

## THE CONGRUENCE AND DIVERGENCE BETWEEN ROMAN CATHOLIC TEACHINGS AND EXPERIENCES OF CHRISTIAN MARRIAGES IN NAIROBI'S MAKADARA DEANERY, KENYA

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### ABSTRACT

This study explores the congruence and divergence between Roman Catholic teachings on marriage and the lived experiences of Christian marriages in the Makadara Deanery, Kenya. This paper investigates how the doctrinal teachings of the Catholic Church on marriage are understood and practised by married couples within the context of contemporary Kenyan society. Given the increasing challenges married couples face, such as societal pressures, financial strains, and cultural dynamics, the study assessed whether Catholic teachings on marriage resonate with the lived realities of Christian couples in Nairobi. Formulated under the phenomenological qualitative method, this research employed questionnaires, interviews and focus group discussions to collect and analyse data from 33 respondents: twelve couples, four Parish Priests, four Head Catechists and one member of staff of the Nairobi Archdiocese Marriage Tribunal. The study established that while the Catholic Church was unwavering in articulating fundamental doctrines on marriage, most of these doctrines were not fully received and implemented by the Makadara deanery couples. In the spirit of synodality, which advocates for a reciprocal listening between the Church leadership and membership, this study is a step toward promoting dialogue between faith and reason, religion and science, theory and practice, orthodoxy and orthopraxis.

**KEYWORDS:** *Roman Catholic teachings, Christian marriage, doctrinal congruence, cultural divergence.*

### INTRODUCTION

The Roman Catholic Church, with its rich history and tradition, has long been a pillar of religious and moral guidance for millions of followers worldwide. Central to its teachings are the doctrines that govern the sanctity of marriage, which it views as a sacrament, divinely instituted, and an essential part of human life. The Church's teachings on marriage emphasize its permanence, indissolubility, and the necessity of mutual love, respect, and fidelity between spouses.<sup>[1]</sup> The fundamental teachings of the Church on marriage and family are rooted in Scripture, tradition, and the periodic writings of the Church Leadership, also known as the magisterium. Further, what the Church teaches about marriage is found in writings by various authors of a theological and sociological nature touching on marriage and family, which have been developed over the years.

The relationship between faith and action, theory and practice, has dominated investigations and discussions over the years. Lawler and Salzman<sup>[2]</sup> noted a dichotomy between the official teaching of the Church on divorce and remarriage without annulment and the belief of a large majority of the Catholic faithful. The actual lived reality of a majority of Catholics who are divorced and remarried without annulment does not reflect the official teaching. Apart from Scripture, this current study will draw insights from other sources such as the writings of the Church magisterium, which over the years has sought to interpret and enrich the biblical teachings in the light of the emerging questions and challenges in the sphere of marriage. A recommendation of reformulation of the official doctrine of divorce and remarriage to reflect the lived experience of the Catholic faithful was emphasised.

Vorster<sup>[3]</sup> noted the rapidly shifting ethics surrounding the institution of marriage, noting the escalating

incidents of divorce, with global statistics depicting that increasingly more young people are opting to become single parents or remain unmarried. One of the changing dynamics of the society that the church needs to take into account is the changes in sexual relations and sexual expressions that are different from the way marriage has been taught within the Church community as a union between a man and a woman. Gay unions, homosexual relationships, cohabitation, pre-marital sex, among others, have put the traditional and deeply biblical ethical norms to serious test.<sup>[4]</sup> In Africa, South Africa legalized same-sex marriage in 2006, backing it up with a constitution that protects against discrimination based on sexual orientation. Six other African countries have since followed suit and decriminalised same-sex relationships. They are Angola, Botswana, Mozambique, Lesotho, Seychelles and Mauritius.<sup>[5]</sup> Catholic teaching approves only heterosexual marriages between a man and a woman, affirming that God instituted marriage between a man and a woman, with Adam and Eve. Genesis (2:24) states that a man leaves his parents, joins his wife, and they are one flesh. Thus, Jesus was unequivocal in saying that to understand marriage and sexual union, we must go back to the beginning and see how God created humanity and to what end.

The permanence of marriage forms one of the core teachings contained in pastoral marital programs. Similarly, marriage tribunals process and grant some requests for dissolution of marriages when they meet certain thresholds. Consequently, marriage education should consider the social, personal, and spiritual dimensions of marriage.<sup>[6]</sup> The authors argue that marriage belongs to both secular and sacred domains, and understanding this distinction is crucial for comprehending Christian marriage.

To effectively teach the full meaning of marriage in light of the Christian tradition, Churches must consider all three dimensions of marriage. For the church to be effective in bringing about marital stability, marital teachings ought to integrate the diverse aspects of the human person and society.<sup>[7]</sup>

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Thatcher<sup>[8]</sup> illuminates the multifaceted nature of marriage teachings within the New Testament. The study methodically examines Paul's teachings, Jesus' Gospel teachings, and later Letters on marriage in chronological order while acknowledging their variances. Additionally, it proposes several pastoral advantages for ministry derived from recognizing these divergences. Unlike Thatcher's<sup>[9]</sup> study, the current study draws on marriage teachings on both the New and Old Testaments.

Sommer<sup>[10]</sup> asserted the fact that marriages continue to face various challenges, and attributed these challenges essentially to the varying definitions given to marriage by different cultures and religions. These sentiments are also echoed by Kostenberger<sup>[11]</sup> who argued that

according to scripture, marriage is divine and there is no room for humans to redefine or renegotiate marriage and family. These two authors paint a biblical portrait of marriage as an exclusive union of a man and a woman, which was instituted by God from the very beginning of the world. Like the two authors, this study will draw a lot on the Biblical teaching of marriage.

The question of the effect of the magisterial pronouncements over the years has continued to emerge, especially in the face of the rising cases of divorce among contemporary Christian couples. Crucial questions surrounding the Magisterium, such as whether its teachings are subject to change and if there is enough evidence from tradition to support current teachings.<sup>[12]</sup> Himes and his companions addressed the teaching on the indissolubility of marriages that have been ratified and consummated, insisting that the existing arguments do not suffice to dismiss all proposals for alteration of this teaching.

## METHODOLOGY

Given that this paper endeavors to conduct an objective inquiry into the applicability of church doctrines and teachings to contemporary marriages, as informed by the lived experiences of couples, a phenomenological research design was deemed most suitable. This study was undertaken within the Makadara Deanery, a constituent part of the Archdiocese of Nairobi. The Archdiocese of Nairobi was deliberately selected for this investigation due to its establishment of a fully operational Marriage Tribunal. The Makadara Deanery, which was intentionally chosen, encompasses eight parishes.

Consequently, simple random sampling was employed to select four parishes from this list. Volunteer couples were stratified into three categories based on their self-reported length of marriage: category 1: Couples married for more than 20 years; category 2: Couples married between 10-20 years; and category 3: Couples married for less than 10 years. Within each of the three strata in each of the four parishes, simple random sampling was conducted to select one couple making it a sample size of twelve (12) couples. Therefore, the number of married respondents was twenty-four (24). The selected couples were contacted (initially through the parish contact or directly if they provided contact information). The study also selected the parish priests and head catechists of the four selected parishes within Makadara Deanery. Hence, there were four (4) parish priests and four (4) head catechists. Finally, one (1) member of the Tribunal of the Archdiocese of Nairobi was also selected. Therefore, this brought the total sample size to 33 respondents.

To collect data for this study, both the Questionnaires and Focus Group Discussions were conducted the married couples. For the parish priests, head catechists and a member of the Marriage tribunal semi-structured interview guide was employed.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Three broad fundamental doctrines on Christian marriage were considered for analysis and discussion in the current study: the sacramentality and sanctity of marriage, which underpin the Catholic belief that marriage is essentially an institution whose origin and goal is God Himself<sup>[13]</sup>; permanence of marriage, and the place of children in a marriage.

### 1. Sacramentality and Sanctity of Marriage

Marriage pre-exists Christianity, thus, it is not an exclusive practice of the Jewish-Roman culture. In all cultures and religions, marriage is understood, experienced and practised in one way or another. While some similarities in the understanding and practice of marriage can be discerned across different cultures and creeds, there are also differences and even peculiarities. When questioned about the distinctiveness of Christian marriage, the respondents emphasized its celestial origin. Drawing from their spiritual and theological background, the pastoral agents underscored the sanctity of Christian marriage by affirming it as a Sacrament. The responses from the Priests and Catechists align with the longstanding doctrinal teachings of the Catholic Church, dating back to the proclamation of marriage as a Sacrament during the Council of Verona.

The classification of Christian matrimony as a sacrament sets Christian marriages apart from other forms of unions and relationships.<sup>[14]</sup> Karukaparampil<sup>[15]</sup> argues that the classification of marriage as a sacrament serves to explicitly declare that marriage is of divine origin.

As stated in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, “the matrimonial covenant, through which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership for the whole of life... has been elevated by Christ the Lord to the status of a sacrament”.<sup>[16]</sup> To safeguard this institution from the influences of modernity, the Second Vatican Council reaffirmed the holiness of Christian marriage. The Council acknowledged the significance of the voluntary commitment made by two partners to each other, while also emphasizing the divine nature of Christian marriage by stating that “this sacred bond is no longer solely dependent on human will.”<sup>[17]</sup> According to the understanding of the Second Vatican Council, “Married life and love” are ordained by the Creator... God Himself is the architect of marriage and has bestowed upon it its various blessings and purposes.<sup>[18]</sup>

The sanctity of the Christian marriage is also evident in the liturgical celebration of the sacrament of marriage. Within the realm of liturgy, both the ministers and the congregation are required to adhere to a specific framework. A priest respondent recounted the ensuing encounter.

*There are growing requests by some Christian couples to celebrate their weddings in social places, such as restaurants, golf courses and other entertainment joints.*

*Three months ago, I remember receiving a request from a couple in my Parish to officiate their wedding at Voyager Beach Hotel in Mombasa. Upon inquiry, the couple told me that they needed a neutral place where all their guests would be at ease. The Church, they said, was restricting to some of their friends who were not Catholics, would complicate the logistics, and so many other reasons. What they forgot is that marriage is, first and foremost, a spiritual activity, a Sacrament.*

Indeed, the Catechism of the Catholic Church gives clear and strict guidelines that ought to accompany the celebration of a christian marriage in order to depict its sacred character. “It is fitting that the celebration of marriage be public, in the framework of a liturgical celebration, before the priest (or a witness authorized by the Church), two witnesses, and the assembly of the faithful”.<sup>[19]</sup> The Code of canon Law is more emphatic in this regard. A marriage between Catholics, or between a catholic party and a baptized non-Catholic, is to be celebrated in the parish church. By permission of the local Ordinary or of the parish priest, it may be celebrated in another church or oratory.<sup>[20]</sup> Furthermore, to underline the sacred nature christian marriage, secular music and entertainment styles of music are utterly prohibited and the introduction of inappropriate music considered as deplorable conduct.<sup>[21]</sup> Instead, in the celebration of marriage, sacred music that “evokes God’s majesty and honours it” is carefully selected.<sup>[22]</sup> In the church’s guidelines on the choice of appropriate, Vatican II urged that such music must have the “grandeur yet simplicity, “solemnity and majesty”, should be “exalted and sublime” and must bring “splendour and devotion” to liturgy.<sup>[23]</sup> All these legal and liturgical provisions on the venue for church weddings, the presider, the choice of hymns serves to depict in word and deed that Christian marriage is a sacred covenant, in that God alone brings a Christian marriage into existence.<sup>[24]</sup>

Findings from the couples revealed their recognition of the distinction between a marriage solemnized in church and other marriages and unions. Christian marriages, they affirmed, are grounded in God. They also appreciated the spiritual assistance they received from religious leaders to help them in nurturing healthy and fulfilling marriages that align with divine principles.

The role of pastoral agents in mediating conflict between couples was evident from the respondents. The priests and catechists intimated that due to the crisis in many marriages, substantial office time is taken up by marriage-related cases and issues. One catechist had this to say.

*Sometimes, it is very easy to see a couple that is struggling. I remember getting a distress call from a wedded lady who told me that she is tired with her marriage and wants to walk out. Their marriage was barely a month. She came to my house and literally refused to go back to her matrimonial home. She shared*

*in confidence what she was facing in her marriage with me, expecting me to guide her on what God wants her to do in this situation. From this sharing, I was able to meet the husband and mediated the dialogue, forgiveness and reconciliation between them. It is now five years down the line and they look happy and peaceful.*

However, the respondents also spoke boldly to the changing perspectives and perceptions regarding the sacred nature of christian marriage. The essence of sanctity in general, and specifically in Christian marriage, was rapidly waning. According to the assessment of the respondent from the Tribunal, this diminishing reverence for the sacred is the main reason for the escalating petitions for annulments at the marriage tribunal.

In agreement with the opinions of the respondents at the tribunal regarding marriage annulments, one priest-respondent expressed the following sentiment.

*The statistics are worrying. Marriage and family are the hardest hit by the worldliness that is currently sweeping across many places. In my parish for instance, throughout last year, there was no fresh wedding; that is marriage between a bachelor and spinster. Many teenagers are already sexually active; sexual intimacy is no longer a preserve for the married couples. Many parishioners, both young and elderly, are cohabiting without solemnizing their marriages. A sizeable number of parishioners have attempted marriages more than once. Another section of these parishioners even see marriage as a waste of time and limiting their freedom!*

The sentiments expressed by both the Tribunal staff and the pastoral agents resonate with Parkinson's<sup>[25]</sup> who articulates the societal regression akin to an ancient civilization succumbing to the encroaching jungle, where the remnants of marriage culture lie obscured by secular confusion. While secularization may not spell the end of marriage, it is poised to coexist with alternative forms of partnership such as cohabitation and "living apart together." The sacred resonance is diminishing, foretelling a solemn silence in the canyon ahead.

Michelucci,<sup>[26]</sup> whose sentiments are shared by the couples in Makadara Deanery, argues that Christian ideologies strongly influence US marriage laws, undermining the constitutionally stated separation of church and state. By examining legal history, laws, and court decisions, the paper concludes that significant religious bias exists, which should be addressed to ensure a secular legal system.

For a long time, religion, especially the Catholic Church, defined legitimacy in human relationships, particularly marriage. Bible citations and declarations by popes were considered sufficient. The Catholic Church's marriage monopoly is now being challenged. Traditional marriage symbols and practices are being reinterpreted or rejected

by contemporary Catholics. The gap between accepted beliefs and daily actions is evident. The traditional catholic doctrine on marriage sanctity is changing.

## 2. Unity and Indissolubility of Marriage

In the teaching of the Catholic Church, Christian marriage has two essential properties: unity and indissolubility. By unity, it means that through marriage, husband and wife are tied in an intimate bond; they are no longer two but merge into one. Indissolubility is defined as the permanence of the marriage bond.<sup>[27]</sup> Thus, a validly contracted sacramental marriage is accompanied by divine ratification, creating a virtually indissoluble union until the couple consummate, after which the sacramental marriage is dissoluble only by the death of a spouse.<sup>[28]</sup> This means that ordinarily a marriage is dissolved by the death of one of the spouses and extraordinarily when dissolution is recognised as such by a competent ecclesiastical authority while both spouses are still alive.<sup>[29]</sup>

Various church councils also delved into the question of the permanence of the marriage bond. The second Vatican council upheld the teaching on the unity and indissolubility of marriage clearly and distinctly. Marriage is understood as an all-embracing and life-long communion between a man and a woman. So important is the doctrine of the unity and indissolubility of marriage that the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith affirms that unity and indissolubility give marriage a new and deeper sense: marriage becomes the image of God's enduring love for his people and of Christ's irrevocable fidelity to his Church.

The doctrine of unity and indissolubility of marriage is also seen practically in the liturgical celebration of Christian marriage. This is found in the very words of the marriage vows that husband and wife pronounce publicly and solemnly in the presence of the Minister of the church and the Christian community.

*I, \_\_\_\_, take you, \_\_\_\_, to be my lawfully wedded wife (or husband), to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part.*

The Catholic Church explicitly acknowledges that its teaching on the unity and indissolubility has encountered difficulties in its implementation, even among Catholics. According to the body charged with the formulation and propagation of the catholic faith, the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF), "the defence of the unity and indissolubility of the marriage covenant has been a perennial thorny issue". Within the context of liberalist tendencies that advocated for flexibility on the issue of divorce and remarriage, the Church's insistence on the permanence of marriage has come at a cost.

The controversy over divorce and marriage continues. Recently, it affected Catholics who divorce and remarry.



The Church has strict rules on remarried Catholics receiving Communion. Pope John Paul II<sup>[30]</sup> confirmed marriage's permanence. He urged discernment and support for those in this situation. He prohibited divorced and remarried Catholics from receiving communion. This is to prevent confusion about Church teachings on marriage unity.

The marriage Tribunal respondent spoke to the strict scrutiny that an annulment case is subjected to before getting a positive ruling, all in a bid to protect the marriage bond which is permanent.

The marriage laws governing the Tribunal are distinct from the civil marriage and divorce laws. One or both spouses may obtain a civil divorce but fail to secure an annulment before the Tribunal. For example, while spousal adultery and violence are sufficient grounds for obtaining a civil divorce, these are not sufficient grounds for granting an annulment petition before the Tribunal. The Church will explore other avenues such as reconciliation. In the event that the couple are not willing to forgive each other, reconcile and live in peace, then they can be granted permission to live separately. They cannot enter another marriage, because the marriage bond still exists.

The position of the Tribunal staff is confirmed by the official Catechism of the Catholic Church, which regards divorce as “a grave offense against the natural law... does injury to the covenant of salvation, of which sacramental marriage is a sign”.<sup>[31]</sup> Furthermore, divorce is considered “immoral also because it introduces disorder into the family and society. Where efforts to reconcile the spouses fails completely, the Church teaches that “the separation of the spouses while maintaining the marriage bond can be legitimate”.<sup>[32,33]</sup>

At the level of the lived experience of couples, most of them stated that they found the doctrine of the unity and indissolubility of marriage impractical. Some felt that in insisting on this doctrine, the Catholic Church had lost touch with the real situation on the ground, further accusing the Church of insensitivity and failure to be a listening and compassionate Church. One participant in the FGD had this to say.

*I know of my fellow parishioners who are married only by name. In the eyes of the Church and the public, they are exemplary husbands and wives. They participate in Mass and other Church functions posing as couples, even sitting next to each other. They live in the same house. But I can tell you for a fact, they are practically separated. In the house, they sleep separately, there is total communication breakdown; they live like perfect strangers.*

Another participant concurred adding.

*This is a teaching that has outlived its usefulness. It is casting the church in bad light. In fact, it is the biggest*

*deterrent for many Catholics to do weddings. Once you enter into a Christian marriage, coming out when things go wrong is a nightmare. I don't even know where one would start and end. Look at the case of infidelity and the real risk of contracting infections and diseases, all the church does is to preach forgiveness and separation in the worst-case scenario. With the growing incidents of homicide, even among married couples, how is separation a prudent option when a spouse's life is in danger? I better get a civil divorce, save my life and live in peace, then sort out the rest with God.*

The sentiments of the couples on the impracticality of the doctrine of indissolubility of marriage, and the call to reconsider and reformulate it in the light of the emerging questions and experiences of married couples resonate clearly with the argument of Himes and Corriden<sup>[34]</sup> who argue that church teaching must align with scriptures and tradition while acknowledging human experience of married life. The authors further assert that teaching grounded in human experience is more credible and impactful. This leads to stronger beliefs in marriage and family care.

Data on the rising numbers of divorce around the globe reveal that the institution of marriage is facing numerous challenges that threaten its very existence and sustainability in the contemporary society. Reviewed literature attest to the fact of the increasing incidents of marriage conflicts, most of which end in divorce. Runcan and Nicu<sup>[35]</sup> found out that most marriages for couples aged between 30 and 32 years in Moldavia collapsed within the first six years. Amato and Spencer<sup>[36]</sup> equally attest that divorce rates have been on a steady rise in America and most European countries, with the recent decades recording alarmingly high numbers. A similar scenario is experienced in most African nations, such as Nigeria<sup>[37]</sup> and Kenya.<sup>[38]</sup>

Similarly, annulment requests at the Tribunal that are increasing exponentially speak to the difficulty of applying the doctrine of the unity and indissolubility of marriage, even within the Church. The fears of Tribunal staff about more couples suffering silently due to complex annulment processing find echo in Buthelezi<sup>[39]</sup> who notes challenges in annulment, such as the Church's refusal to accept civil court jurisdiction and divorced couples' hesitance to request annulment. Data on divorce and annulment requests call for reconsidering indissolubility of marriage doctrine. Himes and Corriden<sup>[40]</sup> suggest gaps between Church's teaching and pastoral care can lead to revision. They argue for a pastoral solution for divorced and remarried individuals.

### 3. Sexuality and Procreation

The Christian concept of sexuality and procreation is rooted in God's creation of the world in Genesis 1 and 2, and specifically God's creation of man and woman, in his image, as the pinnacle of his creative acts. In Genesis 1:26-28, God created both man and woman to bear his

image, which included multiplying and spreading across the earth and having dominion over it. Genesis 2:18-25 elaborates on God's creation of man and woman, explaining that woman was created as a suitable helper and companion to man. God created the woman out of the man's body, and in marriage, the man and woman are reunited, as the text explains: "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh" (Genesis 2:24).

#### a. Marriage between a man and a woman

In creating them male and female in his image, Catholic teaching affirms the equal dignity of a man and a woman. None of them is inferior or superior to the other, because each one is created in the image of God.<sup>[41]</sup> However, man and woman are also created for each other, meaning that they are to complement one another.

The stand of the Church asserting that a marriage between a man and a woman, known as heterosexual marriage, is the exclusive alignment with God's design is encountering challenges from various angles. In today's contemporary society where diverse expressions of intimacy and alternative forms of marriages and unions are prevalent, the traditional doctrine advocating for solely heterosexual marriages is being increasingly questioned.

However, Van Eck<sup>[42]</sup> argued that successive epochs have promoted different forms of marriage as legitimate, not so much because they are intended and sanctioned by God but as a means of controlling sexual behaviour. He asserts that the labelling of same-sex unions as sinful is not biblically founded but it is a historical, social-cultural construct.

The priest-respondents spoke about the spread of homosexuality in the Church membership especially among adolescents and young adults. Some marriages, they confirmed, are confronted by this reality. The Tribunal staff also confirmed that among the grounds brought forward by couples seeking marriage annulments, homosexuality is becoming a frequent feature.

*Homosexuality is becoming increasingly prevalent in marriages. Some couples actually conceal their actual sexual orientations prior to marriage. They play along, pretending to be heterosexual only for them to come out in the open and reveal their homosexual orientation. Some even sire children or conceive children, making it difficult for anyone to believe a spouse's story.*

In corroboration to these findings, Joo<sup>[43]</sup> highlights that homosexuality transcends geographical boundaries. It is a ubiquitous phenomenon that has persisted throughout human history in various cultures, despite facing widespread rejection. The author notes that these groups are currently promoting the institution of marriage within their communities.

From the foregoing, it is evident that within the membership of the Church itself, the long-standing teaching legitimizing heterosexual marriages alone is slowly but surely being challenged. How the Church will respond to the needs of these Church members who seek to live and experience the love and mercy God is an issue that has recently arisen. In his recently published encyclical letter, Pope Francis sought to chart a different path away from the dogmatic and definitive stance by proposing an approach that would embrace and bless persons of homosexual orientation without approving or blessing the homosexual union. The document brought out mixed reactions and widespread debate that are either upholding or seeking to shift the heteronormative paradigm.

#### b. The Fidelity of Conjugal Love

According to the Catholic teaching, sexual intimacy and conjugal love are exercised only within the ambit of marriage. The catechism of the Catholic Church affirms that human sexuality is designed to be in harmony with the conjugal love between a man and a woman. Within the bounds of matrimony, the physical union of the spouses serves as a symbol and assurance of their spiritual unity.<sup>[44]</sup> Sexual intimacy outside marriage is classified as fornication, which is sinful in the Church's teaching.

While preparing couples for marriage, the sanctity of conjugal love occupies a central place. Accordingly, if the prospective marriage is between a spinster and a bachelor, they are forbidden to engage in any sexual activity until they are officially married in Church. On the other hand, if the prospective marriage is between couples who have been cohabiting, whether married under civil or customary law, such a couple must first avail of the Sacrament of reconciliation (confession) before their wedding in Church to obtain God's forgiveness for engaging in pre-marital sex.

The respondents found the teaching prohibiting pre-marital sex to be removed from reality. In the FGD, one respondent remarked.

*This is a typical case of wishful thinking. Yes, as a parent, I would want my children to abstain from sexual activities until marriage. But the reality is that our children are much more exposed, their awareness of their sexuality is at another level, and majority of them become sexually active from their youthful years.*

Agreeing with these sentiments, another couple added. *To be honest, my biggest worry is not so much whether my children abstain from sex before marriage, but if they have heterosexual relationships. I fret at the idea of my son or daughter ever turning out to be gay or lesbian. I encourage them to be open about their relationships, introduce their friends to us and even host birthday parties. These are things we could never do in our days.*

*But the world has changed. The Church has to change too!*

The pastoral agents equally expressed the challenge they encounter in preaching the gospel of abstinence. The priests confirmed that while stating the position of the church on pre-marital sex, they also endeavour to speak to the reality of many young people today who live in a contemporary world that is dominated by sex.

The question of legitimacy or illegitimacy of pre-marital sex and its prevalence especially among adolescents cuts across other religions and cultures. In their research on the adolescent involvement in pre-marital sex in a Malaysia society governed by “a strong and stringent Islamic foundation and Islamic law”. It was established that “the number of adolescents engaged in pre-marital sex is alarming and occurring at an early stage”. In an Islamic society that had “clear guidance on what is acceptable and unacceptable in matters of sex, where the “relationship between husband and wife is the only accepted form of sexual relation in Islam” these authors found out that young Muslim Malaysians were engaging in “random and diverse sexual activities from the age of 13”.<sup>[45]</sup>

The findings from the respondents and researchers pointing to a growing reality of many members of the Church, both adult and adolescent who disregard the Church teaching on pre-marital sex. Pastoral agents as a body and the Church as an institution have not been able to instil in their membership what they consider to be the appropriate behaviour – abstinence from pre-marital sex. Is the Church clinging to a teaching that has been overtaken by events? Is it time to re-examine the Church teaching and contextualise it in the lived experience of her members?

### c. Ordered towards procreation

Catholic teaching holds that each and every act of sexual intercourse between married persons should be aimed towards procreation. On the foundation of Holy Scriptures especially the divine command to Adam and Eve to be fruitful, multiply and fill the earth (Gen 1:28), Catholic teaching has linked sexual intimacy directly to procreation. Pope Pius XI<sup>[46]</sup> set the stage for what would remain the dominant position of the Catholic Church on the conjugal love in marriage, namely, every sexual activity is ordered towards procreation. According to Selling<sup>[47]</sup> the teaching of Pope Pius XI “assumed that there is a direct connection between sexual congress and the coming into being of a human person, even though there was completely no understanding of how the biological process of conception took place”.

When knowledge became available that fertility was predictable; that married couples were capable of knowing with relative certainty that their sexual activity would not lead to procreation, Pope Pius XII (1951)

followed in the footsteps of his predecessor, reaffirming that the goal of marriage is procreation.

The truth is that marriage, as a natural institution, is not ordered by the will of the Creator towards personal perfection of the husband and wife as its primary end, but to the procreation and education of a new life. The other ends of marriage, although part of nature’s plan, are not of the same importance as the first. Still less are they superior. On the contrary they are essentially subordinate to it. This principle holds well for all marriages, even if they are unfruitful.<sup>[48]</sup>

The position adopted by Pius XII marked a significant departure from traditional beliefs. Pius XII recognized that sexual intercourse could serve secondary purposes within marriage. This doctrine marked a pivotal moment as it was the first instance where the Catholic Church sanctioned the moral validity of a sexual act that was inherently infertile.<sup>[49]</sup> Nevertheless, it was emphasized that even in such circumstances, the act must retain the possibility of procreation, even during periods of infertility.

The teaching by Pius XII opened room for an important question: whether it was morally licit for a married couple to intentionally limit sexual activity to the period of infertility for the purpose of avoiding procreation? On this issue Pope Pius XII<sup>[50]</sup> ruled that the practice could be tolerated as long as there were serious reasons (medical, economic, eugenic or social) to avoid the realization of the primary purpose of marriage.

According to Selling<sup>[51]</sup>, the Catholic Church contends that the primary purpose of sexuality is procreation, thereby rejecting contraception and alternative sexual practices. Pope Paul VI articulated that every sexual act must retain the capacity for procreation, which necessitates the placement of semen in proximity to the cervix. The Church emphasizes on the crucial role of children within the institution of marriage. The inability to have children results in social estrangement and a disconnection from humanity.<sup>[52]</sup> Mbiti<sup>[53]</sup> maintains that the principal aim of marriage is to bear children and sustain the family lineage. In the absence of offspring, a marital union may be perceived as illegitimate and unable to endure. Similarly, Muthengi<sup>[54]</sup> argues that in many African cultures, the value placed on children is profoundly esteemed. The imperative to generate offspring is so formidable that it eclipses other dimensions of marriage, such as compatibility. Moreover, he asserts that in traditional African societies, the permanence of marriage hinges on its capacity to yield fruit. Practically speaking, the arrival of a child signifies the fulfilment of the marital union.

Abasili<sup>[55]</sup> underscored the crucial role of procreation within the Igbo society of Nigeria. The idea of dying without descendants was regarded as a profound failure. The Catholic Church categorically rejects the use of

contraceptives, advocating instead for natural family planning. Contraception is viewed as inherently immoral. Pope Pius XII condemned both artificial insemination and in vitro fertilization (IVF), accentuating the deeply personal nature of marital intimacy.

This perspective has been consistently reiterated in contemporary magisterial teachings, particularly in key documents such as *Donum Vitae*<sup>[56]</sup>, *Evangelium Vitae*<sup>[57]</sup>, and *Dignitas Personae*<sup>[58]</sup>, which assert a resolute rejection of IVF due to the unavoidable destruction of surplus embryos, the ethical concerns surrounding the acquisition of germ cells, the involvement of third parties in the fertilization process (including embryologists and gynaecologists), and the treatment of children not as gifts but rather as commodities.

The FGDs and interviews conducted with various participants were lively. The majority of couples expressed dissatisfaction with the Church's teachings on human sexuality and marriage across various dimensions. For instance, when discussing birth control, all couples of childbearing age confirmed that they adhered to a family planning regimen. One female respondent said.

The days when women stayed at home with the full-time job of giving birth to children are gone. The whole idea of house-wives does not make sense in our present-day Kenya. Women are professionals, just like men; they have careers to grow, bills to pay and bodies to take care of. For the church to expect me not to plan my family and give birth to children I can give quality care, is unrealistic.

Another respondent in the FGD spoke to what he termed as the church's 'myopic understanding of human sexuality' by limiting it to procreation. He further questioned if the pronouncements coming from the Church leaders is backed by science.

Sometimes, I wonder if the Popes and clergy are competent enough to teach us about sexual intimacy. They are not married and have no families. They do not know the pressure of raising a family. They lack the practical experience of the dynamics of growing a family. They are supposedly green in matters of sex. How do they go ahead to teach others? A position some Pope took in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is still being repeated in 2024? We are in a different world. I love my catholic church, but on this one, I am not boarding!

Reflecting on the purpose of human sexuality, Ash<sup>[59]</sup> sought to broaden it beyond the purely biological function of procreation. Sex also serves to deepen relationships, a vehicle for interpersonal intimacy. Sex has benefits to the couples, which include shared pleasure, mutual comfort and companionship and the

psychological benefits of mutual affirmation and acceptance.

The teaching of the church on human sexuality in general, and the dominant teaching that that sexuality is primarily for procreation elicited animated discussions in the FGDs. The stand of the Catholic Church championing natural family planning and forbidding couples from any artificial family planning methods particularly generated heated debates. One lady shared her experience of natural family planning saying.

My body cycle is quite unpredictable, and I cannot predict my cycle with certainty. On the other hand, my husband and I live and work separately. Because of the nature of his job in the military, he comes home only when his job allows him. After our first child, we tried the natural family planning we were taught. Six months down the line, we conceived our second born. The stress we went through cannot be described! We left the natural way 7 years ago, and life goes on.

The pastoral agents pointed out the challenges they encountered in teaching and implementing the Church's stand in matters of human sexuality, especially on matters of birth control and modern birth technologies.

*Our christians are very informed. They are raising pertinent questions on the church stand on such matters as contraception and IVF. They are simply asking for the science behind the teaching of the church. They ask that the church speaks and listens to their concerns, questions and anxieties. They are not being rebellious. They simply want to be heard.*

The sentiments of the respondents find echo in recent research by Myroslava and Mykola<sup>[60]</sup>, who state that many catholic members find Church teachings on human sexuality impractical. Church teachings on human sexuality are no longer helpful or meaningful for some members. Issues like contraception and homosexuality are problematic.

The position of the Church stating its unwavering position on contraception and other birth technologies on one hand, and the practical difficulties on implementing these teachings on the part of the respondents. While the competence of the Church as a moral voice has been heard and embraced in other areas such as social justice and the global environmental campaign, the Church teaching on human sexuality does not seem to attract similar affirmation and acceptance. Instead of dismissing this response as open defiance to the teaching of the church, this experience offers a window of opportunity to reformulate these important teachings in a manner that is persuasive and responsive to the new context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century believer.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

There is an urgent necessity for a reevaluation of certain marital doctrines to ensure they are more suited to the realities of today's society. This revision is vital to affirm the relevance and significance of these doctrines to the lived experiences of believers in the contemporary context. By revising these doctrines, we have the opportunity to improve their acceptance among congregants and reinforce their significance in the daily lives of married couples. It is crucial to connect timeless teachings with modern experiences to foster a more inclusive and forward-thinking perspective on marriage within faith-based communities.

## CONCLUSION

This paper established that while the Catholic Church was steadfast and unwavering in its teachings, most of the couples experienced challenges in implementing most of these teachings in their daily lives. There was a dichotomy between the official Church teaching and some of the concrete marital actions and choices of the Christian couples. The study found out that the implementation of the fundamental Catholic doctrines on marriage was becoming increasingly challenging in the Makadara deanery. While most couples understood the official teachings of the Church on marriage, most of the couples in Makadara deanery considered most of these teachings to be impractical and inapplicable to their contemporary marital experiences.

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