

A Moral Response to the Challenge of Extreme Individualism in Christian Families in Africa Today

Murrey Vincent

I. INTRODUCTION

The current reality of the family is under attack from problems and challenges such as domestic violence, anti-life programs, divorces and extreme individualism. This concrete reality has called for a discussion on how to protect, promote and safeguard Christian families against these threats. Pope Francis has rekindled the debate on the Catholic Church's pastoral and moral concern about the current and concrete experiences and challenges of the family today. These challenges have an adverse influence on all aspects of life. Spread of radical individualism weakens family bonds. Indeed, these problems and challenges in the families as Pope Francis exhorts "call for an analytic and diversified approach."¹

This article limits itself to the challenge of extreme individualism in Christian families. This work is based and guided by the following assumptions: That there seems to exist extreme individualism in Christian families today and that this can injure the life of many married couples and their children. Again, that extreme individualism is a human problem which can affect the society and the human reality. As a response to the problem, this assumptions can guide the work to design a socio-moral formation that can reverse or overcome extreme individualism in African Christian family today.

We shall begin with examining the current concrete reality of Christian family thereafter we shall discuss the concept of individualism and its Biblical understanding. Anthropologico-Moral perspective of individualism shall also be examined. The article will also discuss some causes of extreme individualism in families. We shall, in conclusion propose the way to promote moral formation in Christian family in Africa today.

1.0 The Current Reality of Christian Family Today

In our attempt to respond to the problem of individualism we will present the Christian family in its current state. The Christian family today is going through numerous challenges. Pope Francis clearly observes: "Faithful to Christ's teaching we look to the reality of the family today in all its complexity, with both its lights and shadows... Anthropological and cultural changes in our times influence all aspects of life and call for an analytic and diversified approach."² As Pope Francis rightly observes, these experiences and challenges are occasioned by families enjoying greater freedom which has been achieved "through an equitable distribution of duties, responsibilities and tasks."³

It is therefore, clear that anthropological-cultural tendencies have led to changes in individuals and family life that have ignored support from social structures as it used to be in the past. These are tendencies are such as urbanization, euro-centricity, emergence of new technologies and influence of modern media. In relation to this Pope Francis exhorts that:

...equal consideration needs to be given to the growing danger represented by an extreme individualism which weakens family bonds and ends up considering each member of the family as an isolated unit, leading in some cases to the idea that one's personality is shaped by his or her desires, which are considered absolute. The tensions created by an overly individualistic culture, caught up with possessions and pleasures, leads to intolerance and hostility in families. Here I would also include today's fast pace of life, stress and the

¹ Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, The Joy of Love, Nairobi, Paulines Publications Africa, 2016, No.32.

² Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, No.32.

³ Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, No.32.

organization of society and labour, since all these are cultural factors which militate against permanent decisions.⁴

There exists a culture of anti-family in Africa today as a result of a faulty understanding of human freedom. Indeed, we concur with Pope Francis when he cautions us about irresponsible use of the right of freedom. He advises:

Freedom of choice makes it possible to plan our lives and to make the most of ourselves. Yet if this freedom lacks noble goals or personal discipline, it degenerates into an inability to give oneself generously to others. Indeed, in many countries where the number of marriages is decreasing, more and more people are choosing to live alone or simply to spend time together without cohabiting.⁵

Emmanuel Wabanhu concurs with Pope Francis. He says: "...irresponsible freedom of choice leads to a consideration of the family as a way station, helpful when convenient, or in a setting in which rights can be asserted while relationships are left to the changing winds of personal desires and circumstances...the faulty understanding of freedom has caused postmodern people to reject the Aristotelian-Thomistic view that sanctity and perpetuity are central traits of matrimony- the source and foundation of a family."⁶ This is the reality in which modern families find themselves in, a state of widespread uncertainty and ambiguity. It is on account of this that this article attempts to propose ways of safeguarding families against the threat of extreme individualism. It is therefore appropriate to first understand what individualism entails.

1.1 The Concept of Individualism

Individualism is understood as the spirit which inclines one to oneself with minimal or no regards at all for relational interest or concern. It is a kind of self-dissociation from others. The English dictionaries define individualism thus: It is "the behaviour of someone who does things in their own way without worrying about what other people think or do."⁷ It is defined by *The 'Concise' one Volume Reference Book of the English Language* as "the conduct or feeling centred on self, egoism, self-interest, selfishness; idiosyncrasy, personal peculiarity; an attitude, tendency or system in which each individual works for his(her) own ends; independent action as opposed to co-operation."⁸ *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines it "as self-centred feeling or conduct, egoism."⁹ While the *Webster's New World Dictionary* defines it as "the leading of one's life in one's own way."¹⁰

The general understanding of the term individualism depicts the dissociating of oneself from others. This understanding is in contrast to solidarity which means standing together, joining hands for a common cause or even sharing resources. Schindler agrees with this understanding, he says: "Individualism is a loosening of the individual community connection."¹¹ This definition brings out the clear understanding of individualism in relation to communitarian life. This individualism is a feeling which disposes a person to isolate him/herself from the mass of his fellows and withdraws to him/herself. This is also an indication that individualism is a willful attitude of someone as a tendency to magnify individual liberty against legitimate institutions that serve the regulated communal life. The institution of marriage and family is intended to serve the well-being of spouses and their children and individualism therefore can be detrimental to this arrangement. This is because the problem of extreme individualism revolves around personal freedom by which one chooses to act with minimal or no regard at all for what those choices would mean to the life of others. And in the case of marriage and family, we think of the well-being of spouses and the care of children.

The term individualism is used in philosophical, theological, political and economic fields. Individualism emphasizes the separateness, independence, and uniqueness of different people. Naturally, it

⁴ Francis, *Amoris Lætitia*, No.33.

⁵ Francis, *Amoris, Lætitia* No.33.

⁶ Emmanuel Wabanhu, "Socio-Ethical Ways of Safeguarding Families in Africa in the Light of *Amoris Lætitia*", in Nicholas Segeja & Emmanuel Wabanhu, *The Echo of Amoris Lætitia in Africa*, Nairobi, CUEA Press, 2017, (153-190).

⁷ *MacMillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners: The International Student Edition*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002.

⁸ *The Concise One Volume Reference Book of the English Language: English Dictionary*, München, Orbis Verlag, 1990.

⁹ *Concise Oxford English Dictionary, 11th Edition, Revised*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008.

¹⁰ *Webster's New World Dictionary and Thesaurus*, Cleveland, Wiley Publishing Inc., 2002.

¹¹ Thomas F. Schindler, *Ethics: Social Dimension-Individualism and Catholic Tradition*, Wilmington, Michael Glazier, 1989, p. 45.

supports full equal rights for all ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations.¹² Proponents of individualism believe in freedom over authority and conformity. Some individualists support selfishness, social inequality, or the destruction of social and political institutions.

According to Pietro Palazzini, “Individualism extols the value of the individual, his (her) individual liberty against authority, his (her) activity against social activity... Individualism is based on the principles that man is sufficient unto himself (autarchy) and responsible only to himself (autonomy). One’s own conscience is the only criterion of good or evil.”¹³ This explanation therefore implies that for the proponents of individualism, the individual person is the only social reality; whereas the society is the only reality which emanates from and dependent on the free will of a particular person.

Individualism has become a way of life in some societies. It believes “in the essential goodness of human nature and its infinite capacity for evolution as well as in the harmony between free individuals and their interests.”¹⁴ Individualism therefore has its focus on the individual person. It is thus anthropocentric. It makes man the centre and ultimate end.

1.2 Evaluation of the Concept of Individualism

In reference to this evaluation it brings to our attention Pope Francis usage of the term extreme individualism. He recognizes the fact that individualism per se is not detrimental. It is to be borne in our minds that individualism “was general reawakening of the Middle Ages in the reaction to political absolutism. Thus the proponents were fighting for freedom, honour, the rights of the human person, restriction of governmental powers, and free development of forces about to assert themselves.”¹⁵ When one looks at the society and the way it is naturally designed, there exists no such a thing as isolated individual. This is because in one way or the other one belongs to the various social communities.

According to Roger L. Shinn, “The individual glories in freedom and autonomy. He has little interest in tradition, social solidarity and authority.”¹⁶ Collectivism requires individualism to adjust and to perform a social function. Society finds ways to impose its values and enforce its will upon individuals. “Collectivism is thus one primary element in human experience. Man’s self awareness comes through the tribal self, the corporate personality. The Bible includes many echoes of primitive collectivism: blood-guiltiness for crimes falls upon the tribe, the vengeance is executed against the tribe of the offender; the sins of the fathers are visited upon children; the misdeeds of kings bring retribution upon people.”¹⁷

1.3 Biblical Understanding of Individualism

As regards the Biblical perspective of individualism studies have shown that there existed the concept and praxis of individualism during the time of Israel. Osborne B. Kenan gives a succinct description of individualism in the Bible. He argues:

The rise of modern individualism owes something to the historical Christian emphasis on the sanctity and dignity of the person (Cf, Matt. 10:30), though the often exaggerated distinction drawn from modern individualism between the individual and the community-particularly in the moral, social, and economic spheres-is inconsistent with the traditional belief in the inherently social nature of the person, the unity of the humankind and the ultimate dependence of the individual upon God.”¹⁸

When one reads through the scriptures there is likelihood to see the images which illustrate individualistic tendencies. In the creation story God did not want man to be alone and that is why a partner was created for him. The creation of Eve was supposed to get rid of Adams loneliness. In Gen 2:18-22 we are given a scenario of where Adam and Eve were to complement each other. They were each subjected to responsibility to the other. But after the fall, individualism crept in, there seems to be no corporate responsibility. It is also to be noted that although the Old Testament seems to emphasis “corporate responsibility” of the people of Israel the call to fidelity of an individual and personal decision came to distinguish the individual from the society. Even though one belonged to the tribe of the people of Israel one would still be responsible for their

¹²Individualism, <https://philosophyterms.com/individualism>, (accessed on 15.1.2019).

¹³ Pietro Palazzini (ed.), *Dictionary of Moral Theology*, The Newman Press, Westminster, 1963, p. 619.

¹⁴ Pietro Palazzini, p. 620.

¹⁵ Pietro Palazzini, p. 620.

¹⁶ Roger L. Shinn, “Individualism”, in John Macquarrie, *Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, (1967) 164-165.

¹⁷ Roger L. Shinn, “Collectivism”, in John Macquarrie, *Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, (1967) 60-61.

¹⁸ Osborne B. Kenan, “Individualism”, in Richard P. McBrien (ed.), *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism 1st Edition*, New York, HarperCollins Publishers Inc., (1995) 662-665.

shortcomings. It can also be observed that the punishment of the family or tribe of Israel for the sins of some of its members gave way to the law that fixed guilt and responsibility upon the individual.

The Bible presents us with different perspectives of looking at the person. The Old Testament emphasized the “corporate” personality of the tribe of Israel. But the call for fidelity and personal decision came to distinguish the individual from the society...The punishment of the family or tribe for the sins of some of its members gave way to the law that fixed guilt and punishment upon individuals (Deut. 24:16).¹⁹ The New Testament seems to front for individualism when Jesus taught that there is more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than ninety nine people who need no repentance. Jesus himself went to his lonely death on the cross yet the New Testament interprets this solitary man as representative man suffering and conquering sin for all men. Instead of individualism he teaches and exemplifies love...His followers understand themselves as the household of God, as the body of Christ. The New Testament goes further to defend the indissolubility of marriage (cf. Mtt 19:3-6). St. Paul encourages families to live together; parents are called upon to take care of their children while children are advised to respect their parents.

1.4 Anthropologico-Moral Perspective of Individualism

Anthropology is the study of the human person. Morality is the state of living according to the set standards of a community. In this case we are looking at Christian morality; that is a way of life that agrees with gospel values. “Christian morality is a set of moral standards based on the teachings of the Bible, especially the teachings of Jesus.”²⁰

This section will examine individualism from a person point of view and the moral influence it has on the person in his/her relational reality in the family. We contend that individualism is a trait which portrays itself in the human person. It therefore, has a moral impact on the person and on the community. The first community here is the family. In relation to anthropologico-moral perspective, Heinz Robert Schlette defines individualism as a view where individual attitudes are much more valued than that of Society. He argues thus: “Individualism can stand for a large number of highly divergent views and attitudes of which the highest common factor is the effort to make an individual stand out against the background of society, community, collectivity and general setting.”²¹ This definition presupposes that there is no systematic philosophy of individualism but rather upholders of individual exhibit tendencies appearing in other philosophies such as nominalism, skepticism, subjectivism and existentialism. The individual is therefore here taken to be the goal and norm of political and anthropological knowledge whereby the individual is elevated in contrast to the universal and ideal.

Though the term individualism cannot be used for any philosophical or theological theory, the concept is most enlightening and useful to characterize a certain attitude to life and way of behaviour. Individualism is thus a “modern phenomenon which is usually associated with the Renaissance, the reformation, the rationalism of the enlightenment and the great revolutions. The individualistic attitude can express itself in the astonishingly large number of variations. It includes the appeal to reason, conscience, personal freedom as well as total or partial resistance to traditional culture, beliefs, political and ecclesiastical institution.”²² Individualism is often reproached since it undermines the state and society but in actual sense it gives its proper value to state and society. Sometimes liberalism and democratic institutions are simply branded as symptoms of individualism, but on the contrary they voice powerfully an understanding of the individual which uphold the individual against the pressure to conform unduly to the anonymous mass, whether in the state and society or in the Church. But where emphasis on the individual becomes rejection of the political responsibility, anti-social and egoistic, it becomes an extreme form of individualism which may eventually lead to anarchy and absurdity.

A comprise solution between individualism and collectivism in the fields of social ethics is to be sought in a correct understanding of personalism and solidarity. It is to be noted that in the mass society of the present age of technology there is room for individualist attitude and this type of individualism should be encouraged. Knowledge and innovations are not only a preserve of a certain group such as the rich and intellectuals. In the present age everyone has to foster a certain individualism or search of privacy as a necessary and possible line of self-defense against encroachment of publicity. In this sense an individual is to be seen in his/her reciprocal personal relationship with fellow human beings in society. Schlette further argues that: From the theological point of view it should be noted that individualism, whatever its form can only exist by virtue of the intervention of Christianity since the consciousness of selfhood and individuality has its bases in the Biblical experience of man’s relationship with God. Within Christianity, however, it has happened that too much importance was attached to the subjective effort to attain salvation. The most important thing is not the

¹⁹ Roger L. Shinn, “Individualism”, in John Macquarrie, *Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, (1967) 164-165.

²⁰ Christian Morality, <https://newlife.bible/article/what-is-christian-morality/>, (accessed on 6.2.2019).

²¹ Heinz Robert Schlette, “Individualism”, in Karl Rahner (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Theology, The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, London, Burns & Oates,(1991) 700-702.

²² Heinz Robert Schlette, “Individualism”, 700-702.

individual but the universal character of salvation. Piety, liturgy, the self understanding of the Church, pastoral care and moral direction are now turning more and more away from individualism to enter more deeply into the spirit of eschatological brotherhood. Basic words like “the individual” “the heart” and “the person” point to the inviolable dignity of each single historical human being, which can never be renounced and which sets up within the Church a fruitful and sometimes painful tension between authority and freedom. Theologically therefore an extreme individualism is also absurdity though the dignity of the individual can only be fully recognized in the light of the faith.”²³

Individualism poses a moral problem since it affects both the behavioural a relational pattern of an individual. Robert Nisbet rightly argues that: “If there is any single root meaning of the word individualism, it lies in the notion of the discreet being of I-am-myself-alone-free-of-all bonds.”²⁴ This is in contrast to the communitarian conscience where one is supposed to be alive to the fact that we live and work in a community with the goal of improving the social and moral aspects of that particular community. John Paul II gives us a succinct understanding of the effects of individualism in a community. In his exhortation to the clergy he advises thus:

Like the apostles, bishops and priests too are called together... This community of vocation doubtless implies an openness of one to the other and of each to all, so as to live and work in communion. This does not occur without renouncing an ever real, recurring individualism without achieving self denial in the victory of charity over selfishness.²⁵

John Paul II is bringing to the attention of the priests that they should not live in isolation since their vocation is a call to service of all the Christians and humanity as a whole. Renouncing individualism is not only restricted to ordained ministers. It applies to all the sectors of our life as human beings.

II. CAUSES OF EXTREME INDIVIDUALISM IN FAMILIES

The challenge of extreme individualism in Christian family can only be handled when we get to understand the root causes. Indeed, every occurrence must have a cause. In relation to extreme individualism one cannot assign a single factor as its cause. This is due to the fact that the human being who is at the centre of this subject is born and brought up in different cultures, diverse social and economic backgrounds. These factors have a considerable bearing on the behaviour of a human person. Other factors that could easily determine the cause of individualism is the racial, geographical and historical setting of a people. However, there are factors which are common and similar despite these diversities.

2.1 Materialism

Materialism is a tendency to consider material possessions and physical comfort as more important than spiritual and social values.²⁶ It is the attitude of someone who attaches a lot of importance to money and wants to possess a lot of material things. Materialism therefore affects our choices and decisions and relationships. Seán Fagan in his book *Does Morality Change?*, says this concerning materialism: “Material goods can significantly change human life.”²⁷ Fagan brings to our attention that, material goods can alter and transform the way we behave and treat the other people. We spend quite a considerable amount of time in acquisition of these goods at the expense of the time we need to spend as persons who need relational togetherness. In relation to marriage materialism can create a rift between the spouses. It can therefore be observed that as the husband struggles to fend for his family there is a tendency that he can expend all his energies looking for material goods at the expense of the social and spiritual welfare of the family. What comes out clearly is the preoccupation of one with acquisition of material goods which result in what we can term as “absentee parent”. Absentee parenting is detrimental to the upbringing and formation of children.

2.2 Poverty

Poverty is the scarcity or lack of a certain amount of material possession or money necessary to meet basic personal needs such as food, clothing and shelter. This definition encompasses living conditions, an inability to meet basic needs because food, clean drinking water, proper sanitation, education, healthcare and other social services are inaccessible.²⁸ According to Samuel Bedijo poverty can be a cause of individualism in

²³ Heinz Robert Schlette, “Individualism” 700-702.

²⁴ Robert Nisbet, *Prejudices: A Philosophical Dictionary*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1982, p.186.

²⁵ John Paul II, General Audience of Wednesday, 4th August 1993, “Priests: Union with their Bishops and their fellow priests” in James P. Socias, *Priesthood in the Third Millenium: Address of John Paul II 1993*, Priceton, Scepter Publishers, 1994, p104.

²⁶ Materialism, <https://www.google.com/search?q=materialism&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&client=firefox-b> (accessed on 7.2.2019).

²⁷ Seán Fagan, *Does Morality Change?*, Dublin, Gill & MacMillan, 1997, p. 16-17.

²⁸ Poverty, <https://www.compassion.com/poverty/what-is-poverty.htm>, (accessed on 7.2.2019).

the sense that this state pushes people to use most of the time looking for basic things. He argues: "Poverty is a potential factor which provokes individualism as it creates difficulty in such conditions of scarce resources."²⁹

2.3 Influence of Western Culture

Cultures borrow heavily from each other. This is a common phenomenon especially in a situation where there are regular and consistent interactions among peoples. These interactions can be occasioned by free movement as a result of trade, in search of education, or even migration. In comparison, the African culture has borrowed a lot from European and American culture. In relation to this, Pickaers argues that: "The major problem arising from this Western culture is mainly due to the liberal lifestyle which encapsulate into freedom of indifference. That is, the ability to take decisions independently from motives; implying the power to choose between contraries."³⁰ Indeed it is true that certain cultural aspects can erode other cultures. Bénézet Bujo clearly brings this out. He argues that European and North American industrial mentality and lifestyle have had adverse influence on the African morality of communitarians. According to him this affects the cultural, social, political, economic as well as religious life of a people.³¹ It can therefore be rightly concluded that traditional values that held people together are slowly disappearing thanks to the growing social changes. The communitarian spirit especially that in which marriage is involved is therefore not spared. A case in point is where African cultural religious and moral instructions which are highly valued in the African culture in maintaining closely knit families have been replaced by formal and liberal education coupled with scientific experimentation, proof and pragmatism which relegates marriage and family into a mechanical institution.

2.4 Emerging Religious Sects

A religious sect is a body of believers following a particular practice or doctrine which is distinct from that of the majority or "orthodox" norm but within the same religion. Here we are thinking of Christianity with its diverse beliefs. In reference to moral response to extreme individualism in families; our interest is to make an inquiry into how emerging religious sects can lead to couples in married life living individual lives. As much as the Church advocates for religious freedom this must be handled cautiously in order to avoid extreme situations.

Vatican Council II in the document: Declaration of Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis Humanae*, looks at this freedom on the basis of the dignity of the human person who must not be coerced into adhering to a religion not of his/her choice. The declaration rightly states:

The Vatican Council declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. Freedom of this kind means that all men should be immune from coercion from the part of individuals, social groups and every human power so that, within due limits, nobody is forced to act against his own convictions in religious matters in private or in public, alone or in association with others...the right to religion is based on the very dignity of the human person as known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself. The right of the human person to religious freedom must be given such recognition in the constitutional order of society as will make a civil right.³²

While this is true we are faced with a problem that the unchecked proliferation of Christian sects might become a mechanism of fanning extreme individualism. When we look across the society "the increase of Christian sects is affecting Church communion due to their pronounced emphasis on freedom in the Holy Spirit (that is freedom from Church authority), personal conversions and relationship with Christ, prophetic vision and prophesying."³³ These emerging sects make good use of mass media which has a very strong appeal to the young people. These appeals range from adopting modernity to emulating fashionable religious sects. This has a strong impact on religious conscience and how people will understand religion. The result as Mc Manners remarks is: "When religion becomes personalized and individualized faith is reduced to personal preference."³⁴ In this article, Mc Manners illustrates how religion can turn an individual in him/herself.

2.5 Influence of Modern Media

Modern media encompasses all forms of information exchange. This includes social networking sites driven by the internet. Types of modern media include blogs, social network podcasting and mobile media. The most pervading are social networks with online connections. These powerful tools are challenging established

²⁹ Samuel Bedijo, *The Moral Problem Posed by Individualism in the Church in Africa: A Case Study in Nebbi Catholic Diocese in North-Western Uganda*, Unpublished work, Nairobi, CUEA, April 2013, p.141.

³⁰ Servais Pickaers, *The Source of Christian Ethics*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1995, pp. 351-352.

³¹ Bénézet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic*, Nairobi, Paulines Publications Africa, 2003, P. 167.

³² Austin Flannery (ed.), Vatican Council II, *Declaration on Religious Liberty, Dignitatis Humanae*, Bombay, St Paul Publications, 7 December 1965, No.2.

³³ Samuel Bedijo, p. 144.

³⁴ John Mc Manners, "Enlightenment: Secular and Christian 1600-1800", in John Mc Manners (ed.), *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, (2002) 277-278.

societal settings including marriage and family. Emmanuel Adetoyese Badejo rightly observes: “The evolution of the social web and its compelling mobility and visual engagement have unprecedented social impact and sometimes powerful disruptive influence on what had hitherto been held as sacred facts, truth and even faith.”³⁵ The concept of family and that of the African communitarian spirit has radically been changed by modern media. It can thus be concluded that modern media has aided in promoting new ideologies which have had negative impacts on the human race. The institution of marriage and family has greatly been affected by the ever increasing influence of the modern media. Some fundamental characteristics of the family are being changed. Parents cannot monitor friends their children keep, the young people themselves hardly know the friends they have. The same can be said of spouses. “People today actually live under the same roof with complete strangers while having close friends whom they share every few minutes of their lives living across the globe.”³⁶ This behaviour has alienated couples in marriages, children no longer have filial interactions with their parents and the community has lost the spirit of togetherness as a result of the modern media.

III. PROMOTING MORAL FORMATION IN CHRISTIAN FAMILY IN AFRICA TODAY

Introduction

Today, the African family is facing numerous challenges. One of these challenges is the threat of individualism. This situation therefore calls for immediate action to revive moral values will lead to stability in families. In our attempt to propose a response against extreme individualism we will make recourse to sources of Christian faith. This section will therefore examine how the word of God can be used to correct and reverse the problem of individualism in the African family. It will also explore other means that include moral formation and family catechesis as mitigating factors against the threat on individualism.

3.1 The Importance of the Word of God the African Family

Here we shall examine the role of the word of God in shaping Christian families in Africa today. We shall also analyze the role of the word of God in the moral life of believers. The word of God is very crucial in handling emerging moral problems. Vatican Council II in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* teaches that the word of God has a perennial value in the life of the family. The word of God is responsible for transforming God’s divine revelation. The Council continues to teach that without recourse to scripture family life is bound to weaken and lose its vitality. The Council vehemently exhorts: “Therefore, Christ the Lord, in whom the entire revelation of the most high God is summed up, commanded the apostles to preach the Gospel which had been promised beforehand by the prophets, and which he fulfilled in his own person and promulgated with his own lips. This Gospel was to be a source of all saving truth and moral discipline.”³⁷ Pope Benedict XVI in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* emphasized the need to rediscover the importance of the word of God in the life of a Christian. “...I express my hope that the word of God will ever more fully be at the heart of every ecclesial activity.”³⁸

As a remedy to the problem of extreme individualism it is therefore advisable to place scripture in the hands of the spouses especially those who don’t have access to it. In this case, a concerted effort of all pastoral and moral agents is necessary to bring the word of God into Christian homes. This can also be done in schools, places of work and more so in ecclesial communities. Frequent and consistent use of the word of God adds a lot of value in families today. This therefore calls for adequate catechesis on the use of the word of God. In his book, *The Craft of Theology*, Avery Dulles highlights theological approaches to using the Bible which can bring vitality to the Church and indeed the institution of marriage and family.³⁹ He proposes a method of interpreting the Bible in relation to emerging issues. He calls it the *cultural-linguistic approach*. According to him, the Bible consists of stories which communicate God’s way of dealing with humanity. This approach provides the believers to understand God’s word with regard to their cultural values and realities of life. The approach must move from telling Biblical stories to exploring implications of these stories on the Christian communities in their social activities. The approach must also impress on the individual the moral life as demanded by the word

³⁵ Emmanuel Adetoyese Badejo, “The Influence of Modern Media and New Technologies on the Family in Africa Today”, in Nicholas Segeja & Emmanuel Wabanhu, *The Echo of Amoris Lætitia in Africa*, Nairobi, CUEA Press, (2017) 3-26.

³⁶ Ibid., 3-26.

³⁷ Austin Flannery (ed.), Vatican Council II, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei Verbum*, Bombay, St Paul Publications, 18 November 1965, No.7.

³⁸ Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Verbum Domini*, On the Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church, Vatican City, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2010, No. 1.

³⁹ Avery Dulles, *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System*, New York, The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2000, p. 69.

of God. Here we think of stories in the Bible that have shaped families such as the creation story in which Adam and Eve, though they are created separately, they are supposed to complement and help each other. When the word of God is placed on the hands of the family it inspires, encourages and shapes their moral life.⁴⁰ It also promotes cohesiveness and unity in the family. This therefore helps to check and reverse the influence of individualistic tendencies.

3.2 Christian Moral Formation

Although modern life presents problems not covered by the specific prescription of scripture, the Bible gives general moral directions through prescriptions and general principles. Biblical moral teachings are relevant in a general sense to modern challenges facing families. The importance of the word of God in the life of the family, the proper use of scripture and its relevance in the Christian moral life provide possibility for Christian moral formation.

Christian moral formation is the process of how society is informed and subsequently formed to be aware of Christian moral values. The goal of the formation is to produce members of the community who respect and live by Biblical tenets. The Church has always taught the importance of unity in families. We find these teachings repeated and emphasized in recent Church documents. The Vatican Council II, in *Gaudium et Spes*, teaches that the individual person is to be carefully educated to become responsible social participant. The reasons for this careful education of the individual is to enable them discharge with greater exactness the obligations of their conscience towards themselves and the various groups of which they belong. It is necessary then to foster among all the will to play a role in common undertakings.⁴¹ The document therefore recognizes the fact that even though human beings are entitled to their freedom they should also “feel inclined to take part in activities of the various constituent groups of social structure.”⁴² One such group is the institution marriage and the family.

3.3 Christian Family Catechesis

In our endeavour to come up with a solution toward extreme individualism in the family we must therefore consider the formation of the Christian family through catechesis. The family unit is a very crucial component of our society. It follows that a well-formed family leads to a well-formed society. As we attempt to explore the benefits of Christian catechesis it is necessary that we understand what a family is.

Vatican Council II in *Lumen Gentium* defines family as “the *domestic Church*, the parents, by word and example, are the first heralds of faith with regard to their children.”⁴³ This mandate of the parents to impart faith on their children is given by God. The document *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, Decree on the Apostolate of Lay people further exhorts that:

The mission of being the primary vital cell of society has been given to the family by God himself. This mission will be accomplished if the family, by the mutual affection of its members and by family prayer presents itself as a domestic sanctuary of the Church; if the whole family takes part in the Church’s liturgical worship; if finally, it offers active hospitality, and practices justice and other good works for the benefit of all brothers suffering in want. Among the various works of family apostolate the following may be listed... assisting engaged couples to make better preparation for marriage, taking a share in catechism-teaching, supporting married people and families in a material and moral crisis.⁴⁴

The Church continues to teach that: The family is *the original cell of social life*. It is the natural society in which husband and wife are called to give themselves in love and in the gift of life. Authority, stability and a life of relationships within the family constitute the foundation of freedom, security and fraternity within society. The family is the community in which from childhood, one can learn moral values, begin to honour God and make good use of freedom. Family is an initiation into life in society⁴⁵ It is clear therefore that the catechism looks at individualism as a vice that should not be tolerated. Forming the family therefore means forming the conscience of every individual who is the centre of human relationship. It is in the family that the most intimate, vivid and fundamental expression of a truly human relationship is lived which opens every

⁴⁰ Pope Francis on marriage, <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2018/10/07/pope-francis-lasting-marriage-needs-self-gift-and-christs-grace/> (accessed on 22.1.2019)

⁴¹ Vatican Council II, *Dei Verbum*, No.31.

⁴² Ibid. No. 31.

⁴³ Austin Flannery (ed.), Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, Bombay, St Paul Publications, 21 November 1964, No.11.

⁴⁴ Austin Flannery (ed.), Vatican Council II, *Decree on the Apostolate of Lay people, Apostolicam Actuositatem*, Bombay, St Paul Publications, 18 November 1965, No.11.

⁴⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church: With Modifications from the Editio Typica*, New York, Doubleday, 1995, No. 2207.

individual to all extended family relationships. It is in the family that one knows and feels the sense and the need for sharing, solidarity, fraternity and being neighbour.

From the aforementioned arguments we therefore contend that the family is the foundation of the unity between spouses and their off springs. In his exhortation on the family, *Familiaris Consortio*, John Paul II, teaches that:

The family, which is founded and given life by love, is a community of persons: of husband and wife, of parents and children, of relatives. Its first task is to live with fidelity the reality of communion in a constant effort to develop an authentic community of persons... The love between husband and wife and, in a derivatory and broader way, the love between members of the same family-between parents and children, brothers and sisters and relatives and members of the household-is given life and sustenance by an unceasing inner dynamism leading the family to ever deeper and more intense communion, which is the foundation and soul of the community of marriage and the family.⁴⁶

According to him, the family is a natural, the basis of social life and human relationships, “a school of deeper humanity...where there is care and love for the little ones, the sick, and the aged; where there is mutual service every day; when there is a sharing of goods, of joys and of sorrows,”⁴⁷ particularly because it guards and transmits virtues and values. Life in the family reveals God’s love through education, upbringing, discipline, moral and religious training. We therefore agree with John Paul II with individualism taking root in our society a lot many things will go wrong in our families. Our children will not receive the kind of upbringing that is desirable for a Christian family. In *Familiaris Consortio* John Paul, cites the holy family of Nazareth as the model of good Christian family. He sees St. Joseph as a just man and the Blessed Virgin Mary as mother per excellence.

Benedict XVI concurs with John Paul II. He teaches that:

The family is the “sanctuary of life” and a vital cell of society and of the Church. It is here that the features of a people take shape; it is here that its members acquire basic teachings. They learn to love inasmuch as they are unconditionally loved, they learn respect for others inasmuch as they are respected, they learn to know the face of God inasmuch as they receive a first revelation of it from a father and a mother full of attention in their regard. Whenever these fundamental experiences are lacking, society as a whole suffers violence and becomes in turn the progenitor of more violence.⁴⁸

It is the family which makes the best setting for learning and applying the culture of true human living. The Christian family should practice spirituality that brings Christ into the heart of everyday life.

3.4 The Small Christian Communities: Agents of Change

The small Christian communities provide a perfect ground for moral formation of individuals by reviving and encouraging relevant Christian values. Small Christian communities are organized into a closely-knit community of persons who know and understand each other. In this case they can share their joys and sorrows; hence they are in a position to support one another. The small Christian community encompasses the nuclear family, homestead, kinship and the village. In such a setting the members can define their true identity that opens to the wider ecclesial community. The Special Assembly of Bishops of Africa likens the small Christian community to the African clan structure:

Small Christian communities...bring together several families from an area of the town or village within the parish territory. The advantage of such communities is that they give Christians a sense of belonging and a sense of being united in a common purpose. The family and the clan structure of traditional African society makes these small Christian communities particularly appropriate.⁴⁹

Constance Bansikiza concurs with the Special Assembly of Bishops of Africa. He observes:

Communities should not be influenced by individualistic ideas and attitudes that are detrimental to both moral values and formation. Values such as solidarity, love, hospitality and generosity which unite the community should remain the pivotal principles of modern Christian living...These values need to be revived and relived in the small Christian communities where every member shoulders the responsibility of forming young people morally. Creating awareness of the need for moral formation starts with small Christian communities.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, On The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World, *Familiaris Consortio*, Rome, St. Peter's, 22 November, 1981, No. 18.

⁴⁷ Ibid, No. 21.

⁴⁸ Benedict XVI, Africa’s Commitment, *Africae Munus*, Ouidah, Benin, 19 November, 2011, No. 42.

⁴⁹ Synod of Bishops- Special Assembly for Africa, *The Church in Africa and her Evangelizing Mission, Towards the year 2000: Instrumentum Laboris*, Vatican City, Libreria Editrice, 1993, No.45.

⁵⁰ Constance Bansikiza, *Restoring Moral Formation in Africa*, Eldoret, AMECEA Gaba Publications, 2001, p. 91.

In his encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II recognizes the role of the small Christian communities in moral formation. He observes that: Small Christian communities are good centres for Christian formation...an instrument of formation and evangelization and a solid starting point for a new society based on a civilization of love.⁵¹ Bishops of AMECEA region during their pastoral implementation strategy argued in favour of small Christian community as an effective means to reach at the grassroots. They argued: "Creative pastoral approaches are needed today to adequately respond to the life situations of our people and communities. Better methods must be devised to incarnate the gospel message into the local customs and traditions of our people."⁵² In the small Christian community the members develop an intense vitality of a truly Christian community life, becoming more aware of its true needs in its own environment.

3.5 Contribution of African Traditional Values

Among some of the causes of individualism is the imitation of Western culture. Many people in Africa today view African traditional values with suspicion. The Africans too share in the image and likeness of God therefore they also have moral norms which facilitate and guide human conduct. African traditional values should therefore be embraced in order to check the modern values which are not to be taken as absolute. Pope Paul VI clearly teaches that: "People must know how to discriminate among those things that are held out to them; they must be able to assess critically, and eliminate those deceptive goods which would only bring about lowering of the human ideal, and to accept those values that are sound and beneficial, in order to develop them alongside their own, in accordance with their own genius."⁵³

In support of Paul VI Bansikiza argues: "African traditional communities should emphasize the importance of good moral conduct, through both oral and written literature as these moral values are continually imparted on to the people...These teach communitarian aspect of responsible living. For instance, a person performing a good deed or committing an evil deed would affect the entire community. Each community member, therefore, would endeavour to behave accordingly in order to strengthen the moral life of a community."⁵⁴ Africans are renowned to exhibit these values without hesitation as this is part of their upbringing. Julius Nyerere reiterates that individuals would take care of community and the community would take care of its people.⁵⁵ African values recommended to reverse extreme individualism include moral values like hospitality, solidarity and generosity.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we can deduce from the discussion that extreme individualism is a reality in the African family today. The article has therefore endeavoured to propose ethical initiatives aimed against the threat of extreme individualism. The work proceeded by examining the current reality of the family. This section discovered that there exist problems and challenges in family today. Our focus was the challenge of individualism in the family today. The article therefore examined the meaning and some causes of this vice which weakens family bonds and ends up considering each member of the family as an isolated unit. Thereafter it delved into proposing socio-moral ways against the threat of extreme individualism. Pope Francis rightly summarizes: "All of us are called to keep striving towards something greater than ourselves and our families."⁵⁶

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⁵¹ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, No. 51

⁵² AMECEA Bishops, "Conclusions on Implementation Strategies," *Conclusion 1*, in AFER, vol. 18, No. 5 (1976), p. 253.

⁵³ Paul VI, *Fostering the Development of Peoples*, London, Catholic Truth Society, 1967, No. 41.

⁵⁴ Bansikiza, p. 84.

⁵⁵ Julius Nyerere, *Ujamaa*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1968, p.6-7.

⁵⁶ Francis, *Amoris Lætitia* No.325

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