

THE FAMILY AND HUMAN LIFE

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

1. Gratitude:

It is with a deep sense of gratitude to Almighty God that I recall some of the major events of last year 2007. The Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI on the 28th of May 2007 raised our Cathedral Church to the status of a Basilica; The Basilica of the Most Blessed Trinity, Onitsha. This is a renewed call to holiness and availability of more means to attain it. Please avail yourself of the opportunity and privilege of a basilica among us and make pilgrimages to the Basilica from time to time.

*Also, we gratefully remember the visits of three eminent Princes of Holy Mother, the Church: Their Eminences, Ivan Cardinal Dias - Prefect, Congregation of the Propagation of Faith, **Justin Cardinal Rigali** - Cardinal Archbishop of Philadelphia and **Francis Cardinal Arinze**, Prefect, Divine Worship and discipline of the Sacraments, The dedication of the Magnificent SS John and Paul Church in Commemoration of the first Papal Visit to Nigeria of the servant of God, Pope John Paul II; The completion and blessing of Priests retirement home and the ordination of twenty one deacons to the Holy Priesthood of Christ. These and many more are occasions of Grace for which we remain grateful to God.*

Let me register my immense gratitude to all of you priests, religious, consecrated persons and Christ's lay faithful of Onitsha Archdiocese for your commitment and support to Archdiocesan projects. Here, the Holy Family Youth Hostels deserve special mention. This hostel meant for University students will definitely be of great help to their moral and spiritual life. The Hostels when finished, will be a veritable means of evangelization as well as an asset to their holistic formation as good human beings. May God bless you as you assist the future generations.

2. THE THEME: FAMILY AND HUMAN LIFE.

In our first pastoral letter; “That they may have life” Written five years ago, we declared in the words of His Holiness, Pope John Paul II that “the gospel of life is at the heart of Jesus' message... It is to be preached by the Church with dauntless fidelity as “good news” to the people of every age and culture” (cf *John Paul II, Evangelium Vitae, I*). This time, I would love to elaborate on the family from where life starts. Again, the overwhelming reception given to my last year's pastoral letter on the “**Common Good**”, coupled with our desire, duty and privilege to continue the mission of Christ Jesus – the Redeemer, who came that they may have life (*Jn 10:10*) have informed the choice of the present topic namely - ***The Family and Human Life.***

There is a clear connection between the family and human life. Every human life generally starts from a family and largely depends on it for survival. The family is the fulcrum of human life, the cradle into which life is born and in which it develops.

It is thus important for us as Christians to examine this important institution, to understand how it impacts on our lives as followers of Christ and to seek how best to uphold the dignity of the family.

Moreover, my present position as the Chairman of the ***Committee on family and human Life of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN)*** has increased my interest in the subject matter.

3. THE FOUNDATIONAL IMPORTANCE OF HUMAN LIFE

As human beings, life is the basis of all that we do. Any other human action virtuous or vicious presumes the existence of the doer, the presence of life. Life is of supreme value. It is foundational and fundamental since without it, no other human value can be attained by the individual person, The Sacred Scriptures tell us that life comes from God – who made man in His image. Life is therefore a gift from God but also an invitation to freedom and responsibility. But human life comes to us through the family hence the need to discuss it in the context of the family, and the need to promote the dignity of the family from where life comes.

4. IMPORTANCE OF THE FAMILY FOR THE HUMAN SOCIETY IN GENERAL

In his letter to families, His Holiness, Pope John Paul II says, “The family is a community of persons and the smallest social unit. And, as such it is an

institution fundamental to the life of every society". (*John Paul II, Gratissimam Sane, 17*). The family is not only the smallest social unit but also the first form of communion. According to Pope Benedict XVI, "The first form of communion between persons is that born of the love of a man and a woman who decide to enter a stable union in order to build together a new family" (*Benedict XVI, The Human Family, A community of Peace, #1*). Affirming the importance of the family and its fundamental nature, Francis Cardinal Arinze says; "The family is fundamental indeed. From it we receive our major orientation in life. The family gives us our sense of direction, our philosophy of life, our basic values, our spiritual and moral major points of reference. The family has therefore, far-reaching consequences on the Church, government and the society as a whole". (*F. A Arinze, Living Our Faith, 1980, Pg. 172*). It follows that the human community cannot do without the service provided by the family ... Children learn from the looks and the actions of their mothers and fathers even before they learn from their words. (*CT Benedict XVI, The Human Family, H3*).

5. THE PIVOTAL IMPORTANCE OF THE FAMILY FOR THE CHURCH AND CHRISTIANITY

Given that the human person normally comes into the world within a family and can be said to owe to the family the very fact of his existing as an individual, it follows that the image of God in man (at creation) is passed on through the family. Through the divine mystery of His incarnation, the Word made flesh – The son of God, linked himself intimately with the human family. He did so not only with one family, that of Nazareth, but in some way with every family. Following Christ who came into the world to serve (Mt 20:28), the church considers serving the family to be one of her essential duties. (*Cf John Paul II, Gratissimam Sane, #2*).

As the church shares in the joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties of humans on their pilgrimage on earth she occupies herself with the promotion of the dignity of the family and human life as one of her primary duties. The church has called the family the domestic church because there the child generally enters his first school, where he learns about God and meets his first community where he prays and joins in worship.

One can easily observe that a healthy family is the primary living cell of society" (*Vaticam 11 Apostolicam Actuositatem, 11*), it is also the sanctuary of life, a community of peace, the first school of life, the first community, the first Church, a microcosm of the larger society, a place of freedom,

responsibility, love, acceptance and forgiveness. Conscious of the precious values of family and human life, we wish in this year's pastoral letter to offer assistance to all men and women of good will who are already aware of these values and seek to protect them. We also wish to speak to those who are uncertain but searching for the truth about these values and finally to those who are unjustly deprived from enjoying these basic gifts of God.

CHAPTER TWO

SOME USEFUL DEFINITIONS

- 6. Family:** The word family has many meanings.
- Family can refer to a group of people consisting of parents and children. In a wider sense it can mean a group of people related by blood, for example: parents, their children and close relatives, uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, cousins etc.
 - In a still wider sense, family can refer to a group of individuals that are descended from a common ancestry, a merchant family, a royal family, etc.
 - In a very general sense, it can refer to a group of things, languages, animals that are of related genera. For example, language family which is made up of many related languages may be from the same root.
 - In a more sociological sense, family can mean a harmonious group bound together by common interests, for example, an Ecclesiastical family, a University family, a Religious family, family of nations etc.
 - Human family; this refers to the entire human beings living on earth. It refers to the world community of humans as one family. As the Venerable Fathers of the second Vatican council stated, "All peoples are one community and have one origin, because God caused the whole human race to dwell on the face of the earth (*Cf Acts 17:26*), they have also one final end, God" (*Vatican II, Nostra Aetate, #1*).
- 7. Family in our Context:** In this write-up the use of the word family is specific, going back to the Latin origin, familia which means household. The word family here thus refers primarily to the community formed by parents and their children. "A man and woman united in marriage, together with their children, form a family" (*CCC 2202*). The church defines it as the first natural society, "a divine institution that stands at the foundation of life of the human

person as the prototype of every social order” (*Benedict XVI, The Human Family, #2*)

The word family is in practice not restricted to what is referred to as nuclear family. But it is the nuclear family in the sense defined above that forms the basis of all other extensions of the meaning of family. The sense of family is also very much influenced by the cultural context in which human beings live and work. For example, there is a remarkable difference between the European concept of family and the African understanding of the same. The European family is defined by Lucy Mair as “a domestic group in which parents and children live together and in its elementary form it consists of a couple and their children. This is often called nuclear or elementary Family” (*Lucy Mair, An Introduction To Social Anthropology, 1972, P. 94*). While the European definition limits the family in some cases to the man, his wife and their children or child, the African concept conveys a much wider understanding. Hence F. C. Ogbalu observes that the African understanding differs from the English concept of family in that it does not only apply to husband, his wife and children but also includes somewhat other relations such as uncles, cousins, nephews or even maids and servants (*Cf Ogbalu F.C. Igbo Institutions and Customs, pg 7*).

Note that, mere nuclear family refers to family on the natural plane. But even on this level, the family as an institution owes its origin to the creator God who made human beings in such a way that they are suitable to human family. Consequently, most cultures both in Europe and Africa consider the family as a **sacred institution**.

8. The Christian Family: Still over and above the natural family is the Christian family. The Christian family is still a union of man and woman, and their children but which is now sanctified by the sacrament of matrimony. While marriage as such is a natural institution. created by God for the well-being of the society. Christian marriage benefits enormously from the mystery of the Christ event since the presence of Christ sanctifies it. Jesus Christ has raised Christian marriage to the status of a sacrament for all Christians. The Christian family, which is founded on the Christian marriage, is therefore a holy institution. Consequently, the letter to the Hebrews admonishes that "the marriage bed must not be defiled" (*Heb. 13:4*). This new and additional status conferred on the Christian family has many implications. It also entails rights, privileges and obligations. The Catechism of the Catholic Church observes as follows:

“In creating man and woman, God instituted the human family and endowed it with its fundamental constitution. Its members are persons equal in dignity.

For the common good of its members and of the society. the family necessarily has manifold responsibilities, rights and duties" (CCC no. 2203).

In this write-up most of our discussions will center on the Christian family.

9. Human Life: The family, which originates in a marital communion between a man and a woman, is at the service of life. The Union of husband and wife, which the church has described as a covenant and as a communion of life and love is open to new life as one of its primary ends. This Covenant in which a man and woman give themselves to each other and accept each other is a communion which gives birth to the community of the family. The unity between the spouses which dissolves into a communion opens them towards a new life namely their child. As parents they will be capable of giving life to a new being like themselves, a person, made in the image and likeness of God. Marriage from where family results is therefore a vocation to Cooperate with God in giving life which is of divine image and likeness.

It should be recalled that in God's plan the vocation of the human person extends beyond the boundaries of time. God's will is to lavish upon man a sharing in his own divine life. Hence Christ makes it clear when he says: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (*Jn 10:10*), (*CC. John Paul II, Gratissimam Sane #9*).

10. Man reaches fullness of life only in God. Man is called to life in abundance or fullness of life which Christ came to give, this he can only achieve by sharing in God's life which is beyond time. Natural life culminates in the supernatural or heavenly life as a continuation of this earthly life. The preface to the mass of the dead tells us that "Life is changed and not ended (*Vita Mutatur non tollitur*). It is the same life which is a gift of God here on earth that is transformed into heavenly, eternal life hereafter.

Hence, the concern for family touches on the concern for life both terrestrial and eternal, since the institution of the family has very special role to play in the outcome and direction of life.

CHAPTER THREE

BIBLICAL FOUNDATION OF THE FAMILY

11. Family has a strong foundation in the Bible. God is depicted as a father in the book of Genesis (*Gen 1:3*). The universe at large is inscribed in God's

fatherhood, which is its source (*Cf Eph 3: 14-16*). God replicates himself in creation in an analogous manner, but he does so more in the human beings. All beings trace their origin to God, and by logical implication, they are members of the same family – the family of God.

In the creation of man God said “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness” (*Gen 1:26*). It was as if to make man, God withdrew to himself in order to seek the pattern and inspiration in the mystery of his being. From this mystery of his being he created man, male and female and ordered Israelites, but more of the just among them. (*Wis 2:16, Sir 23:1-4*).

Jesus and his Apostles liberated the Fatherhood of God (from Jewish nationalism, and presented it as a result of God's love for all his children among whom he makes no distinctions between Jews and Gentiles; males and females (*Mt. 5:45; Lk 6: 32-36; Acts 17:28*). In a more exalted sense, God is the father of all who believe in Christ, those who love him and do his will.

13. Jesus bestows the Holy Spirit on such people and thus they become adopted children, heirs of God. Consequently, such people are able to call God father with confidence (*Rm 8: 14-17; Gal 4:5^{ff}*). The fatherhood of God is no longer based solely on the resemblance between God and man, rather it endows man with divine life. That God is the father of all means that all are bound together in the same family, the family of God.

CHAPTER FOUR

FAMILY: THE NURSERY OF HUMAN LIFE

The family is not only the primary cell and sanctuary of life and the human society, it is also the nursery which grooms and shapes human beings from birth to maturity. Francis Cardinal Arinze rightly observes that, it is the family that brings an individual into the world, surrounds him with love and care and guides him year after year. It is the family that protects the individual from menaces of hunger and disease, educates him and equips him to set out on the road of life on his own... It is from the family that the individual inherits his initial character make up, in the family that he begins to develop his qualities and in the family that he begins to learn how to react to the outside world. It is to the family that he returns in days of rejoicing and in clays of heart break and disappointment, to the family that he has recourse in doubt and confusion, by the family that he is given stern but loving rebuke in time of misbehavior and in the family that he anchors his last hope of

understanding, forgiveness and love without counting the cost” (F. A. Arinze, *Living our Faith*, P. 172).

The family consequently is of strategic importance in the life of every human person. It is an indispensable factor such that even when due to some accidental circumstances of birth, one lacks a natural family, he must be provided with a substitute like motherless babies home, an orphanage, etc., to supply the duties of a family otherwise death would be imminent.

15. The nature of the family explains its importance and dependability. As a natural institution created by God, the family is fashioned for the good of the human being. To achieve this good, its constitution is in accordance with human nature. It is remarkable that though the human being is over and above other animals in the order of being or is the golden chain of being, he is physically the weakest at birth. The human being is described by Philosophers, as rational animal. His rationality which is due to his spiritual soul places him in the company of other spiritual beings. The human being is created in the image of God, and it is precisely due to his spiritual part that he resembles the creator. Despite man's high position, on the natural level. on the level of his physical self, he has strong affinity with other beings we call animals. He is indeed one of their members, but operating on a higher plain due to his rationality endowed him by his spiritual nature.

16. It is on account of that power of reasoning, generously given to man by the creator - God that every human society has developed the institution of the family. The family is founded on the love between man and woman. Even though it is first and foremost intended for the good of its first founders (Man and woman), the love that brings them together has as a natural consequence the procreation of children. Their offspring become automatically members of the family, and as it were genetically replicas of their parents.

17. Man's vulnerability at the point of his entry into life makes a stable institution like the family a *sine qua non* (i.e. an unavoidable necessity). Most brute animals are almost independent at birth. Sure, they also need the care of their parents especially the female. They need milk from the mother. They need to be protected against preying enemies. Still they are able to do a good number of Things that the human offspring need months, sometimes years to be able to do. The family is a fulcrum where new members of the human race are given opportunity to learn how to live. This should be seen on three levels.

18 (a) on the physical, biological level; At birth and infancy, new members of the human race are given opportunity in the family to learn virtually all essential non instinctual human actions like: walking, talking, eating, playing etc. Later, they are guided through continuous education; both formal and informal to learn skills that they will practice in order to earn their living.

19 (b) On the Social level: In the family the child learns to be integrated into the society - in which he must live and work. He is introduced into the customs of his culture. He learns their values and also learns to abhor negative tendencies. He learns how to go around and co-operate with others for a more harmonious living in the society. He is initiated into the various stages of life, and eventually he is prepared to become independent of his original family and ground his own family for the continued existence of the human race.

20(c) On the Spiritual level: The family introduces the Child into the love and worship of God. He learns from the family that life is a gift and responsibility; that there is a being, a personal being, in whom we live and move and have our being; that our indebtedness to his love cannot be repaid but that we can approach him with gratitude, in prayer, in abnegation and in active charity. It is from the family that new human beings learn the love of neighbour which is a necessary prelude to the love of God. The family faith is usually transmitted to the child. He of course, will have the right as an adult to choose his religion if he so desires. But just as one breathes the air that is around him, the religion of parents and close relatives are usually the first instance from which the child learns about God and the worship that human beings owe to him.

Affirming the nursery nature of the family, Francis Arinze says, "The family is a cell of the social, economic, educational and religious life of man. God has endowed this fundamental institution with the qualities, values and purposes which are crucial for the continuance of the human race, for the personal progress and welfare, temporal and eternal, of the members, and for the dignity, stability, peace and prosperity of human society as a whole" (*F. A. Arinze, living the faith, P. 171*).

Thus, in these and other senses the family is like a cradle from which human life springs, a nursery in which it experiences its initial growth, and a school in which he is prepared for many important aspects of life that will enable him to live a full and wholesome life.

CHAPTER FIVE

21. THE AFRICAN SENSE OF FAMILY

In every culture the family remains the Nursery of human life. It is an institution that is very fundamental for the beginning and continued care of human life. The family is a community, the foundation of all communities since it is on it that all others depend. "The mission of being the primary vital cell of society has been given to the family by God himself" (*Vatican II, Apostolicam Actuositatem, no. 11*)

However, as we have already explained, the word family is not restricted to the nuclear family but is often influenced by the cultural context in which human beings live and work. Even though it is clear that the primary sense of the word family is the community of parents and children, or the nuclear family, but also as has been indicated, family has other applications which are derived from, but are more expansive than the sense of nuclear family. Such is the case in many African cultures. Many cultures in Africa have very much and expansive application of the primordial sense of the family. It may be true that this sense of the family developed from the special circumstances of the life of Africans both in the past and present, but there is little doubt that the African sense of the family has been of great help to the nurturing and fostering of human life through many types of difficulties.

22. The African sense of the family is much more embracing than the nuclear family. Sure, on the level of intimacy, the nuclear family is very much recognized in Africa also, just like almost in all human societies. Socially however, the African sense of the family is what is usually called the extended family. The notion of extended family is one where the institution of family is understood to embrace many more people than just parents and children. Thus, the typical African extended family includes, fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins, etc. All these relatives are socially much closer than relations in societies where family is primarily and sometimes exclusively understood in the sense of nuclear family. For instance, many African languages have no special words for cousins, for uncles and aunts. In many parts of the Igbo nation, cousins are addressed as brothers or sisters. Uncles are named by the same word for father – Nna. Sometimes the specific name of the uncles is added as the suffix to the word Nna (Nnam – Ugomba, my father Ugomba) to make the referent of the appellation more specific and clearer.

23. The African extended family has far reaching effects in the nurturing and care of human life. There is a wide range of mutual help within the circle of

the extended African family. Individual family members, who are more privileged in terms of wealth, education and social standing, extend their privileges to their relations who may not be directly their relations. Many young people whose actual parents are not economically buoyant enough to train them in schools are taken care of by their uncles and other relatives. Through this practice, a good number of people are given wider opportunities in life than would have been available to them if strict obligation of nurturing the young is limited to the nuclear family. The readiness to do this is due to the rich sense of the extended family which is operative among Africans. In a sense therefore, the concept and practice of extended family provides some sought of social security net-work for many less privileged members of the society. Those who, through this practice are enabled to make good in life are in turn expected to help others in future according to their ability.

Thus, the African sense of the family creates a valuable sense of solidarity among members of extended family. In the past, whole towns have contributed money to provide scholarship for their young ones whose parents alone would not be able to sponsor them beyond certain levels of education. Through this practice, many have acquired qualifications that have made great positive difference in their lives.

The African sense of the family goes well beyond the living. It also embraces the ancestors, good members of the families who lived worthy life and are now believed to reside in the land of the spirits. They are not regarded as dead and annihilated. They are rather the living dead, and are believed to take special interest in the families they left behind at death. In African traditional beliefs, the living dead take care of those who are alive, while the living offer periodic sacrifices to "feed" the living dead. This sense of mutuality among traditional Africans can be better informed and perfected by the teachings and examples of Christ.

24. Some prominent African Thinkers have tried to use the African valuable concept of extended family as basis for modern sociopolitical and economic theories and action. One easily remembers the saintly **Julius Nyerere**, the late president of Tanzania and his philosophy of Ujamaa. Nyerere used the concept of Ujamaa (family) to outline the type of socialism; he thought would be suitable for Africans. Hence he says "I was the first to use the word Ujamaa in order to explain the kind of life we wish to live in our country. The word Ujamaa denotes the kind of life lived by a man and his family - father, mother, children and near relatives. (Cf J. Nyerere, *Freedom and Socialism*, in C. B. Okolo, *African Social and Political Philosophy*, p. 30)

The late president recalls the ideals of the large African Ujamaa and insists that in traditional Africa, the material destiny of all the members of the society was both equal and inseparably linked with the other. The individual or the families within the tribe were "rich" or "Poor" according to whether the whole tribe was rich or poor. Nyerere achieved a considerable measure of success thanks to the example of his personal life which was informed by the sense of family which fertilized his thoughts and actions.

Another prominent figure, the late **Leopold Senghor**, the former president of Senegal, also based his philosophy of Negritude on the rich African sense of the extended family. For Senghor, the family is the centre of the life of the African. Here the family is understood in a very wide sense in which other social institutions are as it were forms of the family. He maintains that; "All concentric circles which form the different levels of society... village, tribe, kingdom, empire... reproduce in extended form, the family (*Cf. L. Senghor, prose and poetry, P 30*).

The African who lives in the enriched and different levels of the extended family is bound and supported by a light-network of communities, both vertical and horizontal. The family means a great deal to him.

25. The expanded and enriched concept of the family among traditional Africans prepares the ground for the understanding of the church as family of God, which is one of the strongest focal points of the Post Synodal exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*.

CHAPTER SIX

THE FAMILY OF GOD

26. The *Ecclesia in Africa* – The Post Synodal Pastoral exhortation uses the image of the Church as the family of God. This image is an effort at inculturation - the effort to make the Gospel of Christ find a lasting home in the culture of each and every Christian especially in Africa. The use of the image of Family of God in the African context indicates that it is an appropriate image among African Christians due to the culture that forms the background of their faith. The Synod Fathers acknowledge Family of God as an expression of the Church's nature particularly suitable for Africa, since it emphasizes care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationship, acceptance, dialogue and trust (*Cf. Ecclesia in Africa, no. 63*).

27. The use of the image of Church as the family of God does not mean that the implications of the expression are already realized in the African Church.

It is rather a guiding principle for new evangelization. It is supposed that the ideals of God's family will have positive effects like avoiding ethnocentrism and too much particularism. It would foster reconciliation and better understanding among different ethnic groups. Brotherly love and charity between particular churches would be heightened. All these and more are qualities that are usually associated with the African ideal of family.

They are all qualities that go counter to the most insidious ills of the African Society, not excluding its church. Such negative qualities include sectionalism, tribalism or ethnicity, nepotism, unjust discrimination, ills which work against peaceful co-existence in the society, and constitute a drawback on the efforts of development, and contradict the most basic ideals of the message of Christ.

28. In addition to the strong cultural foundation of Church as family of God in Africa, it has also a strong foundation in the Bible. As we have already seen, the concept of the family is founded in the Bible when God decided to replicate himself by creating man in his own image and likeness. This human family generated by God is further elevated to his sons and daughters in Christ through the mystery of the incarnation. Again, Christ formed all believers into one body - the church which is a family of God's adopted children. So, in a very exalted sense, God is the father of all who believe in Christ, those who love him and do his will. The church is the family of God's adopted children, brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ on whom Jesus has bestowed the Holy Spirit.

This family of God, the Church, is expected to manifest the characteristics of an ideal family where all members feel at home, and where sons and daughters can never suffer discrimination.

29. The image of family of God is strengthened by scriptural passages about the mystical body of Christ. The Lord told his disciples, I am the vine, you are the branches (*Jn 15:5*). The mystery of the Eucharist is evoked by St. Paul to admonish the Corinthians against scandals in their midst which contradict the strong unity that already exists among them by their sharing in the body and blood of Christ (*1 Cor 10:16*)

In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul uses the relationship between Christ and his church to explain the relationship between husband and wives (*Eph 5:23*). It means that the image of Church as family of God is strongly founded in the Bible. The mystery of God's family should make it much more cohesive, more extensive and much stronger than natural family.

The image of Church as family of God is also interchangeable with the image of Church as God's household. The household recalls the initial meetings of the people of God in private houses at the beginning of Christianity, Members of the Christian community were called members of the household of faith, and also members of the household of God (*Gal 6:10; Eph 2:19*). The foundation of all these is common experience of new life and power of the Holy Spirit, Because the Holy Spirit dwells in them, they become house of God and God's temple. In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul asked them; "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that the spirit of God dwells among you" (*1 Cor 3:16*). In the letter to the Ephesians, Christians are called "members of the household of God", constituting a building with Apostles and Prophets as its foundation (*Eph. 2:19-21*)

In the pastoral letters, the conflict within the early Church made all the more necessary the evocation of the image of family, and the practical implications are presented as examples for the young Church. In Paul's letter to Timothy, the ability to manage one's own family is a criterion for leadership in the Church. Similarity is drawn from interpersonal relationship in the family to relationship within the church -- as God's household. "Do not castigate an older man but exhort him as a father, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, and younger women as sisters in all purity" (*1 Tim 5:1-2*)

30. The image of the Church as family of God takes its root in the natural family which is due to God's creation. It emphasizes and universalizes values which are inherent in the normal natural family. The Church as a family of God adds to the qualities which are inherent in natural families as well as the African extended family. The Church brings solidarity, charity, respect and brotherly love beyond the confines of natural belongingness. It is founded ultimately on the faith that we are all God's creatures and thus members of extensive family for whom Christ came. This foundation makes the church as God's family very conducive to the nurturing and fostering of life, both natural and supernatural.

CHAPTER SEVEN

DUTIES AND PRIVILEGES OF THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY

31. The family, both in terms of nuclear family, extended family and God's family or household is instituted by God the Creator for the benefit of the members and the society at large. To make this a reality, members of the family have obligations towards one another and towards other members of the society, as well as towards God the creator.

In this write up, for pastoral reasons we want to address Christian families in particular without excluding other families of men and women of goodwill. In the words of pope John Paul II, "The family is the most effective means of humanizing and personalizing society: it makes an original contribution in depth to building up the world, by making possible a life that is properly speaking human, in particular by guarding and transmitting virtues and values". (*John Paul II, familiaris Consortio, no. 43*). Among such duties of the family may be included the following:

32., Mutual Support and Respect: We recall that the family comes into being from the responsible and definitive "yes" of a man and a woman, and it continues to live from the conscious "yes" of the children who gradually join it. (*Cf Benedict XVI, the Human Family, No 6*). This sincere and mutual gift of his husband and wife forms a communion of life and love which is the first one of marriage and family. This communion is open to new life, the begetting of children which is also a primary end. The well-being and dignity of the persons that constitute a family must be respected and upheld. The persons involved, the husband, the wife and the children should never be considered as a means to an end nor as a means of pleasure. Mutual support and respect of the members of the family must remain, a primary duty at all times, in sickness and in health.

33. Obedience to Parents: The honour due to parents which the bible commands us to give has an analogy to the worship owed to God. Given that our parents are our first benefactors through whom we came into existence in a particular family, nation and culture, they deserve our honour and love.

Since honour is generally deserved and not forced, it follows that parents have to behave in such a way as to merit the honour of their children. Through their good example, they will mirror the love of God from whom all fatherhood comes. It will then be easy to teach the children obedience which goes with honour and above all love.

34. Education: The church teaches us that in God's plan, the family is in many ways the first school on how to be human. This is so because children learn from the looks and the actions of their fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters even before they learn from their words. Education is a primary duty of the family.

It is the duty of the family to give both formal and informal education to the younger members. Such virtues like tolerance, discipline, hard work, truthfulness, selfishness, sharing and many more are learnt in the family. The family teaches a child to care for his brothers and sisters, to respect other

members of the family and to see itself as only a part of the community. It is the duty of the family to initiate their younger ones into formal education. This includes making a choice of good schools/environment for them. Whenever the family fails on her duty to properly educate, the child becomes a problem to the society.

35. Responsibility and Trust: The family is the first place where the child learns to trust and to accept responsibility. If the parents and members of a family behave in such a way as to be seen as unreliable, the child who grows in that family never trusts anybody in his life. Parents must generate trust and confidence by the way they live.

36. Worship of God: The family is the first church, the first school of evangelization where the child learns to pray, learns about God, learns to worship God and love him. In the family the child begins to learn and respect the sanctity of human life, the sanctity of the family and the mystery of God. The child prays and worships with the family until he is old enough to do so on his own.

37. Love of Neighbour: The church has repeatedly told us that on the love of husband and wife hinges the civilization of love which is true human civilization. The family is an expression and source of love. This love which is freely and mutually given by couples passes on to their children and to the entire society as authentic civilization. The family is the first and ideal place where children learn to receive and give love. Whenever families fail on this great duty, it has grave consequences on the children and society.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE TRAVAIL OF THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY AND HUMAN LIFE IN NIGERIAN SOCIETY

38. The state of the society impacts on the state of the Christian family since the family is an institution within the society. In the same way, the faith of the family touches on the condition of the society at large. It is thus not possible to have a well-ordered society where the family is in disarray. Nor can a well-ordered family exist in a society without making that society advance on the way of progress.

39. In general, the situation of family life in Nigeria is very commendable. The family is still a very stable institution among us. The rate of divorce though

increasing is comparatively low. Children are still taken good care of and provided opportunity to prepare for their adult life. The extended family comes to help where the primary family finds it difficult to fulfill the basic obligations. Among Nigerian Christians, sacramental marriage is still taken very seriously and very importantly regarded as a binding covenant for life. Someone once remarked that only two institutions work in Africa: ***The Family and the Church***. The state of the family among us amply justifies this assertion. However, we should not close our eyes to the trials and many problems besieging the family in Nigeria and through the family the entire human life. Among them are the following:

40. Selfishness: Selfishness can show itself when one seeks only one's own interest within the context of the family. Sometimes due to selfishness a person can treat other members of the family as means to an end. The end may be wealth, children, comfort or pleasure. Some display this selfishness when they base their choice of a life partner on the profession of the woman or the wealth of the man.

41. Lack Of Support In Times Of Need. The family is a community of persons, which grows into a communion of life and love. Marriage is a covenant of love, which is on-going for better, for worse. But some members abandon their spouses, their parents, brothers or sisters in times of difficulty. As long as the going is good, there is wealth, health etc. the family is together but when trials and difficulties come, some are unable to whether through the crisis. This is a threat to the family as it shows a tendency toward utilitarianism.

42. Acts Against Life: Abortion, Sterilization, Artificial Contraception etc. Due to the rapid globalization in the world of today, acts, which are directly against life, are on the increase in our society.

43. Abortion: Is the deliberate and direct killing, by whatever means, of a human being in the initial phase of his or her existence extending from conception to birth. From the moment of fertilization, a new life is formed and endowed with meaning instilled by the creator, a meaning which is infinite, eternal, and shrouded in mystery. To destroy this new life at will is to say the least a grave sin against the creator and the person destroyed. The rate of abortion is increasing in our society, even some lawmakers are toying with the possibility of legalizing it in the name of individual freedom and rights. Such is only an attack on the foundation of life.

44. Sterilization which is the removal or suppression of some part of the generative system as a result of which an individual is rendered incapable of

reproduction is gradually being accepted by many. It is important to note that the capacity for reproduction is a fundamental good of the human person. God alone is the Lord and author of man's bodily integrity. To render oneself or another impotent is evil and unjust except for a very grave reason like saving the life of the individual involved.

45. Artificial Contraception This is artificially induced method of birth control. The Church teaches us that we do not need to do evil so that good may result. Good end requires good means, Couples are therefore advised to use the natural method of birth control at all times when they have the need.

46. Euthanasia This is generally called "mercy killing". It refers to an action or omission which of itself or by intention causes death, in order to "assist" a sick person die quickly so as to eliminate his sufferings.

This is not yet rampant in our midst but sometimes people do not give adequate care to their sick or old ones, which is indirect type of Euthanasia.

47. Divorce: which is generally described as the funeral of marriage is on the increase in our society. In the traditional African Society, divorce was minimal mostly because the members of the extended family helped to settle quarrels and reconcile differences. Today due to increased individualism, lack of pre-marriage formation, selfishness and shallow spirituality, it has become a normal occurrence. Divorce is one of the major problems of the family and human life today.

48. Irresponsible Parenthood: Today some enter into marriage without due preparations. Some continue beggling children without thinking of the future well being of the children. Such irresponsibility often leads to having many children who constitute problems to themselves and to the society.

49. Unfaithfulness In Marriage And Sexual Licentiousness Unfaithfulness is maintaining intimate relationships outside the family. Unfaithfulness and general laxity in sexual matters are often the mother of many problems in the family. Such problems as adultery, fornication, prostitution, pornography and many forms of impurities are traceable to them. These weaken the family and generate many problems.

50. Inordinate Quest for Wealth: Nowadays in Nigeria some families are so preoccupied with wealth that the parents abandon the kids to house maids and security men in preference to money. Parents move out very early in the mornings only to come back late in the evenings. The paid house helps may be from remote villages or distant countries, many a time not having much which they can teach the children. The children are left at the mercy of these

strangers who have little or no interest of the family. No wonder some kids can develop all sorts of funny character which their parents cannot account for. Parents should plan their work life in such a way as to be sufficiently available to their children.

51. Bad Examples: Sometimes parents give bad example to the children when they maltreat house-helpers, when they quarrel openly with each other or one beats the other. They can also give bad example when they tell lies or prove themselves unreliable before the kids.

We often give bad example as a society when the media or some people of means project some backward aspects of our culture as models. When polygamy, divorce, get-rich-quick syndrome are portrayed as angelic then the most treasured values are being undermined.

52. Irreligion, Fear And Superstition where one or two of the parents are uninterested in religion or they manifestly show coldness in the worship of God, the children are being taught that life has no meaning. There is nothing as destructive as seeing the entire life as meaningless. Parents can easily do that by their attitude to the things of God. Some parents teach children unhealthy fear and superstition by introducing them into types of occult practices and paranormal fear of other people leading to superstitious beliefs and practices.

53. Dishonesty: Some parents and elders teach children dishonesty by supporting them to indulge in exam malpractice or defending them in a case where they are clearly wrong. Such children learn to be dubious.

54. Family Dictatorship: This happens when one partner feels he should have the say in everything and where there is no dialogue in the family. When such is the case, the family may never enjoy true peace and children will live in fear, their potentials may never be truly developed.

CHAPTER NINE

UPHOLDING THE DIGNITY AND SANCTITY OF CHRISTIAN FAMILY

55. The family is a gift of God the creator. It behooves us as his children to protect that gift that is very important in our lives, both as individuals and as community. One who appreciates a precious gift usually devotes time and energy to take good care of it. The Christian family is not only a natural gift, but one whose institution has been elevated to the honour of being a sacrament, special symbol of Christ's presence among his people. This is a clear indication of God's special care for the family as the natural source of

care and nurture of life, including supernatural life. It is our duty to up-hold the dignity of the family. Certain activities should be fostered in order to ensure that the Christian family can give the best to its individual members, and to the church and community at large.

56. Family Prayer: The church teaches us that prayer makes the Son of God present among us. The Bible assures us of Christ's statement. "For where two or three are gathered in my name. I am there among them" (**Mt. 18:20**). Family prayer is that which is offered in common by husband and wife together with their children. It is a common saying and belief that the family that prays together stays together. This is more so because prayer increases the strength and spiritual unity of the family, helping the family to partake of God's own strength.

Pope John Paul II tell us that, the prayer of the family is the place where, in a very simple way creative and fatherly remembrance of God is made manifest: not only man's remembrance of God, but also and especially God's remembrance of man. (*John Paul II, Gratissimam sane, no. 10*)

57. Family prayer is therefore seen as an opportunity for trusting abandonment of the family into the hands of their common father in heaven. The high dignity of the Christian family can only be achieved with God's constant intervention and assistance which can only be guaranteed in a way through prayer. It is highly recommended that each family should agree and accept a particular convenient time in a day, preferably at night, when they will come together to seek the face and mercy of God in prayer. In this way, the family will be consistently nourished by God's own strength and loving affection. Let each family please return to the tradition of family prayer.

EDUCATION OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY CATECHESIS

58. As we have already mentioned education, formal and informal is one of the primary duties of the family. But here we refer to conscious religious education within the context of the family. To promote the dignity of the family formal catechesis must exist within the family. Religious values and moral principles must be taught at regular intervals. Just as families have time for their vacations, for recreation and relaxation and for other social issues, families must make out time for such spiritual needs like, family spiritual reading, family bible reading and family catechism.

59. Family spiritual reading includes getting good and instructive spiritual books as well as reading and discussing the same by members of the family.

Family Bible reading implies that members of the family should have occasions where they read passages from the Bible and exchange of views about their implications for life.

Family Catechesis implies finding time to explain the various teachings of the church to members of the family

PARTICIPATION IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH

60. Active participation in the life of the Church nourishes the family and revives its dignity and strength. The church is a large family of God made up of individual nuclear families. The church builds up Christian families through the sacrament of Holy Matrimony and nourishes their spiritual strength through prayer and the sacraments, the teachings, preaching and sacraments of the church will draw us closer to God enabling us to acknowledge him as the deepest source of our existence and that of others. It is this attitude that will assist us to discover the intrinsic worth of each other as brothers and sisters. Active participation in the parish life or our local church is of immense value to the family.

PARTICIPATION IN THE SACRAMENTS

61. Christ our Lord has given us the sacraments as means of sanctity and salvation. For example, the Holy Eucharist draws us closer to Christ and increases the life of grace within us, penance reconciles us to God and to one another, confirmation infuses in us the gifts of the Holy Spirit, Holy Orders configures us to Christ so that we can act in persona Christi (in the person of Christ and his name)

In fact, any family which participates actively and sincerely in the church's sacramental life will always enjoy grace and peace.

TRUTHFULNESS, GENEROUSITY AND BROTHERLY LOVE

62. These virtues are very essential for the dignity of the family. While generosity and truthfulness are natural virtues, brotherly love is a supernatural virtue. However, grace builds on nature and all of them can be learnt by repeated practice.

Through practice, teaching and examples, generosity can become a life style in the family. Children will grow with it learning to be generous and considerate towards others.

63. Truthfulness in the family is a sine qua non if children are expected to grow to responsible adults. Children are taught to say the truth to their parents whose love surpasses their childishness. In that way they grow with the habit of integrity and truthfulness. To uphold the dignity of the family, brotherly love must be learnt and lived. The church teaches us that love is a major duty of the family. His Holiness Pope John Paul II summarizes this when he says, that love is a command and it is a task, given by God at Mount Sinai, given as a command by Jesus Christ. It is not a utopia. It is entrusted to man and woman in the sacrament of matrimony as the basic principle of their “duty” and the foundation of their mutual responsibility. He went further to say that on this “duty” hinges human civilization which is the civilization of love. (*Cf John Paul II, Letter to families, No. 15*)

From the above, we can say that when families fail to live and communicate love, then they have failed on their primary duty.

PROMOTING PRO-LIFE AND PRO FAMILY POLICIES AND ASSOCIATIONS

64. It is an obligation to Christians and to all men and women of goodwill to oppose every public policy that threatens the dignity of the family and human life. Examples include any attempt to legalize abortion, physician assisted suicide, contraception and any similar policy. We must engage in an active and sustained effort to defend the family and human life. Pastors of souls, religious men and women, parents and all people of goodwill must make this their duty.

On the very positive side we need not stop at protecting life. We need to promote life and the family by joining pro-life movements, pro-family pious associations and pro-life organizations,

65. Some initiatives in support of the family here in Nigeria include:

- ❖ Works of the Pontifical Council for the family, Vatican Council for the family, Vatican City.
- ❖ Family and Human life Committee of the Catholic Bishop's Conference of Nigeria (**Presently I am the current chairman**).
- ❖ Catholic Pro-life movement of Nigeria.
- ❖ Sir David Osunde, Holy Family Society
- ❖ Jerry Conniker's Apostolate for Family consecration
- ❖ Marriage Advisory Council etc.

These and many other approved pro-life family groups need our support and encouragement.

66. PRE-MARRIAGE PREPARATIONS

Since life begins in the family through the communion of life and love between a husband and wife, given that only good families could make a good society, it becomes necessary to intensify or totally review marriage preparations as they presently hold.

The Church has an elaborate program and guide for pre-marriage instructions but many a time intending couples trivialize these study sessions.

67. If the family institution is Sacred, if it is the vital cell of the society, the domestic church and the first school, then it needs more preparations than it is getting presently. I sincerely propose that pre-marriage instructions be started much earlier than the period of preparation for the sacrament of matrimony. Let the instructions be extended to youth groups in remote preparations for their future marriage.

68. Such problems like polygamy, same-sex union, co-habitation and surrogate motherhood can be avoided or at least reduced if the victims know more about marriage.

In all, better preparation is very necessary for the success, stability and dignity of the family.

DEVOTION TO OUR LADY AND TO THE SACRED HEART

69. Our blessed Mother Mary is the mother of Christ, mother of the Church and mother of the Holy family of Nazareth. Devotion to her who loved the family so much that she requested our Lord Jesus Christ to perform his first miracle at the wedding feast at Cana in Galilee - will certainly be of immense help to our own families.

70. Also devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the tender heart of love will do our families much good.

We warmly commend the holy practice in many Christian families where the altar of the Sacred Heart adorns some corners of the living room. May the peace and love of Christ be with such families.

71. Again devotion to the Holy Jesus, Mary and Joseph will greatly help our family. We can all take the Holy family as our model and emulate their

qualities. The kind attitude of Joseph at the news pregnancy of the wife, Mary shows a merciful and just man. Mary's concern for the host and guests at the marriage to Cana shows a compassionate mother. Jesus obedience to his parents shows humility and love. It was Christ humility and obedience that led to the first miracle. We have a lot to learn from the Holy Family.

PROMOTING THE HUMAN FAMILY

72. His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI has recently reminded us that Humanity is one great family. The Pope further insists that we need to say yes to the one family of humanity if we want peace in the world. According to him, the fact that God is our common father leads to our oneness as a family. Without this transcendent foundation, he says, society will become a mere aggregation of neighbours not a community of brothers and sisters called to form one great family (*Cf Benedict XVI, Human family, No. 6*)

We are called to promote this reality of the global human family which will lead to greater peace in the world and in individual families.

CHAPTER TEN CONCLUDING REMARKS

73. We have tried to refresh our minds on the teachings of the church on the family. The family which is the primary place of humanization for the person and the society, the cradle of life and love both on the natural and supernatural level, a divine institution that stands at the very foundation of life, is like life itself, a gift and a responsibility. It is important for us to take adequate care of this gift in order to achieve wholesome Christian living.

We have seen that the family has its foundation in the Bible and the fatherhood of God. The concept of family in the traditional African Context which prepares the solid ground for understanding the church and the entire humanity as a family is clearly expressed. We named some factors which constitute a threat to the family and suggested some initiatives which can help to restore dignity of the family and human life.

74. We urge all families, the youth and people of goodwill to embrace the initiative that promote the dignity of the family so than Christ's mission to give us life in abundance would be realized.

CONCLUDING PRAYER

75. Father in heaven, creator of all, you ordered the earth to bring forth life and crowned its goodness by creating the family of man. In history's moment when all was ready, you sent your son to dwell in time, obedient to the laws of the world.

Teach us the sanctity of human love, show us the value of family life and help us to live in peace with all men that we may share in your life forever,

Through Christ Our Lord, Amen

(From the alternative collect of the feast of the Holy Family)

Given this day, the 6th of February, 2008.
Ash Wednesday, At the Basilica of the Most
Holy Trinity, Onitsha, Nigeria

MOST REV, VALERIAN M. OKEKE

Archbishop of Onitsha