TOPIC: EDUCATIONAL RESOURCE ON MARRIAGE IN AFRICA
(Nigeria as a Case Study)

INTRODUCTION

Among the Igbo people of Eastern Nigeria, in Africa, marriage and procreation have a pride of place. As such with the adherents of African Traditional Religion, procreation has always been viewed as the primary purpose of marriage, while the Catholic Church in the new Code of Canon Law rules that “The essential properties of marriage are unity and indissolubility” (can.1056). There is no place for divorce and polygamy in the Catholic Church. In the face of the value of children in any marriage among the Igbo people, the question arises as to what should be the attitude of an African Christian to such customs? In the midst of the conflict in value and difference in emphasis where do we stand? Can there be really a dialogue between the two religions? What are the pastoral problems therein and could there be a way out?
1. **THE IMPORTANCE OF CHILDREN IN TRADITIONAL AFRICAN MARRIAGE:**

For the African Religion in Igboland, marriage involves not only interpersonal relations but also in the final analysis inter-community relations. In marriage, the communities involved share their very existence. In reality they become one people, one “thing” (Ofuihe) as Africans themselves would put it. It is very common to hear pastors during weddings addressing the new couple in words highlighting the social ethical expectations of people. Adhering to the principles of African Religion, the pastors advise the couples that through their marriage, their families and clans are also united, so that what is done to their families and clans are also done to all. The marriage also means that the partners’ responsibilities are not limited to themselves alone but have a much wider application. Their own personal identity and identification are equally extended especially through the expected children. In any pre-marriage investigation, the fertility of the bride and bridegroom are considered seriously.

If any of the men in his family is known or rumored to be sexually inadequate in any way, he is most unlikely to be accepted for marriage. Fertility is the central requirement in marriage. A marriage proposal would be even less likely if there were cases of barrenness among the female members of the girl’s family. This brings doubt on the ability of whole family to transmit life. But the most serious impediment to marriage is witchcraft, of which impotence, sterility, barrenness, or a generally bad reputation may be considered to be symptoms. ¹

It is of interest to note the observation made by E.A. Onyeocha regarding the attachment The Africans especially the Igbos of Eastern Nigeria have towards children,

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The first prayer on the lips of all couples is that God would bless their marriage with Children. Fathers adore them for they prove their manhood. Mothers worship them for they remove the stigma of barrenness.²

On every marriage ceremony in any Igbo community, one always hears such prayers and utterances like “In nine months’ time, we shall gather again to welcome a new child”. Thus marriage concerns not only social factors, but of necessity also economic, political and religious factors, all of which are inextricably intertwined. Since the traditional family had to be large in order to guarantee the material well-being of all its members, of children, of the sick, the disabled and the old, and since this require continuity over time, every person had a moral obligation to marry and to contribute to the social reproduction of his kinship group. The most basic value, to beget or bear children, is instilled in all members of the society from early childhood onwards.³

The importance of marriage and procreation have long been considered necessary for every Igbo person from ancient times up to the present day. Without progeny individuals can have no immortality in the realm of spirit because there would be no one to preserve their memory by sustaining a communal relationship with them after they should have made the transition from the realm of history to that of spirit. In short progeny is a prerequisite for becoming an ancestor: the existence of the later depends on the family. Further, since Africans in general and the Igbos in particular believe not only in the immortality of souls but also in their reincarnation in subsequent generations. Thus procreation evidences the reciprocal relationship between the living, the dead and the family. No greater misfortune can be-fall an African person than the inability to procreate.⁴

³ Magesa, African Religion pp.120 - 121
Throughout the Igbo area of the Eastern Nigeria in particular and Africans in general, procreation has always been viewed as the primary purpose of marriage. It is observed that;

In ethnic groups, such as the Maasai, Many wives and children are a sign of blessing, wealth and prosperity as well as continuing the family heredity and lineage.\(^5\)

Childless marriages have therefore been regarded as misfortunes because children are the necessary agents for maintaining the link between the ancestors and the living family. Since Africans view children as God’s gifts to the family, their absence implies God’s punishment for some kind of wrongdoing that requires appropriate expiation under the direction of professional priests, priestesses, diviners, or others. A fruitless marriage constitutes a major moral and spiritual problem for all concerned. Traditionally the family would have assumed that the woman was barren; hence the man would have been pressed to take a second wife. Under such circumstances all viewed polygamy as fully justified. Similarly, Igbo people have also appealed to the same cultural values to justify levirate marriage as substitutes for male impotency or infertility.\(^6\)

Despite the influence of Christianity and the West in general, the motivation for marriage in traditional Igbo society has remained essentially to perpetuate an existing family. It is even believed that a marriage is only concluded through the birth of a child. Hence, Laurenti Magesa, has this to say:

\[\text{At the conclusion of the marriage through the birth of a child, husband and wife belong completely to one another, and the bond between the two families and communities is sealed.}^{7}\]

\(^6\) Paris, The Spirituality of African Peoples; pp 78-80
\(^7\) Laurenti Magesa, African Religion, p. 127.
Consequently, childlessness becomes a threat to the unity and indissolubility of marriage.

The essence of this form of traditional marriage was the production of children; the social relationship between the two families and unbelievably - the personal relationship between the two partners – (warmth and love) were of themselves relatively unimportant. Moreover, in our traditional system of marriage the wife was conditioned to the possibility of the husband taking another wife or wives. This combination – lack of necessary emotional bond and the possibility of other wives – meant that there was little chance of the marriage breaking down, since adultery was by definition excluded and divorce was hardly known.

The above world view has made authors to talk of “trial marriages” nearly always cropping up among the Africans. Bujo argues that the reason for this is that in African society, the achievement of life, as commanded by the ancestors, is an affair of the whole community. In the societies of Africa, a man who dies childless falls into oblivion. He will be unable to find happiness in the next world because, having no children to honor him, he is cut off from the family community. Some tribes place a piece of charcoal in the mouth of a man who has died childless, apparently to signify the final extinction of one who has left no issue in whom he might continue to live.

Among the Edo people of Nigeria like all other Africans, Children are the perpetuators of the family’s name, to inherit their property, to give them security in their old age, to give assurance of social recognition, and to give them a befitting burial when they die.

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8 Rose A. Wilson, Customary Marriage and Divorce in Igbo Society in Igbo Jurisprudence : Law and Order in Tradition Igbo Society., p.8
2. TRADITIONAL BELIEF ON THE CAUSES OF CHILDLESSNESS

Many explanations are offered for infertility (Childlessness) in the African Traditional Religion. In all, the hands of the evil spirit can be traced. Among some of the reasons given is the wrath of the (gods) and/or Evil one: Firstly, a woman may have inadvertently trespassed into an area forbidden to women, or performed some action public or private that has attracted the disapproval of the evil spirit, and as punishment he had prevented her from having any children. In some areas a woman may be rendered infertile if she sees a public or in private the village masquerade at certain times forbidden to women.

Secondly, the family ancestors may render a woman childless when she commits adultery or any grievous offences that are detrimental to the stability of the family. Adultery is a grave crime that is punishable by immediate termination of marriage when discovered or if done in secret the ancestors may punish the woman by rendering her childless. The common belief is that the ancestors are spirit and are capable of seeing things done in secret.

Thirdly, practicing witchcraft or participation in various activities connected with witchcraft may also leave a woman childless. It is believed that the blood of the innocent victims had appealed to God and the ancestors to avenge. Such a woman may be punished by childlessness.

Finally, in rare cases where the boy’s wishes prevailed over those of the negotiating elders in the choice of the bride, it is believed that they could put a curse on the couple to express their disapproval of the marriage. Again the parents of the girl engaging in marriage, may put a temporary curse on her to be lifted on the payment of some impending debt arising from partly unpaid dowry.

Solution to the problem of childlessness depends on what the supposed cause is. Where the woman is believed to have offended the spirit, she or her whole community or her new
family – community will have to make the appropriate atonement. Where it is thought that a curse was put on the girl or on both, the necessary steps are taken to rectify the irregularity: the impending debt is paid or the offending child prostrately begs forgiveness and blessing of the offended party. There is no documented writing or any given statistics to prove how effective these solutions can make on infertile women to be fertile. In spite of these efforts to explain the causes of childlessness, it is wholly and totally accepted that children are a gift from God and that ultimately the final decision lies with God alone.

3. EFFECTS OF CHILDLESSNESS IN AFRICAN MARRIAGE

Childlessness for the Igbo speaking area of Africa is a personal disgrace. It is also felt as a kind of slur on the community, a social fault, and it often leads to divorce or polygamy. It is therefore understandable that many tribes expect their members to enter marriage on a provisional basis until the wife’s ability to bear children has been established. While it is true that there are other reasons for a “trial marriages” such as mutual knowledge, yet the testing of the fertility of the woman remains the main motivation. Childlessness makes a family perpetually uneasy and miserable. The husband is not only encouraged to marry another wife, but also the childless wife marries or helps to marry another woman for her husband. This act of “generosity and largeness of heart” moves the husband, and saves her from being thrown away. Due to the pride of place which children occupy in marriage within the Igbo community the African traditional setup, polygamy has evolved and accepted as, honorable and respected form

13 Igwineweka, The Sacrament of Marriage and Childlessness in Edo Pastoral Problems and Possible Solution. P. 98
of marriage. Indeed many of those who take additional wives are convinced or believed that polygamy is a higher status of marital life than monogamy since it meets better their aims and purpose of marriage. As long as it meets better their aims and purpose of marriage, it is still alive and practiced extensively in Africa especially in Igboland, without denying the fact that Christianity is winning over many. Childlessness has also encouraged concubinage. Some prefer it to bringing a second wife to their matrimonial home. Many have long recognized the destructive potentialities of polygamous and concubinage family life, but due to the quest for children, they have to live with it in perpetual bondage.

In general in the traditional African Society, divorce is not common and it is not usually the answer to childlessness, but it can contribute to it. Chinuba Obi has articulated this so well, “Nevertheless, there are a number of reasons and circumstances which are generally accepted as affording a party sufficient moral justification to seek to have his or her marriage dissolved. These include impotence or sterility on the part of the husband or sterility on the part of the wife, since the main object of marriage is the production of Children.”

Today, things have changed considerably among Christians. Divorce has become rampant as a result of childlessness. The greatest problem is that you cannot correctly estimate the rate because only a few cases could come up to the customary or High Court. Divorce is usually done in the native way, that is, the unceremonious dismissal of the barren wives by the husbands – unceremonious in the sense that their personal belongings are hurled out of the house. Another serious way to send out unproductive wives is to neglect them or treat them with impunity as unworthy objects.

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16 Igbineweka, The Sacrament of Marriage and Childlessness in Edo Pastoral Problems and Possible Solutions, p. 111.
From all indication it seems that the African Christians, particularly the Igbos accept unity and indissolubility of marriage as far as children are forth coming. A Christian legal wife would prefer to remain at home with another woman rather than be divorced and be faced with the impossible task of finding another husband. She would prefer to live under the roof and protection of the husband as she is still regarded as the legal wife, with rights and privileges.

4. CATHOLIC TEACHING ON THE NATURE AND ESSENTIAL PROPERTIES OF MARRIAGE

Remaining faithful to the injunction of the Lord and the Catholic traditions, Pope John Paul II has argued that:

Being rooted in the personal and total self-giving of the couple, and being required by the good of the children, the indissolubility of marriage find its ultimate truth in the plan that God has manifested in His revelation: He wills and He communicates the indissolubility of marriage as a fruit, a sign and a requirement of the absolutely faithful love that God has for Man and that the Lord Jesus has for the Church.17

The Catholic Church in the 1983 Code of Canon Law rules that:

essential properties of marriages are unity and indissolubility; in Christian Marriage they acquire a distinctive firmness by reason of the Sacrament (canon 1056).

Following earliest teachings and legislation of the church, the 1983 code of Canon Law shows that the essential properties of marriage are unity and indissolubility. Essential properties are qualities that flow from the very nature of marriage in itself, so that without them there can never be a real marriage. Unity involves the marriage of one man and one woman, and accordingly excludes all forms of plurality, whether it be polygamy, where one man has several wives, polyandry where one woman has several husbands, or so called ‘group marriages’ where several

men ‘marry’ several women. It does not of course exclude successive marriages, where the former bond has been dissolved by the death or other legitimate means. Without unity the total self-giving essential to marriage is impossible: a person with several spouses cannot give totally to any of them. However, Christian Marriage, because it is a sacrament and because it reflects the unbreakable union of Christ with His Church, is especially indissoluble. Nevertheless, in certain circumstances, the church does dissolve marriages where neither party, nor even only one, is baptized. This is done in favor of the faith of a catholic party (See Canons 1142 – 1150). Even the valid marriage of two baptized people can in some situations be dissolved if it was never consummated. The marriages, which are absolutely indissoluble, are the consummated marriages of baptized parties (See Canon 1141).18

In marriage man and woman are so firmly united as to become – to use the words of the Book of Genesis – ‘One flesh’ (Gen. 2:24). Male and female in their physical constitutions, the two human subjects even though physically different, share equally in the capacity to live “in truth and love”19.

5. THE CATHOLIC CHURCH’S MARRIAGE LAW ON DISPARITY OF CULT

The Catholic Church has laid down some laws regarding Marriages between Catholics and non-Catholics, canonically it is called “Disparity of Cult” marriages. The church in the 1983 code has ruled that: ‘A marriage is invalid when one of the two persons was baptized in the catholic church or received into it and has not by a formal act defected from it, and the other was not baptized. This impediment is not to be dispensed unless the conditions mentioned in canons

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1125 and 1126 have been fulfilled” (c. 1086). The cited canon 1125 rules that “The local ordinary can grant this permission if there is a just and reasonable cause. He is not to grant it unless the following conditions are fulfilled:

i) The catholic party is to declare that he or she is prepared to remove dangers of defecting from the faith, and is to make a sincere promise to do all in his or her power in order that all the children be baptized and brought up in the Catholic Church.

ii) The other party is to be informed in good time of these promises to be made by the Catholic party, so that it is certain that he or she is truly aware of the promise and of the obligation of the catholic party.

iii) Both parties are to be instructed about the purposes and essential properties of marriage, which are not to be excluded by either contract.

The aim of the third instruction is to ensure that both parties consent to marriage as understood and taught by the church. It is therefore, the duty of the Episcopal conference to prescribe the manner in which these declarations and promises, which are always required, are to be made, and how they are to be established in the external forum, and how the non-Catholic party is to be informed of them (C.1126).

The church as an institution has always been conscious of the problems which may arise when Catholics marry outside the church. Such marriages have always being considered a threat to the catholic party. Consequently, the Church protect its members by laying down laws against such marriages. Canon 1060 of the 1917 Code highlighted the church’s disciplinary measure in this regard. At present, mixed marriage and disparity of cult marriages remain an exception in the church. The local ordinary can grant the necessary permission for such a marriage only with a just and reasonable cause.
6. **PASTORAL PROBLEMS:**

In the face of the value of children in any marriage in Igbo land, the question arises as to what should be the attitude of Igbo Catholic to such customs? Christian pastors are confronted with the difficulty of how to prevent their Christian converts, or those who have grown up in the faith, from being totally cut off from the tradition of their tribe. Often in Igboland marriages which have been validly celebrated in church, but without regard to the traditional customs, are essentially fragile, especially if such marriages were childless. Igbineweka summarily avows:

> Africans in general fall into these ‘crimes’ because of their attitude towards procreation as the main aim of marriage. Catholic adherents are the most affected because it creates serious tension between their religions beliefs and their traditional practices. In the final analysis, their faith gives away to their tradition. They prefer to loose their faith than to remain in a childless marriage. This is a serious problem that has occupied the minds of Christian leaders for a long time and series of suggestions have been given to correct these anomalies between the Christian and traditional Marriages.²⁰

Even among the Catholics, the values of their tradition more or less remain more appealing than even some of the church’s teachings in its Magisterium. Consequently, the implementation of the church’s norms on marriage is very difficult if not impossible at the practical level. This is so because the African Traditional Religion has a view of marriage as we have seen above different from the Catholic teaching. The case is more complex in a culture like that of Igbos of the Eastern Nigeria where the man is considered to be the decision-maker in the family with little or no reference to the woman. The saying goes among the Igbos that “a woman has no religion until she is married”. This means that the religious affiliation of the woman depends on the religion of her husband.

²⁰ Felix E. Igbineweka, *The Sacrament of Marriage and Childlessness in Edo Pastoral Problems and Possible Solutions*, p. 117.
In the present day Igboland, a marriage may be undertaken either under the church law, customary or ordinance law (also known as statutory marriage law or marriage act). In contemporary Igbo society, marriage is rooted in the nuclear family than in the more traditional communal or extended system. What is meant here is that traditional marriage like every other social institution was communal affair – everybody was everybody else’s responsibility within the communal circle. Marriage among the Igbos has remained a ‘Union of man and woman, though not necessarily in the sense of a voluntary union for life of one man and one woman to the exclusion of all others.” The Igbo marriage system makes allowance for both monogamy and polygamy.21

In a patrilineal society like the Igbo, the man who is a non-catholic and worst of all an adherent of the African Traditional Religion sees the conditions laid down by the Catholic Church for marriages as a threat to his pre-eminent position in the society and family. The man who ordinarily is presumed to determine the religion of the wife as well as all other important decisions in the family is subjected to take into consideration the religions affiliation of the prospective wife. This poses a great threat to any non-catholic considering to enter into marriage with a catholic. Even if he is ready to yield, his social status is considered to be at stake.

The social pressure is often too strong for many to easily neglect. He is considered in the society as a weakling who could not ‘bend’ his wife. The few men who tried to consider the women as their equal partners in the marriage arrangements are threatened with and in fact, are sanctioned by their families.

On the other hand, most of the women grow up with this impression that the choice or decision depends on their men. Efforts of some women to resist the pressure have been

misinterpreted in most cases. The resistance is usually taken to be a sign that the woman is not going to be a good housewife or subservient and should therefore be abandoned immediately. The consequences have often been great that many of such women end up in not getting married, at least within the vicinity.

At the institutional level, experts find it difficult to reconcile the Catholic Church’s teaching and practice on marriage regarding unity and indissolubility with African Traditional Religious practice of polygamy, divorce and remarriage. One who contracts a second marriage while the first partner is still alive is considered in the Catholic Church as a dissident. It is not so among the adherents of the African Traditional Religion. We have many instances of where catholic join the African Traditional Religionists due to their matrimonial conditions. Their loss of the Catholic faith is always through marriage celebrated by the members of the African Traditional Religion as a ‘home coming’. Such fallen Catholics become antagonistic to the Catholic church and her teachings especially on marriage and family. Having lost their catholic faith, they constitute a stumbling block to any dialogue between the Catholic church and the African Traditional Religion.

At the local level, the Catholics see the African Traditional Religionists as people with lower moral standards. This “holier than thou” attitude does not go down well with the traditional religionists. They then put in every effort to poison the minds of other members of the society against the catholic church. As a consequence, this hinders inter-religious dialogue. Religious issues are no longer approached with the sincerity and dialogue they deserve. There is a mutual suspicion instead of trust. The efforts of Catholics in promoting dialogue are often construed as an attempt to prevent the Catholics from going back to ‘their roots’. The Catholic pastors are criticized as being agents of the Papacy to prevent indigenization of the church of
Christ. Things are not even easier for the Catholic Pastors among their faithful. Inter-religious dialogue efforts are seen as compromising the Catholic faith. Some conservative Catholics even publicly teach that there is no relationship between light and darkness – darkness referring to non-catholics which as well extends to the African Traditional Religion.

Furthermore, interreligious dialogue in Africa sets the stage for Christianity to encounter the indigenous African religious heritage. The dominant approach in African Theology tends to consider it as non-viable dialogue partner. This position originates from the claim, rightly or wrongly, that African Traditional Religion lacks the structures necessary for the dialogue. Examples of such structures include a systematically organized body of doctrines, a centralized form of leadership, and an authoritative definition of the African Traditional Religious creeds. The Christian bias here is very obvious. However, a remote but more plausible explanation for this negative attitude clearly points to the missionary legacy of intolerance vis-a-vis other religions. There has often been the attempt to reject recognized cults and creeds as a “preparatory stage” for a fuller revelation embodied in Christianity.22

**PASTORAL RESPONSE**

Many theologians have tried to tackle this problem and various solutions have been proposed. The Solution which many now favor and which seems likely in the end to prevail, is that church discipline must be relaxed so that African Partners may live together before marriage. This refers especially to the discipline of Roman Catholic Church. Some have even suggested that the African view of marriage should be extended to the universal church so that infertility would be everywhere an impediment to valid Christian marriage23

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However, this view is not univocal. There are divergent views. Some are of the opinion that the church has no right to offer African a ‘cut-price’ Christianity. The church’s task everywhere was to proclaim and maintain the Christian ideal. It was not empowered to water it down to suit circumstances, but was commissioned to educate the faithful up to the demands of the gospel. This position however seems both too severe and too sweeping.

With respect to polygamy, however, it is important to know that in his book written for African Christian Youth, John S. Mbiti typifies the position of African clergy in arguing that while he personally, view monogamy to be the preferred marital state over polygamy, he is not prepared to condemn the latter because it is a timeless institution that provides a necessary corrective for a crucial problems. Of course, a childless marriage could work and be a happy one, but children in African marriages are an absolute necessity and a couple without them is simply miserable. 24

The bishops being aware of the threat facing a valid Christian marriage in the face of childlessness, declared in their 5th plenary Assembly:

As we realize the value and importance of fertility for African people, we may legitimately ask ourselves whether or not the time has come to examine this point and list it among the conditions of invalidity for annulment of marriage. What, in fact are the consequences of our refusal to take this point into account? Either the wife is purely and simply sent away after a few years without any annulment of the marriage, thus making it impossible for both husband and wife to approach, the Sacraments or if there is no separation, the husband will take a second or third wife in other to get the children the first wife did not give him. 25

It is with a committed interest that we note that the “final proposition” of the African Synod, submitted to the pope, sent everyone back to the drawing board thus: We strongly affirmed the church’s teaching on the unity and indissolubility of marriage as of divine origin……

However, there is the problem of so many Catholics who are being excluded from the Sacraments because they have contracted marriage in a form not recognized by the church. Therefore, the Synod recommends that Episcopal conferences create commissions on marriage in African which will include marriage couples. Their aims will be to study all the questions concerning Marriage from the point view of Theology, Sacramentals, Liturgy and Cannon Law with special reference to cultural questions. One should of course, expect such commissions to consider very seriously the issue of childless marriages in the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria, nay Africa in relation to its effect on the validity or otherwise of Christian marriages.

Although some pastors continue to help those already involved in marriages with the members of the African Traditional Religion so that the marriage becomes, not a source of further division, but an experiment in dialogue at the family level, the results have not been encouraging. There are cases where the woman is ‘forced’ to either join the husband completely or becomes completely indifferent to religious matters. Similar experiences motivate some pastors to absolutely refuse the celebration of marriages of disparity of cult in their churches. Some pastors however are not relenting in their efforts to get the faithful better informed through Catechesis. The Catholic diocese of Awka have also on several occasions in the past, organized seminars for her pastors to get them more enlightened on the church’s policies regarding marriages of disparity of cult or mixed marriages.

SPECIFIC GUIDELINES TO THE PASTORS:

26 Propostion no 35 as cited by Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches, pp.147 – 148.
Since the Africans and the Igbo Catholics in particular are not to be given a watered-down version of the Catholic faith, the pastors should intensify their effort in catechizing the youths especially on the teaching of the Church on marriage. On this we propose the institution of the diocesan marriage counseling centre. This centre of necessity will take care of marriage-related issues; advising both the diocese and the parishes on situations relating to marriage cases, planning marriage—course—programs for the diocese considering its local sensibilities, and assisting individuals especially young unmarried women in their plights. Awareness should be created of the existence of this counseling center which will be made up of experts in Canon Law, psychology, inter-religious dialogue, and local customs in the personnel. It will be the pre-occupation of these experts to organize constantly seminars, workshops and retreats for the youth in which intensive education on marriage and its implications would be provided for them. Integral formation of the Christian should be embraced so as to educate the prospective couples on the different aspect of marital relationship. This should form an essential part of the preparation of candidates for the reception of sacraments of initiation (baptism, eucharist, and confirmation).

Immediate condemnation and excommunication of those who have flouted the church’s teachings in the unity and indissolubility of marriage should be avoided. Without compromising the teaching of the Church, the pastor should reach out to the individual involved to help him or her out of the predicament. It should always be necessary to give proper pastoral attention to such families in difficulty resulting from childlessness. This will help to prepare them to receive and withstand the pressure from the society towards entering into another simultaneous marriage. This can be done by frequent visitations by the pastors.
Even when one should decide to enter into another marriage contrary to the teaching of the Church, the pastor is expected to show some compassionate care and concern. While the church forbids the giving of the sacraments to such people, the pastor should encourage them to continue to participate in other aspects of the Church’s life such as masses, prayers, works of charity and social activities. Pastoral care should be given to them which will be geared towards regularizing such marriages.

At the individual level, the pastor should intensify his study of the African Traditional Religion so as to understand it more. This will help him to know the areas of convergence and divergence between the Catholic faith and the African Traditional Religion, which is mixed up with the culture of the people. Taking into consideration the fact that the African Traditional Religion has no systematized and formulated written creed or articles of faith; that the practitioners are mostly illiterate and aged; and there are variations in practice from community to community, a more concrete approach has to be made to enhance dialogue between the practitioners of the African Traditional Religion and Catholics, the pastors should also appreciate these proposals: They should utilize moments of all available common festivities such as the new yam festival, New Year and other social activities to encounter the practitioners of African Traditional Religion formally. They should use any available opportunity to make public speeches in which he will often highlight the common heritage of all children of God irrespective of their religious affiliations. This is very possible since the Africans especially the Igbo people are disposed to listen to the Pastors whenever they are around to give them some words of wisdom in any field of their choice. Such opportunities should not only be used for blessing the people but also to enlighten them on the teachings of the church.
The pastors can even organize seminars or workshops aimed at enhancing dialogue between the two religions. Not only scholars on African Traditional Religion but real practitioners of the religion should be invited to participate and where possible, give lectures on the tenets of African Traditional Religion. He should face the difficult challenge of helping the people to realize the difference between their culture and the African Traditional Religion. Above all, the pastor must manifest the love of Christ even for sinners. His emphasis should be on how to get them back to communion with the Catholic faith rather than simply judging and condemning. Cases known to him in the internal forum should be reserved to that forum. Even when there appears to be a scandal, the situation should not be exaggerated.

**CONCLUSION:**

The African understanding of Marriage is undoubtedly to be numbered among those customs and usages which must be integrated into the Christian tradition to help towards the creation of a genuinely African Christianity. Creating a genuine African Christianity is simply incarnating the same Gospel message into the African culture. The essential in the Christian message should always remain intact irrespective of the culture. “When doctrine is hard to assimilate even after a long period of evangelization, or when its practice poses a serious pastoral problems, especially in the sacramental life, fidelity to the teachings must be maintained. At the same time, people must be treated with justice and true pastoral charity.”

The good elements in the African culture like the spirit of solidarity manifested in such moments like marriage ceremonies have nothing contrary to the Christian Faith. It is in view of the African Christians’ contribution to the universal church that Pope John Paul II applied the expression “The Church

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as God’s Family in his Apostolic Exhortation Ecclesia in Africa. When African marriage and family are protected, the future of the world and the Church is also preserved since the future of the world and of the church passes through the family.

It will help the church to overcome all ethnocentrism as well favor solidarity and the sharing of personnel and resources among particular churches. The fruits will go beyond the frontiers of African. It is true that the church has made several efforts to encourage dialogue at different levels, the results at the grass roots especially in the catholic diocese of Awka seems not to be encouraging. Much effort is still needed to catechize the faithful. The mutual suspicion between catholic and other religions is yet to be overcome. Most of the people are yet to be literate to be able to read and digest most of the theological guidelines usually proposed by the church’s Magisterial. Many depend more on the customary practices in their locality. Catholic Pastors should also be better informed on the positive elements on the African traditional marriage. This will equip the pastors to fulfill the office of teaching in the Church. Unless the formators are themselves, well formed and informed, the consciences of the faithful will not be well formed to appreciate the church’s efforts at encouraging inter-religious dialogue.

With the on-going search for the proper means of more peaceful dialogue between the Catholic Church and the African Traditional Religion in Igboland especially in the area of marriage, we call on African Church leaders to utilize the means provided by the universal Church to implement the principles of inculturation. According to John Paul II, “it is only with inculturation that the Gospel be firmly implanted in the Continent’s Christian communities”. One area that needs attention is the place of celebration of marriage. The Church rules that the local Ordinary can allow a marriage to be celebrated in another suitable place (c. 1118 par. 2).

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29 John Paul II. Ecclesia in Africa n. 78, pp. 61-62.
Canonists agree that “Another suitable place” could be a hall, a private house a church belonging to another denomination etc.\textsuperscript{30} Although the choice of the place of marriage must take into consideration the fact that marriage is a sacred event, which should not be secularized by the surroundings of the ceremony, the Church in Africa should consider the option of celebrating marriages in the family of the bride where the people culturally conclude and ratify any marriage. Inculturation should not only be emphasized but also seen to be practiced in Igboland. This will bridge the gap between the African Traditional marriage and the Christian marriage. It will correct the impression of considering the Christian marriage as a colonial imposition on the African Traditional marriage, which can easily be overlooked. It will also help to reduce the number of Christians living in irregular unions due to their inability to undertake “another process in the church after their traditional marriage considered valid in the society.

The attitude of the church that goes with the denial of the sacraments of reconciliation and the Eucharist to Catholics in such union will be avoided. A similar practice of celebrating funeral Masses in the family of the deceased is yielding a great dividend in evangelization. Since Africans are always united and hence gather in large numbers irrespective of religious differences in moments of joy and sorrow, such moments should be used for evangelization. Only a few committed Christians usually attend such ceremony like marriage in the church. This will be real inculturation at the grass-root level.

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14 The Code of Canon Law [1983].