From *Una Caro* to the SECAM Final Report on Polygamy: A Critical Reading

The issue of polygamy remains a point of tension between the traditional church teaching on marriage and the socio-cultural context of sub-Saharan Africa. As part of the Synod on Synodality launched by Pope Francis for the period of 2021 to 2024, the question of polygamy had sparked renewed interest among certain African theologians and bishops who wished to see it included on the agenda. Since this was not possible, the African episcopal conferences were asked to set up a research commission to shed light on the issue. It is in this context that two texts – the doctrinal note of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (DDF) on monogamy, *Una caro*,[1] and the final report of SECAM (Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar)[2] entitled *The Pastoral Challenge of Polygamy* – have addressed this issue from a theological and pastoral perspective. Both documents clearly emphasize the "normative value" of monogamy, although SECAM in particular appears willing to acknowledge certain positive aspects of African family structures in relation to polygamy. However, these overarching analyses continue to be based on a traditional Christian anthropology that has been formulated from a deductive perspective and pays scant attention to people's actual living conditions. In contrast, developments in contemporary moral reflection have called for the application of an inductive method based on a holistic and realistic anthropology of human beings. This approach considers the person in all their dimensions (physical, relational, historical, and social) as the fundamental criterion for moral discernment. From this perspective, it is necessary to re-examine *Una caro* and the SECAM Report, not simply by pitting norm against culture, but by highlighting some of the problems this poses.

1 Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith: *Una caro, In Praise of Monogamy: Doctrinal Note on the Value of Matrimony as an Exclusive Union and Mutual Belonging*, 25 November 2025; available at: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20251125_una-caro_en.html.

2 SECAM Commission: *The Pastoral Challenge of Polygamy: Final Report*, 24 March 2026; available at: https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/process/implementation/10workinggroups/final-reports/sg2-sceam/SECAM_ENG_Final-Report.pdf.

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1. Una Caro – A Staunch Defense of Monogamy

Polygamy is considered here not as a topic for academic debate but in regard to its direct impact on the lives of people in marital relationships. The African bishops do not shy away from acknowledging the tensions that have arisen and been fueled within the church by polygamous arrangements since the beginning of the evangelization of the continent. SECAM's final report makes no secret of the bishops' skepticism and lack of choice on the matter, referring to "the intransigence of the first missionaries" and "the firmness of John Paul II in his post-synodal exhortation on the family" (i.e. *Familiaris consortio*).[3] They even add that magisterial documents, particularly the post-synodal apostolic exhortations *Ecclesia in Africa* and *Africae munus*, did "not dare to take an official position on this very delicate subject".[4] On the other hand, however, they do not hesitate to emphasize the need to preserve the sacramental – and therefore also legal – integrity of Christian marriage, which, in their view, is incompatible with polygamy. In other words, even though they are cautious, and sometimes even reluctant, to criticize a certain rigidity within the Catholic church and insist on acknowledging the complexity of the situations, they do not go so far as to make structural decisions that would be appropriate to their circumstances. The mind of the DDF's *Una caro* sets the tone.

The Synod on Synodality, initiated by Pope Francis, aimed to promote an inclusive and participatory church in which local churches actively contribute to decision making. In the present case, however, a form of persistent asymmetry becomes discernible: the DDF seeks to preserve its normative authority by framing the debate in advance through *Una caro*, which extols monogamy and leaves no room to listen to the concrete experiences of people in polygamous living situations. This is indicated not only by the title of the doctrinal note but also by several references throughout the text. The first paragraph of the document's introduction states, for example, that it is a text addressed to the universal church and to regions facing local cultural challenges, explaining that "at the origin of this text are…various dialogues about the topic of polygamy with the bishops of Africa and bishops from other continents during their *ad limina* visits".[5] But what conclusions did these discussions lead to? Pope Francis's idea of an inclusive and participatory church seems to be fading. Ultimately, the final decision on the meaning of marriage rests with Rome. A glance at the SECAM document confirms this: while the report may be closely attuned to the realities on the ground and the African context, while it may highlight the problem, describe the situation, provide an overview of the issue and offer cautious criticism of a certain rigidity, it makes no bold proposals whatsoever.

3 SECAM Commission: *The Pastoral Challenge of Polygamy*, 15.
4 Ibid.
5 Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith: *Una caro*, 2.

Furthermore, *Una caro* contains references to Genesis and Ephesians 5. Many exegetical studies have repeatedly called for a new interpretation of these passages. The document, however, interprets Ephesians 5:21-33 as if it had a clear message, arguing that Paul does "not merely propose a model of Christian marital conduct" but rather regards "the perfect and unique union between Christ and the Church as the original source of monogamous marriage".[6] What is overlooked here is that Christ's significance for humanity and his work of redemption extend far beyond human life and the life of the church. There is no adequate sign that definitively represents the reality of Christ's covenant of love with humanity and the church. This means that every love for Christ, even if it appears radiant, always bears a mark of human finitude and sin. In other words: there will always be a great distance between the "sign" and the "signified". Human weakness is incapable of supplanting Jesus's fidelity to the church. It is evident that from this indissoluble fidelity, revealed in Jesus's supreme sacrifice on the cross – an inexpressible sign of his love for humanity – mercy overflows, which he bestows upon all, including in the celebration of the Eucharist. One can only hope that the African bishops had good reasons for avoiding any reference to Ephesians 5 in the SECAM report when addressing the sensitive issue of polygamy.

In their advocacy of monogamy, the DDF, like the SECAM commission, emphasizes human dignity,[7] as well as the reciprocity and self-giving of the spouses in the marital relationship.[8] If one takes the personalist perspective of the Second Vatican Council seriously, the marital union cannot be understood merely as a legal institution but above all must be seen as a community of persons based on freedom, equality, and the mutual self-giving of the spouses. In *Una caro* and the SECAM report, however, marriage is only conceivable as a monogamous union – actual cases of polygamy in real life simply go unnoticed. Neither of these documents takes any account of the subjectivity of people in polygamous relationships or their dignity as human beings. They barely touch upon the issue of the genuine consent of the spouses and the quality of their relationship. The focus is exclusively on the form of the relationship, with all other personal and existential aspects disregarded.

6 Ibid. 31.

7 For instance, the final report of SECAM dedicates a section to the "dignity of women"; see SECAM Commission: *The Pastoral Challenge of Polygamy*, 22f.

8 See Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith: *Una caro*, 14: "two persons constitute a couple, equal in their fundamental dignity but distinct in their individual identity. The fullness of the union between human beings is found in this equality made of a necessary, dialogical, and complementary mutuality."

2. SECAM Final Report – A Long-Awaited Document, Albeit with Strict Requirements

There is no doubt that both the DDF and the SECAM Commission adopt a defensive stance towards the teachings of the Catholic church and regard the ideal of monogamous marriage as a universal Christian norm. While *Una caro* proves to be more uncompromising overall, the SECAM report, however, oscillates between defending Catholic doctrine on the one hand and showing understanding for the context of polygamous relationships on the other. It may come as a surprise that the report starts its study with the conclusion that polygamy is "more than just a resilient phenomenon".[9] The contextual insights highlighted by SECAM reveal that polygamy remains an inescapable social reality in many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, a fact which cannot be treated as a mere individual aberration but must be understood as a phenomenon that is always imbued with social, cultural, and religious significance. Ongoing transformations in Africa with modernization, demographic transitions, and convergence toward the nuclear family model have certainly contributed to the discrediting of polygamy, but that does not mean that it will disappear. On the contrary, modern versions of polygamy persist and coexist side by side. One example of this is the "system of multiple offices", sometimes referred to as "veiled polygamy", which is by no means confined to Africa.[10] Another example, one that is more typical of Africa, is the way women, "even intellectual and Christian ones", are embracing polygamy: "They intend to defend their freedom, that of living their femininity, as a woman and mother, in complete peace without sacrificing their desire to pursue a career, both socio-professional and in the political arena."[11] Briefly, today polygamy "remains alive and well. It is once again popular."[12] It would be illusionary and wrong to assume that updated African pastoral care could ignore or deny these circumstances. And the bishops know this very well – yet they see no other response than singing the praise of monogamy through apologetic means.

It is very difficult to trace a consistent and coherent line of argument in the SECAM report when it seeks to translate theological matters into pastoral approaches, which form the subject of the two final sections. Three aspects stand out. First, having initially addressed the status of a "permanent catechumenate" for polygamists – a practice introduced by some local churches in Africa as a preferred form of pastoral care – the bishops have now spoken out against this approach. They insist that polygamists should not be allowed to receive the sacrament of baptism until they have renounced polygamy and committed themselves to a monogamous marriage. The fear is that allowing the administration of baptism for persons who live in polygamous relations and request baptism

9 SECAM Commission: *The Pastoral Challenge of Polygamy*, 5. Similarly, the conclusion that "in short, polygamy continues to be a reality in African societies today" (25).
10 See ibid. 4, 17.
11 Ibid. 4
12 Ibid.

would give the impression of legitimizing the irregularity of such relationships and would diminish the value of the sacrament of initiation into Christian life. On the other hand, the report also states that "the experience of the Gospel is not limited to the sacraments and their reception",[13] in other words, that a Christian life can receive grace beyond the sacramental signs. However understandable the risk of a minimalist interpretation of sacrament may be, the argument that baptism should not be administered to polygamists who request it and only after the irregular situation of polygamy has first been regularized, i.e. eliminated, the bishops themselves will finally have to face the question that, according to their reasoning, people living in polygamous relationships cannot lead a Christian life.

A second aspect concerns the meaning of biological fertility in relation to polygamy. The report rightly emphasizes that in Africa children are of crucial importance – "without which it is difficult to maintain a home in many African cultures". From a western perspective, one could only welcome the bishops' statement that "for Christian marriage, biological fertility is not part of the essence of marriage, being simply open to the life that can be born from this union".[14] This view is in line with the vision of Vatican II, which aimed to move beyond the view of marriage focused on procreation. Certainly, procreation is "a pure gift of God of this relationship which unites two persons and two families", but the text goes on to assert: "in the Christian family, there is no place for polygamy, which is incompatible with the unity of marriage".[15] The bishops seem to be completely neglecting the culture in which they live and see the solution in a Christian idea that runs counter to the spirit of a culture in which having children remains of central importance. The concept of "inculturation" that they advocate reaches its limits here.

One final point along the same lines. The question of how "a man or woman in a situation of polygamy [can] 'become one flesh' with several wives or several husbands", is indeed a significant theological and ethical question.[16] In reality, however, it remains a rhetorical question. One response that is, in essence, inadequate is that of a bishop who replies: "the Gospel overcomes cultural obstacles and reaches each person in their cultural identity, while cultures purified of the signs of their finitude and sin flourish by expressing the highest and most fundamental message in the world: God saves us in Jesus Christ and calls us to enter the great family of the Church".[17] It is regrettable that the bishops have succumbed to the idea that a Christian life is free from limitations, contingencies, and finitude. One would have hoped for pastoral care for people living in polygamous relationships that differs from what the bishops are calling for.

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13 Ibid. 24.
14 Ibid. 21.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid. 12.
17 Ibid.

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