

# The Theology of the Church as Family Informed by “Ecclesia in Africa”: A Double-Edged Sword Ecclesiology

Marcel Mukadi

Jordan University College (JUCo), St. Augustine University of Tanzania, Morogoro, Tanzania  
Email: mukadimarcel@yahoo.fr

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

**Received:** September 9, 2025

**Accepted:** September 27, 2025

**Published:** September 30, 2025

Copyright © 2025 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc.  
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

---

## Abstract

The paper explores the concept of the Church as a family in Africa, highlighting its complex nature as a double-edged sword. It emphasizes the benefits of community and support within the Church, particularly in the context of African ecclesiology, where it fosters a strong sense of identity and interconnectedness. However, it also addresses the challenges, such as reinforcing traditional hierarchies and exclusionary practices based on the saying “blood is thicker than water”, which complicates inclusivity within the Church. A critical examination of this duality is essential for gaining a deeper understanding of ecclesiastical dynamics in African contexts. This analysis is grounded in comprehensive library research and is primarily centered on the Post-Synodal Exhortation of the First African Synod of Bishops, titled *Ecclesia in Africa* (EA), which was published in 1995 by Saint John Paul II.

## Keywords

Church, Church as Family of God, Double-Edged Sword

---

## 1. Introduction

In today’s world, there is a growing curiosity about the essence of the Church, often framed by the question, “What is the Church?” Contemporary theologians recognize that no single term can fully capture the Church’s complex identity, which renders it a profound mystery. The Church’s nature and mission are best expressed through various metaphors, influenced by cultural and social contexts that enrich ecclesiological discourse.

One illustrative metaphor is that of a “family”, which was emphasized in the outcomes of the 1995 African synod. This raises the pivotal question: Can we ap-

ply all the characteristics of the African family model to the Church? For Augustin Ramazani Bishwende, the Church as the family of God is key to solving the challenges of global modernity (Bishwende, 2022). Based on this, we firmly acknowledge the positive values associated with family, reflecting community ideals such as love, mutual support, and solidarity. Ramazani, as well as the African Synod Fathers and I, acknowledge the same values. However, everyday reality demonstrates the opposite; daily challenges, including tribalism and ethnocentrism, can undermine these values.

While the concept of family can promote fraternity, it can also lead to exclusion and dependency, posing a double-edged sword for both society and the Church. A critical approach is necessary to navigate these complexities and examine the Church's role in addressing both challenges and opportunities for growth. Considering this, we assert that the Church, as the family of God, represents a double-edged sword ecclesiology. This is the core theme we will explore in this paper, beginning with the Church as a mystery.

## 2. The Church Is a Mystery

A plurality of images exists to express the reality of the "Church". This plurality deeply enriches our understanding of the Church. On the one hand, it shows us that the Church cannot be confined to a single definition, because that would mean diminishing its inner realities. On the other hand, the fact that the reality of the Church cannot be imprisoned in a unique description proves the incapacity of the human mind to grasp its very nature. The Church is a mystery (LG, 1). And the word mystery, according to *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, signifies in general "that which is unknowable, or valuable knowledge that is kept secret. The mystery, then, is a supernatural truth, one that by its very nature lies above the finite intelligence" (McHugh, 1971). In this regard, Pius XII declared in *Mystici Corporis*: "If we could define and describe this true Church of Jesus-Christ—which is the One, Holy, Catholic, Roman Church—we shall find no expression noble, more sublime or more divine than the phrase which calls it the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ" (Pius XII, 1943). The Church is a reality incommensurate with any human expression. Pius XII put the emphasis on Christ as the core, the center, and the source of life to Whom all are united and Who endows each one with gifts fitting him/her for his/her position in the body, which is nothing less than the Church (Joyce, 1971).

In other words, as Henri De Lubac shows in his book, *The Splendor of the Church*, "the Church is a mystery of faith, and surpasses the capacities and powers of our intellect" (De Lubac, 1956). We find the very same teaching with much more weight in the opening address of Paul VI at the Second Vatican Council, in *Lumen Gentium* (LG 1): "The Church is a mystery. It is a reality imbued with the hidden presence of God. It lies, therefore, within the very nature of the Church to be always open to new and ever greater exploration" (Abbot, 1996). The Church, like the Blessed Trinity, is a true mystery of our faith that we experience and be-

lieve in. Like Christ, the Church is also at the core of our faith. Hence, the Church as the mystery becomes the point around which all the other ecclesiological expressions revolve. Avery Cardinal Dulles believes that the Church is a mystery that cannot be fully described. His perspective aligns with that of Vatican II, which states, “The term ‘mystery’ signifies that the Church, as a divine reality embedded in history, cannot be completely understood or expressed by human thought or language” (Dulles, 1987b). This understanding of the Church as a mystery is fundamental to his ecclesiology and models of the Church. He articulates this clearly when he argues (Dulles, 1987b),

In selecting the term “models”, I wish to indicate my conviction that the Church, like other theological realities, is a mystery. Mysteries are realities of which we cannot speak directly. If we wish to talk about them at all, we must draw analogies afforded by our experience of the world. These analogies provide models. By attending to the analogies and utilizing them as models, we can indirectly grow in our understanding of the Church.

In my own view, these analogies or models represent human experiences. They reflect the daily human life of communities in society and the Church. This argument encapsulates Dulles’s comprehensive understanding of the Church’s reality. He realized that the human intellect could not comprehend the Church’s inner nature as a Mystery, but it can express that truth through analogies. It cannot fully grasp the deep coherence and values that are contained in that mystery. Still, it can help Christians understand their own local realities and have the capacity to apply the model of the Church, which corresponds to their daily lives.

### 3. Use of Images

In his book “*Images of the Church in the New Testament*”, Paul Minear provides more details on this matter (Minear, 1960). The Bible offers us various images found in both the Old and New Testaments. Paul Minear lists more than ninety-six images, for instance, the Church as a flock of sheep, a marching host, a temple, a field, a vine, and a pillar. Such images convey a specific message to those who use them. They carry a program of life and actions for the specified communities and transform their life perspectives in one way or another. Regarding secular life, the images arouse courage, militancy, and purity among people. As Dulles says, they generate confidence, devotion, attitudes, and courses of action in the community (Dulles, 1987b). Meanwhile, Preston notes that not all these images are strictly and exclusively applied to the Church, but all, to some extent, reveal the dimensions of the Church and speak about God in this world. He pursues (Preston, 1997):

“The New Testament boasts a wealth of imagery where the Church is concerned. It is the salt of the earth, a letter from Christ, fish and fish net, the altar, the God’s building, the bride of Christ, virgins, the wedding feast, a chosen race, a holy nation, the justified, the lambs, the house of the God, sons

of God, the diversities of ministries, the body of which Christ is the head”.

So, I can say that these biblical images reveal what the Church really is. The images of the Church depict the realities of believers and their daily human experiences, encompassing both social and religious aspects. To use Dulles’ language, “images of the Church should be deeply rooted in the corporate experience and situation of the faithful” (Dulles, 1987b).

It follows then that images are not static, unmoved, or unchanged because they adopt and are adapted to the new form of life of the believers. They are dynamic, allowing them to change. As Paul Tillich states: “Images are born, or they die; they cannot be forced on people, nor can they ever adequately represent the reality they signify” (Murphy-O’Connor, 1984). Even apart from this understanding, it becomes very clear that there are old images that actually mean nothing to our modern world and are intended to disappear, making way for new ones that correspond to recent realities. As the world changes, so do images. Rapid cultural change significantly impacts the newly adopted forms of images. If the meaning of an image lies in its use, then we learn how to use images from the culture in which we live, thereby shaping our experience of the particular realities surrounding us. Images cannot be imposed on people. They are expressions of people’s identities. One must examine the environment to discover the true meaning of a particular image. He, at the same time, notes (Dulles, 1987b):

“City dwellers in a twenty-first-century democracy feel ill at ease with many of the biblical images, since these are drawn from the life of a pastoral and patriarchal people of the ancient Near East. Many of us know very little from direct experience about lambs, wolves, sheep, vines, and grapes, or even about kings and patriarchs as they were in biblical times. There is a need, therefore, to supplement these images with others that speak more directly to our contemporaries”.

I agree with Dulles when he says, “the contemporary crisis of faith is in very large part a crisis of images” (Dulles, 1987a). What, then, does the Church teach about her images?

The main agenda of Vatican II was the renewal of the Church. To some extent, all Council documents clearly referenced the Church. What strikes me is how the nature and the mission of the Church are presented in images. A notable example is the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, which focuses on the Church as the body of Christ and develops the image of the people of God. Clowney notes that Chapter Six of this document references numerous images from both the Old and New Testaments. He remarks, “These [images] are either taken from the life of the shepherd or the cultivation of the land, from the art of building or family life and marriage; they have their further preparation in the prophets” (Clowney, 1984).

Images derive from human daily experience and reflect its realities. What could the image of a vine mean for Africans unfamiliar with this plant, or the image of

a shepherd for modern Westerners? Are they not meaningless? This is because the image used carries with it the culture and social activities of its people. Additionally, the same image can convey different meanings depending on the context and the time. The way Africans understand the image of “shepherd” differs from Western conceptions. For most Africans, a shepherd spends most of his time far from his people, amidst his flock in the bush. He endures all kinds of difficulties in feeding his sheep. For a Western shepherd, the work has been facilitated by new technologies, which provide him with great facilities for caring for his sheep. Another image could be that of “family”. The understandings of Africans and Westerners differ. While for Westerners, it means the very nuclear family, Africans use it to include the extended family.

According to the Second Vatican Council, the Church is no longer seen as a mere institution, as the Jesuit Robert Bellarmine defined it (Rigal, 2000b). Instead, the Church is the people of God, the body of Christ, and the sacrament of salvation. Vatican II introduced a new perspective on the mystery of the Church, grounded in Scripture. The Council seems to have understood better than earlier synods that mere definitions impoverish rather than enrich our appreciation of the Church as a mystery. Therefore, the Fathers of the Council preferred the use of images. Although they used many diverse images, they seem to emphasize one image of the Church: “people of God”. Unless I am mistaken, the people of God as an image of the Church is the most popular image known to many Christians, and it is still taught in many major seminaries to this day. In many African countries where I have been, whenever you dare to ask any believer what the Church is, without delay and too much reflection, he/she will answer that the Church is the people of God. Even simple believers know this definition by heart, like the old catechism. But when this image is challenged by the image of the Church as the body of Christ and then by the image of the sacrament, such abrupt changes in ecclesiology generally confuse Christians in general and African Christians in particular. They do not know which model to follow.

As far as models of the Church are concerned, Dulles speaks of the Church as an Institution, the Church as Mystical Communion, the Church as a Sacrament, the Church as a Herald, and the Church as a Servant. These models are not absolute; rather, they stimulate thought on various approaches in ecclesiology. One cannot say of any single model, “This is the entire ecclesiology, or That is what the Church is.” It is, therefore, a great mistake to be imprisoned in one model. For instance, “the fact that the Church of a certain century may have been primarily an institution does not prevent the Church in another generation from being conspicuously a community of grace, a herald, a sacrament or a servant” (Rigal, 2000b). Every individual model underlines some dimensions of the Church that are lacking in other models. Each model possesses its own characteristic elements that distinguish it from the others. They remain located in terms of time and space. Each model reflects its own reality. Yves Congar understood this well when he noted that “the fact that the Church exists and lives in a true history also means

that it cannot free itself from time, from its weight and its thickness, from the deadlines it imposes. It is not in spite of time and its unfolding, but in them that the Church bears the gifts of God and puts them into action” (Congar, 1968). And in the same line, Bernard Sesboüé adds: “*car l’Église est toujours de son temps et de la culture des milieux où elle vit*”. That means, “The Church is always from the time and the culture in which she lives” (Sésboüé, 1996).

Furthermore, Dulles encourages the combination of models because they illuminate each other and, at the same time, qualify one another. Any model interpreted exclusively leads to fundamentalism and, moreover, to distortion (Dulles, 1987b). Louis Luzbetak, in his book *The Church and Cultures*, makes a beautiful observation on the matter. He says: “No single perspective—institutional, communal, sacramental, or whatever—will by itself describe the Church satisfactorily. In isolation, any single model would, in fact, be a distortion. We are saying that any sound ecclesiology will complement its preferred model with aspects from other models, thereby filling in gaps and restoring balance” (Luzbetak, 1988). To borrow an apt classic comparison from Avery Dulles, “in ecclesiology, we must constantly and simultaneously keep a variety of models before us [the dominant as well as the complementary] much the way jugglers concentrate on and deal not with only one but all objects tossed in the air. To ignore any one of them”, concludes Dulles, “might well spell disaster” (Dulles, 1987b).

From this observation, it follows that the models should be related to each other to yield a good result. A good and practical ecclesiology should find ways of including positive and important aspects of each basic ecclesiological model within itself. Any single isolated model, however excellent, can hardly solve all questions in the community. It undoubtedly needs the help of elements from other models to be successful. I, therefore, see that for Dulles, we cannot exclusively commit to a single model of the Church because each model has its own strengths and weaknesses; no one model should be canonized as the measure of all the rest (Dulles, 1987b). Moreover, remarks Dulles: “We must recognize that our own favorite paradigms, however excellent, do not solve all questions” (Dulles, 1987b). The above contribution of Cardinal Dulles can help us to understand the theology behind the metaphor of the Church as family. I underline the fact that “each image of the Church brings with it its own favorite set of images, its own rhetoric, its own values, certitudes, commitments, and priorities. It even brings with it a particular set of preferred problems” (Dulles, 1987b).

## 4. The Church in Africa

### 4.1. Background on the Origin of the Church

The evolution of the Church from its Jewish roots to the acknowledgement of local variations involved significant cultural adaptations. Initially, the Church’s message was limited to Jews but later expanded to include non-Jews (Gentiles), primarily through European influence (Schreiter, 1997). This transition often faced challenges and sometimes required extraordinary councils, as illustrated in Acts

15. Questions about whether Jesus founded the Church can obscure a deeper truth: Jesus gathered people, establishing the Church on the faith of Peter and the apostles. While not all Jews accepted his teachings, many were intrigued by his authority. Jesus' mission emphasized community-building (Rigal, 2000a), centered on the Good News and the Kingdom of God (John Paul II, 1990), which became the foundation of our faith and the essence of the Church (Küng, 2001).

#### 4.2. Choice of the Model: Church as Family

The primary theological insight from the first African Synod (John Paul II, 1995) is understanding the Church as the family of God. The African Synod took place in Rome from 10 April to 8 May 1994. It was the Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops. The main topic of the Synod was: "The Church in Africa and her evangelising mission towards the Year 2000: 'You shall be my witnesses' (Acts 1, 8)." And on 14 September 1995, as fruit of the Synod, John Paul II published the Apostolic Exhortation "*Ecclesia in Africa*" (EA). The second synod also speaks about the family, as we read in *Africa (AM)*, published by Pope Benedict XVI in 2011 (Benedict XV, 2011). Looking back at the First African Synod, there is an interesting question: why did the Synod Fathers choose this model of "family" to illustrate the Church in Africa, as opposed to many other images found in Scripture? After all, the concept of family is not only an African reality but a universal one. Furthermore, why choose the family image over other metaphors, especially considering the wealth of imagery present in Africa? To address these questions, we can draw on the insights of Agbonkhanmeghe Orobator (Orobator, 1999):

African theologians unanimously conclude that the African-church did not invent "the image" of the church-as-family. [He argues]... that these theologians do not concern themselves primarily with the question of whether or not this image owes its origin to the African church. The critical point of their debate focuses on the realization that the image of church-as-family appeals to the African sensibility more than any other metaphor of the church. This explains why the synod made a fundamental option for the model of "church-as-family" as the guiding idea for the evangelizing mission of the Church in Africa. As such, the synod hopes that its development will make a specific and significant contribution to the ecclesiology.

The importance of family in every human society is undeniable; it serves as a crucial cornerstone of social structure. Families can be found in every community around the globe, forming the very essence of human interaction and cultural identity. In this context, the Synod emphasized the importance of evangelizing African families as a critical and urgent priority, recognising that nurturing strong familial bonds not only strengthens individual households but also enhances the overall social fabric. By focusing on the unique traditions, challenges, and values of African families, the Synod in EA 80 aims to foster spiritual growth and unity, ultimately contributing to the flourishing of entire communities (John Paul II,

1995). In an extraordinary act of divine love, God elevated and sanctified the institution of the family through His incarnation, choosing to step into the tapestry of human history as our Redeemer within the context of a human family. This profound choice serves as a testament to the significance of family in God's design, illustrating how fundamentally open and inclusive the family structure can be for every individual. Likewise, the Church, often referred to as the family of God, mirrors this vision by striving to be a welcoming haven for all. It should provide a nurturing environment where every person, regardless of their background or circumstances, can find solace, acceptance, and a sense of belonging. In this way, both the family and the Church exemplify God's desire for a community rooted in love and support, reflecting the inclusive nature of God's kingdom on Earth.

Moreover, the church-family has its origin, model and finality in the mystery of love of the Holy Trinity. As Israel Joseph paraphrases the bishops of Congo and says: "The novelty of the concept church family of God underlines above all the richness of the Church. In fact, this image is also an appropriate expression to translate the term the Church mystery and communion" (Israël, 1998). Furthermore, the theologian Sanon from Burkina Faso states, "the church-family is the same Church born of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Sanon, 1970). The Holy Trinity is an example *par excellence* of what the family of God should look like: Three Persons yet One God. For Orobator, all the African theologians agree that the model of the Church as family reflects "the community of the Triune God".

Did the Synod Fathers not acknowledge it as an expression of the Church's nature, which was also appropriate for Africa? For them, the image of family evokes care for others, solidarity, hospitality, sharing, warmth in human relationships, mutual acceptance, dialogue, and trust (EA 60). In this regard, the African Synod should be remembered for enriching the entire Church with the image of the family. Using a very touching illustration, Gerard Nwagwu cleverly affirms, "This is the model [the church as family of God] which has motivated people to paraphrase the pop song, 'We are the World' to read 'we are the Church'. It profoundly contributes to the universal church, especially when people's consciousness is focused on creating a global village" (Nwagwu, 2000). To grasp well the theology behind the church as family of God, we should first look to the in-depth reality of family as understood by Africans. What does the reality of family signify for Africans?

### 4.3. African Family

The concept of family in Africa encompasses a broader definition than in Western culture. While Western families tend to be more nuclear and confined, African families often include a larger network known as the extended family. This is referred to as the extended family. By nuclear family, I mean a family that consists of father, mother and children, when it is thought of as a unit in society. There is little room for outsiders from the aforementioned to step in. The extended family

is a family group characterised by close relationships among its members, encompassing not only parents and children but also uncles, aunts, nephews, nieces, cousins, and grandparents. All belong to the same family. The ideal African family is based on the extended family system, where members are united in a common ancestor, which gives each person his or her identity (Mbiti, 1994). Africans often recognize each other as family members and consequently have family-like relations to a degree, which seems puzzling to the European mind. This labyrinth of relations denotes the family as the unique place for community and communion among its members. The family becomes an oasis of rest, security and identity. Such understanding confirms the sociological golden rule that a human being is a social being.

For instance, many Europeans will hardly understand that Africans have neither cousins, nor paternal uncles, nor maternal aunts, nor nephews, nor nieces. Instead, all male cousins are brothers, and all female cousins are sisters. Moreover, all brothers of our father are not uncles but rather they are our fathers, and all sisters of our mother are our mothers. The children of our brother are our children too. We have the same power over them as our brother. That seems very strange for Western people. It would be a great insult for a child to call his father's brother uncle. This could even lead to the child being cursed. It is regarded as a lack of respect. The parents are responsible for teaching their children to consider everybody no longer as a cousin, uncle, or aunt, but rather as a sister, brother, mother or father. The lesson behind this is to educate the children to have a sense of belonging together and to be one strong and big family. From early childhood, parents reinforce the notion that there is no life outside the community and the communion of the family. The family becomes the center of the possible human ties among the members. On this matter, Cardinal Murphy in his book *The Family of the Church* states that "the strength of any human family lies in the internal unity, trust and love of its members which gives it in turn the strength and confidence to share in the wider community of the world and play a creative part within it" (Murphy-O'Connor, 1984).

Considering this, we should look at African life as "being with" (Mukadi, 1997). By their very nature, Africans are "being with". That means, they are being taught from their very youth through sayings and proverbs that any human being is powerless without the family, community and communion. There exist popular proverbs in the mouths of Africans, such as *Mtu ni Watu*, which can literally be translated as "Man is Men", and the second *Kidole kimoja hakivunji chawa*, which means, "one finger does not pick out a louse". These sayings emphasize the togetherness dimension and underscore the fact that the family is the first place of education and human formation. The family, so to speak, is the first school where every person experiences and tastes the community-communion life. There is no individual life, and life outside the community means nothingness. Anyone living outside the community is considered dead. There is no longer life in him or her because to live is to "be with". To be with is to be in harmony with the community.

Once the “being with” is broken, the member loses his/her integrity and lacks energy and vital force. To avoid such disastrous situations, parents repeat unceasingly to their kids this principle of life “I am because you are; and without you, I am not; you and I are the community” (Mbiti, 1994). The moral behind this is to incorporate the individual into the large community of brothers and sisters as much as possible. As the African Synod Fathers brought it out in *EA 85* (John Paul II, 1995),

by its nature, the family extends beyond the individual household; it is oriented towards society. The family has vital and organic links with society, since it is its foundation and nourishes it continually through its role of service to life: it is from the family that citizens are born and it is within the family that they find the first school of the social virtues that are the animating principle of the existence and development of society itself.

In this sense of “being with”, Africans are very conscious of their being for one another and with one another. In *Bantu Customs in Mainland Tanzania*, Van Pelt splendidly expresses the same idea: “Africans feel responsible for one another and are held responsible for one another by the other groups of related people. They keep in contact with one another and often stay together. They rely on each other in all circumstances and are very much interested in the family’s offspring.” This is how the extended family in Africa operates. It creates the “being with” ready to relate to others, to help them, to live with them and die for them. Van Pelt goes on to stress that, “as the nuclear family is only a cell in the extended family, it is natural that the children belong to the extended family” (Van Pelt, 1982). In our tribe, we consider the nuclear family as an island. And no one can live as an island; he/she will soon die. Africans are called to be open to others, to “be with”. This is why an African is evaluated more by what he is than what he has. “To be with” or “not to be with” is the radical question for Africans. To have or not to have comes afterwards. In fact, an African might get rich, but the wealth is not his/her alone. It is for the whole family, because his/her being is always “being with”. Otherwise, the more he/she has, the less he/she is.

Meanwhile, we should note that the “being with” dimension of Africans is closely tied to their respect for life. Life is the ultimate reality for Africans. On this concern, the Synod declares in *EA 43* (John Paul II, 1995), “In African culture and tradition, the role of the family is held to be fundamental everywhere. Open to this sense of the family, of love and respect for life, the African loves children, who are joyfully welcomed as gifts of God. The people of Africa respect the lives of those who are conceived and born. They rejoice in this life”. The paragraph ends with, “Africans show their respect for human life until its natural end, and keep elderly parents and relatives within the family”. So does the church as family. She stands for more human life. To use Orobator’s words, the church as family is at the service of life. He refers to Bishop Laurent Monsengwo, who states that: “*D’une façon plus large, l’Église-Famille doit être toujours présente du côté des forces de la vie dans ce grand duel qui l’opposera aux forces de mort jusqu’à la parousie...*” That

means “in a broader sense, the Church-Family must always be present on the side of the forces of life in this great duel which will oppose it to the forces of death until the parousia...” (Monsengwo, 1996).

To borrow Placide Tempels expression (Malibabo, 2006), African life is dynamic. Life can increase or decrease in energy, vitality or spirit. However, whatever the case, Africans always fight for life’s increase. To demonstrate that Africans are fond of life, they often express their appreciation for it through their greetings. For instance, in many African tribes, especially in the Baluba from Kongo, when they meet, they greet one another *moyo* or *kolako*, which means “live; be alive” or “be strong” (Mukadi, 1996). To live and to be strong are the great aspirations of Africans. Life is sacred; therefore, nobody can dispose of it as he/she wants. If that is the case, that is, if life is the ultimate reality for Africans, where does it find its fullness? Obviously, individual life is rooted in the life of the community. Africans will never conceive life outside of the community because it is the community which gives life and protects it. Whenever life is diminished due to unworthy behavior, people in Africa call for reconciliation through rituals of purification and expiation within their family community. Through these rituals, they express their profound religious sense, a sense of the sacred, and the existence of God, the creator, and a spiritual world. They also feel the reality of sin and the need for reparation (EA 42).

The African family, therefore, is a shelter of rest, security, identity, solidarity, community, communion of life, mutual participation, belonging together, listening to one another, and mutual understanding through frank dialogue, among other things. In other words, the philosophy of “being with” and that of “increasing life”, which can greatly enrich the nature and mission of the Universal Church, highlight the family in Africa.

#### **4.4. Theology of the Church as Family of God**

##### **4.4.1. The Family as a Domestic Church**

When we deeply introspect on our human and spiritual life and examine who we are, we realize that we are largely shaped by the education, formation, and basic trust we received from our parents within the family. We can hardly deny that the family is truly the first school. The family is the first school that initiates children into all kinds of human relationships. The family becomes the *ecclesiola*, the little church, whereby parents faithfully transmit proper faith to their children. In the language of the Second Vatican Council, the Christian family is “Domestic Church” (LG11) and “Domestic sanctuary of the Church”. In it, parents are called to be the first preachers of the faith to their children (LG 12). The same idea is explicitly found in the same document of the Second Vatican Council, but in *Apostolicam Apostolorum* 11:

The family has received from God its mission to be the first and vital cell of society. It will fulfil this mission if it shows itself to be the domestic sanctuary of the Church through the mutual affection of its members and the common

prayer they offer to God, if the whole family is caught up in the liturgical worship of the Church, and if it provides active hospitality and promotes justice and other good works for the service of all the brethren in need.

In view of this, Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor splendidly argues (Murphy-O'Connor, 1984),

Nor should one ignore the fact that parents themselves share in the teaching authority of the Church. It is axiomatic that it is within the Christian family itself that children are taught to worship God and love their neighbor according to the faith given to them in baptism. If the Church really is a family of faith, one will find that the duty of teaching the faith and learning the faith is focused not only in the hierarchy of the Church but also at every level where the Christian community comes together. Thus, in the school, the home, the parish, there will be a relationship between the teacher and the taught that serves to deepen the unity of the whole family of the Church.

Bearing this in mind, John Paul II, in his apostolic exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, in the seventeenth paragraph, clearly declares, “the future of the world and of the Church passes through the family” (John Paul II, 1981). The Synod adds to it some elements in EA 80-85, “Not only is the Christian family the first cell of the living ecclesial community, it is also the fundamental cell of the society on which the social edifice is built. The Christian family of Africa will thus become a true domestic church, contributing to society’s progress towards a more fraternal life” (John Paul II, 1995). So, the crisis of the Church is actually the crisis of the family. The faith of the Church depends much on the faith of the family. Perhaps we can paraphrase the common French proverb *Tel père, tel fils*, “like father, like son”, as *Telle famille, telle Eglise*, which could literally mean, “like family, like Church”.

In the case of the Church in Africa, the family bears some indelible marks that will be passed on to the universal Church. As we have previously indicated, the family is “being with”. What then are its implications when applied to the Church? In this sense, the Church becomes the Church of “being with”, of being together under the one umbrella of God the Father. That means it is commissioned not only to make its members holy but also to guide, support, challenge, and educate them to grow integrally and holistically as a family; moreover, it is commissioned to make us brothers and sisters engaged in genuine interpersonal relationships. All members are called upon to serve one another, to be with one another as children of one family (Wachege, 2000). This reveals the communal aspect of the Church, which cannot be lived in solitude but rather realized, in mutual acceptance and cooperation. It leads to a real sense of belonging together, to the Church of all. Like the family, the domestic church or the church as family becomes imbued with solidarity among its members because everybody is accepted and warmly welcomed. Everybody feels at home; everybody worries about the community, and moreover, there exists a pure spirit of mutual responsibility whereby everybody cares for one another. The slogan here will be “No to solitude,

yes to solidarity”.

The Church, as “being with,” calls upon the intimate brotherhood and sisterhood among its members, who are children of one family with the same Father. Saint Paul says, “Those whom God’s Spirit leads are God’s sons. For the Spirit that God has given you does not make you slaves and cause you to be afraid; instead, the Spirit makes you God’s children, and by the Spirit’s power we cry out to God, ‘Abba, Father!’ God’s Spirit joins himself to our spirits to declare that we are God’s children” (Rom 8,14-16). Is it not in the community of communion, as brothers and sisters, that we shall encounter Christ? In this regard, the message of the Synod of Africa emphasizes in *EA* 66 that the Living God, Creator of heaven and earth and the Lord of history, is the Father of the one great family to which we all belong. We are truly God’s children, as Christ taught us to call His Father, our Father (Mt 5: 9-15).

Here, we intend to enlighten the mind that the Church will become God’s family only when the human family succeeds in building up within the sphere of daily life an atmosphere of accepting each other by promoting the idea of “being with”, belonging together in one great family of the children of God. We also think of the Church being built upon the foundations of the extended family. Such family extends its hands beyond the individual household and is oriented to all without any segregation or discrimination. The extended family remains open-armed to human relationships through dialogue in which everyone is much needed and much valued. So does the church as God’s family. It fosters the same kind of relationships among its members, centred in Christ, by continually fighting against the values that could reduce humans to the level of either things or animals. Does this not show another strength of the African family, that of increasing life, enriching once more the Church? So, the African family is a community of communion not for the passive sake of only “being with” one another, but also by “being with”, they aim at increasing mutual life. The vision of the church as family is to reach the same goal of giving life to its members. It struggles for it in season and out of season. Above all, the church as family of God, revolves around Christ, who is the way, the truth, and the life. Therefore, as Christians, we are being called to a real, committed life in the church as the family of God through mutual love, mutual understanding, and mutual solidarity, which transcends any natural and human boundaries. What then are the implications of the understanding of the church as family for Africans?

#### **4.4.2. The Contribution of Pope Francis to This Image of the Church as Family of God**

The Synod Fathers encouraged African theologians to explore the concept of the Church as Family of God more deeply. They stated, “It is our sincere hope that theologians in Africa will develop a theology of the Church as Family, fully embracing the richness of this idea and demonstrating how it complements other images of the Church” (*EA* 63). I was truly amazed and excited to learn that on May 29, 2013, during his General Audience, Pope Francis used a metaphor that

represents a unique African contribution to the universal Church. I would like to repeat his own words (Francis, 2013b):

Last Wednesday I emphasized the deep bond between the Holy Spirit and the Church. Today I would like to begin some catecheses on the mystery of the Church, a mystery which we all experience and of which we are part. I would like to do so with some concepts that are evident in the texts of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. Today, the first one is: “The Church as the Family of God”.

It was marvellous for Africans to hear this metaphor of the Church from the Holy Father in Saint Peter’s Square. This was precisely the image that Africa should be sharing with the rest of the world. A friend of mine called me that day from Saint Peter’s, informing me that the Holy Father had publicly acknowledged Africa as a spokesperson for the universal Church. He was overjoyed and recalled the entire Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, “Ecclesia in Africa”. On that day, Pope Francis stated (Francis, 2013b):

What is God’s plan? It is to make of us all a single family of his children, in which each person feels that God is close and feels loved by him, as in the Gospel parable, feels the warmth of being God’s family. The Church is rooted in this grand plan. She is not an organization established by an agreement between a few people, but—as Pope Benedict XVI has so often reminded us—she is a work of God, born precisely from this loving design which is gradually brought about in history. The Church is born from God’s wish to call all people to communion with him, to friendship with him, indeed, to share in his own divine life as his sons and daughters. The very word “Church”, from the Greek *ekklesia*, means “convocation”: God convokes us, he impels us to come out of our individualism, from our tendency to close ourselves into ourselves, and he calls us to belong to his family... The lifeblood of God’s family, of the Church, is God’s love which is actualized in loving him and others, all others, without distinction or reservation. The Church is a family in which we love and are loved.

During a teaching focused on the phrase “I believe in One Church”, the Holy Father once again emphasized the aspect of the Church as the Family of God (Francis, 2013c):

Wherever we go, even to the smallest parish in the most remote corner of this earth, there is the one Church. We are at home, we are in the family, and we are among brothers and sisters. And this is a great gift of God! The Church is one for us all. There is not one Church for Europeans, one for Africans, one for Americans, one for Asians, one for those who live in Oceania. No, she is one and the same everywhere. It is like being in a family: some of its members may be far away, scattered across the world, but the deep bonds that unite all the family members stay solid, however great the distance.

The unity of the Church must be built on the model of family unity. Everybody cares for everyone (John Paul II, 1980). As Pope Francis put it again in such a way, it requires a deep personal meditation (Francis, 2013c):

When I hear that so many Christians in the world are suffering, am I indifferent or is it as if one of my family were suffering? When I think or hear it said that many Christians are persecuted and give their lives for their faith, does this touch my heart or not? Am I open to a brother or sister of the family who is giving his or her life for Jesus Christ? Do we pray for each other? I have a question for you, but don't answer out loud, only in your heart. How many of you pray for Christians who are being persecuted? How many? Everyone responds in his heart. Do I pray for my brother, for my sister who is in difficulty because they confess and defend their faith? It is important to look beyond our own boundaries, to feel that we are the Church, one family in God!

It is together that we are the Church. For the Church in Africa, as well as for the Holy Father, the image of family embodies care for others, solidarity, hospitality, sharing, warmth in human relationships, mutual acceptance, dialogue, and trust (EA 60).

This aspect of care for other members of the Family of God was clearly highlighted by Pope Francis at a General Audience, when he suddenly asked the crowd to pray for a member of the family of God—the Church—who was sick. One of the rare times in history, a Pope named someone and asked the assembly to pray for her. It was surprising, and in the meantime, his call has created a sense of belonging in everyone to the same family. The Pope's call united people. He said (Francis, 2013a):

And now let me ask you for an act of charity: relax, it is not a collection! Before coming into the Square, I went to see a little girl, a year and a half old, who is gravely ill. Her father and mother are praying and asking the Lord to heal this beautiful little girl. Her name is Noemi. The poor little one was smiling! Let us perform an act of love. We do not know her, but she is a baptized child, she is one of us, she is a Christian. Let us perform an act of love for her and in silence ask the Lord for his help in this moment, and that He grant her health. Let us take a moment of silence and then we will pray the "Hail Mary". And now all together let us pray to Our Lady for the health of Noemi. Hail Mary! Thank you for this act of charity (Francis, 2013a).

"Be who you are"—this act of charity affirms who the Church is: the Family of God. The Church as Family of God has mainly two characteristics: "to be with Christ" in order "to be for one another". This Church must be the sacrament of brotherly love. It is the Church that prays together and cares for one another. In Francis's own words (Francis, 2013d):

In the family, everything that enables us to grow, to mature and to live is

given to each of us. We cannot grow up by ourselves, we cannot journey on our own, in isolation; rather, we journey and grow in a community, in a family. And so it is in the Church! In the Church we can listen to the Word of God with the assurance that it is the message that the Lord has given us; in the Church we can encounter the Lord in the Sacraments, which are the open windows through which the light of God is given to us, streams from which we can draw God's very life; in the Church we learn to live in the communion and love that comes from God.

Suddenly, the Pope brings in new metaphors in juxtaposition with the image of the Church as Family of God (Francis, 2013d):

Each one of us can ask himself or herself today, how do I live in the Church? When I go to church, is it as though I were at the stadium, at a football match? Is it as though I were at the cinema? No, it is something else. How do I go to church? How do I receive the gifts that the Church offers me to grow and mature as a Christian? Do I participate in the community's life, or do I go to church and withdraw into my own problems, isolating myself from others? In this first sense, the Church is catholic because she is everyone's home. Everyone is a child of the Church and in her all find their home.

The Church, as the family of God, is the home for all, and nobody is excluded. What does the Home for All mean? The Holy Father has a clear answer (Francis, 2013e):

In visiting Elisabeth, the Virgin Mary brought not only material help—she brought this too—but she also brought Jesus, who was already alive in her womb. Bringing Jesus into that house meant bringing joy, the fullness of joy. Our Lady also wants to bring the great gift of Jesus to us, to us all; and with him she brings us his love, his peace, and his joy. In this regard, when he talked of Mary as image or model of the Church, he says: “In this, the Church is like Mary: the Church is not a shop, she is not a humanitarian agency, and the Church is not an NGO”.

Pope Francis envisions the Church not as a fortress but as a family of God that supports one another, particularly those who are vulnerable. This is why he later describes the Church as a battlefield hospital. In essence, the Church acts as a good Samaritan.

#### **4.4.3. Contribution of Modern African Theologians**

In the line of praising the values of the Church as family of God, the African theologian Augustin Ramazani Bishwende considers this metaphor to be the key to solving immoral issues in our world today. The title of his article speaks for itself: “The Church, family of God in Africa, to the challenges of global modernity” (Bishwende, 2022). The positive features depicted throughout this metaphor can serve to confront the challenges of immorality in the world. He states: “The Church, Family of God, the community of love, leads to hermeneutics that in Af-

rica it must become Light of God and Light of men in the midst of our world in the making". It is by accepting to be the Lord's Easter that she can enter modernity and assume it, that she can embrace all sinners. It is a Church of sinners saved by Christ, anointed of God.

In his insightful article titled "Mater et Magistra", Marcel Mukadi elaborates on the dual role of the Church as both a nurturing mother and an instructive teacher within the community of believers. He emphasizes that as a mother, the Church should embody a spirit of compassion and unconditional love towards her members, providing them with guidance and support. This maternal aspect involves not only nurturing her children's faith but also standing firm in her beliefs while lovingly correcting those who may stray from its teachings (Mukadi, 2024). In her role as a teacher, the Church is tasked with imparting essential values to her followers, such as the importance of loving and respecting every individual, regardless of their background or orientation. She serves as a guiding light, teaching her children how to coexist peacefully and harmoniously with one another in a diverse world. Moreover, Mukadi highlights the Church's responsibility to enhance her outreach and support for those in dire need, particularly individuals grappling with moral dilemmas or personal struggles. Through embodying the principles of "Mater et Magistra", the Church should aspire to be a profound sacrament of love, extending her embrace to all, without exception. This commitment to loving guidance and educational support is essential for nurturing a community that fosters understanding, acceptance, and unity among its members. (Mukadi, 2024).

## **5. Limitations of the Church as the Family of God**

The Church has some limitations in its role as God's family. These challenges can affect how the Church connects with its members and the community. Recognising these limitations is important for a better understanding of the Church's mission.

### **5.1. Family of God and Blood Family**

One of the merits of the African Synod is that it describes the Church in Africa as a family. They did it splendidly, corresponding to Africans' language, patterns, idioms, values, and culture. If we were to define and describe the Church in Africa, we would find no expression more meaningful than "the Family of God". This model is helpful in understanding many other African human dimensions in light of the Gospel. In this model of the church, Africans live and share their daily realities as children of one family. They recognize each other as brothers and sisters. They find in it their own identity, their own assurance of life, and their security. Joys and sufferings are shared together. No one remains indifferent to the other. The Synod clearly underlines this aspect of strong solidarity among Africans and states, "African cultures have an acute sense of solidarity and community life. In Africa", the document continues in *EA* 43, "it is almost unthinkable to celebrate, be it a feast [or a mourning] without the participation of the whole [family] vil-

lage” (John Paul II, 1995). While admiring this precious African value, Pope John Paul II expresses his fatherly wishes to all Africans to stick strongly to it. He continues, “It is my ardent hope and prayer that Africa will always preserve this priceless cultural heritage and never succumb to the temptation to individualism, which is alien to its best traditions” (John Paul II, 1995). However, there is a point to bring to the attention of Christians about Africans regarding blood relationship.

There is a popular saying in Kiswahili: “*damu ni nzito kuliko maji*”, “blood is heavier than water”, which we hear all day long from Africans to signify that brotherhood is first and foremost a matter of blood (Mulago, 1978; Mukadi, 2004/5). This is not a bad thing in itself. Starting from this positive premise, it would be beneficial to construct an ecclesiology of blood that unites and fosters harmony among peoples. And the precious blood of Christ serves us as a model for such an ecclesiology: an ecclesiology of the precious blood. It is a desirable contribution of the blood pact to universal brotherhood.

While highlighting the positive aspects of blood in building a united, strong, and fraternal society, I would like to pinpoint its negative aspects: for instance, foreign blood can hardly be accepted by another tribe or clan in Africa. “Outside the tribe or natural blood, there is no brotherhood”, we can deduce. Relationships outside the blood, tribal, or clan circle are difficult to imagine. People idealize their own blood, that is, their own clan or tribe, to the detriment of others, to the point of seeking the disappearance and death of others. In this sense, the adage “*damu ni nzito kuliko maji*” does not satisfy me. Instead of working towards a holistic brotherhood, open to all human beings, this adage limits it to a restricted family, clan or tribal circle. It thus becomes a source of neglecting anyone who is not of our family or tribal blood.

To remedy this, we intend to correct the above adage. By maji, I mean the water of baptism. I would not want to assert the opposite, “*maji ni nzito kuliko damu*”, “water is thicker than blood”, because this formula does not satisfy me either. Acting according to this new formula would again harm the source of encounter and holistic fraternity (Mukadi, 2004/5). For me, it is and remains clear that between *damu* and *maji*, there is no juxtaposition but symbiosis, no enmity but friendship; there is no divorce but marriage. In the logic of the ecclesiology of Symbiosis, the two elements always need each other. One does not exclude the other. Therefore, blood and water are the source of encounter, of universal brotherhood without discrimination. This is why the holistic ecclesiology in the context of the church as family of God is not the ecclesiology of juxtaposition but rather of symbiosis between blood and water (Mukadi, 2004/5). That means the Church is an inclusive home, a home for all, wherein no one is excluded based on any form of discrimination, whether biological or related to baptismal water. The ecclesiology of symbiosis presents a vision of the Church as an inclusive and nurturing family, rooted in care and mutual support. It calls for active engagement and personal reflection, encouraging believers to recognize their roles in uplifting one another. This em-

bodies the spirit of unity and love that characterizes the Church as the Family of God. This was precisely the experience of the fathers participating in the ongoing Synod on Synodality. A Synod represents a desire for a Church that serves as God's home and family. As stated in the final document of the ongoing Synod 2023-2024, titled "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission" (Francis 2024):

The terms "synodality" and "synodal" derive from the ancient and constant ecclesial practice of meeting in synods. According to the traditions of the Eastern and Western Churches, the word "synod" refers to institutions and events that assumed different forms over time, involving a plurality of agents and participants. This variety notwithstanding, what unites them is gathering together to dialogue, discern and decide. Owing to the experience of recent years, the meaning of these terms has come to be better understood, and what they represent is more vibrantly lived. They have become ever more deeply associated with the desire for a Church that is closer to people and more relational—a Church that is God's home and family.

The ongoing Synod emphasizes the values of unity and harmony which characterize the Church as family of God, the home of all (Francis, 2024). Moreover, the Church itself finds its origin and growth in the blood and water that flowed from the side of the crucified Jesus (Jn 19:34) (Kabasele Lumbala, 1996). The Church is a universal reality that welcomes everyone without exception. The ecclesiology of symbiosis or encounter is neither an ecclesiology isolated from blood nor an ecclesiology isolated from water, but it is both the ecclesiology of blood and water. Thus, when speaking of the Church as the "Family of God", we must not separate the two elements that constitute it and make us sons and daughters of the same Father, whose only Son, Jesus Christ, is our brother. In fact, Kabasele is saying that (Kabasele Lumbala, 1996),

The blood and water that flowed from the pierced side of Jesus crucified are types of Baptism and the Eucharist, sacraments of new life: from then on, it is possible to be born of water and the Spirit to enter the Kingdom of God our Father.' Every time the sacrifice of the cross, by which "Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed" (1 Cor 5:7), is celebrated on the altar, the work of our redemption is accomplished. At the same time, the sacrament of the Eucharistic bread represents and produces the unity of the faithful, who constitute one body in Christ, our brother, who is the light of the world, from whom we come, through whom we live, towards whom we strive.

The same idea is expressed by the French singer Jean François Frié in one of his hymns that we pray during the Liturgy of the Hours: "We are the children born of your blood, your descendants, a new race, an eternal race that lives by your life. Of all the peoples under heaven, languages, tribes and nations, for the one Father, at the price of your blood, you have redeemed us! Son of Man, Son of God, in your Church, the Spirit bears witness with the blood and water taken from your side"

(*Prière du temps présent*, 1980).

That is why I propose an ecclesiology of holistic encounter in the church's image as the family of God. It would encompass the ecclesiology of blood (union through natural blood) and that of water (union through baptism), through the blood and water that flowed simultaneously from Jesus' pierced side. There is then no rejection, opposition, or exclusion between the two, but rather a profound encounter. It leads to their intimate unity, to which we, as Christians, are invited despite our blood differences. The unity we discuss is not about uniformity; it is about unity in the diversity of gifts and equality in the differences of charisms. This concept is what Thomas O'Loughlin refers to as the theology of human equality (O'Loughlin, 2022). He goes on to explain that this theology "is then expressed in the inter-relations that must characterize those who might claim leadership: the greatest is to be a servant of all, and all are to relate in acts of mutual service" (O'Loughlin, 2022). Thus, the blood and water in Christ mark the victory of universal brotherhood over exclusive tribalism, the victory of unity over ethnic divisions, and the victory of life over death caused by tribal hatred. For, as St. John tells us, "blood and water join with the Spirit to bear witness to the mission of the Son who gives life" (1 Jn 5: 5-12). 1 Jn 5, 8 (*Bible de Jérusalem*): "There are thus three witnesses: the Spirit, the water, and the blood. See notes d and f. The original text of Saint Cyprian is: 'When the chalice of water is mixed with wine, it is the people who are mixed with Christ, and the crowd of believers who join and unite with the one in whom they believe'. This mixture, this union of wine and water in the chalice of the Lord, is indissoluble" (Santedi Kinkupu, 2001). Jesus Christ came not only with water but with water and blood. The meeting of water and blood makes the Church a true Family of God, united to the Father through His Son, Jesus, in the Holy Spirit. The prayer of St. Cyprian, which the priest recites during the Holy Eucharist as he pours a little water into the cup of wine, clearly expresses this idea of indissolubility: "As this water is mixed with the wine for the sacrament of the Covenant, may we be united with the divinity of Him who took our humanity" (Vanhoosier, 2025).

## 5.2. The Theology of Church as Family Is a Double-Edged Sword

African theologians already asked the same question just after the declaration of *Ecclesia in Africa* by John Paul II in 1995. The well-known African theologian John Mary Waliggo, as quoted by Laurent Magesa, in connection with what we have mentioned above, expressed his concern two years after its publication: "Will this model of the Church as family respect the rights of women and children in the community or will it retain its hierarchical character where the father is a feared figure?" (Magesa, 2000). Elsewhere, he cautions, "The theology of Church as family is a double-edged sword. It can be profitably used, but it may also lead to benign paternalism. We must be careful not to end up again with a pyramid structure of the Church instead of a circular one of the communion" (Israël, 1998; Magesa, 2000). He then concludes in another publication that "no, the authentic

family consists of father, mother, brothers and sisters, aunts, and uncles, and so. So should the authentic church-family”.

In fact, we are now in a better position to see that blood ties can easily lead to paternalism or “maternalism” when they are strongly emphasised in the family. In this case, nobody else but either the father or the mother has the last word in the family. In most cases, the father in African families remains the ultimate authority, the primary decision-maker. Waliggo’s concern was akin to an alarm or warning that the misuse of this model in an oppressive or unchristian manner leads directly to perdition and the distortion of African ecclesiology (Magesa, 1995). Even the Synod in EA 64 called for prudence in transposing African values to the Church. We should avoid all ethnocentrism and excessive “particularisms”. Rather, we should encourage reconciliation and true communion between different ethnic groups (John Paul II, 1995). About the mistreatment of women in African Society, the Synod Fathers deplore in EA 82 with regret those customs and practices which deprive women of their rights and the respect due to them and at the same time appeal to African Christians to make every effort to foster the safeguarding of these rights. The bishops manifest publicly their great longing to see a just, rightful African family where the rights of everyone, whether a woman or a child, are respected.

It is, therefore, inappropriate to transpose blindly all African values from the African family to the Church at the risk of destroying the in-depth nature of the Church. To do so is to build up a powerful place where those in power have only one desire: to dominate and to be served. The church as family is called to transcend the limits of blood, natural bonds, clans, and tribes and to live according to Christ’s wishes in mutual love. As Bishop Leobald D’Souza preached once (D’Souza, 2000),

We are familiar with family relationships. No doubt, in the family, blood ties dominate. Blood is thicker than water. Do not we know this in India. The blood relations of castes, of communities, of tribal clans are thicker than the water of baptism. The Church praises the family and refers to it as a domestic church. The domestic church is not merely the family of natural ties. The domestic church is a family of faith, constituted by the discipleship of Jesus. The temptation of the family, and indeed for individuals, is to be closed in and become self-sufficient, forgetting others outside of their ken. But Jesus gave a clear call to his disciples to go beyond family ties.

The ecclesiology of symbiosis in the African context cannot be reduced to a simple transition from the ecclesiology of blood to the ecclesiology of water. Unfortunately, such a transition also carries with it hatred and discrimination against those who have not been baptized in the same religious denomination as oneself. We should not move from exclusion based on blood to exclusion based on water. Nor should we seek to privilege one aspect at the expense of the other. It is the task of the Church and the theologian to interpret the words of the Gospels

properly. It is by no means Jesus' intention to minimize natural blood relations, which are the foundation of all community life. The water of baptism does not eliminate these relations, but renews, purifies, expands, lengthens, extends, and opens them to everyone without barriers or discrimination. This is why the holistic ecclesiology in the context of the church as family of God is not the ecclesiology of juxtaposition but rather of symbiosis between blood and water (Mukadi, 2004/5). These two elements, as sacraments, work for reconciliation, solidarity, and brotherhood among humans without discrimination based on race, language, tribe, clan, or blood (Mukadi, 2003/1). The ecclesiology of blood and water symbiosis reminds us about the fragility of any imagery applied to the Church. It tells us that the Church, as a family of God, is a double-edged sword. To mention A. Dulles, "each model of the Church has its weaknesses; no one should be canonized as the measure of all the rest" (Dulles, 1987b).

## 6. Conclusion

In concluding this paper, we must emphasize the intricate relationship between the Church and the family unit. The Church functions as a familial structure, deeply rooted in shared values that can best be articulated through the lens of kinship; all members are regarded as brothers and sisters under the guidance of a singular divine Father. When we turn our attention to the African family, we can confidently assert that, regardless of the various evaluations and cultural interpretations made, the family remains an undeniable and universally acknowledged reality for every individual. This highlights the significance of the family as the *fons vitae*, or the wellspring of life, serving as the foundational source from which both society and the Church draw sustenance.

At this point, however, it is crucial to understand that the Church is not merely a reflection of traditional family structures. The Church is made up of both blood and water from Jesus' side. It works together in harmony. The Church needs to recognize the positive contributions of African families, as does Ramazani, while also addressing the challenges that threaten and alienate them. This is key to maintaining the Church's unity, holiness, universality, and apostolicity. Therefore, we must always remember that the Church, as a family, serves as a double-edged sword.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

## References

- Abbot, W. M. (1996). *The Documents of Vatican II*. Guild Press.
- Bishwende, A. R. (2022). The Church, Family of God in Africa, to the Challenges of Global Modernity. *Revista Eclesiástica Brasileira*, 82, 444-459.  
<https://doi.org/10.29386/reb.v82i322.4238>
- Clowney, E. P. (1984). *Interpreting the Biblical Models of the Church: A Hermeneutical*

- Deepening of Ecclesiology. In *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: Text and Context* (pp. 64-109). Paternoster Press.
- Congar, Y. (1968). *Cette Église que j'aime*. Les Éditions du Cerf.
- D'Souza, L. (2000). The Bishop Today. *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 64, 447-450.
- De Lubac, H. (1956). *The Splendour of the Church*. Sheed & Ward.
- Dulles, A. (1987a). *A Church to Believe in*. Doubleday.
- Dulles, A. (1987b). *Models of the Church*. Doubleday.
- Francis (2013a). *General Audience, The Church as Communion of Saints*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- Francis (2013b). *General Audience in Saint Peter's Square: The Church is Family of God*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- Francis (2013c). *General Audience in Saint Peter's Square: The Church is One*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- Francis (2013d). *General Audience in Saint Peter's Square, The Church is Catholic*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- Francis (2013e). *General Audience in Saint Peter's Square, Mary as the Image and Model of the Church*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- Francis (2024). *XIV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission.* Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- Israël, J. (1998). *The Church as Family. A Theological Pastoral Study with Reference to the African Synod*. AbeBooks.
- John Paul II (1980). *Encyclical Letter Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- John Paul II (1981). *Apostolic Exhortation Familiaris Consortio*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- John Paul II (1990). *Encyclical Letter Redemptoris Missio*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- John Paul II (1995). *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation "Ecclesia in Africa"*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- Joyce, G. H. (1971). "The Mystical Body of the Church". In *The Catholic Encyclopaedia X* (pp. 663). Robert Appleton Company.
- Kabasele Lumbala, F. (1996). *Liturgies Africaines*. Facultés catholiques de Kinshasa.
- Küng, H. (2001). *The Church*. Burns & Oates.
- Luzbetak, L. (1988). *The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology*. Orbis Books.
- Magesa, L. (1995). End of Bishop's Assembly: Beginning and Future of African Synod. *African Ecclesiastical Review*, 37, 1-20.
- Magesa, L. (2000). Involving All in Ministry: A Challenge to the Church of the 3rd Millennium. *African Ecclesiastical Review*, 42, 1-25.
- Malibabo, B. (2006). *The Bantu Philosophy of Tempels from an African Perspective*. <https://www.afrikanistik-aegyptologie-online.de/archiv/2006/268>
- Mbiti, J. (1994). *African Religions and Philosophy*. Eastern African Publications Ltd.
- Mchugh, J. A. (1971). "Mystery." In *The Catholic Encyclopaedia X* (pp. 662-663). Robert Appleton Company.
- Miner, P. (1960). *Images of the Church in the New Testament*. Westminster John Knox Press.
- Monsengwo, L. (1996). *L'Église, famille et images bibliques de l'Église*. *Revue Catholique*

- de l'Afrique de l'Ouest*, 14, 121-138.
- Mukadi, M. (1996). "Symbols in the Rites of African Reconciliation: Based on the Notion of Life and Strength." *Sauti ya Mwokozi*, 4, 65-67.
- Mukadi, M. (1997). "Church as God's Family is 'Being with' in Africa." *Sauti ya Mwokozi*, 7, 65-67.
- Mukadi, M. (2003). Le caractère transformateur des sacraments pour l'Afrique déchirée par le tribalisme exclusif: Une nécessité inévitable. *Questions Liturgiques/Studies in Liturgy*, 84, 51-65. <https://doi.org/10.2143/ql.84.1.565681>
- Mukadi, M. (2004). Une éclésiologie du Sang et de l'Eau en Afrique. *Questions Liturgiques/Studies in Liturgy*, 85, 158-189. <https://doi.org/10.2143/ql.85.3.505141>
- Mukadi, M. (2024). "Mater and Magistra". In *Miedzy Religioznawstwem a Teologia* (pp. 95-127). Bernardinum.
- Mulago, V. (1978). *La mise en question de la notion de révélation surnaturelle*. In *Foi chrétienne et langage humain, Actes de la 7<sup>ème</sup> Semaine Théologique de Kinshasa du 24 au 29 juillet 1972* (pp. 109-122). FCK.
- Murphy-O'Connor, C. (1984). *The Family of the Church*. Darton Longman and Todd.
- Nwagwu, M. G. (2000). "Communion and Self-Reliance: Signs of the Church as God's Family in Africa". *African Ecclesial Review*, 42, 18-26.
- O'Loughlin, T. (2022). Equality as a Theological Principle within Roman Catholic Ecclesiology. *Ecclesiology*, 18, 35-56. <https://doi.org/10.1163/17455316-18010004>
- Orobator, A. E. (1999). *The Church as Family. African Ecclesiology in Its Social Context*. Paulines Publications Africa.
- Pius XII (1943). *Encyclical Letter Mystici Corporis Christi*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- Preston, G. (1997). *Faces of the Church*. T & T Clark.
- Prière du temps présent (1980). *Paris: Cerf-Desclée*.
- Rigal, J. (2000a). *Découvrir l'Église*. Desclée de Brouwer.
- Rigal, J. (2000b). *L'éclésiologie de communion*. Les Éditions du Cerf.
- Sanon, A. T. (1970). *Tierce Eglise, ma mère ou conversion d'une communauté païenne au Christ*. Thèse de doctorat présentée à la Faculté de Théologie de l'Institut Catholique de Paris.
- Santedi Kinkupu, L. (2001). *L'Eucharistie comme sacrement de communion et de promotion humaine dans la perspective de l'Eglise-Famille*. In *L'Eucharistie dans l'Eglise-Famille en Afrique à l'aube du troisième millénaire, Actes de la 23<sup>ème</sup> Semaine Théologique de Kinshasa du 28 au 31 mars 2001* (pp. 45-60). FCK.
- Schreiter, R. (1997). *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local*. Orbis Books.
- Sesboüé, B. (1996). *N'ayez pas peur! Regards sur l'Église et les ministères aujourd'hui*. Desclée.
- Van Pelt, P. (1982). *Bantu Customs in Mainland Tanzania*. TMP Book Department.
- Vanhoosier, J. W. (2025). "Sharing in the Divinity of Christ: The Mystery of Water and Wine, Theosis, and Our Baptismal Call". <https://westernkycatholic.com/2025/04/01/sharing-in-the-divinity-of-christ>
- Wachege, P. N. (2000). The Church: Its Role in God's Plans of Salvation. *African Ecclesiastical Review*, 42, 28-40.