

## Chapter 6: Child Protection in the Church as a Family of God

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Children are invaluable treasures and precious gifts of God. The future of any nation is largely determined by the pride of place accorded children in the present, which demands care of their inviolable dignity and protection of their inalienable rights. This basic responsibility of civil society to provide for the integral wellbeing and welfare of children cannot be sacrificed on an altar of negligence. Being part of human society, the Catholic Church cannot afford to become a passive spectator or to adopt a defensive posture to care and protect the child. It is an ecclesial moral and social responsibility to support families and civil institutions in the care and protection of minors. While most nations have constitutional norms and domesticated international charters intended to protect the child from all forms of abuses, it is only in recent decades that the Church has developed procedural norms and ethical guidelines oriented toward fostering an accountable *ecclesia* that protects children from sexual abuse, exploitation, and harassment.

The recent unprecedented number of reported cases of sexual and other forms of abuses and violence against minors in the Church indicate that the faithful, and most especially the clergy, have frequently failed to be responsible guardians of minors. In many cases, a culture of negligence and silence has been pervasive among ecclesiastical authorities responsible for the care and protection of children. Within the Church in Africa in particular, clergy have often not sufficiently recognized the pride of place of the child in the Family of God. Children are often relegated to the background in terms of spiritual and pastoral care. Yet the well-being of the child extends beyond the family, with the Family of God also sharing in responsibility for their integral well-being and development.

This chapter articulates a theology of accountability for the Church in Africa as Family of God and invites particular churches to move toward becoming a foster guardian and credible protector of minors, in response to the unheard cries and untold stories of those sexually abused by clergy. The chapter engages with the ecclesiology of the Family of God and the magisterium of Pope Francis to propose theological paradigm shifts on fostering the care and protection of minors. It unearths some of the constraints and account for strategies adopted by churches to safeguard minors. The chapter adopts a literature review and oral interview approach in delineating the place of the child in the African family and in the Family of God. I argue that the Church in Africa must give the child a special place as the Church listens to the cries of victims and embrace transparency in the Family of God.

## **The African Child and Sexual Abuse**

Historical studies chronicle scanty African traditional experiences on the lives of children. Outside of folktale and fiction, little literature exists on how children were socialized and protected in traditional African societies.<sup>1</sup> The few scholarly works on children emerge during the experience of colonialism and tend more toward descriptions of child slavery, child soldiers, and child labour.<sup>2</sup> This dearth of literature diminishes the possibility of constructing a linear indigenous historical

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<sup>1</sup> In "Between Ecclesiology and Ethics: Promoting a Culture of Protection and Care in Church and Society," *Theological Studies* 80, no. 4 (2019): 897–915, Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator presents an overview of some folktale and fictions from the following African classics: Wole Soyinka, *Ake: The Years of Childhood* (London: Random House, 1962); Chinua Achebe, *Chike and the River* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966); Onuora Nzekwu, *Eze Goes to School* (Portsmouth: Heinemann Publishers, 1977); Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Nyamba Nene and the Flying Bus* (Nairobi: East African Publishers, 1986); Nyamba Nenes, *Pistol* (Nairobi: Heinemann Press, 1986).

<sup>2</sup> See Manzoor Ahmed, *Within Human Reach: A Future for Africa's Children* (New York: United Nations Children's Fund, 1985); Loretta E. Bass, *Child Labor in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2004); Chinua Achebe, *Chike and the River* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966).

overview of the place and worth of the child. Available literature is not equivocal in presenting childhood in traditional society as sacred, a valuable phase, and a gift from God to the community.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the diversity in the narrative of childhood, African culture holds children as blessing and a gift.<sup>4</sup> A Gikuyu adage indicates this worth of the child thus—*mwana muciare ndateagwo*—once a child is born, he/she cannot be abandoned. In *Ecclesia in Africa*, Pope John Paul II writes, “In African culture and tradition the role of the family is everywhere held to be fundamental. 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” (no. 43).<sup>5</sup> Consequently, children are considered an indispensable gift, a family asset, and a fruitful blessing of marriage as well as the future of the Church and nation.

Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator contends that children were valued for who they are and what they represent, and they were valuable relative to social expectations and cultural norms.<sup>6</sup> In traditional African communities, the child was accorded a special place in the family. An indispensable end of marriage was procreation, and in some communities, the procreation of males was preferred to that of females.<sup>7</sup> Couples without a child, or without a male child, were considered to constitute a

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<sup>3</sup> See Ferdinand Ezémbé, *L'enfant africain et ses univers* (Paris: Karthala, 2009), 126; Mary Makamatine Lembo, “Africa and the Reality of Sexual Abuse of Children and Vulnerable Persons,” in *African Theology in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Call to Baraza*, ed. Elias O. Opongo, SJ, and Paul Bere, SJ (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2021), 332.

<sup>4</sup> See Khofi Arthur Phiri, *African Traditional Marriage: A Christian Theological Appraisal* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2011), 75–77.

<sup>5</sup> The Bishops of Zambia equally describes the African child a precious gift. See Zambian Episcopal Conference, “A Call to Love and Care—A Pastoral Letter on the Family,” in *The African Enchiridion: The Documents and Texts of the Catholic Church in the African World, Vol. IV, 1994–2004* (Bologna: Editrice Missionaria Italia, 2008), nos. 1013, 2746.

<sup>6</sup> Orobator, “Between Ecclesiology and Ethics,” 902.

<sup>7</sup> Phiri, *African Traditional Marriage*, 76; Anthonia Bolanle Ojo, “Family Institution under Threat in Nigeria: An Ethical and Pastoral Response,” in *African Theology in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Call to Baraza*, ed. Elias O. Opongo, SJ, and Paul Bere, SJ (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2021), 262–263.

pitiable marital union, to be remedied through the marriage of a second wife. Male children were expected to act as leaders to their siblings on reaching adulthood, and the eldest male was considered to be the head of the family on the demise of the father. Childlessness diminished the worth of the man and invalidated the identity of the woman.<sup>8</sup> It also robbed the dignity and respect of the man and woman within the community. Children, especially male children, were considered progenitors of future generations of families and communities. Without children, the lineage of families face extinction. Childhood, therefore, was protected by adults and the community, who acted as authentic guardians, educators, and protectors.<sup>9</sup> The African child was nurtured and protected by the parents and the community, growing under the tutelage of trust in embracing cultural values, including solidarity, care, communion, respect, and integrity.<sup>10</sup> No wonder the African proverb states: “It takes the whole village to raise a child.” In other words, the entire community is delighted whenever a child is born, and the community takes responsibility for the upbringing and protection of the child. This enabled children to learn from their parents and community without fear of abuse or harm.

Furthermore, children grew up in the community educated on “sexuality, learning mutual respect, respect for physical intimacy of the other, and self-control.”<sup>11</sup> The fundamental lessons were the respect for the dignity of the human person, and the sacredness of human sexuality. Deviation from the cultural norms and the sexual ethos of the community—such as through fornication, adultery, or incest—were

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<sup>8</sup> Orobator, “Between Ecclesiology and Ethics,” 902; Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Anchor, 1959), 77–79.

<sup>9</sup> Lembo, “Africa and the Reality of Sexual Abuse,” 332; Philomena N. Mwaura, “The Gospel of the Family: From Africa to the World Church,” in *The Church We Want: African Catholics Look to Vatican II*, ed. Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 151.

<sup>10</sup> Idara Otu, *Communion Ecclesiology and Social Transformation in African Catholicism: Between Vatican II and African Synod II* (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2020), 129; Lembo, “African and the Reality of Sexual Abuse,” 332.

<sup>11</sup> Lembo, “African and the Reality of Sexual Abuse,” 333.

taboos and abominations. In most cases, perpetrators of such abominable acts were expelled from the community and a propitious sacrifice offered to appease the divine and cleanse the land.

Unfortunately, the modern utilitarian valuation of the African child has conveyed a burden on the child, not just as a gift from God but also as a means to an end for the family. Within this context, “Children have no voice; they are seen but not heard—let alone trusted—in a society where age is revered and political systems prioritize gerontocratic privileges.”<sup>12</sup> The African child appeared as a pawn for adults to valorize their own self-worth, identity, and dignity. No wonder the residues of all forms of abuse linger amidst declining socioeconomic order and degrading standards of living in many African nations. On the one hand, these social conditions contribute to the prevalence of child labor, child molestation, infant mortality, child trafficking, child pornography, child kidnapping, child soldiers, and child sexual abuse. On the other hand, the social ills contribute to the erosion of traditional African cultural values, thereby fermenting the grounds for violence and abuse toward children.<sup>13</sup>

Conscious of the diminishment of the safety and resulting increase in the vulnerability of children in the world, and the need for their protection, the community of nations promulgated the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child.<sup>14</sup> This convention was preceded by the 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child by the United Nations. Child Rights conventions are globally accepted norms, grounded on the dignity of the child as a person, and directed toward the integral development of children and the common good of society. Adopted by many nations,

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<sup>12</sup> Orobator, “Between Ecclesiology and Ethics,” 905.

<sup>13</sup> Otu, *Communion Ecclesiology and Social Transformation in African Catholicism*, 130–131; Betty Bigombe and Gilbert M. Khadiagala, “Major Trends Affecting Families in Sub-Saharan Africa,” in *Major Trends Affecting Families: Background Document*, ed. United Nations. (New York: United Nations, 2003), 1–36.

<sup>14</sup> United Nations Humans Rights Office of the High Commissioner, “Convention on the Rights of the Child,” November 20, 1989, [www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child](http://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child).

Child Rights laws recognize African children as deserving maximum protection as they grow into adulthood and from all forms of abuse. The 1989 Convention articulates rights, including survival rights, developmental rights, participation rights, and protection from abuse and exploitation. Child Rights laws designate any person who sexually abuses or exploits a child in any manner as committing an offence liable on conviction to imprisonment.<sup>15</sup> Despite the advances in legislations, the enforcement of children's right to protection in society is undermined by a checkered history of negligence and compliance.

### **Clerical Sexual Abuse of Minors**

Clerical sexual abuse of minors is a heinous criminal act and grievous mortal sin that violates the innocence and dignity of a child created in the image of God. Sexual abuse of minors extends beyond penetrative acts and rape to include inappropriate behavior, harassment, exhibition, fondling, manipulation, forced masturbation, and "entertainment" acts.<sup>16</sup> Particular churches in Africa have experienced scandals of sexual abuse of minors in the recent decades. Unfortunately, according to Edward Obi, "Data that should point to the number of perpetrators and the incidence of their attacks is often not available."<sup>17</sup> Marie Keenan argues that estimating the scale of clerical sexual abuse "raises particular difficulties, as information on perpetrators is not always available in general crime statistics, research reports, and service uptake figures, and the Catholic Church has traditionally been slow to release the relevant data."<sup>18</sup> Cases of clerical sexual abuse not disclosed by victims or civil and ecclesiastical authorities abound in many African nations (mainly because of a culture of

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<sup>15</sup> See United Nations, "Convention on the Rights of the Child."

<sup>16</sup> Lembo, "Africa and the Reality of Sexual Abuse," 333.

<sup>17</sup> Edward Osang Obi, "Protection of Minors and Vulnerable Adults: The Moral Leadership of the African Church," Presented at the 34<sup>th</sup> CATHAN Annual Conference, Catholic Diocese of Port Harcourt Pastoral Centre, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria, April 23–26, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Marie Keenan, *Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church: Gender, Power and Organizational Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 5.

stigmatization and shame), which stifles a proper estimate of its scale in particular churches.

The dearth of records of clerical sexual abuse does not mean that such abuse has been absent in particular churches. Clerical sexual abuse of minors, reported or not, inflicts deep wounds and indelible scars on victims, families, the Church, and society. In Ghana, a 2011 survey shows that 90 percent of children were physically or verbally abused, and over 15 percent of teenage girls aged 15–19 years were sexually abused.<sup>19</sup> The general secretary of the Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference, Hermenegild Makoro, intimated in an interview with Catholic News Service that "the South African church defrocked three priests over sexual abuse of children in the parishes. Since 2003, 35 cases of abuse involving priests have been reported to the church in South Africa."<sup>20</sup>

In 2019, a religious sister of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, Veronica Openibo, at the Vatican Summit on Protection of Minors from Clerical Sexual Abuse, described cases of abuses in Nigeria. According to her: "In the early 90s a priest told me there were sexual abuses in the convents and formation houses and that, as president of the Nigerian Conference of Women Religious, I should please do something to address the issue."<sup>21</sup> Regarding another case: "A second priest in the early 2000s said that a particular ethnic group practiced incest but I added that from personal experience incest is a world issue. A dying old man revealed to me he was acting strangely because of the sexual abuse he experienced as a teenager from the priests in his school. A thirteen-year-old girl met her

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<sup>19</sup> Rejoice E. Hoedoafia, *Intrafamilial Sexual Abuse of Minors in Ghana: Impact on the Wellbeing of Survivors: Indications for Interventions* (Rome: Université Gregorienne, 2019), 220.

<sup>20</sup> Fredrick Nzwili, "Africa is also grappling with clerical abuse, says Catholic leaders," *Crux*, February 8, 2019, [www.cruxnow.com/church-in-africa/2019/02/africa-is-also-grappling-with-clerical-abuse-say-catholic-leaders](http://www.cruxnow.com/church-in-africa/2019/02/africa-is-also-grappling-with-clerical-abuse-say-catholic-leaders).

<sup>21</sup> Veronica Openibo, "Openness to the World as a Consequence of the Ecclesial Mission," Presented at The Protection of Minors in the Church Meeting, New Synod Hall, Vatican City, February 23, 2019, [www.vatican.va/resourcess/resourcess-uoropenibo-protezionemino ri20190223en.html](http://www.vatican.va/resourcess/resourcess-uoropenibo-protezionemino ri20190223en.html).

priest attacker 25 years later and he did not recognize her.”<sup>22</sup> Such undocumented and untold experiences of clerical sex abuses of minors are often shrouded by a culture of silence and negligence. Some priests in Nigeria and Kenya interviewed acknowledged the possibilities of clerical sexual of minors but at a limited scale compared to North America and Europe. They acknowledge this might be largely due to unreported cases.<sup>23</sup>

Pope Francis has initiated ethical and pastoral reforms in matters of clerical sexual abuse of minors, abolishing any pontifical secrecy in his 2018 *Letter to the People of God*. The pope adopts a zero tolerance approach for perpetrators and has directed bishops to follow suit in their respective dioceses. In furtherance of this commitment, in 2014, Pope Francis established a Pontifical Commission for the Protection of Minors to foster child care and protection among local churches and the universal Church. Headed by Cardinal Sean O’Malley, this commission received its mandate to propose initiatives that would protect children from pedophiles in the Church. The commission charts a renewed path for the universal Church in responding to clerical sexual abuse crisis.

Four years later, in 2018, the pope sent a message to the universal Church on this same topic. In the letter, he states, “It is essential that we, as a Church, be able to acknowledge and condemn, with sorrow and shame, the atrocities perpetrated by consecrated persons, clerics, and all those entrusted with the mission of watching over and caring for those most vulnerable” (*Letter to the People of God*, no. 1). In 2019, the pope convened a meeting of presidents of episcopal conferences and leaders of the Curia in Rome to pray and reflect on the prevention of sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable adults. This epochal gathering brought witnesses’ testimonies from various parts of the world on clerical sexual abuse. The

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<sup>22</sup> Openibo, “Openness to the World as a Consequence of the Ecclesial Mission.”

<sup>23</sup> For this research, some priests in Nigeria and Kenya (who requested to remain anonymous) were interviewed between December 2021 and January 2022 on safeguarding children in their dioceses. From the interview, many child abuse cases are not reported for reasons including lack of education on what constitutes child abuse, the absence of a report desk, the protection of family name by parents of the victim, and the stigmatization of victims.

fruit of this prayerful deliberation was the issuance, *motu proprio*, of the Apostolic Letter, *Vos Estis Lux Mundi*. In this letter, Pope Francis states that, “The crimes of sexual abuse offend Our Lord, cause physical, psychological and spiritual damage to the victims and harm the community of the faithful” (no. 1). He also sets forth procedures to be adopted by local churches to prevent and combat clerical sexual abuse of minors. The norms are *ad experimentum* for three years.

## **African Episcopal Conferences and Protection of Minors**

Paths to the reception of these teachings of Pope Francis in east and west African nations can be categorized into two intertwined pastoral approaches: 1) issuance and the implementation of ethical guidelines for care and protection of minors and 2) the training of pastoral agents on using the guidelines. The first pastoral approach is the implementation of guidelines for safeguarding minors from clerical sexual abuse. On this note, some episcopal conferences and particular churches in Africa and around the world have applied these provisions. However, there are some episcopal conferences on the African continent which are yet to fully comply.<sup>24</sup>

Previously, some episcopal conferences established norms and procedures for dealing with clerical sexual abuse cases. In 2015, the Southern African Catholic Bishops’ Conference issued safeguarding policies to help care for and protect minors. The Church in Nigeria’s statutory response began in 2006 with its first policy against sexual abuse and ethical guidelines, which was revised in 2012. In 2017, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria published “Guidelines for Processing Cases of Sexual Abuse of Minors and Vulnerable Adults,” which has been domesticated in all of the country’s dioceses. Other episcopal conferences and particular churches in Africa have policies for safeguarding minors

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<sup>24</sup> Some of the episcopal conferences that are yet to domesticate the guidelines for the protection of minors include Central African Republic, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, and Sudan.

and vulnerable persons.<sup>25</sup> In 2019, the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa issued a handbook for the protection of minors titled, “Child Safeguarding Standards and Guidelines: A Catholic Guide for Policy Development.”<sup>26</sup> This handbook has been adopted by the member dioceses. Furthermore, some male religious congregations and societies of apostolic life in east and west Africa have norms and procedures for protection of minors. Such policies set forth appropriate behavior, ethical guidelines, and procedural steps for reporting the sexual abuse of minors as well as setting penalties of perpetrators and for providing assistance and care to victims.

The second pastoral approach complements the first through workshops and seminars for clergy on the protection and care of minors. In Eastern Africa, for instance, the issuance of the handbook by the Catholic bishops was followed up with a three-day workshop for all pastoral agents. In some particular churches, clergy and religious are required to attend a seminar on care and protection of minors prior to being assigned to any pastoral responsibility. Organization of workshops and seminars for the training and ongoing formation of priests on the magisterial teachings, emphasizing the Church is not tolerating clerical sexual abuse. Such workshops are extended to seminarians in formation and integrated into their academic curriculum. In a major seminary in Nigeria (The National Missionary Seminary of St. Paul, Abuja) students periodically attend seminars on ethical guidelines for the care and protection of minors and procedures for reporting of abuse cases. Magisterial teachings on childhood are integrated into philosophical and theological studies. Similar initiatives abound in formation houses,

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<sup>25</sup> See Catholic Bishop’s Conference of Nigeria, *Guidelines for Processing Cases of Sexual Abuse of Minors and Vulnerable Persons* (Abuja: Catholic Archdiocese of Abuja, 2017); Catholic Archdiocese of Abuja, *Policy on Safeguarding Minors and Vulnerable Persons for Archdiocesan Personnel* (Abuja: Catholic Archdiocese of Abuja, 2020).

<sup>26</sup> Association of Member of Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa, *Child Safeguarding Standards and Guidelines: A Catholic Guide for Policy Development* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2019).

religious institutes, seminaries, and Catholic universities in the African continent. In the Catholic Diocese of Malindi in Kenya, there are child protection desks and a phone help-line for supporting victims and reporting cases of sexual abuse. This is rare and commendable feat in safeguarding the African child. A challenge with such initiatives would be the culture of shame and stigmatization of victims of sexual abuse. It means that the parents of an abused child might be reluctant to come forward to report cases so as to avoid being the object of gossip, ridicule, or humiliation in the community.

Pope Francis invites episcopal conferences in Africa and indeed the world to implement the document on protection of minors and vulnerable persons. Particularly, the pope mandates clergy and religious to report incidents of sexual abuse: “That means they [priests and religious] are required to inform church authorities when they learn or have ‘well-founded motives to believe’ that a cleric or sister has engaged in sexual abuse of a minor, sexual misconduct with an adult, possession of child pornography—or that a superior has covered up any of those crimes.”<sup>27</sup> Any non-disclosure of sexual abuse keeps the wheel of abuse running. Whichever method of child protection adopted by particular churches, or chosen in a given context, a child protection desk should set in place a framework to protect the integrity and dignity of abused minors and their families. As well, the identity and confidentiality of the person making the report must be ensured. The Church loves all her children like a loving mother and cares for all with a special affection for those who are smallest and defenseless. This is the responsibility of the entire Family of God.

## **The African Child in the Family of God**

The First Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops (1994) adopted an ecclesiological model rooted in the African notion of the

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<sup>27</sup> Associated Press, “Pope Francis issues ground breaking law requiring priests, nuns to report sex abuse, cover-up,” *NBC News*, May 9, 2019, [www.nbcnews.com/news/world/pope-francis-issues-groundbreaking-law-requiring-priests-nuns-report-sex-n1003651](http://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/pope-francis-issues-groundbreaking-law-requiring-priests-nuns-report-sex-n1003651).

family and modeled on the Trinity (*Relatio post Discepcionem*, no. 3). The bishops of Africa affirmed the Family of God “as an expression of the Church’s nature particularly appropriate for Africa. For this image emphasizes care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationships, acceptance, dialogue and trust” (*Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 63). The Church in Africa’s self-understanding pertains to the religious spirituality and cultural sensibilities of Africa. The Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops (2009) integrated the family ecclesiology into the social mission of the Church, particularly reconciliation, justice, and peace (*Africae Munus*, nos. 1–3, 10). These two synods underscore the ecclesiological and missiological reception of the Second Vatican Council as a way of being Church in Africa.<sup>28</sup> Within the Family of God, “There is a common dignity of members deriving their rebirth in Christ, a common grace as sons and daughters, a common vocation to perfection, one salvation, one hope, and undivided charity” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 32). The Church as Family of God as modeled on the Trinity is “a people made one by the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 4). This expresses the bond of communion and mutual dialogue that characterizes the *ecclesia ad intra* and *missio ad extra* of the Church.<sup>29</sup>

Accordingly, the intrinsic relations within the immanent Trinity serve as an analogy for envisioning the Church as Family of God as well as underscore the dynamics of the relationship between the clergy and the children.<sup>30</sup> The mystery of the Trinity underscores the unicity, the distinction and the relations of the divine persons, which serves as grounds for a theology of childhood that fosters rights and duties as well as

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<sup>28</sup> Otu, *Communion Ecclesiology and Social Transformation*, 198–201.

<sup>29</sup> Idara Otu, “African Theology of Social Development: Successes and Limitations of Methodological Approaches,” in *Faith in Action*, vol. 1: *Reform, Mission and Pastoral Renewal in African Catholicism Since Vatican II*, ed. Stan Chu Ilo, Nora K. Nonterah, and Idara Otu (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick, 2020), 252.

<sup>30</sup> Otu, *Communion Ecclesiology and Social Transformation*, 134.

boundaries and differences.<sup>31</sup> Karl Rahner describes childhood as a “mystery” with “a beginning which is open to the absolute beginning of God who is utter mystery, the ineffable and eternal, nameless and precisely as such accepted with love in his divine nature as he who presides over all things.”<sup>32</sup> In relating with the African child, the clergy are to recognize them as precious gifts and blessings of God, created in the image and likeness of God, and thus treat them with genuine love, respect and care. Orobator observes, “Although hitherto unexplored in regard to the care and protection of children, the theology of church as family committed to reconciliation, justice, and peace offers a rich terrain for exploring the ethical implications for how the Christian community treats children.”<sup>33</sup> The Family of God ecclesiology offers a basis for fostering an accountable Church, responsive to the untold stories and unheard cries of victims of clerical sexual abuse in Africa. Pope Francis reiterates the importance of being an accountable church thus: “I am conscious of the effort and work being carried out in various parts of the world to come up with the necessary means to ensure the safety and protection of the integrity of children and of vulnerable adults, as well as implementing zero tolerance and ways of making all those who perpetrate or cover up these crimes accountable” (*Letter to the People of God*, no. 2).

In safeguarding the child in the Family of God, the vestiges of paternalism, subjugation, and patriarchy in traditional African family, which tint modern African families, should not be transposed into the dynamics of protecting minors in particular churches.<sup>34</sup> In caring for the child, the traditional African family system embodied limitations precipitated by paternalistic attitudes, including the child being viewed as a nonautonomous entity, the protection of family name, and pursuance of the public face of the family. Often when a child is abused or violated, the

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<sup>31</sup> Otu, *Communion Ecclesiology and Social Transformation*, 133–134.

<sup>32</sup> Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 8: *Further Theology for the Spiritual Life 2*, trans. David Bourke (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1971), 42.

<sup>33</sup> Orobator, “Between Ecclesiology and Ethics,” 910.

<sup>34</sup> Otu, *Communion Ecclesiology and Social Transformation*, 131.

response of the parents may be largely influenced by the public face of the family rather than the integral wellbeing and good of the child or healing and justice for the child. These vestiges must be denounced if the protection of the minors in the Church as Family of God is to be truly realized. It means particular churches should be critical of their adopted guidelines and methods for protecting minors.

For the Church in Africa to truly be accountable in caring for and protecting minors, three paradigm shifts arise for the Family of God: a movement from the culture of negligence to the inclusion of the African child, according the African child a pride of place in the Family of God; a shift from a culture of negligence to a culture of listening to the victims; and a movement from a culture of secrecy to one of transparency in dealing with sexual predators. Stan Ilo maintains that the Church as Family of God must give account to the Lord not only of those who are with us in every sense of the word but also of the abused and violated.<sup>35</sup> Abused minors are truly the children of God and deserve pastoral care and healing, for “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it” (1 Corinthians 12:26). The cry of the abused child is the cry of the Church.

For the first paradigm shift the African Church’s self-understanding as Family of God draws from the notion of the family to articulate a contextual ecclesiological image. Traditional African societies recognized, as earlier elaborated, every child as a precious gift of God. In the Final Message of the Second African Synod, the bishops affirmed that the child is a precious gift of God and must be cared for by the family and the Church. Pope Benedict XVI elaborates on this cultural truth: “Children are a gift of God to humanity, and they must be the object of particular concern on the part of their families, the Church, society and governments, for they are a source of hope and renewed life” (*Africae Munus*, no. 65). The Family of God is a privileged place of belonging and

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<sup>35</sup> Stan Chu Ilo, “The Church of Pope Francis: An Ecclesiology of Accountability, Accompaniment, and Action,” in *The Church We Want: African Catholics Look to Vatican II*, ed. Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), 26.

inclusion, where every person experiences love and care. It is a community of God's people, where every child is part of the Family of God and the Body of Christ, the Church. According to Pope Francis, "The crimes of sexual abuse offend Our Lord, cause physical, psychological and spiritual damage to the victims and harm the community of the faithful" (*Vos Estis Lux Mundi*, no. 1).

Jesus treats children with great respect and dignity. He acclaims, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs" (Matt 19:14). Placing children in the midst of the apostles, Jesus acknowledges the importance of the place of the child in the kingdom of God and the character of that kingdom. Regarding the possibility of relegating the child to the clutches of those who are base, Jesus warns his disciples, "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matthew 18:6). Every child must be treated with respect and accorded with a dignity that is assigned to him/her by God and not by society.

The central place of the child in the Family of God is not contestable. The Family of God ecclesiology demands the recognition of the child as having been created in the image of God and so with inherent worth and dignity. This means the faithful must be committed to providing safe environments for children in all pastoral activities so that they can grow in love, and enjoy the fullness of life. Further, the Church hierarchy must institute a necessary framework to protect children from any form of sexual abuse or exploitation. Children should be safe when they go to Church, such as for devotional prayers, catechetical instruction, liturgies, organizational prayers, and meetings with priests and other pastoral agents. Parents should be encouraged to accompany their children to Church when possible and be seated with them during the liturgy. Minors should be under the watchful eye of their parents or designated adult approved by parents and guardians.

The second paradigm shift invites the Church as Family of God to be a listening church, attending to the heretofore unheard cries and untold stories of abused minors. Listening, as a predisposition for the ecclesiology of the Family of God, is elaborated by Elochukwu Uzukwu, in his book *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches*. Uzukwu calls for a vision of the Church as Family “with large ears” that prioritizes mutual dialogue and active participation.<sup>36</sup> This ecclesiological predisposition precludes the hierarchy from assuming that they have the monopoly of understanding the cries of abuse victims. Pope Francis acknowledges this truth when he writes, “I desire that this commitment be implemented in a fully ecclesial manner, so that it may express the communion that keeps us united, in mutual listening and open to the contributions of those who care deeply about this process of conversion” (*Vos Estis Lux Mundi*, no. 1).

The world of the sexually abused remains sacred and demands paying attention with humility and an openness to learning from victims. Sexually abused minors have lessons for the Church in an age where sexual crimes and sins are shockingly widespread. The children’s stories must be told, and their cries heard. The pains and suffering of abused minors are the pains and suffering of Christ since it is the Body of Christ that is violated and abused in the form of the innocent child created in the dignity of God. In his *Letter to the People of God*, Pope Francis acknowledges that past reports of victims of sexual abuse at the hands of priests cannot be ignored because, even though most cases belong “to the past, nonetheless as time goes on we have come to know the pain of many of the victims” (no. 1). The fact is that many ecclesial communities and faithful are oblivious of the trauma and deep scars of abused victims, which define their entire wellbeing and worldview and impact their spiritual, psychological, human, and social interactions. Experience of abuse is one that remains with the victim for life.

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<sup>36</sup> Elochukwu Uzukwu, *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 127, 146.

Despite the many undocumented cases of clerical sexual abuse in Africa, particular churches have a duty to create a means for victims to report past cases of sexual abuse. This duty includes initiating a concrete pastoral process of healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation for the victims as well as for punishing clerical sexual predators. Particular churches should consider establishing a reconciliation commission or panel and supporting survivors of sexual abuse in coming forth to share their stories. The laments of survivors become part of a 'learning curve' for the Church in the training and formation of priests, in the prevention of abuse and in promulgating guidelines for the care and protection of minors. Sexually abused minors have a story that must be heard by the Family of God.

The third shift is the movement from a culture of secrecy to a culture of transparency in the handling of the cases of clerical sexual abuse in particular churches. The Family of God is a Church where every member is a first child of God and loved by God (Hebrews 12:23). The first step in the process of promoting transparency is to acknowledge that clerical sexual abuse occurs in particular churches in Africa. The denial of the possible abuse of minors by clergy without proper investigations would wish away the problem. The current clerical sexual abuse demands a transparent investigation process and procedure of all alleged suspected and reported cases. The unethical practice of cover-up is detrimental and contributed to the perpetuation of a vicious circle of abuse of African children. Veronica Openibo notes that "the normal process for clergy—in the past and still present in some areas—was and is to give support to 'one of us,' to avoid exposing a scandal and bringing discredit to the Church. All offenders, regardless of their clerical status, found guilty should be given the same penalty for the abuse of minors."<sup>37</sup> The past experiences emerging from North America and Europe with priest shuffling indicates unethical practice that the Church in Africa must learn from and not repeat. The perpetrators of sexual abuse must be withdrawn from active ministry and involvement with children.

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<sup>37</sup> Openibo, "Openness to the World as a Consequence of the Ecclesial Mission."

Further, the commitment to transparency means that ecclesiastical procedures are traceable to the specific actions and decisions with regard to who, what, when, why, and how. It accounts for proper documentation of stories and evidence by the competent ecclesiastical authorities. Such documentation will enable dioceses to establish the possible causes of clerical sexual abuse and to work to mitigate reoccurrence. It is a fundamental aspect in establishing trust and confidence within the Family of God, especially in the face of betrayal of trust and abuse of power. The Family of God as a transparent and accountable Church must disclose the outcome of the investigation to the victims and their families. In cases of false allegations, sincere efforts must be made to restore the integrity and reputation of those wrongly accused of clerical sexual abuse. As a transparent Church, the family of God should be open to account for every sexually abused minor with truthfulness and sincerity of purpose that gives priority to their integral recovery. As Pope Francis writes: “It is essential that we, as a Church, be able to acknowledge and condemn, with sorrow and shame, the atrocities perpetrated by consecrated persons, clerics, and all those entrusted with the mission of watching over and caring for those most vulnerable” (*Letter to the People of God*, no. 2).

## **Conclusion**

The Church in Africa considers care and protection of children as an integral dimension of the mission of the Family of God. Hence, the survivors of clerical sexual abuse are treasured gifts and precious children of God. Their experiences of abuses have created an effaceable wound and scars that need healing. Though their stories may never be told or their cries heard, the Church in Africa as the Family of God must acknowledge the heinous crimes committed against African children and ask for forgiveness from the victims and God. Despite the failure of the Family of God to care and protect minors in the past, the Church must not fail to care and protect them in the future. For this reason, this chapter chronicled the priority of the child in African traditional society and the entire family of God and the responsibility of the entire faithful—the clergy, religious and

laity—to be vigilant in caring and protecting minors. Participation of the entire family of God is necessary for the abuse of the clergy to be expunged from the Church in Africa. Consequently, drawing from relevant literature and selected interviews, the essay highlights major approaches adopted by episcopal conferences and particular churches in safeguarding children. These approaches are not exhaustive, rather they indicate conscientious effort of particular churches in responding to Pope Francis's call for the care and protection of minors. The chapter reiterates the relevance of the familial ecclesiology in the care and protection of minors in Africa. Given the unprecedented increase in the youthful demography of Catholics in Africa, the Church in Africa as a Family of God cannot afford to be complacent and complicit in being a credible guardian and protector of children.



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