

WHEN DOCTRINE WALKS ON AFRICAN SOIL: MARRIAGE, POLYGAMY, AND SYNODAL DISCERNMENT BEYOND UNA CARO

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Abstract

The Vatican document *Una Caro* (In Praise of Monogamy) reaffirms the Catholic Church's perennial teaching on the exclusive and indissoluble nature of marriage. While doctrinally sound, its reception in African ecclesial contexts has exposed a pastoral tension that cannot be resolved by abstract moral clarity alone. Engaging Leonida Katunge's critique and drawing on nearly two decades of parish priestly ministry across multiple dioceses in southeastern Nigeria, this article argues that African responses to *Una Caro* represent not resistance to doctrine but a call for synodal listening and contextual moral discernment. Employing a contextual–pastoral theological methodology, the article demonstrates that fidelity to Catholic teaching on marriage is most credible when mediated through accompaniment, patience, and concern for women and children whose lives are directly affected by moral decisions. The study proposes that African pastoral experience constitutes a legitimate *locus theologicus* for the Church's ongoing moral reflection.

1. Introduction: When Moral Teaching Meets Human Faces

The Catholic Church's teaching on marriage is among its most beautiful and demanding moral visions. Rooted in creation (Gen 2:24), reaffirmed by Christ (Matt 19:4–8), and elevated by Paul as a sign of Christ's covenant with the Church (Eph 5:31–32), marriage is proclaimed as an exclusive, lifelong union of love and fidelity (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1992).

Una Caro stands firmly within this tradition. Its intention is clear: to affirm monogamy as the authentic Christian form of marriage and to resist cultural practices that obscure its sacramental meaning. Yet across Africa, the document has generated unease—not because its teaching is unknown or rejected, but because its pastoral implications touch fragile lives.

African Christians do not encounter marriage as a theory. They encounter it in compounds where children eat from the same pot, in villages where lineage matters, and in families where a woman's security is often bound to marital belonging. When doctrine speaks into such spaces, it must walk carefully. As an African proverb warns, when a visitor enters a home, he must first learn where the floor is weak. This article situates the debate around *Una Caro* within this lived ecclesial reality.

2. Theological Framework The Church's teaching on marriage, reaffirmed in *Una Caro*, is treated as doctrinally normative. At the same time, the study follows the Second Vatican Council's insistence that while doctrine itself does not change, its articulation and pastoral mediation must attend to historical and cultural contexts (Second Vatican Council 1965, §62).

3. Methodology

This study adopts a contextual–pastoral theological methodology, integrating Catholic moral theology, African theological anthropology, and the ecclesiology of synodality. The method is intentionally human-centered: it begins with lived experience while remaining anchored in magisterial authority.

Three methodological movements shape the analysis.

First is a receptive hermeneutic, examining how magisterial teaching is received within African pastoral contexts. Reception is understood as a theological moment in which doctrine encounters concrete human lives (Francis 2018).

Second, the article draws on African contextual theology and relational moral anthropology, which view the human person as fundamentally communal. Within this framework, marriage is a social covenant

involving extended families and future generations, not merely a private contract (Bujo 2001; Magesa 2010).

Third, the study employs a pastoral–practical moral method, inspired by Aquinas’ distinction between universal moral principles and their prudent application (Aquinas, ST I–II, q.94, a.4), and Pope Francis’ emphasis on accompaniment and gradual discernment (*Amoris Laetitia* 2016).

This dialogical methodology reflects the Church’s synodal self-understanding: a Church that listens, walks with her people, and discerns truth together (Francis 2015).

4. Africa as Context, Not Moral Problem

Leonida Katunge’s critique—“Why Is the Vatican Still Getting Africa Wrong on Marriage?”—does not deny the Church’s teaching. Rather, it questions the lens through which Africa is often viewed: as a perpetual pastoral exception defined almost exclusively by polygamy (Katunge 2025).

This framing obscures Africa’s complexity. In most African Catholic communities today, monogamy is not only taught but embraced. The real pastoral challenge lies in a minority of cases where polygamous unions predate conversion or baptism and involve women and children whose survival depends on relational stability.

To speak of Africa without listening to Africa risks reducing lived faith to a footnote in moral discourse..

4.1 Parish Ministry as a Locus Theologicus

For the author, these questions are not theoretical. Ordained in 2003, he has served continuously as a parish priest for over nineteen years across multiple parishes in southeastern Nigeria: St. Anthony’s Parish, Umunze; St. Mary’s Parish, Aguluezechukwu; St. Patrick’s Parish, Igbo-Ukwu (Awka Diocese); and currently St. Theresa’s Parish, Oko (Ekwulobia Diocese).

Across these contexts, the overwhelming majority of Christian marriages conform to Church teaching. Where polygamous unions exist, they are few, inherited, and pastorally delicate. Yet experience has shown a recurring pattern: when canonical norms are applied abruptly—without sustained accompaniment—pastoral crises emerge.

Women are left economically exposed. Children become socially displaced. Families fracture. The Church, instead of appearing as a mother who guides, is perceived as a judge who wounds. African wisdom warns: the doctor who treats the disease but kills the patient has not healed.

This experience does not weaken doctrine; it reveals the cost of detaching doctrine from pastoral prudence.

5. Accompaniment, Prudence, and Moral Credibility

Catholic moral theology has always distinguished between moral norms and their application. Aquinas reminds us that while principles are universal, their application requires attentiveness to circumstances (ST I–II, q.94, a.4).

Amoris Laetitia echoes this wisdom, cautioning against applying moral law “as stones to throw at people’s lives” (Francis 2016, §305). African pastoral experience confirms this insight. Conversion often occurs gradually, through patient catechesis, dialogue, and trust.

Where accompaniment is practiced, change becomes possible. Where it is absent, damage is often irreversible. As elders say, a calabash does not fill with water in one rain.

6. African Moral Anthropology and Communal Discernment

African moral reasoning is relational. Personhood is defined by belonging and responsibility. Marriage is therefore a communal covenant, not merely an individual choice (Magesa 2010).

This worldview resonates deeply with Catholic social teaching, which places human dignity and the common good at the heart of moral discernment (Second Vatican Council 1965, §26). From this perspective, the ethical question is not whether monogamy is the Christian ideal—it is—but how the Church journeys with people toward that ideal without destroying existing human goods.

7. Synodality and the Authority of Listening

The Una Caro debate exposes a test for synodality. Pope Francis insists that synodality requires listening at all levels of the Church (Francis 2018).

Africa today is not a peripheral Church. Its experiences must shape global moral reflection. Listening does not weaken magisterial authority; it purifies and strengthens it.

8. Conclusion: Doctrine That Walks With the People

This article has argued that African engagement with Una Caro is not resistance but responsibility. It is the voice of pastors and families asking that moral truth walk gently on human soil.

Doctrine remains intact. What must grow is the Church's capacity for accompaniment. As African wisdom teaches, the road is made by walking. Moral teaching becomes credible not when it stands above people, but when it walks beside them toward conversion, justice, and hope

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