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Review of the PhD thesis by Louis Mbuyeh Ngeh entitled:

***A VISION OF MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY IN THE LIGHT
OF THE DOCUMENTS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN CAMEROON***

written under the supervision of Rev. Prof. PhD hab. Krzysztof Kietliński,
Warsaw 2022, pp. 228.

The German theologian Peter Hünermann, reflecting on a new list of sources of theological knowledge, pointed to culture as one of the seven most significant *locorum* in post-conciliar Catholic theology. He was aware that, for the Church, the issue of communication between different cultures is particularly pressing because, as a universal Church, she incorporates different local Churches, each with their cultural form. The participants of the Second Vatican Council were aware of this fact, noting in ‘Gaudium et spes’: *The experience of past ages, the progress of the sciences, and the treasures hidden in the various forms of human culture, by all of which the nature of man himself is more clearly revealed and new roads to truth are opened, these profit the Church, too. For, from the beginning of her history she has learned to express the message of Christ with the help of the ideas and terminology of various philosophers, and has tried to clarify it with their wisdom, too. Her purpose has been to adapt the Gospel to the grasp of all as well as to the needs of the learned, insofar as such was appropriate. Indeed this accommodated preaching of the revealed word ought to remain the law of all evangelization* (44).

We can say that culture is the medium through which God's revelation reaches human beings. As a manifestation of the various ways human beings live, cultures are the condition and outcome of human expressions of life. As such, they contain the possibility of accepting

God's invitation. At the same time, culture cannot be a criterion for evaluating revelation or truth. In fact, it is necessary to implement a process of inculturation of the Gospel and evangelisation of cultures: the immersion of the Gospel in the concrete reality of human life expressed in cultures. It can be said that in cultures, the Gospel is realised concretely.

In the context of those challenges within the Church, Louis Mbuyeh Ngeh analysed the situation of the local Church in Cameroon, researched a wide range of sources and wrote a 228-page-long dissertation entitled 'A vision of marriage and the family in the light of the documents of the Catholic Church in Cameroon'.

1. Aim of the thesis

At page 11 author presents objective of the research: *this work aims at clarifying the position of the Church, and ultimately God's will, for marriage and the family. The elaborate study of the conditions of marriage and the family of the social context (Cameroon) is indispensable for a comparative study of the Gospel and the cultural values.*

The objective is combined with the novelty of the work, which on page 13 is stated in the following words: *This research, thus, seeks to make a unique contribution to the world of theology by studying the Catholic teaching on the subject side by side with the Cameroonian context, thereby identifying the meeting points as well as the points of disagreement, and attempting to resolve the tension.*

This objective is formulated differently in the conclusion of the work. On p. 196, we read: *The aim of the work has been to propose a Catholic vision of marriage and the family for Cameroon.* Although the emphasis in both formulations is on different realities, it can be considered that the work presents the Church's teaching on marriage and the family and builds a vision for Cameroon.

The author's intentions are more precise in the research questions - one primary and eight subsidiaries. We read: *What are the complex moral problems with regard to marriage and the family in Cameroon, especially in the Diocese of Kumbo? And: The first is: what does the Catholic Church teach about marriage and the family and where can this teaching be found? The second: what are the living conditions of marriage and the family in Cameroon? The third: what can be known about some of the customs of marriage and the family in Cameroon? The fourth: what is the nature of the state policy for marriage and the family in Cameroon? The fifth: do the identified living conditions of marriage and the family contribute to the multiple moral problems of the contemporary Cameroonian society or are there other causes? The sixth:*

how does the Diocese of Kumbo respond to the specific moral problems? The seventh: to what extent does the Catholic vision contribute to the improvement of the well-being of marriage and the family in the Cameroonian society? The eight: what specific challenges for the functioning of the family should be addressed in the future? (pp. 13-14).

In order to reach his objectives, the author decides to use analytical, descriptive and critical methods (p. 14). The methods are used accurately and consequently. However, I need to include a broader description of their use.

Having analysed the table of contents of the dissertation and the text itself, I conclude that the objective has been properly formulated and sufficiently achieved.

I have doubts about the link between the aims and structure of the dissertation and its main title. In the formulation ‘A vision of marriage and the family in the light of the documents of the Catholic Church in Cameroon’ the author suggested that the dissertation would present marriage and family based on the documents of the Catholic Church in Cameroon. Meanwhile, this is only explored in chapter IV, with chapters II and III providing the context for these considerations. From this perspective, chapter I is unnecessary. One may assume that the documents of the universal Church are also the documents of the Catholic Church in Cameroon, but in my opinion, this is a too trivial assumption.

I understand that the PhD student assumed that the dissertation topic was not only about the documents of the Catholic Church in Cameroon but about the situation in Cameroon as a case study in implementing Catholic doctrine on marriage. However, this is not clear from the way the topic is formulated.

Therefore, the content of the dissertation corresponds to the objectives outlined in the introduction. However, the link between the objectives and the dissertation title could be more precise.

Reading the dissertation, one is under the impression that the author looks at the issues from a very broad perspective. It proves that the PhD student is well-prepared and broad-minded.

2. Structure of the thesis

Louis Mbuyeh Ngeh’s dissertation consists of a list of abbreviations, an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, a bibliography and four appendixes.

In the 9 page-long introduction, the author included research questions, methodology, *status quaestionis*, objectives of the research, structure of the work. All these elements meet the criteria described in methodology coursebooks.

The first chapter, 'THE CATHOLIC BASIS FOR MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY', provides context for further considerations. In three steps (biblical and historical basis for marriage and the family, the Catholic teaching on marriage and the family and a moral vision of marriage and the family), the author guides the reader through the historical and contemporary paths of development of the doctrine on marriage and the family. This part of the dissertation is written synthetically and communicatively. However, as I mentioned in the previous section, one may question its necessity in the dissertation. Suppose we see in the title of the dissertation a reference to the documents of the Catholic Church in Cameroon. In that case, we can expect that the content of this chapter will be to present the reception of the teaching of the Magisterium of the Church in the episcopal documents of Cameroon. Meanwhile, the reference to Cameroon appears only once in the entire chapter - in the introduction.

The second chapter is entitled 'CONDITIONS OF MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY IN THE CONTEXT OF CAMEROON'. The justification for the need for this chapter in the structure of the work is described in the following words: *The Cameroonian society is unique in its history, culture and political rule. Knowledge of what this uniqueness consists in is a necessary step through which the light of the Christian vision can shine* (p. 74). In the following sections, we learn valuable information about Cameroon's history and culture, state policy on marriage and family, and the economic situation of Cameroonian families. I rate the value of this chapter very highly. Both the selected information and the scope of its presentation provide the reader with knowledge about Cameroon. The data is correctly selected, without unnecessary details or lengthy encyclopaedic analyses.

The third chapter, 'SOCIO-MORAL CAUSES OF THE CRISIS OF MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY IN CAMEROON', describes the different categories of root causes of the crisis of marriage in the country described. The author divides them into two categories: socio-cultural influences and socio-moral threats. The doctoral student describes these issues and attempts to evaluate them. This chapter is an interesting part of the work. The division proposed by the PhD student is clear and acceptable. Alternatively, one might wonder if it would be more interesting to divide the factors in question into universal factors and factors specific to Cameroon. As in chapter II, the data is correctly selected.

The last section, entitled ‘SOCIO-MORAL CHALLENGES FOR MARRIAGE AND THE FAMILY IN THE DIOCESE OF KUMBO’, is an attempt to look at the problems described in the previous chapters from the perspective of one diocese. The doctoral student characterises the structure and functioning conditions of the Kumbo diocese and then discusses the relevant socio-moral problems occurring in the diocese. He also identifies those forms of local Church activity that respond to the crisis of marriage and family. The tips for preparing for marriage are valuable. Many crises can be avoided or resolved more quickly if the propaedeutic stage is appropriately conducted. In this chapter, we also see the original contribution of the PhD student. For example, this is well illustrated in the consideration of the burden of a triple wedding ceremony.

The core of the dissertation ends with a 6-page general conclusion. In this section, we can find the research results described in the chapters. Finally, the author presents research perspectives.

The final part of the thesis is the bibliography. The content of the section entitled "Sources" is questionable. Looking at the theme of the work, it seems that 'Sources' are also some of the texts under the heading 'Primary Literature'.

After the bibliography, we find three appendixes. They do not bring anything new to the substantive part of the dissertation, but they illustrate and complement its content in an interesting way.

3. General content-related and formal assessment

While talking about the strong points of Louis Mbuyeh Ngeh’s doctoral thesis, one needs to stress the importance of the issue discussed by the author. Using the example of Cameroon, he addressed a problem which is relevant to many other countries in Africa (and not only there). He is not only able to accurately analyse and systematize source materials, but also to arrive at insightful conclusions and develop research perspectives. He does this with personal passion, which, in my opinion, adds to the value of the dissertation.

A positive aspect of the dissertation is the use of broad contexts for the matters described. It proves the author’s broad intellectual horizons and far-reaching interests. He presents not only theological content, but a rich social and historical background, touches upon political themes and ethnographic issues. Once again, it is worth emphasizing that both the content and the bibliography prove Ngeh's broad interests and very good research skills.

Thirdly, the author of the dissertation has presented a comprehensive perspective of the initiatives of the local Church in the care of marriage and family. However, he did not limit their presentation but showed on several points the imperfections and prospects for development. Although there could have been more moments of criticism, these already testify to the PhD student's scientific maturity, courage and honesty.

It is worth stressing once again, that both the introduction and the conclusion include all necessary elements.

The literary style of the dissertation is its strong point, however, inconsistencies in spelling occur (e.g. *There is the unpublished first-degree dissertation of Lukong Clarisse on 'Natural Family Planning and the Challenge of the Anti-life Culture in the Diocese of Kumbo in Cameroon'*, Cotonou, 2028. – p. 12).

Despite the fundamental value of the study, a few details can be debated. I have already mentioned the problems relating to the title of the dissertation. Here I would like to touch on one more issue. When we read the first chapter of the work, we may get the impression that it is a textbook on the history and theology of marriage and the family. The content is given as in an encyclopaedia or lexicon. This approach is correct but very schoolish. If the PhD student wanted to write a context for future considerations, he could have looked for a different key to systematise the historical material. It would have been much more interesting to describe the history of theology through the lens of aspects touching on major issues in Africa. He could have looked for those passages in the documents of the Church in which interesting issues appeared and followed their development. Another way has already been mentioned. A PhD student could have looked for those threads from the history of theology that found reception in the episcopal teaching of Cameroon. I will repeat that the way proposed by the author is correct, but Ngeh could have written the first chapter more interestingly.

4. Questions for debate

I would like to pose two questions for discussion.

In the first chapter of the dissertation, the PhD student outlined the history of the sacrament of marriage and the theology of the family. He developed it based on the documents of the universal Church. From the perspective of the local Church in Kumbo, what is the most lacking in these magisterial documents?

Looking at other aspects of life in Cameroon, areas other than marriage and family, what is the biggest challenge for the local Church?

5. Final conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to stress that the reviewed dissertation is a very successful attempt to explore the issue of marriage and family scientifically. The PhD student addresses this theological issue very competently. The Cameroonian context of these reflections is interesting. The dissertation also contains additional analyses inspired by the main issue, which the author brings out, develops and comments on. Thus, the dissertation can be an important contribution to the efforts of theologians concerned about Catholic theology's credibility in encountering African cultures. It can also be a valuable help to researchers in cultural and religious studies. On the formal side, the dissertation is well-edited, with many logical deductions and well-founded conclusions.

I am convinced that the dissertation by Louis Mbuyeh Ngeh meets the criteria defined for a doctoral thesis and can serve as the basis of further registration and conferment procedure for a doctoral degree.

I put forward a proposal to the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University Senate to admit Louis Mbuyeh Ngeh to further stages of the registration and conferment procedure for a doctoral degree.



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