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Africa: Marriage Cannot be Reduced to a Legal Formula

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THAT MY FATHER was a polygamist did not seem to bother the Jesuits when I applied to join the order 28 years ago, *writes Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator SJ.*

Cases such as my father's illustrate attitudes and circumstances are still current in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa. My father once told me that polygamy accounted for why men in my home town of Benin, Nigeria, flocked to other churches. While they opted to adapt church teaching to local context, to become a Catholic my father would have had to renounce at least eight of my mothers and settle for one. The few men who did almost always kept the youngest spouse, forcing the luckless older wives into early widowhood and penury.

I fear the synod might succumb to the temptation to consider marriage and the family as a monolithic social and cultural system. Marriage cannot be reduced to a canonical formula that pronounces each relationship either "regular" or "irregular". We cannot pin "family" down so neatly.

The theology of inculturation has tried to align African traditions of marriage and family life with Church teaching. But inculturation cannot be a wishy-washy baptising of all things African. Some traditional practices cry out for condemnation: gender-based violence, female genital mutilation, the denial of a woman's right to inherit property.

I hope for a synod that instead of simply cataloguing aberrations – or applying simplistic nostrums to complex social realities – advocates practical initiatives, such as an increase in access to education and the economic empowerment of women. I would like to see Church leaders

encouraged to offer protection and pastoral care to people who embrace their vocation to marriage in responsible, alternative ways, rather than colluding with the civil authorities to prosecute and penalise them, as we have seen in Uganda, Cameroon, Kenya and Nigeria.

It would be refreshing if the synod urged an open dialogue to take place in the year leading up to the second Synod on the Family, with the clergy humbly learning from the laity about the reality of family life. And I hope that access to marriage tribunals is made easier and more affordable.

Back to my father. Polygamy is patently unjust, but would I have barred my mothers from the sacraments for being “co-wives”, and denied them (and their children) pastoral care? Who am I to judge?

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