

Growing Pains of a Young Nation: Exploring the Roman Catholic Church's Stance on Polygamy in Papua New Guinea¹

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Polygamy. The very utterance of the word perks up ears and engenders discussion even in the most reticent of classes. Everyone has an opinion and they are usually quite adamant. And so it should be, for in Papua New Guinea, as in most places where it is practiced, the theme draws in so many of the hot topics of the day: church and state relations; pre-colonial traditions and the European Enlightenment; revelation and the philosophical quest for truth; customs and Christianity; gender issues and societal relations.

I will consider such topics in this short study of polygamy in PNG in two parts.² In the first, I will look at several of the anthropological and sociological reasons for the practice, touch upon the question of multiculturalism and western colonization, and discuss the benefits of polygamy, as well as the ill effects it has had on the societies of PNG. In the second, I will consider the ethical question of polygamy, first looking at the debate from the point of view of Scripture and natural law arguments, and then exploring recent Vatican documents of the Roman Catholic Church as well as a statement issued by the Catholic bishops of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands. I will conclude with a note on the possible impact of the Church's stance on polygamy on the many cultures of PNG.

Reasons for polygamy in PNG

Polygamy is a rare phenomenon neither in human history nor in contemporary societies. Although it may be true that the percentage of men who have more than one wife is small, still it has been estimated that polygamous societies are about four times more numerous than monogamous ones.³ Put another way,

¹ This article first appeared in *Topic: The Washington & Jefferson College Review* 55 (Fall 2007), pp. 101-113.

² By way of definitions, 'polygamy' means the marriage of one person to two or more spouses. 'Polygyny', on the other hand, refers specifically to one man having more than one wife, while 'polyandry' refers to one woman having more than one husband. In nearly every conversation I have had in PNG, however, people have used the word 'polygamy' in the more narrow sense of referring specifically to one man married to more than one wife, most probably because it is almost without exception the only sort of polygamous marriage that exists in PNG. (See, however, the work by Ennio Mantovani, *Marriage in Melanesia: An Anthropological Perspective* [Goroka: The Melanesian Institute, 1992] p. 202 that does report instances of polyandry in New Ireland.) In this article I will use 'polygamy' in this more narrow sense of 'polygyny' as well.

³ See Charles H. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness*, (NY: Maryknoll, 1996) who contends that 80% of the world's societies (not 80% of the world's population) allow polygamy (p. 306). See also 'Polygamy', in *Wikipedia Encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polygamy>. This latter article goes on to note that polygyny is often found in tropical, disease-prone climates and that some observers 'speculate that

nearly a third of the world's population belongs to communities that allow polygamy.⁴

The most common reasons for polygamy are well known: prestige, labor, sexual satisfaction, children, security and alliances, the care of widows.⁵ But such a list tells only part of the story because the reasons combine in such a way as to form a web of social relations wherein it is hard to separate one from the other. It is, for example, difficult to isolate the term 'sexual gratification' from cultural safety nets and the very survival of a people. In some societies, for example, it is forbidden for a lactating mother to have sexual relations with her husband. Such a taboo can be very good for the health of the mother, helping to ensure she not get pregnant too soon after bearing a child. Nevertheless, in this instance reasons like sexual abstinence for the wife, and sexual gratification on the part of the husband easily link with demographic statistics: simply put, there are often more women than men in societies, frequently as a result of war. Add to this fact that some women are infertile or will not bear children because they are lactating and –unless adultery or 'promiscuity' is acceptable— polygamy appears to be a very reasonable way to assure the survival of the clan.

The so-called reason of 'prestige' and wealth, by way of another example, is often inseparable from economics and survival of the culture itself. The chief, for instance, in many societies must ensure the protection of the clan. Several wives work the gardens and raise the pigs, and even in-laws may contribute to his wealth. The chief, in turn, must ensure that all are fed, that there are ritual pigs to slaughter at village gatherings, and that there is peace amongst the clans. The prestige of the polygamous chief, in addition, cannot be separated from authority and internal harmony; a chief without several wives would not command the respect necessary to maintain authority and thus the ability to ensure the peace and survival of their very small societies. In a country of more than 800 languages and less than five million people, such arguments must be taken seriously.

In spite of its very disruptive and often times cruel history of colonialization, Papua New Guinea appears to have accepted the very idea of a nation and even the somewhat arbitrary borders set by its colonial past, but a nation nonetheless of disparate languages and cultures that it does not want to lose. It seeks economic development and acceptance in international circles, but not at the expense of its cultural heritage. And polygamy, so the argument goes, for some societies anyway, appears to be integral to its survival.

(from a potential mother's view point) perceived quality of paternal genes may favour the practice.' In harsher climates, on the other hand, again from a potential mother's viewpoint, 'reliable paternal care as exhibited in monogamous pair-bonding outweighs the importance of paternal genes.'

⁴ Peggy Fletcher Stack, 'Globally, Polygamy Is Commonplace', Sept. 20, 1998, <http://www.polygamy.com/Other-Globally-Polygamy-Is-Commonplace.htm>.

⁵ See, for example, Mantovani, pp. 189-208, especially pp.195-6 and Kraft, pp. 307-308.

Given its unique history, then, this very young and struggling nation has attempted to meld western thought and customary practice into its legal system. Thus, as regards legally recognized marriage, there are two types in Papua New Guinea: statutory and customary. Statutory marriage, whether officiated by the State or the Church, recognizes only monogamous unions,⁶ whereas customary law allows for polygamy if it is in accordance with the custom of either party wishing to marry and if the first marriage was itself a customary union as well.⁷ In other words, customary marriage is legally valid unless one of the parties is already married by statute to somebody else.

At this point, then, there surfaces the inevitable question: given that it is legal and has apparently functioned rather well in Melanesian societies for innumerable generations, why would anyone consider banning polygamy, except that western and Christian ideas are imposing themselves upon a long established tradition? The answer, put succinctly, is that many have come to regard polygamy as the source of much discord and violence in contemporary PNG society.

Social ills of polygamy in PNG

From a survey conducted in several parts of the nation, Catholic anthropologist Ennio Mantovani reports that some seventy percent of the men and ninety percent of the women thought that polygamy was bad for their society. Even in the Highlands, which more readily accepts the practice, nearly two-thirds of all respondents condemned it.⁸ Moreover, one may assume that those figures of disapproval will probably rise in years to come, for the younger the respondents, the less likely they were to favor polygamy.

One of the biggest reasons for disapproval, it would appear, is that polygamy has been linked to various social ills in PNG. Miriam Young, Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary Chief Inspector, for example, claims that polygamy is among the several factors for why domestic violence is on the rise in PNG.⁹ And professor Scarlett Epstein, in a talk delivered to the staff and student body of Divine Word University on April 29, 2004 related the potentially explosive HIV/AIDS epidemic to the existing attitudes of violence against women and

⁶ Owen Jessep and John Luluaki, *Principles of Family Law in Papua New Guinea*, 2nd edn., (Waiani: University of Papua New Guinea Press, 1994), pp. 22-23.

⁷ Jessep and Luluaki, pp. 11-12.

⁸ Ennio Mantovani, *Marriage in Melanesia: An Anthropological Perspective*, 189-192, and 204-206.

⁹ Miriam Yawa, 'Gender and Violence', www.Polygamy\Gender%20and%20Violence.htm. The other factors listed are sexual jealousy, intermarriage between language or cultural groups, bride price, and disorientation of men in a changing world. See also Government of Papua New Guinea, United Nations Children's Fund, *Children, Women and Families in Papua New Guinea: a Situation Analysis* (Port Moresby: Moore Business Systems, 1996), especially p. 16. For a semi-fictional account of some of the violence and social ills associated with polygamy in PNG, see Linda Harvey Kelley, *Toropo: Tenth Wife* (Melbourne: Heinemann, 1995).

children. Her solution, in part: 'stop treating women as slaves; stop polygamous relationships.'¹⁰

Finally, it should be noted that the union of so many language groups into one nation and the growth of towns and cities in PNG have influenced the tradition in ways perhaps few might have foretold. One such change to the tradition is a new phenomenon of polygamous unions whereby the man is married to one wife in the village and another in the urban setting. Thus, whereas in the past prestige and wealth may have been linked to labor, gardens, and the very survival of the clan, there are times today, some will opine, when the tradition has been 'truncated' or invoked as a means to 'justify and legitimate' otherwise unacceptable behavior.¹¹ Young men may take a second wife without having the resources to maintain the first as well as his offspring. In doing so the women in the marriage become isolated and the social and economic reasons for polygamy are nullified. The Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands Bishops, in their 1999 'Statement on Polygamy,' noticed a similar trend. 'Under the pretense of culture', they say, 'prominent and wealthy men entice women to be their second, (third or more) wives because they have the money and power to do so.' The result, they contend, is discord in the family, as well as pain and suffering for many women and children.¹²

Polygamy in the scriptural tradition

The discourse thus far on the ethics of polygamy in PNG has been sociological in nature. Many have argued for the positive aspects of the practice, not the least of which is the very survival of some cultures. Others, however, have pointed out that domestic violence, prostitution, rising crime, loss of woman's dignity, the new post-colonial situation, and new diseases such as HIV – although none are theoretically caused by it—in all practicality cannot be separated from polygamy. And all of these factors come together to convince them that polygamy in PNG, now, must cease.

When one looks at the western religious tradition concerning polygamy, one discovers again perhaps a prevalence of opinion in one way or another, but by no means a consensus. Most western religious consideration of the legitimacy of polygamy begins with the Hebrew canon of Sacred Scripture. There, especially in the historical books, one finds many examples of polygamous unions, from Abraham, Esau and Jacob at the time of the patriarchs to David, Solomon and Rehoboam at the time of the monarchy.¹³ With such facts, all are

¹⁰ See also Cliffor Fairparik's article in *The National*, May 6, 2004, p. 4. Epstein estimates that by 2014, of a total PNG population 7 million, 1.5 million will be HIV positive, and some 350,000 children will be orphaned.

¹¹ Government of PNG, UNICEF, p. 15.

¹² The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands, 'Statement on Polygamy', unpublished, 1999. My copy was kindly given to me by Dr. Phil Gibbs of the Melanesian Institute in Goroka.

¹³ Although one may not agree fully with the biblical criticism that accompanies it, an extensive list of references to polygamy in the Bible can be found online at <http://www.btinternet.com/~familyman/scriptur.htm>.

in agreement. The controversy begins when one starts to interpret the facts and apply them to the ethical situation today.

Many advocates of polygamy make a great leap forward in the literalist tradition of interpretation. God allowed polygamy in the Old Testament. Even Jesus never explicitly condemned it (though he did condemn adultery). Thus who are we to change God's law? From the Scriptural point of view, they conclude, polygamy is legitimate.

But such a literalist leap from Old Testament practice to a supposition of legitimacy today is highly questionable to others. The Hebrew Scriptures appear to sanction holy war as well, for example, in Joshua and Judges, and even Paul did not explicitly condemn slavery in his letter to Philemon, they argue. Thus, the great majority of Christianity, including the Roman Catholic Church, would not take this same literal approach to interpretation. The Papua New Guinea and Solomon Island Bishops, for example, 'supporting the cry of so many women in PNG' and pleading 'that polygamy be banned from the country,' bluntly claim that polygamy is not in God's plan.¹⁴ Their reasoning? Jesus, they say, did in fact make a stand on monogamy claiming that it was always the Father's intention and it was only because of the hardness of heart that Moses allowed shortcomings to slip into the marriage laws.¹⁵

Proponents of the practice will point out, however, that Christianity has not always considered polygamy illegitimate. In fact it appears that the early Church more fell in line with Greco-Roman mores banning polygamy than vice versa,¹⁶ and that the practice of polygamy in Europe, though rare, continued throughout the Middle Ages.

Yes, that may be correct, the anti-polygamy camp might concede. Nevertheless, though it is true that Christianity, a 'religion of the book', may be founded upon revealed truth, still, it is also true that one's understanding of revelation can change and grow throughout the centuries. Even the Greco-Roman laws and customs help us to interpret Scripture. In fact, throughout her long tradition, the Catholic Church especially has made recourse to Natural Law Philosophy to help her seek truth and interpret revelation. Polygamy is a case in point and St. Thomas (1226-1274) a key figure in the debate.

Natural law and polygamy

Natural law can be understood in a number of ways. First, it can refer to that which governs the material universe. Natural law philosophy does not employ the term in this sense. Secondly, in the Roman jurist tradition, natural law can refer to instincts common to both humans and animals, such as self-preservation and care for the young. Although in academic debate reference is

¹⁴ Bishops of PNG/SI, 'Statement on Polygamy'.

¹⁵ See Mk 10:1-9 which becomes a key passage for the Church's stance on divorce as well; cf. also Mt 19:1-9 as well as Dt 24:1-4.

¹⁶ See 'Polygamy' in *Wikipedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polygamy>.

sometimes made to this second meaning, for the most part natural law in the philosophical tradition refers to a third, ethical meaning: the 'rule of conduct which is prescribed to us by the Creator in the constitution of the nature with which He has endowed us,'¹⁷ or, as St. Thomas says, 'rational creature's participation in the eternal law'.¹⁸

Christianity holds firmly that there is a purpose, a goal, for each individual as well as for the universe as a whole. God not only created everything, but is so intimately involved in that creation that this very God became incarnate, entering and redeeming both history and material so that one day all might be reunited in the community of the Trinity. Such is the Christian meta-narrative, if you will, of creation and redemption; such is the Christian understanding of the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Thus there is a direction to history and the cosmos; moreover, humanity, created in God's image, through free will and intellect can cooperate with God's plan. We are an integral part of the cosmic drama. (Alternatively, by degrees, either through ignorance or bias, we may not participate in God's plan; such is sin.)

It is important to notice that, according to this philosophy of natural law, humanity can participate in God's plan through (natural) reason alone. In this sense, although perhaps lacking the 'fullness of life' (cf. Jn 10:10), there is no need for divine revelation for one to lead an ethical life. The subject of polygamy is one such instance in which, according to the natural law tradition, one can come to an understanding of what is ethically moral and what is not without recourse to divine revelation.

St. Thomas Aquinas is an inevitable stop along the path of any discussion on natural law¹⁹ and he does take up the issue of polygamy.²⁰ His answer to the question of the morality of polygamy is an unequivocal no for the following reasons. First, exemplifying the philosophical tradition's use of the second meaning of natural law, he refers to nature: In monogamous unions in nature, he observes, the male takes greater care of the offspring 'as in all birds that rear their young in common: for one male could not avail for several females as a helper in the rearing of their progeny'. Such care apparently inherent in natural monogamy, he reckons, must apply even more so to humans. Polyandry is out of the question for similar reasons. If a woman has more than one husband, then paternity would not be certain and care for offspring would suffer.

But his most important argument against the legitimacy of polygamy, fitting squarely into the third, most predominant meaning of natural law, has to do with the equality and friendship between the spouses which he takes as inherent in the married life. Both of these necessary facets suffer under a

¹⁷ 'Natural Law', <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/09076a.htm>.

¹⁸ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, Q. 94, accessible online: <http://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/FS/FS094.html#FSQ94OUTP1>.

¹⁹ For Thomas Aquinas's own understanding of natural law see *his Summa Theologica*, I-II, Q.94.

²⁰ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, III, 124, accessible online at http://www.nd.edu/Departments/Maritain/etext/gc3_124.htm.

All references in this paragraph are to this source.

polygamous arrangement. He explains it this way: 'If then while the wife has one husband only, the husband has more than one wife, there will not be a friendship of equality on both sides, friendship consisting in a certain equality. There will not be the friendship of a free man with a free woman, but a sort of friendship of a slave with her master.' The sociologist in Thomas backs his argument up with further observation: 'And this is borne out by experience: for among men that keep many wives the wives are counted as menials.' And again, 'From one man having several wives there arises discord at the domestic hearth, as experience shows.'²¹

Recent Vatican and PNG Episcopal teaching on polygamy

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, 22 quoting *Familiaris Consortio*,²³ and with reference to *Gaudium et Spes*,²⁴ appears to take its stand on polygamy from a Thomistic natural law perspective as well. Polygamy, it says, is not in

²¹ In spite of these unambiguous arguments against its legitimacy, there has still been some dispute over St. Thomas's views on polygamy because of a few lines written in the *Supplementum* to the *Summa Theologica* (q. 65, again, accessible online at <http://www.ccel.org/a/aquinas/summa/XP/XP065.html#XPQ65OUTP1>). First, it should be noted, that the *Supplementum* was most probably not penned by St. Thomas. Still, one could argue that it was published under his name and so, at least in part, must bear his, or at least his disciple's thought. Fair enough. Nevertheless, even assuming that the *Supplementum* represents Thomas's or his disciple's thought, a full reading of the five articles under question 65 entitled 'Of Plurality of Wives' could never give the impression that the author supports polygamy in any way. It is in the first article, where the author responds to a total of nine objections on whether it is against the natural law to have several wives, however, that there does appear one contentious part – if one chooses to read it out of context. In this first article, the author says there are three ends to marriage: The begetting and rearing of children; the community of works (or the well-ordering of human life) wherein fidelity is most important; and the sacrament between a man and a woman which –to paraphrase with a more contemporary expression— points to and brings about the union of Christ with his church. The first end, the author continues, corresponds to humanity inasmuch as humanity is animal; the second, inasmuch as humanity is humanity (endowed with reason); and the third, inasmuch as humanity is believer. Having more than one wife does not hinder the first, the author says (and here we see disagreement between the author of *Supplementum* and St. Thomas in *Summa Contra Gentiles* as shown above.) But one would be hard pressed to argue that the author of *Supplementum* or *Summa Theologica* or *Summa Contra Gentiles* would ever say that humanity is simply animal. In other words, although from an animal perspective, the first end may be fulfilled in a polygamous marriage, the author continues, the second end is 'hindered considerably' in a polygamous arrangement and the third end is 'removed altogether'. In other words, although the author of *Supplementum* does not deny that a polygamous marriage may indeed bring about one of the good ends of marriage, that one end which humans share with other animals cannot be separated from the whole which is humanity and which seeks the human and Christian ends of marriage as well. Humans are not simply animals, and thus polygamy, according to the author of *Supplementum* is, without a doubt, against the natural law.

²² The CCC can also be accessed online at http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.

²³ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, 1981, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html.

²⁴ 'Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*', 7 December 1965, no. 49, in Flannery, Austin, Ed., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents* (New Delhi: St. Pauls, 1999) pp. 794-891, here 837-838.

accord with moral law because 'it is contrary to the equal personal dignity of men and women who in matrimony give themselves with a love that is total and therefore unique and exclusive.'²⁵ Marriage involves an 'equal and personal dignity which must be accorded to man and wife in mutual and unreserved affection.'²⁶ Thus, the CCC concludes, 'Polygamy is contrary to conjugal love which is undivided and exclusive'²⁷

Throughout the last several generations, when there have been many converts to Christianity from regions of the world where polygamy is accepted, the Vatican's pronouncements on the traditional practice have remained consistent. It should be noted that these pronouncements, although officially authored by the reigning pope, have in most cases been penned by others, in consultation not only with the papacy, but also with the bishops and/or peoples to whom they are addressed. Bringing a number of them together, a few things begin to emerge. First, the Vatican has claimed, polygamy is wrong for it threatens the unity and stability of the family and thus all structures of social and political life. Secondly, with respect to the tradition, it insists that polygamy was always wrong, even before the advent of Christianity. Finally, the Christian understanding of marriage has had positive effects on culture and tradition. I will look at each of these aspects of recent Vatican teaching in turn.

The Vatican repeatedly places polygamy alongside other social sins, pointing out the adverse effect of such behavior on the social order. John Paul II's address to the Bishops of Gambia, Liberia and Sierra Leon exemplifies this stance well:

Unfortunately this Gospel of life, the source of hope and stability, is being threatened in your countries by widespread polygamy, divorce, abortion, prostitution, human trafficking and a contraceptive mentality. These same factors contribute to irresponsible and immoral sexual activity leading to the spread of AIDS, a pandemic which cannot be ignored. Not only is this disease destroying countless lives, but it is threatening the social and economic stability of the African continent.²⁸

Polygamy, the Vatican appears to imply, cannot be considered in isolation to other societal issues. Here we hear echo of those researchers who could not help but link polygamy in PNG to domestic violence, prostitution, inequality of the sexes, and other social ills.

²⁵ CCC, no. 2387.

²⁶ CCC, no. 1645.

²⁷ CCC, no. 1645. Such a firm stand raises questions, however, when those from polygamous unions wish to be baptized. The Church still maintains her firm position on monogamy in such cases, but admonishes the convert that 'the Christian who has previously lived in polygamy has a grave duty in justice to honor the obligations contracted in regard to his former wives and his children' (no. 2387).

²⁸ John Paul II, 'Address of John Paul II to the Bishops of Gambia, Liberia and Sierra Leone on their 'Ad Limina' Visit', 15 February 2003, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/2003/february/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20030215_liberia-gambia-sierra-leone_en.html.

These commentators who link polygamy in PNG to other social harms, however, do not go so far as to say that the practice is always wrong, and always was wrong even in pre-colonial, pre-Christian traditions. Even the PNG/SI bishops appear reluctant to criticize pre-Christian Melanesian traditions. In their 'Statement on Polygamy' of 1999, they paint an almost ideal scenario of the practice in the pre-Christian, Melanesian tradition. They note the symbolic values of polygamy as power and prestige, list its economic advantages, and speak of the necessity of the practice for the chief to fulfill his duties. The chief, they continue, would see that his wives and children were content. Having painted this idyllic scene from the past, the bishops then simply move on to say that such sociological conditions no longer exist, that, under the pretense of culture the practice today is being abused, and that women in polygamous marriages today 'do not live in harmony with their husbands and first wives, as the women in traditional Melanesian Society did'. In other words they seem to imply that it was acceptable, perhaps even good and ethical in the past; they certainly never state that polygamy, even in the past, was wrong.²⁹

The Vatican has no trouble making such a declaration. John Paul II, in his Address to the PNG/SI Bishops, states that 'there was a time when, despite the persistence of polygamy, traditional values and practices ensured a certain stability of families in your cultures...' clearly implying that polygamy was not a practice that ensured the well-being of the family.³⁰ It is interesting to note that John Paul II's comment was made one year *before* the PNG/SI Bishops put forth their statement on polygamy.

Both the Vatican and the PNG/SI Bishops conclude, nevertheless, that when Christian (or natural law) values clash with traditional practices, the former must 'purify' the latter. The PNG/SI Statement supposes a Christian constitution, a Christian nation. Thus, the Bishops of these states argue:

While upholding the traditional values that are handed down to us, as Christians, we see the need to purify and change some of the cultural aspects that are in contradiction to the Gospel. Christianity came to our country many years ago. When accepting Christ and His message, we must be ready to follow His principles and that is a challenge to all who want to follow Christ and His teachings. It requires conversion and good will. In this particular case, where two values seem to be clashing, Christ's values need to be followed.³¹

²⁹ Bishops of PNG/SI, 'Statement on Polygamy'. They do, however, in a later paragraph, referring to Mk 10:5 say that 'Jesus emphasized how marriage was meant to be in the beginning and how, because of hardness of heart, many shortcomings had slipped into marriage.' Thus, although never clearly stated –and perhaps even somewhat inconsistent with the earlier paragraph –one could make the case that, at least in this later paragraph, the Bishops were implying that polygamy was a shortcoming, that it was unethical, even in the tradition before the advent of Christianity to the shores of Melanesia.

³⁰ John Paul II, 'Address to the Bishops of Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands in 'Ad Limina' Visit', 30 November 1998, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1998/december/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19981201_papua-adlimina_en.html.

³¹ Bishops of PNG/SI, 'Statement on Polygamy'.

Perhaps because the PNG/SI Bishops suppose Christianity in the populace and the constitution, they argue against polygamy from a sociological stance (domestic violence, socio-economic problems) and from a theological stance (it is not God's plan, it is a shortcoming in the Mosaic law because of hardness of heart [Mk10:5]) but they do not argue from the philosophical stance of natural law. The Vatican cannot always suppose a Christian constitution or a majority Christian population, and so it will often base its understanding of marriage and polygamy on natural law, rather than Scripture.³² Nevertheless, the conclusion is the same: Christian (or natural law) values on marriage must influence all aspects of culture, including societal attitudes and law on such institutions as marriage and practices as polygamy. A passage from 'The Special Assembly for Oceania' perhaps well exemplifies this stance. After listing the many positive values in the indigenous cultures of Oceania, the document goes on to state the following:

In other situations, the indigenous cultures offer strong resistance to a fuller acceptance of Christian faith and morality. In this instance, the responses refer to marriage customs favouring polygamy or the tradition of the 'bride price', sorcery and superstitious beliefs in evil spirits, tribal enmity and warfare as well as the felt obligation to take revenge when evil has been done to the person or to his tribe or family. The Christian community needs to exercise patience and an ongoing perseverance in order to bring about conversion and change in these negative cultural realities.³³

Finally, recent Vatican pronouncements claim, Christian values have made inroads in influencing cultures for the better. Among such amelioration of culture, it lists a 'growing orientation toward a personalized view of marriage understood as a community of life and love', an 'ever-greater recognition of the right of freedom of choice of one's state of life and marriage partner', the 'affirmation of the equality of man and woman,' and the 'decline of polygamy and other conditions by which the woman was subject to the man'.³⁴

³² See, for example, John Paul II, 'To the Tribunal of the Roman Rota,' 28 January 1991, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1991/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19910128_roman-rot_en.html, para. 3. The same holds true for issues such as abortion, capital punishment and war. Whereas not all constituents at an international convention may agree on Christian revelation as a starting point when such issues arise, in theory anyway, they can agree on human reason and its association with nature. Thus, to defend her stance on most ethical issues in the world scene, the Catholic Church makes abundant use of natural law arguments.

³³ John Paul II, 'Special Assembly for Oceania: Jesus Christ and the Peoples of Oceania: Walking His Way, Telling His Truth and Living His Life, *Instrumentum laboris*,' 1998, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_20011122_ecclesia-in-oceania_en.html, para. 12. On the role of Christian values 'purifying' traditional customs such as polygamy, see also John Paul II, 'Address to Nigerian Bishops,' para. 4.

³⁴ John Paul II, 'Tribunal of the Roman Rota', 1981, para. 5; see also Government of PNG, UNICEF, *Children, Women and Families*, p. 16, which states that 'the influences of Christianity and monogamous marriages have empowered some women to resist polygamy'.

Ethics and pastoral application: what way forward?

It would appear that this influence of Christianity on culture is but a symptom of a much larger historical picture. Cultures everywhere are in a state of flux. Whether we like it or not, European expansion over the last 500 years has meant that the belief systems of the great world religions and the traditional cosmologies of some of the most remote cultures of the world on the one hand, and the convictions of the European enlightenment and postmodern thought on the other, battle, clash, mix, meld, peacefully cohabit and sometimes even marry in a myriad of flavours, colours, and degrees, in ghettos, cities, countries and regions throughout the world. And so, like so many other customs, the practice of Melanesian polygamy—with all its social ramifications of authority, hierarchy, economics and religion—has come to butt heads in some parts of Papua New Guinea with the Christian belief in monogamy and the European enlightenment principle of the equality of the sexes. What is the way forward?

One would hope that it is not simply the victors or even the majority who would decide what is right and what is wrong in this case or in any other, but rather the human grasp of the true, the good, the just. Moreover, although many may feel uncomfortable with any notion of someone, some belief system or some institution claiming to know the truth, perhaps most can agree that that the confluence of sociological, philosophical and religious disciplines can give us a direction forward. Thus, in spite of the fact that many may argue the societal benefits of polygamy, nevertheless, from a sociological perspective, experience in PNG appears to demonstrate that polygamy today does come accompanied by a great many social ills. From a philosophical, natural law, perspective, the tradition has almost uniformly declared the illegitimacy of the practice. Finally, the Christian stance, especially as voiced by the Catholic Church—although with just enough exceptions to make the discussion interesting—has come to strongly endorse monogamy and condemn polygamy. In other words, arguments from sociology, philosophy and theology converge to point to the illegitimacy of polygamy.

One thing is the ethical judgment, however; another is the practice, the pastoral application. Christianity has always called one to perfection; anything short of that perfection is sin. One need only consider his sermon on the mount in Mt 5 to be convinced that Jesus set the ethical bar very, very high. To complement such high expectations, however, he never ceased to proclaim the mercy and forgiveness of God (the parable of the prodigal son springs immediately to mind [Lk 15:11-32]). On ethical issues, Christianity should constantly strain to balance these two ideals of perfection and mercy.

One example of the Catholic Church's balancing act between a call to an ethical ideal and the reality of society is her stance on divorce, annulment and remarriage. It has been observed that, ironically, it is Christianity's 'enriched teaching on sexuality and marriage' that has indirectly contributed to the

breakdown of marriage in the West.³⁵ Christianity puts very high expectations of equality, maturity, communication skills, and compatibility on marriage; not all couples possess such attitudes and abilities, often leading to the collapse of the very thing Christian Churches try so hard to strengthen. Given that example, one can sincerely ask if a negative stance on the question of polygamy might inadvertently lead to the breakdown, at least in part, of the very thing that the Church and so many others want to preserve, that is Melanesian traditions.

Given that polygamy cannot be considered simply as a single element of a tradition easily extricated from the whole, but rather must be seen as intricately linked into the web of social, economic and generational relations, I think the only honest answer would be yes. In the same way that a high expectation of marriage has, in part and indirectly, led to what some have viewed as a crisis in the institution,³⁶ so too, to rid Melanesian cultures completely of polygamy may lead to the destruction of some of the very elements of the cultures one wants to preserve.

And so, a practical, pastoral – perhaps very messy – solution or compromise may well have to be worked out in the case of polygamy. But such pastoral, practical – even political and legal – efforts are for another topic, another essay, another conference.³⁷ Nevertheless, the beginning point of all such pastoral discussion must be ethical in nature: Is polygamy good? Is it just? And from a sociological, philosophical and theological point of view the Roman Catholic Church in Papua New Guinea appears to have concluded that it is not.

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³⁵ Kevin T. Kelly, 'Divorce and Remarriage' in Bernard Hoose, ed., *Christian Ethics: An Introduction* (NY: Cassell, 1998), pp. 248-265, here 249.

³⁶ See, for example, Don Browning, 'World family trends,' in Robin Gill, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) pp. 243-260, here especially pp. 243-246.

³⁷ 1 Cor 7:12 and 17-20 might be a good starting point for such a pastoral approach to polygamy; that 'all should remain in the state in which they were called' could be applied to those in polygamous unions as well, but that the practice of multiple spouses should be phased out in future generations. A national law to prohibit polygamy even without retrospective effect would have its own set of problems as well, however, not the least of which is that polygamous unions might just simply go underground. For a discussion on proposals for the legal reform of polygamy in PNG, see Jessep and Luluaki, pp. 191-193.