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1st General Congregation
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PRESENTATION OF THE REPORT OF THE POLYGAMY COMMISSION

SECAM REPORT

Polygamy is a prevalent reality in many African countries, posing a significant pastoral challenge for the Church. This challenge arises both from individuals who were already in polygamous relationships before embracing the faith, as well as baptized members who enter into polygamy after their conversion.

Recognizing the complexity of this issue, the Church in Africa welcomed with gratitude the request made to SECAM (Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar) during the First Session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in October 2023. This request called for an in-depth study on how to accompany individuals living in polygamous situations. As highlighted in the approved Synthesis Report from the First Session:

“SECAM (Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar) is encouraged to promote theological and pastoral discernment on the subject of polygamy and the accompaniment of persons living in polygamous unions who are coming to faith” (16q).

In response to this request, the SECAM Standing Committee has chosen to address the issue from a pastoral perspective. This approach emphasizes closeness, active listening, and support, offering accompaniment without judgment, while upholding the Truth of the Gospel, which brings life to every believer (Jn 14:6). The sacraments and the witness of Christian life serve to proclaim this Truth, fostering a deeper understanding of the vocation to marriage, its intrinsic connection to the mystery of Christ, God, the Church, and its prophetic dimension.

To this end, we have adopted a synodal methodology, structured into a five-stage process:

1. Team of Experts: To address this issue, a working committee of 12 experts was formed, comprising representatives from across Africa and its islands. The team includes specialists from diverse fields such as dogmatic and fundamental theology, biblical studies, pastoral care, canon law, and anthropology. Their collective expertise will enable a comprehensive and in-depth study of polygamy. This interdisciplinary approach aims to provide nuanced insights and practical guidance for accompanying individuals in polygamous relationships within the African context.

2. Episcopal Conferences: Once the Working Committee has completed its study, a draft document will be prepared and circulated to all Episcopal Conferences across Africa and the Islands for further review, analysis, and feedback. Given that the

prevalence and nature of polygamy differ based on state policies, dominant religious practices, and cultural influences, the input from each of the 37 Episcopal Conferences will be invaluable. Their contributions will help refine and enrich the draft, ensuring that it reflects the diverse realities and challenges faced by the Church in addressing polygamy across the continent.

3. Draft document: SECAM Secretariat will gather and consolidate the feedback provided by each of the 37 Episcopal Conferences. This feedback will then be carefully reviewed and incorporated into the initial draft document prepared by the Team of Experts. By integrating the perspectives and insights from across the continent, the revised draft will reflect a more comprehensive and contextually sensitive understanding of polygamy, ensuring that the Church's pastoral response is both theologically sound and culturally relevant.

4. Plenary Assembly: The revised draft document will be formally presented at the SECAM Plenary Assembly, scheduled to take place in Rwanda in July 2025. At this gathering, approximately 250 bishops, including Presidents of national and regional Episcopal Conferences, as well as elected delegates from each Conference, will convene to carefully study the document. The assembly will provide an opportunity for in-depth discussion and deliberation on the proposed content, ensuring that the diverse experiences and perspectives of the Church in Africa and its islands are thoroughly considered. Following this, the bishops will vote on and adopt the final version of the document, which will serve as a key pastoral resource for addressing the complex issue of polygamy in the African context.

5. Submission to Rome: Remaining steadfast in its commitment to Catholic doctrine on marriage, the Church in Africa seeks to explore the question of polygamy from a pastoral perspective, focusing on the key issue: What form of pastoral care is most appropriate for accompanying individuals in polygamous relationships? Once the consensus document is voted on and adopted by the African bishops during their Plenary Assembly, it will be submitted to Rome for further theological and doctrinal guidance. This step ensures that the pastoral approach developed by the African Church aligns with the broader teachings of the universal Church.

At the moment, the work is still being carried out by the team of experts, who have already realized the complexity of the issue. In addition, SECAM Secretariat has already notified the Episcopal Conferences of Africa and the Islands about this process and the need for their input to enrich the draft document being prepared by the team of experts.