

Beyond Procreation: Rereading Aquinas in the Context of Involuntary Childlessness in West and Central Africa

JOSEPH LOIC MBEN, SJ
Boston College

This article tries to construct an ethical framework to address the issue of infertility through a creative use of Thomas Aquinas' thought. Involuntary childlessness is one of the forgotten issues among Christian communities in West and Central Africa. Starting with the scientific definition of infertility, the article shows the gender differences and biases in the perception of childlessness in that region. Although infertility equally affects men and women, the latter, most of the time, are blamed for it. Although Scripture contains some ambivalent elements concerning infertility, on the whole it offers valuable insights by presenting childlessness as a type of life also blessed by God. Likewise, the language of the church since Vatican II has done away with the hierarchical view of the ends of marriage (or the idea that procreation is the primary goal of marriage over and against the unity of the spouses). Aquinas teaches us about the true nature of marriage and the value of childlessness. In addition, Aquinas' understanding of love helps articulate areas that could guide infertile individuals and childless couples, on the one hand, and Christian communities, on the other hand, who have to deal with childless members.

Keywords: childlessness, infertility, couples, women, Aquinas, Catholic Church, Africa

Introduction

THE present article reflects on the issue of involuntary childlessness, which affects millions in sub-Saharan Africa, and asks how the church can address this challenge. By “church,” we mean here local entities such as dioceses, parishes, small Christian communities, and various Christian groups. This reflection on involuntary childlessness

Joseph Loic Mben is a Jesuit priest from Cameroon (West Africa). He recently defended his doctoral dissertation, “Empowering Disempowered Working Women: A Gendered African Perspective on Christian Social Ethics,” at Boston College. He has experience in various contexts and has lived in various countries in Africa and Europe. Mben has published articles and book chapters in English and in French.

is located within the Roman Catholic tradition, although sources from other Christian denominations are also cited. The author's pastoral experience in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, inspired this study. In that context, many women ask for prayers so that they can bear children. Indeed, vigil prayers and evangelization campaigns are full of childless people, mostly women, who yearn for a miracle to become a biological parent. Moreover, many women (often the poorer ones) spend a great deal of money on burdensome fertility treatments.

In an environment where children are primarily perceived as a gift from God, there is a deafening silence within the local churches.¹ There are no specific pastoral programs aimed at childless and infertile people. The condition of childless couples tends to be overlooked and never addressed. This silence echoes the absence of concern on the part of public health officials to confront the issue. By contrast, there are celebrations of families (with children), and of Mother's and Father's Day, and representations of Mary chiefly within her role as the mother of Jesus.

This article examines ways to construct an ethical framework for Christian communities to address involuntary childlessness, chiefly with the help of Thomas Aquinas' theology. I am well aware of the limitations of using a thirteenth-century Western theologian, in particular as regards his limited understanding of biology and his androcentric approach, to address a contemporary issue in Africa. Nonetheless, Aquinas offers some valuable insights that can help in the discernment of appropriate practices for individuals and communities confronted with the issue of involuntary childlessness. These insights will help make clear that childlessness is not an impediment to marriage, and that a marriage can flourish within the context of childlessness if it is centered around love and has the support of the community.

The first two sections of this article offer a general understanding of involuntary infertility in science and in an African context. The third section offers a brief overview of the theological understanding of involuntary infertility in the Bible and recent magisterial documents. And the final two sections offer a reconstruction of Aquinas' thought to meet the challenges of this issue. The

¹ For instance, the apostolic exhortations of the 1994 and 2009 synods of African bishops, while mentioning marriage many times, never refer to infertility. John Paul II, *On the Church in Africa and Its Evangelizing Mission: Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation Ecclesia in Africa* (Yaoundé, Cameroon: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_14091995_ecclesia-in-africa_en.html; Benedict XVI, *On the Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace: Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation Africae Munus* (Ouidah, Benin: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2011), http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20111119_africae-munus_en.html.

article will demonstrate that in the context of Christian ethics, infertility and marriage are not incompatible, and that love serves as the matrix for couples. This article operates with a broad understanding of childlessness and refers interchangeably to childlessness and infertility. I limit my remarks to heterosexual couples.

Involuntary Infertility: Understanding a Concept

There are various ways of understanding or defining infertility. Basically, infertility can be understood as reproductive impairment or a socially constructed reality.² As a reproductive impairment, infertility is a failure to conceive a child after twelve months or more of exposure to regular unprotected sexual intercourse.³ Infertility can be understood from a clinical, demographic, and epidemiological perspective, or as a disability.⁴ The clinical, demographic, and epidemiological definitions offer variations on the basic understanding of infertility.⁵ Infertility is a complex reality that goes from the inability to conceive to being incapable of carrying a pregnancy to its term, and it includes nonviable pregnancies (e.g., ectopic pregnancies), miscarriages, and stillbirth.

Infertility when seen as a disability means that a function (the reproductive tract of a person) is impaired. The use of the term *disability* leads to a further distinction between simple impairment and disability. The latter is increasingly perceived as socially constructed. The socially constructed reality of infertility includes perceptions about fertility, the human body, and the meaning of life and is made manifest by “the absence of children in a home.”⁶ An example of social infertility is the understanding in some

² Ritgak A. Dimka and Simon L. Dein, “The Work of a Woman Is to Give Birth to Children: Cultural Constructions of Infertility in Nigeria,” *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 17, no. 2 (2013): 106.

³ Maya N. Mascarenhas et al., “Measuring Infertility in Populations: Constructing a Standard Definition for Use with Demographic and Reproductive Health Surveys,” *Population Health Metrics* 10, no. 1 (2012), doi:10.1186/1478-7954-10-17.

⁴ From here onward, I am paraphrasing from the World Health Organization’s article “Infertility Definitions and Terminology,” 2016, <http://www.who.int/reproductive-health/topics/infertility/definitions/en/>.

⁵ WHO, “Infertility Definitions and Terminology.” From a demographic perspective, infertility is the inability of those of procreative age (15–49 years) to get or keep a pregnancy within five years of exposure to unprotected sex. The epidemiological definition targets women in a special way. It defines infertility as “women of reproductive age ... at risk of becoming pregnant (not pregnant, sexually active, not using contraception and not lactating) who report trying unsuccessfully for a pregnancy for two years or more.”

⁶ Dimka and Dein, “The Work of a Woman Is to Give Birth to Children,” 106.

societies that having one child or only female children is to be childless.⁷ The notion of disability provides a link between the biomedical and the social understanding of infertility. Indeed, “perceptions of disability are influenced by historical circumstances and prevailing interests.”⁸ Our understanding of infertility will include both realities, namely, medical and social.

Infertility can be termed primary or secondary. Primary infertility is the “inability to have any live birth,” whereas secondary infertility refers to the “inability to have a second live birth.”⁹ Those two types are generally attributed to women, since they are the ones who can bear children. This emphasis could be problematic, especially in patriarchal contexts where women are mostly blamed for infertility. However, both men and women are equally affected by involuntary infertility.¹⁰ Since 1990, the secondary infertility rate has increased (10.5 percent of women) while the primary infertility rate has declined (1.9 percent of women).¹¹ These rates need to be considered with caution, however, because (1) they are based on self-reporting and (2) men in the developing world—especially in sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East—tend not to report their infertility.¹²

Overall, infertility is on the rise. In 2010, 48.5 million couples worldwide were unable to conceive a child—of which 19.2 million were affected by primary infertility and 29.3 million by secondary infertility. South Asian and

⁷ Ibid., 107.

⁸ K. M. Boyd, “Disability,” *Journal of Medical Ethics* 27, no. 6 (2001): 361–62, doi:10.1136/jme.27.6.361.

⁹ Maya N. Mascarenhas et al., “National, Regional, and Global Trends in Infertility Prevalence since 1990: A Systematic Analysis of 277 Health Surveys,” ed. Nicola Low, *PLoS Medicine* 9, no. 12 (2012): e1001356, doi:10.1371/journal.pmed.1001356.

¹⁰ Among the causes of infertility for women in areas like sub-Saharan Africa are untreated infections of the reproductive tract such as STIs, post-abortion complications, and pregnancy complications. Infertility is caused mostly in women by dysfunctional fallopian tubes, and in men by bad or poor sperm quality and erection problems; see Mascarenhas et al., “National, Regional, and Global Trends”; Philip Teg-Nefaaah Tabong and Philip Baba Adongo, “Infertility and Childlessness: A Qualitative Study of the Experiences of Infertile Couples in Northern Ghana,” *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth* 13, no. 1 (2013), doi:10.1186/1471-2393-13-72.

¹¹ Mascarenhas et al., “National, Regional, and Global Trends.” In addition, with 2.9 percent, sub-Saharan Africa is ranked fourth in terms of primary infertility, and with 11.6 percent of women affected by secondary infertility it is in the bottom three regions. In general, younger women (20–24 years) show higher percentages of primary infertility, while older women (40–44 years) are more affected by secondary infertility.

¹² Ashok Agarwal et al., “A Unique View on Male Infertility around the Globe,” *Reproductive Biology and Endocrinology* 13, no. 1 (2015): 2, 7, doi:10.1186/s12958-015-0032-1.

sub-Saharan Africa are among the regions most affected, with 14.4 million and 10 million couples affected, respectively.¹³

Being Childless in Africa

Contemporary Africans experience two paradoxes. On the one hand, their societies are pronatalist—they encourage procreation.¹⁴ On the other hand, their governments, under the pressure of international donors, promote artificial birth control. The second paradox derives from the fact that “many African communities that have high levels of infertility [as in countries of Central Africa] are also known to have high rates of fertility.”¹⁵ It comes as no surprise that in West African countries such as Cameroon and Nigeria, infertility does not appear to be a government concern.¹⁶

In general, it is difficult to meet someone who is childless by choice outside of consecrated Christians.¹⁷ Procreation is expected from everyone, and especially from married couples. I have personally witnessed that even in places such as Nairobi, Kenya, where marriage tends to be unpopular among young women, the latter insist on having their own child. Being

¹³ Mascarenhas et al., “National, Regional, and Global Trends.”

¹⁴ Tabong and Adongo, “Infertility and Childlessness.”

¹⁵ Dimka and Dein, “The Work of a Woman Is to Give Birth to Children,” 115; countries like Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, and Gabon have high rates of fertility: respectively, 5.2, 5.1, 6.6, and 4.3 children per woman; these contrast with high rates of primary infertility (5.3, 7, 3.25, and 5.2 percent of women aged 20–44 years, respectively, in Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, and Gabon) and higher rates of secondary infertility (23.4, 27.4, 19.1, and 29.4 percent of women aged 20–44 years, respectively, in Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, and Gabon); for more, see Ulla Larsen, “Infertility in Central Africa,” *Tropical Medicine and International Health* 8, no. 4 (2003): 355, 359.

¹⁶ Pamela Feldman-Savelsberg, “Is Infertility an Unrecognized Public Health and Population Problem? The View from the Cameroon Grassfields,” in *Infertility around the Globe: New Thinking on Childlessness, Gender, and Reproductive Technologies*, ed. Marcia C. Inhorn and Frank van Balen (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 222–23; Sonja L. Nieuwenhuis et al., “The Impact of Infertility on Infertile Men and Women in Ibadan, Oyo State, Nigeria: A Qualitative Study,” *African Journal of Reproductive Health* 13, no. 3 (2009): 86.

¹⁷ As illustration, a study carried out in Cameroon, Chad, Central African Republic, and Gabon among more than 20,000 women revealed that all of those who were childless desired children; see Larsen, “Infertility in Central Africa,” 358, 360; Dimka and Dein, “The Work of a Woman Is to Give Birth to Children,” 114.

childless creates a dissonance in a “tradition of abundant life,” to borrow from the title of a book by Laurenti Magesa.¹⁸

In addition, infertile people have to live in a communitarian environment. Congolese theologian Bénézet Bujo rightly points out the importance of interpersonal relationships within African communities.¹⁹ Indeed, “in order to exist one must belong to a community where one feels accepted and where one also accepts the others and shares in their integral development.”²⁰ Various authors recognize the primacy and centrality of community in an African worldview.²¹ In return, a true community flourishes where there is mutuality and reciprocity between its members: “One must give life to the other in such a way that each one gives birth to the other.”²² Tanzanian theologian Laurenti Magesa calls this the principle of “participation-sharing.”²³ This communitarianism can simultaneously be an asset or a burden for infertile people. It can be an asset in the sense that the community offers comfort and support to the infertile. It can be a nuisance because of the social pressure to conceive and/or the ostracism of the infertile.

The case of Ghanaian theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye, herself a childless married woman, is enlightening in that regard.²⁴ She first notes her struggles even to mention the issue, because in her Akan culture, as in most African cultures, involuntary childlessness is a taboo.²⁵ In pronatalist societies, childlessness is a shameful experience, particularly for women.²⁶ Oduyoye describes her painful journey through the hands of traditional and modern doctors, the pressure she experienced from both families—her own and her in-laws—to get pregnant, her husband’s support, and the community’s reaction.

¹⁸ Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).

¹⁹ Bénézet Bujo, “Reasoning and Methodology in African Ethics,” in *Catholic Theological Ethics Past, Present, and Future: The Trento Conference*, ed. James F. Keenan, Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 148.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Magesa, *African Religion*, 64–65; David W. Lutz, “African ‘Ubuntu’ Philosophy and Global Management,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 84, no. 3 (2009): 314.

²² Bujo, “Reasoning and Methodology in African Ethics,” 149.

²³ Magesa, *African Religion*, 66.

²⁴ For more on this, see Mercy Amba Oduyoye, “A Coming Home to Myself: The Childless Woman in the West African Space,” in *Liberating Eschatology: Essays in Honor of Letty M. Russel*, ed. Margaret A. Farley and Serene Jones (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 107–16.

²⁵ It took her more than two decades to share her story within her circle of female theologians, and another decade to finally publish it. See Oduyoye, “A Coming Home to Myself,” 109; Susan Weinger, “‘Infertile’ Cameroonian Women: Social Marginalization and Coping Strategies,” *Qualitative Social Work* 8, no. 1 (2009): 45–64, doi:10.1177/1473325008100425.

²⁶ Weinger, “‘Infertile’ Cameroonian Women,” 62; Oduyoye, “A Coming Home to Myself,” 115.

The studies by Philip Teg-Nefaa Tabong and Philip Baba Adongo in Ghana and Susan Weinger in Cameroon shed further light on the struggles of infertile people in West and Central Africa.²⁷ According to local perceptions, childbirth generally validates the union, and confers prestige upon both spouses. Indeed, “one is never really a full and faithful person until one has a child.”²⁸ All these expectations create a sense of failure and inadequacy in many infertile people. Hence, it comes as no surprise that sorrow, isolation, urgency, guilt, and powerlessness plague childless couples.²⁹ Infertile couples also experience depression and frustration because of the prescription of remedies by allegedly concerned people, whom Oduyoye labels “friends of Job.”³⁰

In the African worldview visible and invisible forces constantly intersect. This is the reason why an event always has more than a material explanation. This affects the understanding of the causes of infertility and the search for a cure. As described above, there are a variety of biologically and physiologically based causes of infertility for women and men in sub-Saharan Africa that must be taken into account.³¹

African societies suggest the following as causes for infertility: God’s will, malicious curses, witchcraft, STDs (gonorrhoea especially), moral fault/sin (promiscuity, adultery, and so on), bad blood or incompatibility of blood, male-related causes (quality of sperm and sexual weakness), and lack of inner peace.³² Preternatural causes (such as God, witchcraft, and curses)

²⁷ Tabong and Adongo, “Infertility and Childlessness”; Weinger, “‘Infertile’ Cameroonian Women.” In the next paragraphs I borrow heavily from these two articles.

²⁸ Oduyoye, “A Coming Home to Myself,” 113.

²⁹ See Tabong and Adongo, “Infertility and Childlessness.”

³⁰ Oduyoye, “A Coming Home to Myself,” 114. One should recall from the book of Job that Job’s friends, instead of comforting him in his hardships, blamed him by suggesting he might have done something evil that triggered the unfortunate chain of events in his life.

³¹ In addition to note 11 above, see also Jean Marie Kasia et al., “Laparoscopic Fimbrioplasty and Neosalpingostomy in Female Infertility: A Review of 402 Cases at the Gynecological Endoscopic Surgery and Human Reproductive Teaching Hospital in Yaoundé-Cameroon,” *Journal of Reproduction and Infertility* 17, no. 2 (2016): 106; Trudie Gerrits, “Infertility and Matrilineality: The Exceptional Case of the Macua of Mozambique,” in *Infertility around the Globe: New Thinking on Childlessness, Gender, and Reproductive Technologies*, ed. Marcia C. Inhorn and Frank van Balen (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 239–40; Nieuwenhuis et al., “The Impact of Infertility on Infertile Men and Women in Ibadan,” 86; Larsen, “Infertility in Central Africa,” 365; Agarwal et al., “A Unique View on Male Infertility around the Globe,” 7.

³² Dimka and Dein, “The Work of a Woman Is to Give Birth to Children,” 108; Gerrits, “Infertility and Matrilineality,” 239; Feldman-Savelsberg, “The View from the Cameroon Grassfields,” 228.

tend to be the most prominent explanations.³³ This explains why infertile women and men go to traditional/native doctors or religious leaders in hope of a cure. Researchers have observed that infertile people tend to visit more than one service provider and try more than one type of cure—sometimes simultaneously.³⁴ Thus, infertility creates financial stress, because couples will go to any length to become pregnant. Moreover, biomedical treatments, and especially infertility services, are not always available and remain unaffordable for the majority of women in Africa.³⁵

In addition, a childless marriage is a cultural embarrassment to the extent that laws prohibiting adultery can be broken in order to have children. Traditionally, communities such as the Bassa of Cameroon would allow the wife to have sex with the husband's relative if he is suspected to be the source of the problem. However, such practices have become uncommon nowadays as a result of HIV/AIDS and urbanization. Infertility is perceived as one of the major causes of marital instability. Indeed, "having a child is clearly more important than loyalty to one's spouse."³⁶

Infertility affects men and women differently. Both suffer from bias, exclusion, and derogation. In northern Ghana, childless men are described as people with rotten testicles or with a dead penis.³⁷ Sexual activity usually decreases and drinking increases, especially among men. Childless men in rural settings are excluded from leadership roles. Childless women have to bear verbal abuse and are often exclusively blamed for a couple's childlessness.³⁸ Marriages can end up in divorce or polygamy.³⁹ Contrary to popular belief, the initiative for divorce or separation most of the time comes from the woman.⁴⁰ Men can separate, but do so usually for reasons other than a wife's infertility.

³³ Dimka and Dein, "The Work of a Woman Is to Give Birth to Children," 111.

³⁴ Gerrits, "Infertility and Matrilineality," 238; Nieuwenhuis et al., "The Impact of Infertility on Infertile Men and Women in Ibadan," 95.

³⁵ Weiyuan Cui, "Mother or Nothing: The Agony of Infertility," *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 88, no. 12 (2010): 881–82, doi:10.2471/BLT.10.011210.

³⁶ Tolulope Monisola Ola, "The Socio-Cultural Perception and Implications of Childlessness among Men and Women in an Urban Area, Southwest, Nigeria," *African Journal of Social Sciences* 21, no. 3 (2009): 205–9.

³⁷ Tabong and Adongo, "Infertility and Childlessness."

³⁸ They are accused of, among other things, earlier unsafe abortions, promiscuity, pursuing a long education, and being a witch (who sold her womb for success); for more, see Oduyoye, "A Coming Home to Myself," 117.

³⁹ Tabong and Adongo, "Infertility and Childlessness"; Ola, "The Socio-Cultural Perception and Implications of Childlessness," 208.

⁴⁰ Dimka and Dein, "The Work of a Woman Is to Give Birth to Children," 113.

One would think that childless women would be free to use their time and resources as they wish. To the contrary, there is a kind of “punitive taxation” that the community exacts from childless persons.⁴¹ Society demands that childless women be “child-friendly.”⁴² In addition, “childless women are given societal dictates that their life, time, and money should not be their own. They have limited legitimacy to attend to their own needs because their personal worth is minimal.”⁴³ Additionally, infertile women complain about the lack of support they receive from their male partner in their attempt to remedy the situation.⁴⁴ Indeed, “combined with the widespread lack of insurance coverage, seeking fertility care often means a lonely path for women wishing to conceive.”⁴⁵

In the absence of community support, coping strategies for childless people are mainly individual and personal. Some of the strategies, such as indulging in alcoholism (mostly men) or multiplying sexual partners to test one’s fertility (more socially tolerated for men than women), are unhealthy.⁴⁶ Other coping strategies for women involve social isolation, a drive for excellence, defense against verbal abuse, caring for social children, faith, social conformity, and the cultivation of a positive mind-set and attitude.⁴⁷ Overall, childlessness exacts a heavy toll on people’s well-being.

Involuntary Childlessness in the Tradition of the Church

It is important for the church to offer a pastoral response and to suggest sets of practices for individuals and communities confronted with infertility. I will seek such a path in Scripture and recent magisterial documents. Given space constraints, I will point only to select key areas in which local communities and concerned groups can develop context-specific responses.

Within the church and particularly in West Africa, childless people see God’s hand behind their condition, on the one hand, and use faith as a

⁴¹ Oduyoye, “A Coming Home to Myself,” 110. As Oduyoye asserts, “No African escapes financial and moral responsibility for members of the extended family, especially if they are themselves childless.” This is the main form that this taxation takes.

⁴² Weinger, “‘Infertile’ Cameroonian Women,” 54.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 53–54.

⁴⁵ Cui, “Mother or Nothing,” 882.

⁴⁶ Tabong and Adongo, “Infertility and Childlessness.”

⁴⁷ Weinger, “‘Infertile’ Cameroonian Women,” 56–58; Tabong and Adongo, “Infertility and Childlessness.”

coping mechanism, on the other hand.⁴⁸ Since children are perceived as a gift from God, infertile people consider that it is God's will that they are in a childless condition.⁴⁹ This fosters acceptance in some as well as a sense of powerlessness. Acceptance is facilitated by religion, especially through the Bible.⁵⁰

Infertility in the Bible

The Bible offers many stories about the childless: Sarah and Abraham, Rebecca, Rachel, Samson's parents, Hannah, and Zechariah and Elizabeth. Generally, there is a happy ending to these stories with an eventual childbirth. For many people, however, this is far from always being the case. False hopes should not be nurtured for desperate people, as fertility treatments have a low rate of success, and untested medical and traditional procedures can be very risky.

Two trends observable in the Bible find an echo in African cultures. The first is the affirmation of "God's control of conception."⁵¹ God is the author of life and the one who gives or denies the ability to have children. The second is the tendency of the patriarchal biblical texts to see infertility primarily as a "female phenomenon" (see Gen 25:21; Judg 13:2; Luke 1:7).⁵² This does not mean that men cannot be infertile (Lev 20:20; Deut 7:14).⁵³ The figure of the eunuch is the personification of male inability to impregnate a woman and have children.

Infertility is perceived as a curse and is in contradiction to the divine command in Genesis to "be fertile and multiply" (Gen 1:28). Infertility is associated with fruitlessness, desolation, and being dead.⁵⁴ Infertility "for both women and men was considered a grave misfortune."⁵⁵ In that context, one can understand the distress of the matriarch Rachel, who says, "Give me children or I shall die" (Gen 30:1).

At the same time, prophetic and wisdom literature make the point that the childless can be the object of God's favor (Isa 54:1, 56:4-5; Wis 3:13-14; Sir 16:3). The barren woman and the eunuch—"two traditional images of the

⁴⁸ Weinger, "Infertile' Cameroonian Women," 53, 58.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 53; Dimka and Dein, "The Work of a Woman Is to Give Birth to Children," 108.

⁵⁰ Weinger, "Infertile' Cameroonian Women," 58.

⁵¹ Timothy Willis, "Barren, Barrenness," in *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: A-C*, ed. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 400.

⁵² Ronald D. Witherup, SS, "Barrenness," in *The Collegeville Pastoral Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Carroll Stuhlmueller, CP (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 74.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 75-76.

⁵⁵ Michael Kolarcik, SJ, "The Book of Wisdom: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections," in *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 5:473.

accursed”—are “blessed because of their moral integrity.”⁵⁶ It is in that strand that one should understand biblical characters who are voluntarily childless: Jesus of Nazareth, Miriam, Jeremiah, Esther, John the Baptist, Mary (sister of Lazarus), Martha, John, James, and Paul.⁵⁷

However, human reproduction is not as large an issue in the New Testament, where even family ties—which are essential in a communitarian society—are relativized (Mark 3:33–35). Barrenness symbolizes the fruitlessness of Christians who fail to live in accordance with the values of the kingdom of God (Mark 4:19; Titus 3:14).⁵⁸ In addition, the New Testament seems to emphasize the unitive function of marriage (Mark 10:8–9; Matt 19:5–6; 1 Cor 7:2–3, 9). Paul goes as far as to advise spouses to remain continent (1 Cor 7:5) and the unmarried and widowed not to marry (1 Cor 7:8) because of the imminent return of the Lord.

Infertility in the Recent Magisterial Documents

Following Augustine of Hippo, the church has considered procreation as marriage’s primary goal and good, but this good is balanced with the union of spouses and the indissolubility of marriage.⁵⁹ Childlessness, on the other hand, has rarely been addressed. In 1930, Pope Pius XI quoted Augustine that a wife’s childlessness is no ground for divorce.⁶⁰ In its section on marriage, the Second Vatican Council’s 1965 Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World mentions childless couples in just one line, reaffirming the validity of marriage despite infertility.⁶¹ In the 1981 apostolic exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio*, Pope Saint John Paul II briefly mentions childless couples. He reaffirms the value of conjugal life despite infertility, and also the “services to the life” that childless couples should be carrying.⁶²

⁵⁶ One should bear in mind that eunuchs were excluded “from the priesthood and the assembly of the Lord” (Lev 21:20; Deut 23:2). Kolarcik, “The Book of Wisdom,” 5:473.

⁵⁷ I am drawing from Oduyoye, “A Coming Home to Myself,” 115.

⁵⁸ Witherup, “Barrenness,” 77.

⁵⁹ Saint Augustine, *Of the Good of Marriage*, ed. Kevin Knight, trans. C. L. Cornish, 17–19, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1309.htm>.

⁶⁰ Pope Pius XI, *On Christian Marriage, Encyclical Casti Connubii* (Rome: The Holy See, 1930), §36, http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19301231_casti-connubii.html.

⁶¹ Pope Paul VI, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*, December 7, 1965, §50, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

⁶² Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World (Familiaris Consortio)* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1981), §14, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html.

Donum Vitae (1987) is actually the first official document of the magisterium to deal extensively with involuntary childlessness.⁶³ It addresses the issue in relation to the burning topic of medically assisted procreation (MAP). The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith acknowledges the legitimacy of the desire to have a child, but affirms that marriage does not give spouses a right to have a child. A child is a gift, not an object to be possessed. DV acknowledges the suffering that childless couples endure, advises the Lord's cross as a source of fruitfulness, and invites scientists to find a solution. In addition, DV asserts that infertility does not justify the recourse to methods of MAP, which contradict the teaching of the church. Two criteria need to guide the discernment of appropriate methods: respect for human life and the transmission of life through the conjugal act (DV, Introduction). DV suggests infertile couples should be at the service of life through adoption, educational work, and outreach to the needy and vulnerable (DV II, 8).

Dignitas Personae (2008) is an attempt to update DV in light of the development of new technologies such as cloning and stem cell research.⁶⁴ It reiterates the teaching of DV, and adds an additional criterion—which was implicit in DV—for the evaluation of MAP: the unity of marriage (DP §12). It clarifies DV by stating that the appropriate methods are those that act in support of the conjugal act and its fertility (DP §12). It not only indicates appropriate approaches to infertility (hormonal treatments, surgery for endometriosis, unblocking or repair of the fallopian tubes) but also suggests adoption as a solution for childless couples (DP §13). As understandable as the longing for a child can be, the suffering of infertility does not justify the use of techniques that violate the sanctity of marriage and the integrity of human life (DP §16).

Amoris Laetitia (2016) treats the question of infertility in several paragraphs (§§178–80) in chapter 5 entitled “Love Made Fruitful.”⁶⁵ It reaffirms the points made in earlier documents: infertility as suffering, marriage not limited to procreation, parenthood as more than biological, and the reality of adoption. Pope Francis clearly makes the argument that adoption is an

⁶³ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation (Donum Vitae)*, February 22, 1987, II, 8, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19870222_respect-for-human-life_en.html.

⁶⁴ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction Dignitas Personae on Certain Bioethical Questions*, September 8, 2008, §1, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20081208_dignitas-personae_en.html.

⁶⁵ Pope Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia (On Love in the Family)* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016), https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf.

act of generosity and love, and reminds that it puts the interest of the child at the center. AL §181 clearly teaches the faithful that “procreation and adoption are not the only ways of experiencing the fruitfulness of love,” and it invites families to find ways of expressing love toward the larger society.

The report of the preparatory meeting of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) on the family mentions infertility and infertile couples. The African bishops ask that the church practice “a pedagogy of presence” toward couples who seek medically assisted procreation.⁶⁶ A pedagogy of presence is a way of helping interested couples to discern the proper means of using MAP—that is, means that are consistent with the church’s principles. The African bishops focus mostly on the issue of adoption and call for the adoption of abandoned children, the respect of the rights of adopted children, and a clear demarcation of rights and duties between biological and adopted parents.⁶⁷ At the same time, they express the wish that infertile people convert their desire for biological children into a desire for spiritual fertility.⁶⁸ They offer the witness of consecrated Christians as examples that infertile couples could emulate.⁶⁹ They also acknowledge the particular suffering of women, although they remain vague and general in their statement.⁷⁰

How the magisterium analyzes the particular case of women is also of interest. Motherhood is presented as the essential vocation of women, either married women or consecrated religious (see *Dignitatem Mulieris*). The same is not true for men. The emphasis on motherhood as a vocation—even spiritual—puts even more pressure on women who cannot conceive. Moreover, it places the infertile married woman in a “quandary,” since she “is neither a perpetual virgin like Mary nor a biological mother.”⁷¹

The magisterial texts suggest adoption as a possible option, but that creates other issues in the African context. Then there is the question of adoption. Oduyoye’s case and the studies mentioned above show that many infertile women have “social” children—in contrast to what Oduyoye calls “womb-children.”⁷² Having these children, generally from relatives, eases the pain of

⁶⁶ SCEAM, *L’avenir de la famille, notre mission: Contribution à la 14e Assemblée Générale Ordinaire du Synode des Evêques sur la famille* (Accra: SCEAM-SECAM Publications, 2015), 149.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 150–51.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 152–53.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁷¹ Kathryn Lilla Cox, “Toward a Theology of Infertility and the Role of *Donum Vitae*,” *Horizons* 40, no. 1 (2013): 28–52, doi:10.1017/hor.2013.2.

⁷² Oduyoye, “A Coming Home to Myself,” 111.

some childless women.⁷³ However, women recognize that having “social” children is not the same as having “womb-children,” and the child’s identification with and longing for his or her biological parents are difficult to swallow.⁷⁴ In addition, there will always be people to remind the child that she or he does not really belong to that particular family. Given that one does not need to be a biological parent to be called “father” or “mother,” because the words “aunt,” “uncle,” “cousin,” “niece,” and “nephew” are non-existent in many African languages, it seems strange that these societies emphasize biological offspring. Adoption may be an interesting solution in the West, but in Africa, where the majority of households host members of the extended family in both rural and urban settings, the concept does not translate so easily. The growing Westernization of African cultures, urbanization, and the emphasis on the nuclear family could explain the resistance to adoption and the emphasis on having biological children.

Oduyoye observes that it is strange that “a church that ... [upholds] celibacy (and thereby relativize[s] the importance of biological progeny) could not develop a theology that would help the enforced childlessness of many who are married.”⁷⁵ She notes how unsupportive pastors and congregations blame childless women for irresponsible and promiscuous behavior, or for pursuing social achievement (through long years of study and a professional career) at the expense of marriage and family life. In that respect, Christianity has reinforced rather than counteracted West African traditional beliefs vis-à-vis childlessness.

Finally, church documents do not examine childlessness in itself but only in the context of other issues, such as the indissolubility of marriage, procreation, or MAP. They do not offer a full-fledged theology of infertility (e.g., how it affects people or what resources are available within the Christian community to deal with the issue). One of the main shortcomings of church documents is that the responsibility and support of the Christian community is barely mentioned. Childless couples are left on their own to figure out how to cope with their situation.

Reading Aquinas in the Context of Childlessness

How can one appropriate Aquinas’ theology to build a sound theology and spirituality of childlessness, given the fact that Aquinas never addresses the issue as such? Aquinas, in the context of marriage, emphasizes

⁷³ Weinger, “‘Infertile’ Cameroonian Women,” 57.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Oduyoye, “A Coming Home to Myself,” 115.

procreation and the education of offspring. In the context of virginity, he speaks of voluntary childlessness. The latter substantively differs from infertility, as it is freely chosen. Appropriation of Aquinas' theology is valuable for strategic reasons. Aquinas is among the most studied and well-respected figures among African Catholic clergy. Moreover, Aquinas offers a theological method that draws from non-Christian sources (Aristotle and Averroes, for instance) and is valuable in a context where reference to African traditions is usual.

When Aquinas writes on Jesus' lifestyle (ST III, q. 40, a.2, ad 2), he barely dwells on Jesus' celibacy and childlessness. His commentary on gospel passages such as Matthew 19 (the issue of eunuchs) or 22 (the Sadducees' story about the seven childless brothers and their wife) does not yield much fruit because of his use of allegory.⁷⁶ Nonetheless, I have decided to construct a theology of childlessness, especially for women, by looking at the proper nature of marriage as outlined by Aquinas and then by recovering some elements of voluntary childlessness present in his theology. Before continuing, it is important to underline the main ideas of marriage in Aquinas' thought.

Marriage in Aquinas' Thought

Marriage is simultaneously a function of nature and a sacrament.⁷⁷ As a good of nature, it is ordained to the perpetuity of the human species.⁷⁸ As a sacrament, "it consists in the union of a husband and wife purposing to generate and educate offspring for the worship of God."⁷⁹ Procreation appears as the primary purpose of marriage. As such, marriage contributes to the good of the whole community.⁸⁰ As a sacrament, it is also a remedy against sin, which

⁷⁶ Saint Thomas d'Aquin, *Lecture de l'Évangile de Saint Matthieu*, trans. Dominique Pillet, Jacques Ménard, and Marie-Hélène Deloffre, OSB, (Institut Docteur Angélique, 2005), <http://docteurangelique.free.fr/bibliotheque/ecriture/matthieu.htm>.

⁷⁷ Saint Thomas d'Aquin, *Commentaire du livre des sentences de Pierre Lombard (Scriptum super Sententiis) 1254-1256, Livre IV*, trans. Jacques Ménard, (Institut Docteur Angélique, 2007), d. 26, q. 1, 1, <http://docteurangelique.free.fr/bibliotheque/sommes/SENTENCES4.htm>. I have chosen this early work of Aquinas because it inspires the supplement of the *Summa Theologiae*, which was not written by Aquinas.

⁷⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book IV: Salvation*, ed. Joseph Kenny, OP, trans. Charles O'Neil, online (New York: Hanover House, 1955), chap. 78.2, <http://www.dhspriory.org/thomas/ContraGentiles4.htm>.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae III*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, online (Kevin Knight, 2016), q. 65, a. 3, ad 1, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/4.htm>.

in this case is concupiscence, and it fosters the virtue of temperance.⁸¹ As a sacrament, it is a sign and points to a deeper reality, namely, the mystery of the union of Christ and the church.⁸² As it mirrors this reality, it should be held indivisibly and faithfully. Hence, the two other goods of marriage are fidelity and indissolubility.

Marriage is a sacrament ordained to the good of bodily life.⁸³ As such, it has “less participation in the nature of the spiritual life.”⁸⁴ Marriage in Aquinas’ architectonic structure of sacraments comes in last position.⁸⁵ It is not simply because Aquinas’ anthropology gives priority to the soul over the body. To the contrary, Aquinas’ sacramentology is grounded “in the complexity and historicity of human existence.”⁸⁶ This does not mean that it does not contain spiritual elements (as noted, marriage is a remedy for sin and a sign of a deeper reality).

Marriage is a structure of grace, which is the proper environment for a mature loving relationship to flourish. Grace is a gift freely bestowed on human beings by God.⁸⁷ Grace produces the following effects in the person: it heals the soul, fosters the desire for the good, carries out the good, perseveres in the good, and reaches glory.⁸⁸ Grace unites the person to God and allows him or her to cooperate in God’s project.⁸⁹ However, the reception of grace in a sacrament should not be seen “as an isolated and isolating production of sanctification but as a bonding of believers with Christ in the unity of his Mystical Body.”⁹⁰

⁸¹ Aquinas, ST III, q. 65, a. 1.

⁸² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles IV*, chap. 78.5.

⁸³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book III: Providence (Q. 1–83)*, ed. Joseph Kenny, OP, trans. Vernon Bourke, online (New York: Hanover House, 1955), chap. 58.5, <http://dhspriority.org/thomas/ContraGentiles3a.htm>; St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae III*, q. 65, a. 3, ad 1.

⁸⁴ Aquinas, ST III, q. 65, a. 2.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Liam G. Walsh, OP, “Sacraments,” in *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Rik Van Nieuwenhove and Joseph Wawrykow (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 359.

⁸⁷ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae Ia-IIae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, online (Kevin Knight, 2008), q. 110, 1, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2.htm>.

⁸⁸ ST Ia-IIae, q. 111, 3.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, q. 111, a. 1.

⁹⁰ Walsh, “Sacraments,” 332.

The Proper Nature of Marriage

Procreation appears to be the main goal of marriage for Aquinas.⁹¹ However, procreation is not limited to biological reproduction. He insists on the proper upbringing of children.⁹² Conception and childbirth are not enough; nurturing and caring for children are important. Although Aquinas shares the gender bias of his time, he makes a good point by affirming the necessity of having both parents for the education of children.⁹³

Outside of procreation, Aquinas offers a full-fledged reflection on marriage and its other goods. In the fourth book of his *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, subquestion 1 of distinction 27, he affirms the unitive function of marriage and that marriage is nothing else but a union. He acknowledges that the union of man and woman in marriage is the highest form of union, because it is a union of souls and bodies.⁹⁴ He goes on to state that marriage is not only ordained to procreation but also to a single domestic life. In subquestion 2, he considers three aspects of marriage: the essence (a union), the cause (the act of getting married), and the effect of marriage (procreation). In subquestion 3, he holds that marriage is ordered to a common life within a household.

Aquinas declares that marriage is natural because it is accomplished through free will (*libero arbitrio*) in two ways: the good of offspring and the mutual aid of spouses.⁹⁵ Regarding the good of offspring, he clearly states that procreation is not sufficient, but is completed by education and upbringing of the offspring until they reach the perfect state of the human being—being capable of virtue. Concerning the mutual aid of spouses, he advocates the complementarity (without using the word) of man and woman.

Aquinas maintains that consent makes the reality of marriage come true.⁹⁶ Consent is not only manifested by external words, but has to be internal for a marriage to be true.⁹⁷ Hence, it is not the conjugal act that causes the union, but consent. Marriage is simultaneously spiritual and material, a sacramental and a social reality. Thus, mutual and genuine acceptance expressed in words and perfected by actions grounds marriage.

⁹¹ Thomas d'Aquin, *Commentaire des sentences*, IV, d. 26, q. 1, a. 1.

⁹² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book III: Providence (Q. 84–163), ed. Joseph Kenny, OP, trans. Vernon J. Bourke, online (New York: Hanover House, 1955), chap. 122.4, 6, <http://dhsprory.org/thomas/ContraGentiles3b.htm>.

⁹³ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae III*, chap. 122.6, 8.

⁹⁴ St. Thomas d'Aquin, *Commentaire des sentences*, IV, d. 27, q. 1, a. 1, sq. 2, ad 3.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, d. 26, q. 1, a. 1.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, d. 27, q. 1, a. 2, sq. 1.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, d. 27, q. 1, a. 2, sq. 4.

In distinction 31, Aquinas reviews the goods of marriage, namely, procreation, fidelity, and indissolubility.⁹⁸ As a function of nature and an act of virtue, marriage is ordained to two things: one that is required from the point of view of the agent (intention of an appropriate goal), and the other from the point of view of the act itself (faith). Procreation is located at the first level of intentionality. Offspring should be desired before being effected concretely. Further, the spouses' fidelity is part of the integrity of marriage. Aquinas suggests that indissolubility is more important than the two other goods of marriage.⁹⁹ Indissolubility is superior because it belongs to marriage as a sign of grace, while the two other goods belong to marriage as a sign of nature. Furthermore, he maintains that indissolubility is essential to marriage, while procreation and faith are just actualizations of the marital bond that presuppose indissolubility. A marriage could exist without fidelity or offspring, but not without indissolubility. Still, procreation and fidelity are caused by marriage, and provide the conditions for a genuine marriage, even if one thinks in terms of the intention to procreate and the fidelity to honor one's commitment. Nonetheless, indissolubility is part of natural equity, because a husband cannot leave an infertile or unattractive wife, or vice versa.¹⁰⁰

The indissolubility of marriage sheds light on the nature of the relationship: a friendship between the spouses that goes beyond sexual intercourse. "For [the spouses] are united not only in the act of fleshly union, which produces a certain gentle association ... but also in the partnership of the whole range of domestic activity."¹⁰¹ Friendship is key, because "the greater [it] is, the more solid and long-lasting will [the marriage] be."¹⁰² Moreover, indissolubility is absolute. Hence, only death ends it.¹⁰³ Even if someone would be ready to dissolve marriage on the grounds of adultery, as the Reformed churches do, childlessness would not qualify as a motive for ending the relationship. It is not even listed among the possible impediments to marriage by Aquinas.¹⁰⁴ The inability to conceive children does not destroy the ability to love and to be in a loving relationship. If this were the case, the marriages of the elderly would be illicit.

To sum up Aquinas' argument, marriage creates an everlasting bond, and procreation is more than just having children. Regarding procreation, Aquinas seems to suggest that the intention to procreate is enough.

⁹⁸ Ibid., d. 31, q. 1, a. 2.

⁹⁹ Ibid., d. 31, q. 1, a. 3.

¹⁰⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book III: Providence (Q. 84–163)*, chap. 123.3.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., chap. 123.6.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ St. Thomas d'Aquin, *Commentaire des sentences, IV*, d. 27, q. 1, a. 3, sq. 2.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., d. 34, q. 1, a. 1.

Offspring as a good of marriage goes beyond simply giving birth and means raising one's children until they become adults. Thus, being a parent is not only a biological reality, but also entails taking care of one's children on a daily basis. People have to understand that offspring alone are not enough to guarantee a happy marriage. Moreover, even people who do not have biological children can still nurture and raise children.

Aquinas' Insights into Voluntary Childlessness

For Aquinas, as for many in the Christian tradition, virginity is superior to marriage. When compared to virginity, a counsel, marriage is a lesser good.¹⁰⁵ Here, it is interesting to consider how Aquinas responds to the criticism that consecrated virgins violate God's command to go and increase (Gen 1:28).¹⁰⁶ One of the objections leveled is that if everyone were to follow this virginal path, it would lead to the extinction of the human race.¹⁰⁷

Aquinas affirms that God's command to procreate (Gen 1:26) has been confirmed by Jesus' injunction "What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder" (Matt 19:6).¹⁰⁸ Aquinas puts forth arguments to justify voluntary childlessness that could be used more or less for involuntary childlessness. First, procreation "is ordered to the common good."¹⁰⁹ In other words, it is for the good of the whole species not merely for the individual.¹¹⁰ It follows that everyone is not obliged to procreate. If procreation is vital for the whole species, then it is not necessarily vital for the particular individual. Sexual intercourse is a need that promotes personal wholeness, but it is not as important as breathing, eating, drinking, or sleeping. The same could be said about procreation. People can still survive and be happy without it, as we see in the case of so many consecrated people and childless couples.

Second, procreation is given by Divine Providence, but people are not obliged to use this ability.¹¹¹ The fact that everyone can procreate does not mean that everyone should. Aquinas takes as an example the organization of society where the ability to do something does not necessarily lead one to use it. Third, voluntary childlessness brings awareness about

¹⁰⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae IIa-IIae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, online (Kevin Knight, 2008), 152, 4, <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2.htm>.

¹⁰⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book III: Providence (Q. 84–163)*, chap. 136.7.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, chap. 136.4.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, chap. 136.7.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, chap. 123.7.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, chap. 136.9.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, chap. 136.10.

nonmaterialistic values.¹¹² Reality is both spiritual and material reality. Spiritual reality transcends and gives meaning to other realities. Likewise, a childless couple should be counseled that there is more to marriage than simply procreation. A healthy childless couple can help other members in a community to question themselves about the ultimate meaning of matrimony. Fourth, the command to procreate is no longer necessary to increase the people of God, since the latter are multiplied by a spiritual generation in the new covenant.¹¹³ The emphasis is no longer on physical procreation, but on spiritual procreation. If consecrated celibates can be considered to be spiritual parents, this can be said of childless couples who undertake the task of raising children. Moreover, in Christ, the real family is not the biological one, but the spiritual one: “Anyone who does the will of God, that person is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:35).

We can draw some inferences from Aquinas’ explanations of the situation of infertile couples. If procreation is important to humanity as a whole, it is not as vital for the individual. People should not feel pressured to procreate. Procreation in the new economy of salvation is not an obligation. Hence, if procreation is a gift from Divine Providence, infertility—from birth or from life’s contingencies—should not be seen as a curse. Remaining in a childless relationship shows that marriage is not limited to biological procreation. There are other goods and values attached to marriage: fidelity, friendship, and love. Godly relationships, not procreation, provide an avenue for childless couples to create bonds outside their original community. Aquinas provides a voice from tradition that upholds childless couples’ essential dignity and offers a rereading of the experience that can be helpful for the situation of childless couples in West and Central Africa today.

Striving for Happiness

Childlessness often gives rise to a sense of failure, or even the idea that the union is imperfect. Yet, if it is understood in Aquinas’ sense, childless couples can continue to strive for happiness in a context of infertility. The grief of childlessness can lead people into self-destructive patterns,¹¹⁴ and affect their self-esteem. Striving for happiness means working to achieve a

¹¹² Ibid., chap. 136.11.

¹¹³ St. Thomas d’Aquin, *Commentaire de la première épître de Saint Paul aux Corinthiens*, trans. Charles Duyck, <http://docteurangelique.free.fr/bibliotheque/ecriture/1co.htm>; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles, Book III: Providence (Q. 84–163)*, chap. 136.15.

¹¹⁴ Tabong and Adongo, “Infertility and Childlessness.”

good life. Striving for happiness is a way of acknowledging the agency of the subject and giving him or her the confidence to aim for what is good. The local church and Christian community must participate in this process. Until now, there have been only occasional declarations by local African bishops, but no serious pastoral program to sustain their words.¹¹⁵ In addition, some pastoral approaches are limited in their scope, since they are only preventive and do not offer concrete care to infertile couples.¹¹⁶

Happiness is the proper end of human beings, and in its perfect state consists in union with God.¹¹⁷ While we wait for perfect happiness after this earthly life, there is room for imperfect happiness, which is a participation in perfect happiness.¹¹⁸ Imperfect happiness can be attained through the person's natural powers¹¹⁹ wherein humans are perfected by virtue.¹²⁰ The perfection of charity (love of God and love of neighbor) is essential to happiness.¹²¹ Since charity is the "mother and the root"¹²² of all other virtues, we shall see here how it can illuminate the infertile couple and the Christian community in their search for a good life. Exploring love as a hermeneutical principle can uncover for local Christian communities in West and Central Africa the deeper meaning of marriage and can offer a holistic response to childless couples.

As Aquinas claims, "In the love of our neighbor, as in the love of God we may observe a twofold perfection: one without which charity is impossible, and consisting in one's having in one's affections nothing that is contrary to the love of one's neighbor; and another without which it is possible to have charity."¹²³ This second level could be considered in three ways: (i) the *extent* of love, which may spread to one's enemies; (ii) the *intensity* of love, shown by abnegation and acceptance of hardship for one's neighbor's sake; and (iii) the *effect* of love, through which one surrenders temporal good and even one's life for one's neighbor's sake.¹²⁴

¹¹⁵ Benjamin O. Nwoko, "Childless Marriage: A Pastoral Case Study of a Christian Practical Problem in Southeastern Nigeria" (PhD diss., Pontificia Universita Lateranense, 1986), 131–33.

¹¹⁶ See, for instance, Benjamin Nwoko's suggestions in Nwoko, "Childless Marriage," 135–48."

¹¹⁷ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae Ia-IIae*, qq. 1, 7–8.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, q. 5, a. 3.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, q. 5, a. 5.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, q. 62, a. 1.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, q. 4, a. 8, ad 3.

¹²² *Ibid.*, q. 62, a. 4.

¹²³ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae IIa-IIae*, q. 184, a. 2, ad 3.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.* "First, as to the extent of love, through a man loving not only his friends and acquaintances but also strangers and even his enemies, for as Augustine says

We shall consider this three-tiered second level of charity under three different but equally important power dynamics—namely, the Christian community, the infertile couple, and the individual. These three power dynamics shape the existence of the infertile. Our conviction is that a person does not exist in a vacuum, but in a dependent network of relationships, especially in communitarian societies. The inclusion of the Christian community is vital, because infertility is a social problem, as pointed out earlier. It is important to distinguish between the infertile couple and the individuals within that couple for two reasons. First, there are gender differences in the way men and women experience infertility, and the way they react to it.¹²⁵ Second, spouses may find themselves in different places emotionally, spiritually, and personally.¹²⁶

The Extent of Love

The extent of love highlights the necessity of inclusivity. At the individual level it starts with self-love. Far from being an appeal for narcissism and egotism, the call for self-love is located at the heart of Christian revelation. The horizontal dimension of the great commandment states: “Love your neighbor *as yourself*” (Mark 12:31). In other words, there cannot be healthy love of neighbor without proper love of self. Aquinas, in his *ordo caritatis*, reminds us that genuine self-love is grounded on the love a person has for God.¹²⁷ Stephen Pope, commenting on Aquinas, opines: “Self-love is embedded in human nature by God.”¹²⁸ Pope’s insight that self-love is a gift from God provides an important dimension to understanding self-love properly. Charity requires an appropriate love of self and care of one’s own body.¹²⁹ For Aquinas, the key distinction is not “between self-love and neighbor love

(Enchiridion lxxiii) this is a mark of the perfect children of God. Secondly, as to the intensity of love, which is shown by the things which man despises for his neighbor’s sake, through his despising not only external goods for the sake of his neighbor, but also bodily hardships and even death, according to John 15:13, “Greater love than this no man hath, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” Thirdly, as to the effect of love, so that a man will surrender not only temporal but also spiritual goods and even himself, for his neighbor’s sake, according to the words of the Apostle (2 Corinthians 12:15): “But I most gladly will spend and be spent myself for your souls.”

¹²⁵ Angelique Ruhi-López and Carmen Santamaría, *The Infertility Companion for Catholics: Spiritual and Practical Support for Couples* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2012), 125–26.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 124.

¹²⁷ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae IIa-IIae*, q. 26, a. 4.

¹²⁸ Stephen J. Pope, *The Evolution of Altruism and the Ordering of Love* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1994), 59.

¹²⁹ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae IIa-IIae*, q. 25, a. 4–5.

as such but between proper and improper self-love and proper and improper neighbor love.”¹³⁰

The infertile couple has to practice inclusivity at two levels. First, there is internal inclusivity, in which each partner opens to the other through communication. Second, the spouses should not live in isolation, but also be ready to welcome others.

The starting point of the community’s concern for infertile couples is found in Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 12:26a: “If one part is hurt, all the parts share its pain.” Inclusivity at this level means acknowledging the other (the infertile) and making room for them within the community. This can be in liturgy, in teaching, or in ministry outreach. For example, in liturgy, it could be through including petitions for the infertile in the prayers of the faithful or through preaching. The marriage ritual needs to make explicit the possibility of involuntary childlessness.¹³¹ Certain areas of the theology of marriage can be reformulated.¹³² People need to be sensitized to these issues, because community life in Africa is vital for any individual.

The Intensity of Love

The intensity of love probes the genuineness of love. Since the love of neighbor is tied to proper self-love and self-care, one needs to look at those attitudes that foster or hinder the latter. Infertility creates a crisis¹³³ that leads to unhealthy and risky attitudes (promiscuous sex, isolation, binge drinking) that show improper self-love. It can also produce an erosion of self-esteem. People may feel inadequate, unfulfilled, or useless.¹³⁴

The behavior of individual spouses affects the integrity of marriage. The conjugal act a symbol of this integrity. When there is infertility, this act tends to lose its spontaneity and becomes more like a task to be performed.¹³⁵

¹³⁰ Pope, *The Evolution of Altruism*, 59.

¹³¹ Cox, “Toward a Theology of Infertility,” 30.

¹³² Cox is suggesting, for instance, that a theological move should be made from unitive and procreative to unitive and generative, where generative is more inclusive: “Generativity can encompass biological procreation yet also provide a framework for perceiving ‘fruitfulness’ more broadly.” See Cox, “Toward a Theology of Infertility,” 44–50.

¹³³ Nancy Gieseler Devor, PhD, “Pastoral Care for Infertile Couples,” *Journal of Pastoral Care* 48, no. 4 (1994): 355.

¹³⁴ Ruhi-López and Santamaría, *The Infertility Companion for Catholics*, 103–4; Gerrits, “Infertility and Matrilineality,” 240.

¹³⁵ Ruhi-López and Santamaría, *The Infertility Companion for Catholics*, 121; Devor, “Pastoral Care for Infertile Couples,” 356.

Thus, ironically, when performed in such a manner the marital act, which symbolizes the love of spouses, does not fulfill its unitive role, and love is removed from it. Or the frequency of sexual intercourse tends to diminish. In addition, the intimacy of the couple may be invaded by friends, relatives, and/or doctors.¹³⁶ Their varied advice may actually do more harm than good to the married couple.

At the level of the community, one needs to distinguish well-meaning attitudes from bad practices. Concerning the latter, the Christian community needs to consider ways in which it partakes in negative aspects of local social culture. The society at large aggravates an already painful situation by stigmatizing the childless and excluding them from crucial social roles. It plays a disruptive role in an already fragile marriage by suggesting the rupture of the marital bond, or even polygamy.

The Christian community must engage society and challenge the patriarchal vision of marriage as well as “cultural and religious notions regarding childlessness.”¹³⁷ Special attention should be paid to childless women, who are the ones who suffer the most and often get the exclusive blame for childlessness, regardless of social status.¹³⁸ Christian communities are often complicit in such situations through their silence in face of such injustices. It is the duty of the Christian community to challenge its own way of dealing with childlessness and its specific discriminatory and demeaning social practices against childless women.

The attitudes of “friends of Job,” who tend to lecture the infertile, may be well meaning, but such “friends” are not helpful. Christian communities should adopt a more humble attitude. “The experience of infertility is a grief process.”¹³⁹ It takes time for the infertile to accept their situation, and their grieving process may take various forms. People sometimes need to be heard, to voice their anger and frustration, and to know that they are not alone in their “journey” through infertility.¹⁴⁰ The primary attitude of the community ought to be accompaniment, compassionate listening, and support for the couple.

¹³⁶ Ruhi-López and Santamaría, *The Infertility Companion for Catholics*, 121.

¹³⁷ Cox, “Toward a Theology of Infertility,” 50.

¹³⁸ Tabong and Adongo, “Infertility and Childlessness.”

¹³⁹ Devor, “Pastoral Care for Infertile Couples,” 357. As Devor points out, there is a loss of control and identity around sexuality and reproduction.

¹⁴⁰ Ruhi-López and Santamaría, *The Infertility Companion for Catholics*, 88.

The Effects of Love

This is the level of grace or healing grace. Infertility is an experience of brokenness.¹⁴¹ Only divine grace can heal brokenness and restore human nature. What are the structures of grace that can help infertile couples?

The most important thing for couples is friendship. True friendship is aimed toward the person we love and to whom we wish good.¹⁴² However, well-wishing is not enough, it has to be accompanied by communication understood as communion.¹⁴³ Mutual support is one form this communication can take. The quality of conversation between partners must rise to the level of genuine and open communication.

Infertility strains a marriage and communication between spouses.¹⁴⁴ The couple should recognize this and realize how negatively each spouse is affected. Moreover, each spouse should acknowledge his or her own brokenness and embrace it.¹⁴⁵ It is a humbling experience to realize that one has flaws, and that one hurts and needs help. The infertile couple needs help from outside, either through a priest or pastoral counselor or through a support group.¹⁴⁶

The Christian community must offer support to childless couples and create concrete structures to welcome them. There are various structures of grace that the Christian community can put in place to accompany and show compassion to infertile couples.¹⁴⁷

I see two types of concrete support. The first can be modeled on support groups for HIV patients; thus in an infertility support group all members should be infertile people or couples. This aspect is important, because support groups are intended to counteract the isolation that its members experience on their own. Participation in a support group is also cathartic, strengthening and encouraging individual members as they share their experiences with others who are facing the same problem. The second type of support could be facilitated by the inclusion of infertility in the apostolate of families. Infertility should be among the top issues discussed. Listening to testimonies will help sensitize Christian groups to the experiences of those coping with infertility and lead these groups to adopt proper attitudes toward the infertile.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 87.

¹⁴² St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae IIa-IIae*, q. 23, a. 1.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Devor, "Pastoral Care for Infertile Couples," 358.

¹⁴⁵ Ruhi-López and Santamaría, *The Infertility Companion for Catholics*, 86–87.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 130.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 132.

In addition to church teaching, and to consulting thinkers such as Aquinas, to correct attitudes and beliefs the Bible must be read in a more balanced way. Indeed, the focus “on biological parenthood potentially ignores the Christian claim that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ, responsible for each other, and that relationships based on discipleship are not subordinate to biological familial relationships.”¹⁴⁸ Revisiting childless figures in the Bible with a more concrete and appealing message (e.g., Miriam, Samson, Jeremiah, Judith, Jesus of Nazareth, Paul of Tarsus) would help empower childless people. On a continent where the Bible plays an important role in shaping people’s worldview, these inspiring examples could prove decisive in changing mentalities.

The story of Tabitha (also known as Dorcas) in Acts 10:36–42 can illustrate this. Tabitha is resuscitated by Peter. She is not mentioned as wife or mother.¹⁴⁹ She is primarily praised in virtue of what she does for the Christian faith.¹⁵⁰ “Tabitha was not lauded for the typical female virtues of chastity, motherhood, or domesticity. Her good works were not described as being directed toward her husband or children, but on behalf of others beyond family and relatives.”¹⁵¹ Remarkably, Tabitha is the only woman in the entire New Testament to receive formally the title of “disciple,” although the use of the phrase “a certain female disciple” suggests that there may have been other women “disciples.”¹⁵² Nevertheless, “by naming Tabitha a disciple, the narrator designates that she was someone who was an exemplary follower of” Jesus Christ.¹⁵³ This is confirmed by the fact that she performed “good deeds and acts of charity” (Acts 10:36b). Hence, Tabitha is important not because of offspring, but because of the good works she performs.

Conclusion

Thomas Aquinas offers a rich understanding of marriage that can help the church in West and Central Africa. If procreation is important, it is not limited to biological childbirth, but also takes education into account. Aquinas offers other important ideas. First, procreation is not the sole good of marriage. It has to be balanced with the good of spouses and indissolubility.

¹⁴⁸ Cox, “Toward a Theology of Infertility,” 38.

¹⁴⁹ Teresa J. Calpino, *Women, Work, and Leadership in Acts*, Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament 2, Reihe 361 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 2.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 166.

¹⁵² Calpino, *Women, Work, and Leadership in Acts*, 159.

¹⁵³ Calpino, *Women, Work and Leadership in Acts*, 151.

Second, in the Christian context, infertility is not a ground for divorce or for the man to have a second wife. Third, marriage is about companionship and friendship between the spouses. These are the real ingredients that can make marriage last forever. Fourth, procreation is no longer as critical in the new economy as it was in the old.

Beyond these well-known principles, there is a need for more robust pastoral care around the virtue of charity that goes beyond mere declarations of intention. The magisterium has hinted about what infertile couples might do for the community, but not about how the community should care for the infertile. An examination of the extent, intensity, and effect of love helps correct that approach and indicates how inclusive genuine and healing love in the context of infertility can be. After all, the infertile deserve to be happy, too.