of the Church. This is because many Luo couples would still find it difficult to adhere to the teachings of the Catholic Church due to the fact that they do not have a choice within the Church. Mugambi (1990) supports this argument by saying that the African culture will one day reassert itself and adapt to the prevailing social challenges however long it takes. Ndung'u (2008) observes that the challenge the Church is facing is that she condemns the cultural practices and rituals without offering a suitable substitute. This therefore results into a vacuum which leads the African Christians into hypocrisy whereby they perform these rituals secretly. Mugambi (1990) concurs with this and says that:



If Christians chose to detach themselves from the challenges of the society in which they live, the Church to which they belong will appear to be a cultic club with exclusive membership, which is irrelevant to the needs of the contemporary society (p. 91).

This therefore is a wakeup call to the Church leadership to look at these issues of childlessness and Luo cultural heritage with a lot of keenness so as to assist the childless couples overcome the challenges and to make the Church too effect the work of evangelization; otherwise these cultural practices would not come to a halt at once. Ndung'u (2009) points out that Christianity has survived in Africa for many years and the cultural practices are still so strong. Even after being condemned by the western missionaries. This is a proof that Africans attach great importance to these cultural practices.

It is evident from the study findings that childlessness does not only pose challenge to the lives of the childless couples; but it also impacts to the life and the work of the Church. This is why it is necessary for the Church to address the plight of these couples. Otherwise the Church's effort and her work would be greatly undermined. Chamie and Mirkin (2012) argue that the governments of the developed countries are worried about the trend of voluntary childlessness. They have therefore developed modalities to influence childbearing. Some of these include; maternity and paternity leave, childcare, part time employment, job security, cash allowances, tax credits and other financial incentives. These governments are worried and are finding solutions to the problem of voluntary childlessness. This is because of the influence of the effects of voluntary childlessness. The Catholic Church therefore needs to come up with ways in which involuntary childlessness can be tackled so as not to negatively influence the work and her efforts toward evangelization. According to the functionalists approach, religion should benefit the adherents and the society as a whole otherwise such a religion have no need to exist. The Catholic Church therefore should find ways of engaging with the childless couples with the aim of helping them overcome the challenges of involuntary childlessness and also the challenges it poses to the pastoral ministry of the Catholic Church.

Possible solutions to the challenges of involuntary Childlessness

Guidance and Counselling

The study found out that the Church cannot remain silent and unmoved with the people's plight. Given that the Church is part of the society and these being her members, the Church needs to come out to address some of these challenges that are associated with childlessness. Kemdirim (1996) consents to this fact and he says that the Church should urgently look at the problems faced by Africans since this would make them comfortable within the Church. The priest of Aluor Parish consented that these childless couples need a lot of support. He said that:

Childlessness is always unfortunate for the couple that is why I personally minister to them directly. I must make them feel that they are in the greater family, the Church. Not having a child is quite challenging and so I think they need a lot of spiritual support (oral interview on 21/11/2011 at Aluor Church).



Majority of the couples interviewed admitted that the Church has done little when it comes to addressing the plight of the childless couples, though a few who approached their priests and shared their problem with them got some help. For example, Tabitha Anyango (from Nyabondo) shared her experience how she was helped by her priest when she went to share her problem. She said this:

When I went back home I thought of going to tell my priest. He told me that he is going to pray for me. He asked me to come for mass every day in the morning and pray sincerely. After three days father asked me to take a letter to my husband. Since we were not talking, he told me to put the letter where he will get it. When he came back he got the letter and asked who brought the letter and I said it was me. So he agreed and we went to see father the following day. Father asked him if I am his wife and he agreed and he was told to allow me to receive Holy Communion. He agreed and we finished (oral interview on 23/1/2012 at Nyabondo, Kodong'a).

Field data indicated that most priests did not even know how many childless couples they have in their parishes. The priest of Ojolla Parish admitted that he does not know the total number of the childless couples. He said that:

It is not easy to know the exact number of the childless couples in this parish mainly because some couples do not want to come to the limelight to be known that they are affected (oral interview on 10/1/2012 at Ojolla Church).

The priest of Aluor Parish also admitted that he is yet to know all the childless couples in the parish. He has struggled to know a few. This was the same with all the priests; they could not exactly state the total number of the childless couples in their respective parishes. Even some of the childless couples have admitted that they did not share their problem with their priests. Maureen Atieno (from Nyabondo) said that their priest did not know their problem. *"We did not see it as a big problem, it was only his mother that had a problem but with us we did not have a problem between us"* (oral interview on 23/1/2012 at Nyabondo, Kamgan).

The study discovered that there is a gap that needs to be filled. The Church needs to find a mechanism on how to reach out to her faithful who are affected by this problem of childlessness. Susan Achieng' (from Rang'ala) suggested that the Church through the clergy need to offer counselling sessions and also once in a while bring the open sharing for such couples so that they feel cared for and not feel that they are discriminated against. She said that childlessness has led some couples into depression since they do not have the mechanism of coping with their predicament. The priest of Ojolla Parish realized that the Church has a very important role to play in settling this dilemma. He said that a lot of counselling is necessary so as to enable the couple to understand and accept their condition. He also suggested that the value of the sacramental life needs to be stressed so that people would not turn to ways that may hinder them from receiving the Holy Communion. This was supported by the catechist of Aluor Parish who said:

The Church can do guidance and counselling. Therefore the Church needs to train counselors to help these couples. The Church also needs to include them in the wider Christian family (oral interview on 21/11/2011 at Aluor Church).



The priest of Aluor Parish on his part saw that the problem should not just be addressed in marriage, that the Church should be serious in doing pre-marital counselling. He said that:

I think the Church needs to advise the couple before marriage of the possible challenges so that they marry out of love. The Church may advise the childless couple on adoption. The Church can carry out pre-nuptial inquiry which involves medical checkups. There should be a good pastoral care for the childless couples, counsel them to let them live in love. The Church should also act with love towards these couples, especially the husband who does not want to throw the lady out of marriage, yet he needs children. Some of the scientific inventions like surrogate motherhood are good but quite challenging since no Luo would want to separate conjugal act from conception. None would want to donate a sperm for conception to be done somewhere else (oral interview on 21/11/2011 at Aluor Church).

The catechists of Ojolla Parish, Nyabondo Parish and Jenifer Ooko concurred that the Church must come close to the childless, listen to their story in order to guide and counsel them since they undergo a lot of problems. The SCC leaders said that majority of the couples need guidance and counselling for them to be staunch Christians and to avoid some of the traditional remedies to childlessness since some end up in these situations due to lack of guidance. The SCC leaders of Nyabondo Parish were of the same idea that these couples need to be counselled by the Church and that the Church should also help them with their material needs especially when they are old and have no one to assist them. Burnett and Panchal (2008) in their research reports that, involuntary childlessness may lead to a crisis that may eventually call for counselling. Molock (1999) in her discussion of religious factors in infertility counselling, reported that infertility may precipitate a spiritual crisis. This would call for guidance and counselling.

The catechist of Rang'ala Parish also suggested that the Church should be there for these couples. He said that:

The Church should identify these couples then bring them closer to give them more teachings that would strengthen their faith. If they are left on their own and in the midst of those who despise and laugh at them, then they may end up being lost and the church would have lost in her work of bringing people close to God (oral interview on 3/2/2012 at Rang'ala Church).

The priest of Rang'ala Parish admitted that childlessness is a serious problem that the Church needs to come out openly to address. He suggested ways in which the Church would work out to help these couples. He had the following advice:

I think the Church would advise couples who find themselves in this kind of situation to go for thorough medical examination/check-up. Sometimes childlessness may be due to sickness that can be treated. It is good to consult the right doctors so that they can be helped. But I think because of ignorance, sometimes people live in a situation of not getting children yet that can be corrected. The Church talks about family planning, there are people trained to help couples to get children, but this must be according to the principles of the Church (oral interview on 3/2/2012 at Rang'ala Church).



The priest continued to say that, the Church should help these couples by availing various methods which are accepted by the Church to assist such kind of couples. He said that there are some couples who have used these methods and have succeeded in getting children. The Church, he said, has no problem when the couples seek medical attention. But there is a problem when they use methods which are against the dignity of marriage and the dignity of getting children. The Church encourages the childless couples to go to baby homes and orphanages to adopt children. He stressed that such is a good gesture of charity towards these vulnerable children in the society by giving them homes and showing them love. This will give the children another opportunity to have parents. In conclusion, he said that this should be done after such couples have undergone a medical examination and established that they cannot have children biologically. This would be helpful to the couples since the Church must come out clearly to help couples even in the choice of medical treatment. Burnett and Panchal (2008) support this when they say that ideological and religious influences may affect couples seeking medical treatment of infertility. They report that couples of Roman Catholic faith may face difficult challenges when seeking medical treatment. This is due to the fact that there are some medical treatments that are not acceptable to the Church.

The priest of Rang'ala Parish challenged the agents of evangelization to instruct the faithful through catechism. The Church needs to deepen the faith of the Christians and to re-emphasize the importance of marriage which is meant for companionship. Marriage can be blessed with children or not, but the marriage remains. The Church has to Christianize the culture in such a way that the ways of viewing marriage must not be pegged to children as the Luo would view it. He insisted that the Church needs to catechize the Luo culture. Such catechesis should be ongoing. Perhaps this could be conducted even in the institutions of learning, such that as young people grow up it would be important for the Church to instill in them the value of marriage. This would be able to change some of the cultural worldview. He advised the agents of evangelization that they must make outreach programmes. They should not wait for people in the Church but go out there in the baraza's and in their different associations to enlighten the people and transform them.

The priest of Nyabondo Parish observed that the Church cannot remain indifferent to the plight of these couples. He said that one of the solutions is to reach the couples and share with them, interact with them. The Church needs to give them special attention. He said this:

Given that childlessness is considered a private affair and many would not want to come out of the open so that people can know they have a problem. The Church can have a special pastoral programme to encourage them (oral interview on 22/1/2012 at Nyabondo Church).

The catechist of Ojolla suggested that the Church needs to come up strongly to reinforce her teaching that marriage is not for begetting children, but for love and companionship. The Church can also encourage the childless couples to go for adoption if they need children. They could also take a child from one of their close relatives. The SCC leaders concurred with this that the Church can encourage adoption among such couples who have established that they



cannot have children. Japheth Owino was of the same opinion that the Church needs to do something. He said that:

The Church really needs to help these couples. One cannot really pray well when in a problem. For such kind of people to be free to pray well, the Church need to relax her laws for some of these people. There are those who want to marry another wife for a grave reason. There are also those who marry many women without any reason just for pleasure. The Church can look keenly on each case and handle them separately. This would be the only way in which these couples would be able to live their Christian lives well (oral interview on 22/2/2012 at Ojolla, Karateng').

The SCC leaders suggested that since some of these couples may face some needs as they grow old, the Church can step in and support them materially. This would encourage the ones who fear old age loneliness and lack of support since among the Luo, the children are the ones who take care of their parents in their old age. Once the Church is able to support them, they would be able to feel some relief from their burden. This was particularly observed by the SCC leaders of Rang'ala who comparatively experienced a great number of childless couples who were elderly and needed a lot of material support.

The SCC leaders of Aluor suggested that the Church should bring these couples close and the SCC also should be close to them, visit them in case they miss weekly meetings and try to understand what they go through. Perhaps the stigma that is associated with childlessness may make them miss the meetings and withdraw from the rest. Burnett (2003) supports this saying that the stigma associated with infertility affects couples' self-relation and familial identities. Diamond et al. (1999) corroborates this saying that such couples feel anxious, helpless, confused and ashamed due to their inability to have children. These leaders also suggested that the Church need to propagate the faith to enable people to grow deep in faith and understand the true meaning of marriage whether they are childless or not they would still love each other.

The SCC of Ojolla in one FGD suggested that these couples need to be visited to be strengthened. The Church should be close to them to listen to their problems and challenges. The SCC need to be outstanding in this since it is a neighborhood Church. Members of the SCC need to be there for them as part of their family to make them feel that they belong to a family. Diller (2004) observes that fertility problems may reflect a lack of balance between the natural world and the individual. This is the reason for visiting them to encourage them since this imbalance may overwhelm them to an extent that they cannot live a balanced life. The Church could also advise them to adopt some children if they can take care of them. The SCC leaders of Rang'ala supports that the Church can advise the childless couple to adopt because there are so many abandoned children and orphans in baby homes like Rang'ala baby home.

Apart from the actual help and the guidance that the Church could give the childless couples, the Church needs to look critically at the cultural values of the Luo without biases so as to help



the couples live an integrated Christian life. This therefore calls for deeper studies of the Luo culture so as to pave way for a proper inculturation.

Inculturation

Inculturation has been in the Church circles for almost two decades now, but it is still critical and should be seriously re-considered. Studies from the Philippines shows how the Church is close to the childless couples. Gomez (2002) shows how the Church encourages these couples to be prayerful. There is a prayer specifically designed for the childless couples to seek God's intervention.

Inculturation could be one way in which the Church can help address the challenges associated with childlessness. This is because, through inculturation, the Church will look at the Luo cultural values and attempt to integrate them into her teachings. This would make some of the cultural values that are considered alien to the Church be accepted. Once these values are appreciated by the Church then the childless couple would seek for solutions without fear of going against the Church's teachings and therefore they will live integrated Christian lives. All the Parish Priests that were interviewed observed that there is need for inculturation as a way forward to addressing the problems of an African Christian.

Conclusion

Childlessness causes the couples to face many socio-religious challenges. These could be in the form of social alienation and stigmatization, loneliness, being despised, shame and guilt. These may make them not to attend SCC meetings and thus interferes with their participation in the activities of the Church. These challenges associated with childlessness influence the pastoral work of the Church. The traditional remedial measures are contrary to the work of evangelization of the Church. The Church can respond to the challenges that these couples face and the challenges childlessness pose to her pastoral ministry through providing guidance and counselling to the couples and through undertaking inculturation. Inculturation will ensure that the church appreciates the Luo customary values which will lessen the conflict and ensure that the Christians do not experience a dichotomy between the church's teachings and their traditional values.



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