

A THEOLOGICAL EVALUATION OF THE FAMILY AS THE FIRST SCHOOL OF CHRISTIAN INITIATION IN THE LIGHT OF ECCLESIA IN AFRICA

By

Francisca Eniye Agho

Department of Theology, All Saints Major Seminary,
Uhiele, Ekpoma, Edo State, Nigeria
Email: berylcisca@yahoo.com

and

Kingsley Ehimhenmen Akhere

Department of Theology, All Saints Major Seminary,
Uhiele, Ekpoma, Edo State, Nigeria
Email: akherekingsley066@gmail.com

Abstract

Ecclesia in Africa emphasizes that the family is the foundation of society and the first school of Christian initiation. Findings show that the fruitfulness of conjugal love extends to the fruits of the moral, spiritual, and supernatural life that parents hand over to their children education. It is the function of the Church to protect and evangelize the family to strengthen the larger society. However, the family has become an object of numerous complexities due to rapid challenges and forces of change such as single-parenthood, domestic violence, family instability, and poverty which appear to distort the very essence and notion of family. This paper examines the

theological foundation and meaning of the family as the “first school of Christian initiation” in the light of Ecclesia in Africa and identifies and analyzes the contemporary challenges threatening the family's role as the primary educator in the faith. This paper is relevant to our contemporary world as it seeks to respond to the pastoral urgency of the African family, which has forgotten its role as the first family of Christian initiation, by proposing some pastoral recommendations for empowering African Christian families.

Key words: *Ecclesia*, Initiation, Family, Education

Introduction

The family is the smallest and most fundamental community in the Church and society. It is composed of a father, mother, and children united by deep emotional and spiritual bonds. The Catholic Church refers to this family, consisting of a father, mother, and children, as *Ecclesia Domestica*.¹ The family, which is a mini-Church, grows and develops within society. The family stands as the primary pillar of society and represents the Church on a small scale, entrusted with the mission of proclaiming the faith. Family life is therefore not merely a social arrangement but a vocation of the heart and soul, accompanied by responsibilities that extend to the family, society, and the Church. Understanding the meaning of *Ecclesia Domestica* implies a model and pattern of faith education in the process of forming a personality, intelligence, and noble character. Through a consistent educational pattern rooted in Christian values, children's faith can grow holistically and sustainably. The role of parents in the formation of children's faith is a fundamental aspect of the development of Christian spirituality, especially in the context of the Catholic Church. Effective faith education does not only

occur in formal environments such as school or Mass, but essentially begins and is continuously nurtured through the home environment as a domestic church.

Clarification of Terms

1. Family

A family is the smallest community in the Church and human society. The family, as the smallest element of the Church and society, consists of a father, mother, and children who share a natural and emotional bond. In the context of this article, a family is a basic building block of society created by God, and it is crucial for a healthy state and Church.² In traditional African society, the family is responsible for the spiritual, emotional, moral, intellectual, and physical empowerment of the child. Pope Benedict XVI states that the family is the ‘sanctuary of life’ and a vital cell of society and the church. It is in the family that people are formed and acquire basic life skills.³

2. Ecclesia

Our English word “Church” comes from the Greek word “*Ecclesia*”. “*Ecclesia*” is a compound of two words: one meaning “out of” and the other “calling”. The word *Ecclesia* is used in the Bible to refer to a gathering of people, and never to a building. Hence, in the context of this article, the word *Ecclesia* is fundamentally used to refer to the congregation of the people of God.⁴

3. Christian

According to the Advanced Learner's Dictionary, Christian is based on or believing the teachings of Jesus Christ.⁵ In other words, a Christian is a person who believes in the of Jesus Christ or has been baptized in a Christian Church. In relation to the background of this paper, a Christian is a person who believes in God and lives according to the teachings and practices of Jesus Christ.

4. Initiation

According to the Advanced Learner's Dictionary, initiation is the act of somebody becoming a member of a group, often with a special ceremony; the act of introducing somebody to an activity or skill.⁶ In the framework of this article, initiation means a gradual, formal, and ontological acceptance into Christianity.

An Overview of the Family as the First School of Christian Initiation

The family is the place where the very fabric of life is woven; it ought to be, ideally, the centre of meaning and energy for most lay Christians. It is the milieu in which they are called to grow in sanctity. The family is the place where fundamental relationships for life are created and modeled. Here, we learn to be loved and to love, to serve others, and to share life. In the family, the Christian man, woman, or child lives their daily experiences of choosing in line with the highest ideals set by the community, be it the family itself or its larger context. Accordingly, it is in the family that children learn the processes of making choices and living out the responsibilities inherent in such choices. Within the family, ethical choices are made daily, such as the choice to be fair and just with our resources and the choice to influence young minds in ways of peace and justice. It is the cradle of the experience of living with human dignity. The family is where the dignity of the human person is first experienced and promoted, thus forming the parameters within which these will be understood in other milieu. Through all the circumstances of their lives, family members learn together how to live each experience in faith and in relationship to Jesus Christ, whose total paschal mystery; life, death, and resurrection sanctifies all life experiences of humans and creation. Their faithfulness leads them to encounter the risen one in the

new seeds of hope and life that God's faithfulness unfailingly brings into human situations. Importantly, the family is the first school of the love of God and of relationship with the divine. Thus, the constancy of faithfulness to prayer and the teachings of God's word is first witnessed in the family. Witness is the first and most essential component of formation in a Christian community.

The Nature and Processes of Christian Initiation

Christian initiation is completed through three sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation, and the Eucharist. These sacraments serve as the foundation for every Christian life. The norm, as set down in the New Rite of Christian Initiation, is that a person should receive all three sacraments; Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist during the annual celebration of the Easter Vigil, following a suitable period of formation known as Catechumenate.⁷ These sacraments of Christian initiation free both men and women from the power of darkness, and at the same time, enable them to receive the Spirit of adoption which makes them children of God. Baptism incorporates men and women into Christ. They receive not only forgiveness for all their sins but are also raised from their natural human state to the dignity of adopted children of God. Through water and the Holy Spirit, they become new creatures and adopted children of God.⁸ In Confirmation, men and women are signed with the gift of the Holy Spirit which enables them to be more perfectly the image of their Lord Jesus Christ. As soldiers of Christ, they bear witness to the Lord before the world and readily work towards the growth of the Church. Finally, in the Eucharist, they eat the flesh and drink the blood of Christ so that they may have eternal life. In this Eucharistic sacrifice, the priest offers the entire community of the faithful to God, and

together they pray for a greater outpouring of the Holy Spirit for the unity of the entire human race.⁹

The Role of Parents as Primary Educators in Faith

Since the Second Vatican Council, the Church has consistently affirmed parents as the primary educators of their children in matters of faith. Pope John Paul II emphasized the family as a domestic Church where faith is both taught and lived.¹⁰ Parents have the first responsibility for the education of their children. They bear witness to this responsibility first by creating a home where tenderness, forgiveness, respect, fidelity, and selfless service are the rules. The home is well suited for educating in the virtues. This requires apprenticeship in self-denial, sound judgment and self-mastery -- the preconditions of all true freedom (CCC 2223).¹²

Education in the faith by the parents should begin in the child's earliest years. This already happens when family members help one another grow in faith by the witness of a Christian life in keeping with the Gospel. Family catechesis precedes, accompanies, and enriches other forms of instruction in the faith (emphasis added). Parents have the mission of teaching their children to pray and discover their vocation as children of God. The parish is the Eucharistic community and the heart of the liturgical life of Christian families; it is a privileged place for the catechesis of children and parents (CCC 2226).¹³

The African Family in the Light of Ecclesia in Africa

Ecclesia in Africa, issued by Pope John Paul II after the 1994 African Synod, presents the Church as the "Family of God." This vision resonates deeply with the African cultural understanding of family as an extended network of solidarity, participation, and shared responsibility. This

special synod was geared towards “a detailed and realistic study of the lights and shadows, the challenges and future prospects of evangelization in Africa on the threshold of the Third Millennium of the Christian faith especially at the very moment when human events seemed to be tempting Africa to discouragement and despair.”¹⁴ The special assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops was heavily influenced and motivated by the Second Vatican Council when some African bishops conceived the idea of a meeting to discuss the evangelization of the continent of Africa. One of the fruits of this Council was the creation of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) in July-August 1969, during the visit of Pope Paul VI to Uganda. The special assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops chose the theme, “the Church in Africa and her evangelizing mission towards the Year 2000: You shall be my witnesses” (Acts 1:8).¹⁵ The theme captures all the various aspects of the evangelizing mission which the Church must take into account at the present time: evangelization, inculturation, dialogue, justice and peace and the means of social communication.¹⁶

The Holy Father in the spirit of dialogue stated that he wished to address the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation in the first place to “Pastors and Lay Catholics and then, to our brothers and sisters of other Christian confessions, to those who profess the great monotheistic religions, in particular, the followers of African traditional religion, and to all people of good will who in one way or another have at heart Africa's spiritual and material development or who hold in their hands the destiny of this great continent.”¹⁷ This opening statement of the Holy Father captured in its entirety the openness of the Church to corroborate and dialogue with all people of goodwill, irrespective of one's religion or creed. With this

dispositional attitude, the Holy Father set out to lay the ground for a new method of evangelization through dialogue. The epic centre of this dialogue is the powerful metaphor of the “Church-Family of God.” This is not merely an analogy but a foundational model for understanding the Church's identity and mission in Africa. As a matter of fact, *Ecclesia* in Africa clearly builds on the Second Vatican Council’s teaching of the family as the “domestic Church” (*ecclesia domestica*).¹⁸ However, it deepens this concept by rooting it in the extended family structure central to African anthropology. The Synod Fathers expressed their intention to re-orient the indigenous Church in accordance with the African view of the family. The Church prioritizes the family as the fundamental cell of evangelization and Christian life.

The family presents the Church as a “community of love and life,” where members are bound not merely by doctrine but by familial bonds in Christ. This makes the mystery of the Church tangible and concrete within people’s lived realities. Moreover, scholars like Mukadi note that this ecclesiology can be a “double-edged sword”.¹⁹ While it fosters a strong sense of identity and belonging, it can also unconsciously reinforce traditional hierarchies and exclusionary practices. The familial saying “blood is thicker than water” can sometimes translate into tribalism, ethnocentrism, or clericalism within the Church, complicating the call for universal inclusivity. Thus, *Ecclesia* in Africa presents both an aspirational ideal and a pastoral structure that must be followed wisely.

A Theological Evaluation of Family’s role in Christian Initiation

John Paul II entitles the Christian family’s priestly function as “The Christian family as a community in dialogue with God. The church’s sanctuary in the home is a consecrated

place and a temple of worship. This implies that the church's holy place of worship is not only in the cathedral and parish church, but also in the domestic church."²⁰

1. The Family's Contribution to Christian Initiation in African Parishes:

The Church, understood etymologically as an assembly of people called together, is "One" but is organized or subdivided in a hierarchical pattern starting from the biggest assemblies which are, the archdioceses, to the smallest assembly, the family, which is the cell of the Church. The church models herself as a family. She must work so that the family, as the domestic church, might reflect the Holy Family, where total self-giving for each other is marked by respect, openness to others, and collaboration. The understanding of the Church as a family is a fruit of the first African synod. When we talk of family in Africa, the following elements readily come to mind: unity, solidarity, participation and co-responsibility as well as family based and centered education.

2. Challenges facing the African Family in its role as the First school of Initiation

With all the great children and youth programs within churches today, many parents allow churches to "take the wheel" when it comes to their kids' spiritual development, while they take a more passive role.²¹ We can easily become convinced that it is the church's job to help our kids grow spiritually, not ours. God specifically places the responsibility for nurturing a child's spiritual development on parents -- not the church. In the book of Deuteronomy 6:6-7, we read, "These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up."²² While our churches serve to partner with us in

this great task of spiritually nurturing our kids, God has given us; parents the responsibility and the tremendous opportunity to pass our faith to our kids. It is one way you can truly ‘get back to the basics’ as a parent. However, despite this ideal, African Christian families face significant obstacles in fulfilling their roles. These challenges are both socio-cultural and theological, as discussed below.

a. Single parenthood:

When one parent shoulders the entire burden of raising children, the family’s capacity to be a “school” is stretched. The parent is often consumed by the daily struggle for survival, that is, securing food, paying school fees, and navigating work, thereby leaving little time, energy, or emotional reserve for the intentional, consistent sharing of faith, prayer, and Christian values. The absence of a second parent can also create a gap in the lived example of Christian partnership and mutual love, which is core to the family’s witness. This reality of single parenthood is a key challenge that distorts the essence and notion of the family as the first school of faith.

b. Family instabilities

In many cases, parents have little time with their children, who are brought up by other agents, including hired caregivers. The primary right and duty of parents to educate their children is even overtaken by well-meaning arrangements such as schools. In many countries, schools seem to have taken priority over families in the education of the children. Children leave their homes very early in the morning for school and often return late. Frequently, family evenings are taken up by school “homework”. In the guise of its vital importance, the school has been allowed to overwhelm the family in terms of time, leaving little or no time for living, praying, or playing as a family. These are among the grave dangers to the educative and

formative role of the family, and there are many others. Husbands and wives consumed by work are unable to have the kind of quality time that affords them the companionship that is the grace of Christian marriage.

c. Domestic Violence

Domestic violence directly contradicts the foundation of the Christian family, which is meant to be a sanctuary of love, safety, and respect. In a home marked by abuse, fear replaces trust and control replaces mutual service. This environment often teaches children through traumatic experiences and a distorted vision of power, love, and gender relations. These experiences are hostile to the Gospel message of peace, forgiveness, and dignity for all. Such a home cannot function as a credible “first school” of Christian life, as lived reality weakens any faith teaching.

d. Poverty

Poverty is more than a lack of money; it is a relentless source of stress that permeates every aspect of family life. When parents are consumed by worries over the next meal or rent, spiritual formation can understandably become a lower priority. Poverty can also limit access to resources that support Christian initiation, such as children’s Bibles, transportation to church events, or even the simple stability needed for regular family prayers. Constant pressure can lead to desperation, sometimes fraying family bonds and making the home a place of tension rather than peace. Therefore, the challenge of poverty actively works against the family’s ability to fulfill its formative role in faith.

e. Conflict with Cultural Initiation Rites:

A profound challenge is the tension between Christian initiation and traditional cultural rites of passage, such as male circumcision rituals. These rites are deeply embedded

in the concept of identity, community belonging, and transition to adulthood. For example, In South Africa, every year initiates suffer from deaths, penile amputations, and psychological trauma due to unsafe practices, poor sanitation, and sometimes criminal negligence at traditional initiation schools.²³ Families are caught in a dilemma: choosing between a culturally mandated rite that carries physical risks and a Christian identity that may seem to reject a core aspect of their heritage. As images of the love of Christ for the Church, husbands and wives need to spend time together and help each other thrive in the search for fullness of life to which Christ invites each one.

Pastoral Recommendations for Empowering African Christian Families

To empower African Christian families, the Church must adopt a pastoral approach that is compassionate, culturally sensitive, and creative. Parishes should actively support models that successfully integrate cultural sensitivity with Christian and health safety. The Church should emphasize parental involvement, transparency about health, strict safety protocols, and a substance-free environment, resulting in zero medical complications. The Church can study and encourage family-led, community-accountable models as pastoral alternatives. The Church, constituted of the parish, the diocese, and the universal community, ought to take these concerns of the priority of the family in the formation role for Christians very seriously and propose ways of creating a culture that supports the space and role of the family. There is no doubt that initiates to support families as educators are insufficient. This implies that Catholic laity are in a special position to propose and offer new and creative forums through which families' priorities in the Christian formation of their members can be cultivated. Apostolic outreaches, such as those by the

“Marriage Encounter” ought to be encouraged and made culturally appropriate and financially affordable to support couples and families in their mission. Catholic laity who have the benefit of good formation ought to prioritize new ways of ministering to families to give them the courage to choose life in the midst of the challenges that cloud their daily lives.²⁴ Small basic Christian communities must be further developed as the primary pastoral structure for supporting families. They can provide a forum for catechesis on Church teaching regarding culture and sacrament, practical support for families in crisis, and a communal witness that embodies the “Church as the Family of God”. In addition, churches must move from “public silence” to open dialogue about African ritual practices. Pastoral guidelines should help families navigate cultural obligations without compromising faith or safety, distinguishing between positive cultural values and practices that are incompatible with Christian teaching or human dignity.

Conclusion

This article has confirmed that the family is far more than a place to eat, sleep and live together. The vision of the Church as the Family of God, as articulated in *Ecclesia* in Africa, affirms the Christian family as the first school of Christian initiation where a person learns about God, love and prayer, and how to live as a Christian. Before any child goes to Church or attends catechism classes, the home is where they first see faith in action through the words, prayers, patience and kindness of their parents. This makes parents the very first teachers of Christian life, a duty that no Priest, Nun, or teacher can fully replace. Hence, Christian initiation does not end with Baptism, Confirmation or the Eucharist. Rather, these sacraments are the foundation, and the family continues the work of

building on that foundation every day through family prayer, forgiveness, shared meals and moral guidance. Unfortunately, many African families today struggle to carry out this role because of real and painful challenges such as single parenting, unstable homes, domestic violence, poverty, and even conflicts between Christian teachings and traditional cultural rites. Despite these difficulties, the Church cannot simply watch from a distance. The pastoral recommendations offered in this study are practical steps that can help families regain their position as true domestic Churches. Ultimately, if the Church in Africa truly wants to be the “Family of God,” it must invest deeply in empowering the small family unit. When a father and mother live their faith sincerely at home, when children see love and prayer as normal parts of life, then the family becomes what God intended: a living school of Christian initiation, where faith is not just taught but caught. Without strong families, the Church’s mission remains weak. But with strong families, the faith will naturally grow and spread across Africa.

Endnotes

¹ Agustinus Kia, “Implementation of Parental Education Patterns in Developing Children’s Faith through the Practice of Basic Prayers in the Catholic Church: A Qualitative Study at the Station of Saint Apostle Carolus Mangisuba”, Our Lady of the Sacred Heart Parish, Kuper, International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research and Growth Evaluation, (2025) 1.

² KJ Pali, “The significance of integration of families of seminarians in the Roman Catholic ministerial formation in South Africa”, 1.

³ KJ Pali, “The significance of integration of families of seminarians in the Roman Catholic ministerial formation in South Africa”, 1.

⁴ Boyce Mouton, The Ecclesia, 1.

⁵ A. S Hornby, Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English, (Oxford: University Press, 2015), 260.

⁶ A. S Hornby, Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English, 806.

⁷ The Rite of the Catholic Church (New York: Pueblo Publishing co, 1976), 3.

⁸ The Rite of the Catholic Church (New York: Pueblo Publishing co, 1976), 3.

⁹ Faustinus Ugwuanyi, “God’s Covenants and the Sacraments of Christian Initiation”, (Accessed on 24th of January, 2026), <http://dx.doi.org/10.18290/rt.2019.66.346>.

¹⁰ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio*, “The Role of the Church Family in the Modern World”, 1981, paragraph 21.

¹¹ Pocket ritual, (National Liturgical Centre, 2023), 4.

¹² The Catechism of the Catholic Church, (Kenya: Paulines Publications, 1994), 520.

¹³ The Catechism of the Catholic Church, 520.

¹⁴ Isidore U. Nwanaju, “The Contributions of *Ecclesia* in Africa and *Africae Munus* to Dialogue with Muslims in Nigeria”, (Ebonyi State: Department of Philosophy & Religion, 2016), 3.

¹⁵ The Holy Bible; The New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition (India: Theological Publications, 1991), 119.

¹⁶ Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia* in Africa, 2000, no 17.

¹⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia* in Africa, 2000, no 7.

¹⁸ Austin Flannery, Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium* no. 11, 330.

¹⁹ Marcel Mukadi, “The Theology of the Church as Family Informed by ‘*Ecclesia* in Africa’: A Double-Edged Sword Ecclesiology.” *Open Journal of Social Sciences* 13 (2025): 168-191. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2025.1310009>

²⁰ Ennio Pasquale Mastroianni, “Christian Family As Church? Inquiry, Analysis, and Pastoral Implications”, *Doctoral Thesis and Dissertations*, (1999), 121.

²¹ Jim Burns, “How to Pass Your Faith to Your Kids” *Lifelong Faith: The theory and Practice of Lifelong faith formation*, Volume 5.3, 2011. 41.

²² The Holy Bible; The New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition (India: Theological Publications, 1991), 163.

²³ Thembele Kepe, “Secrets that kill: Crisis, Custodianship and responsibility in ritual Male Circumcision in the Eastern Cape Province, South Africa”, *Journal of Social Science and Medicine*, 2010, 730.

²⁴ Beatrice Churu, *Places of Education and Christian Formation in Africa* (Cameroon: Delegate of the Christian Life Community to the Pan-African Congress of Catholic Laity, 2012), 3.