

FAMILY AS THE FULCRUM OF LIFE AND NOVITIATE FOR DEMOCRACY

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Abstract

By its nature, the family is the basic unit of any socio-political structure and serves as its primary agent of socialization. Thus, democracy, like every other socio-political organization, has the family as its foundation. However, within a democratic system, the family performs a distinctive role as a form of novitiate, where individuals are first introduced to the values and practices of communal life. This study therefore seeks to examine this unique *koinonia* (communion) between the family and democracy. To achieve this, it employs the analytical method to critically assess the socio-political relevance of the family within a democratic setting. It further expands its focus to the human family, conceived metaphorically as a “mother” that performs the dual existential roles of nurturing and launching life—that is, both life-bearing and life-giving. Recognizing that the equality upheld in democracy derives not from race, color, ethnicity, or tribe but from the inherent dignity of the human person, the paper presents the family as the prototype of democratic life, where individuals learn to love others simply for who they are. It argues that if this principle cannot be realized within the family, its realization in a broader democratic context is unlikely.

Keywords: Family, life, democracy, socialization, organisation, *koinonia*, etc.

Introduction:

Since the Third Millennium, humanity has stepped up the long historical process that has been transforming Western and Christian society -the desire to create a "new man" , one who is not bound by the authority and law of God, but who is free to live out his passions to the limit he wishes and in so doing, create his own destiny.

That is the sin of existentialism which believes that man has no essence except that which he gives himself. These agents of change have railed attacks on all institutions, especially the Church and its moral and social teachings on the family and human life, being the only structure that stands in complete opposition to their revolutionary agenda -an agenda opposed to the Church's own program to imitate Christ and propagate his message to the world. And it is the "gospel of life" says John Paul II, 'which is at the heart of this message and requires the Church to preach it with dauntless fidelity as "good news" to the people of every age and culture' (1995). Archbishop V. M Okeke made it clear that it is this duty and privilege to continue this mission of Christ Jesus - the Redeemer, who came that they have life (Jn 10:10)' that had informed his choice of the topic and persistence on the theme The Family and Human Life as his pastoral letter to his flock. Every human life, he said, '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, but unfortunately, it is disintegrating in our national life' (2008).

One of the most evident symptoms of this breakdown of the family is divorce. The universalizing of easy divorce means that the institution of marriage is slowly degenerating into State-licensed free love with its great consequences on the life of the individual members of the family.

Archbishop Okeke describes it as 'the funeral of marriage' which he maintained, is now on the increase in our society today due to increased individualism, lack of pre-marriage formation, selfishness and shallow spirituality' (2008). And the most unfortunate thing here is that the state which is entrusted to protect this social and sacred institution has turned its back against it and joined the eternal conspiracy, probably unaware that it is ultimately destined to the destruction of democracy and the value of the human person. For when a nation ceases to put the highest value on the home, it will not be long before it ceases to put a value on the person.

Beyond and behind all the schemes and blueprints of politics and economics', there is nothing more fundamental to the revival of true democracy than the restoration of the family. In that circle shall our citizens learn that there is other wealth than paper money, namely, the tingling, vibrating wealth of children, the unbreakable bond between husband and wife, the pledge of democracy, and the future heirs of the Kingdom of Heaven. The family is not only the sanctuary of life, it also "the primary living cell of society" (Vatican II: *Apostolicam Actuositatem*), a microcosm of the larger society. Thus, the Archbishop Okeke's tenacity 'to offer assistance to all men and women of good will who are already aware of these values and seek to protect them...to speak to those who are uncertain but searching for the truth about these values and finally to assist those who are unjustly deprived from enjoying these basic gifts of God' (2008). He does this, aware that in this endeavour of proclaiming the Gospel 'we must not fear hostility or unpopularity, and we must refuse any compromise or ambiguity which might conform us to the world's way of thinking (cf. Rom. 12:2)' (John Paul II: 1995).

Family as incubator and launcher into Existence:

In his *Letter to Families*, John Paul II expressed that family is such an unrepeatable and inescapable structure in the life of every human person.

For him, "it is a path common to all, yet one which is particular, unique and unrepeatable, just as every individual is unrepeatable; it is a path from which man cannot withdraw" (1994). This is so because it is through it that the individual first comes into the world, surrounded with care and love. According to Archbishop Okeke, although human beings are quintessential in the order of creation, they are "physically the weakest at birth" that family is an unavoidable necessity to secure its existence. Of all the creatures, none was fashioned to resemble the gods but man (Gen. 1:26). As it were, "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" (2008). In spite of this glory, at his entry into the world, he is least fitted for survival than all other animals. Whereas other animals are less dependent in a good number of things, human offspring need months and sometimes years to do those things other animals do (2008). The family therefore is a sanctuary of life; it protects the individual from menaces of hunger and disease and sets him up on the road of life on his own. It is to it, says Francis Cardinal Arinze, 'that one returns in days of rejoicing and in the days of heart break and disappointment, it is to it that he has recourse in doubt and confusion, by the family that he is given stern but loving rebuke in time of misbehaviour; it is in the family that he anchors his last hope of understanding forgiveness and love without counting the cost' (1980). Indeed, the family is fundamental to man; it is where his vision of the world is shaped, his basic values, spiritual and major moral points of reference. It has therefore far-reaching consequences on the society at large: "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". (1981).

History has shown that where there is a weakening of the family there follows the disintegration of society. Thus, civil laws should secure as far as possible the strengthening of family ties, the free operation of the laws of God in their regard, and the discouragement of all temptation to their violation: "The prosperity of the State and the temporal happiness of its citizens" says Pius XI, "cannot remain safe and sound where the foundations upon which they are established, which is the moral order, is weakened, and where the very fountain-head from which the State draws its life, namely, wedlock and the family is obstructed by the vices of its citizens" (1930). Indeed, the family is anterior to the State, for without the family as its principle and foundation, the State would not properly exist. It is by nature the fundamental building block of society. Though small in itself, it constitutes a true society, with its own head and members, rights and obligations. It is "a society limited, indeed, in numbers, but no less a true society, anterior to every kind of state or nation, invested with rights and duties of its own, totally independent of the civil community ... governed by a power within its limits, that is, the father" (Leo XIII: 1891). Since it is anterior to the state and performs the duty of humanizing the state, the family is part of the commonwealth. Thus, the state is obliged to protect the institution of marriage. Indeed, those who have the care of the state and of the common good, cannot neglect the needs of married people without bringing great harm upon the State and upon the common welfare. Not only in those things which regard temporal goods is it the concern of public authority but also in matters pertaining the welfare of the whole person. The beauty of the family is seen not only in the furtherance of the state, but also in its capacity for self-regeneration. In marriage, says Fulton Sheen, when the first wild ecstasies begin to fade, when the husband is tempted to believe that another woman is more beautiful than his wife, and the wife tempted to believe that another husband would be more chivalrous it is at that moment that God in His Providence sends children. In each boy the wife sees the husband reborn in all his chivalry and strength, and in each girl the husband sees his wife reborn in all her sweetness and beauty (1943). This is why he thinks also that "many married women who have deliberately spurned the "hour" of childbearing are unhappy and frustrated. They never discovered the joys of marriage because they refused to surrender to the obligation of their state. In saving themselves, they lost themselves!" (2001).

Family as Pledge for Democracy

In 1992 came out the book *The End of History* and the *Last Man* written by Francis Fukuyama, and this attracted a wide interest. There he argued, that the advent of Western liberal democracy may signal the end point of humanity's sociocultural evolution and the final form of human government. Appearing just at the collapse of communism, the last surviving enemy of democracy, the book stated: "What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of post-war history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (1992).

Other important reason therefore why the state must endeavor to protect the family is its role in enhancing the universal democracy. The decline in the permanence of family life is intrinsically bound up with the decline in democracy. Understood in its philosophical sense, democracy is a system of government which recognizes the sovereign worth of a man.

From it flows the notion of the equality of all men, and the repudiation of all inequalities based on race, color and class. Man may be revered and respected elsewhere for what he can do, for his wealth, power or his charm;

but in the family a person is valued because he is. Existence is worth in the home. The crippled, the sick, and those who are of no economic value to the family are given more affection in it than those who normally provide for its subsistence. The family is the training school and the testing ground for democracy. If the married couples, for instance, could renege their pledged loyalty in order to satisfy their own pleasure and convenience, then it will not be long before they acquit themselves of their pledged responsibility to the state. "Once a citizenry" says Fulton Sheen, "does not feel bound to the most natural and democratic of all self-governing commonwealths, the home, it will not be long until it ceases to feel bound to a nation... The traitors to the home today are the traitors to the nation tomorrow. A people who are not loyal to a home will not be loyal to a flag" (1951).

In the family, the same loyalty or sacrifice required of couples are demanded of children too. It is like a relationship of a triangle in which each side or member equally puts up with the trials of their collective existence. Once the need of sacrifice for maintenance of the home is uprooted, there is simultaneously uprooted the need of sacrifice for the maintenance of a nation. Only a nation that recognizes sweat, toil, hardship, and sacrifice as normal aspects of life can save itself, and these virtues are first learned in the home (1951).

The State's eagerness to protect the weaker members of society, the socially disinherited or the economically dispossessed depends upon a sense of responsibility to those handicapped, which is first fostered in the home. When people lose sense of loyalty and obligation in the family, it is generally translated into the state; the State invariably picks it up, and moves on to oppress the weak. State socialism would be invented, which first understood as State control of the means of production is finally the control of life itself-and this is nothing but a political expression of psychological laziness and irresponsibility first manifested in the family.

It is for all these reasons that the state must endeavor to assist marital unions. The tempo of free reign of sex and denial of obligation is now destroying our democratic world. Democracy is set up against itself: One of its basic foundations of safeguarding the individual human rights and freedom is now being attacked by the majority. Pope John Paul II calls it

"the sinister result of a relativism" which he says, now reigns unopposed, a situation where 'right' ceases to be such, because it is no longer firmly founded on the inviolable dignity of the person, but is made subject to the will of the stronger part' (1995). And this is unfortunate that 'the great moral decisions of humanity are now wholly subordinated to secular institutions that make no reference whatsoever to unchanging objective values' (John Paul II: 1998)

The Vices against Family:

The most powerful means to destroy a society is to destroy its one absolutely fundamental building block, the family which is the only institution where most of us learn life's most important lesson -unselfish love. The family is destroyed by decapitating its foundation known as

stable marriage, brought about by loosening its glue which is sexual fidelity, and this in turn is destroyed by sexual revolution. This latter is the final enemy because it is about the missiles that touch not only lives but the very wellsprings of life.

Archbishop Okeke listed these missiles to include abortion, sterilization, artificial contraception, euthanasia etc. and decried their upturn in the world today. He denounced especially the rate at which abortion is increasing in our society and the signals from some lawmakers in Nigeria toying with the possibility of legalizing it in the name of individual freedom and rights -an attack on the foundation of life (2008). But, the Archbishop speaks from a background of a society that has not yet gone hare-wire in what Pope John Paul II described as a "culture of death", referring to the development in the West which has allowed these actions because of false conception of freedom and misunderstanding about the nature of suffering. He warns the Western liberal democracy: "To claim the right to abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia, and to recognize that right in law, means to attribute to human freedom a perverse and evil significance: that of an absolute power over others and against others. This is the death of true freedom."(1995)

The "culture of death" for the Pope represents the most significant threat to democratic societies. Attacks on life such as euthanasia "represent a direct threat to the entire culture of human rights. It is a threat capable, in the end, of jeopardizing the very meaning of democratic coexistence" (1995). Against the arguments of the proponents of euthanasia which they base on the emotional need to end suffering; John Paul II held that killing for compassionate reasons is "false mercy... a disturbing perversion of mercy. True compassion leads to sharing another's pain, it does not kill the person whose suffering we cannot bear' to witness" (1995). He therefore called for a turn to a new leaf known as "the culture of life" where people recognize life as a gift from God. When a society adopts a culture of life, it will be able to confront and solve today's unprecedented problems affecting human life, because it will be capable of bringing about a serious and courageous dialogue among all (1995).

Divorce, generally is not directly targeted at life but is nevertheless a vice against the family. Though it is comparatively less in the traditional African society because of the role of extended family structure in settling differences as remarked Archbishop Okeke, it shares all the same in the increase due to world's emerging globalisation. Divorce leaves children between two worlds of their separated parents, disoriented and uncertain of any objective values in the midst of variegated life styles of their parents who reneged their responsibility at least discomfort. They fail to realise that pleasure is deepened and enhanced when it has survived a moment of tedium or pain; that marriage joys, like all great joys, are born out of some pain; that as we must crack the nut to taste the sweet, so in the spiritual life, the cross must be the prelude to the crown.

Indeed, Pius XI tells parents in the encyclical *Casti Connubii*, that it is actually inescapable for them to leave their work unfinished: "It is certain that both by the law of nature and of God this right and duty of educating their offspring belongs in the first place to those who began the work of nature by giving them birth, and they are indeed forbidden to leave unfinished this work and so expose it to ruin" (1930).

In fact, it is unfortunate that fidelity required for stable marriage is being destroyed by sexual revolution, a revolution which is propagated mainly by the media, a network massively controlled by the enemy. The courts and states easily acquiesce to its propaganda on sexual revolution and break at will the marital bonds, unaware as Fulton Sheen noted that "to the extent that the courts disrupt this natural unity of a nation, they will incapacitate themselves for international fellowship. For if we destroy this inner circle of loyalty, through disloyalty, how shall we build up the larger international circles of loyalty from which world peace is derived?" (1943)

Conclusion

The family as we have seen is one of the fundamental building blocks of the world, an institution where the virtues and values of the society are transmitted to its members; where the sovereign worth of a man which democracy stands for is first lived as a prototype. Unfortunately, this institution has faced a lot of turbulence and the one not to be neglected are the missiles of sexual revolution and moral relativism. This is so painful because it touches life and that is why some have judged that sexual revolution may quite possibly prove to be the most destructive revolution in history, far more than military or political revolution since it deals with the spring source of life.

Archbishop Okeke sees in general, the situation of family life in Nigeria as still commendable. Although the rate of divorce is increasing, it is comparatively low. Children are taken good care of and provided opportunity to prepare for their adult life. These are all possible because of the extended family structure which provides some sort of social security net-work for many less privileged members of the society, coming to help when the primary family finds it difficult to fulfil its basic obligations. The sacramental marriage among the Christians is also seriously pursued and regarded as a binding covenant for life. He sees these ideas collaborated by the remark of some authors who maintain that only two institutions are viable in Africa: *the Family and the Church* (2008). This moderate optimism did not stop him however from thinking of many areas we must tighten up and fight collectively in forestalling the looming danger, like opposing every public policy that threatens the dignity of the family and human life such as legalizing abortion, euthanasia, contraception etc. and encouraging the faithful to promote life and family by joining pro-life organisations. It is only by collectively defending life and family that we can ensure the future of our democratic society and defence of human dignity.

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