

Jesus' Family (Luke 8:19-21) in Lucan and Nigerian Perspectives

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Hermeneutical Question Guiding the Study

This paper explores the concept of “Jesus family” as a contribution to expanding our vision of the family, within the context of the Synod on the family. At Mass, in many Catholic Churches in Nigeria, when collections are made for diverse church projects, different groups are called up in turn to make contributions: Catholic Men Organisation (CMO) and all men, Catholic Women Organisation (CWO) and all women, Catholic Youth Organisation (CYON) and all the children present. These are followed by states associations, pious societies, and other groups. Finally comes what is called “the big one, all of us: Jesus' family”. A possible source of this designation of the congregation as “Jesus’ family” is the Lucan episode where Jesus, speaking to the crowds (a situation similar to our liturgical context?) is told that his mother and his brethren have been standing outside (perfect tense) desiring to see him. In reply Jesus declares that his mother and his brethren are those who hear and do God’s word (Luke 8:20-21). The episode is also reported by Matthew and Mark; it must have been important and of general knowledge to the early church.

The paper explores the theological soundness of the designation of the congregation in our churches as Jesus’ family at this point in the liturgy. Is the entire congregation gathered for the celebration of the Eucharist worship, the source and summit of Christian worship, not “Jesus’ family”? Are the previous groups identified individually not "Jesus' family"? Does the designation of the congregation as “Jesus’ family” at this point help the assembly to internalize and deepen their awareness of being one family of Jesus (or is it “family of God”?), his brothers and sisters gathered in with and through him to offer worship to God? Or does it promote a split mentality in the members: before they were CMO, CWO, CYON, but now they are Jesus’ family?

These questions are all the more pertinent since the calling of the members by groups encourages competition as each group’s collection is counted separately and published later to see which group contributed the most. In view of this, the designation of the final group as “Jesus’ family” appears to be in function of economic purpose; a ploy to ginger all in the assembly to identify with Jesus and in his name donate extra money for a given cause. What did the Lucan Jesus understand by his family (mother, brothers, and sisters)? What does he posit as the criteria for belonging to this family? What would Luke have intended his immediate audience to hear by this designation? What insights can we gain from this episode and other parts of Luke’s Gospel as gospel/good news resource for addressing this modern phenomenon in our churches? These are leading questions that guide this study. The study examines the episode successively in its literary, Lucan and Nigerian contexts.

1. The Passage in its Literary or Gospel Context

Occasion of the episode (Luke 8:19-21)

Jesus is speaking to the “great crowd gathered from town after town” to hear him (8:4). In response, he first speaks to them the parable of the sower, the core of which is the necessity or invitation to hear and keep God’s word and so bear fruit in plenty; or ignore it and remain

fruitless (8:4-15). In the parable, the poor soils forfeited the fruitfulness of the seed, God's word planted in them. This parable with its interpretation is followed by two other short sayings, that nothing is hidden which will not be revealed (v 16) and that a lamp is lit not to be hidden but put on a stand for all to see (v 17). Jesus caps up these sayings by warning the audience to take heed how they hear; adding another proverbial saying that to those who have will more be given; while those who have little will have even that little taken away from them (v 20). These short sayings explain and expand on the parable of the sower, with its focus on the reception of the word, reception of "the good news of the kingdom of God" which Jesus travels through towns and villages to proclaim or sow (8:1).

The incident happens in the region of Galilee to which Jesus of Nazareth belongs, and where he is well known. It happens before he begins his programmatic journey toward Jerusalem (9:51); in an unspecified place (the last place mentioned is Nain where in passing he raises the widow's dead son to life; 7:11; no place is specified for the house of Simon the Pharisee who invited him to a meal; 7:36). It happens while Jesus is touring the towns and villages of Galilee preaching and evangelizing (proclaiming the gospel) of God's kingdom or reign or God's value system; "with him went the Twelve and certain women" (Luke 8:1-3).

"The Women" group is deliberately put here as a title to correspond with "The Twelve". After the resurrection in Luke and in the other gospels they are called "**The Women**" who came up with him from Galilee to Jerusalem (Luke 23:55). These women were different from the several women in the crowds who sporadically accompanied Jesus. They were among the core members of his inner circle of disciples, always mentioned by name, unlike some of The Twelve. They were women, who heard and kept God's word as Jesus spoke it; who responded selflessly and wholeheartedly to it, and persevered from Galilee all the way to Judea and Jerusalem, through the events of his passion and death to his resurrection. They were the women whom he made the first witnesses of the resurrection, the peak of his gospel proclamation, and with Mary of Magdala, commissioned to announce the same to his other disciples, "his brothers and sisters" (John 20:17). These and other unnamed disciples, at least the seventy-two (some witnesses say seventy) are also mentioned in the Gospel (Luke 10:1-18, 22-24).

In this episode, Jesus is speaking to the crowds, in public, not to an exclusive group. At this juncture in the narrative, Jesus' mother and his brethren (brothers and sisters) arrive to see him but are hindered by the huge crowd,¹ a scene similar to that of the paralytic led in through the roof due to the impassable crowd.² Matthew simply says they "suddenly arrived" in the scene (Matt 12:46-50). Luke does not give the purpose of their coming, nor does he restrict those who hear and keep God's word to "his disciples" (Matt 9:49) or the "crowds sitting in a circle round him" (Mark 3:33). When told that his mother and his brethren are waiting outside to see him, Jesus simply answers, Matthew and Mark have "those who do the will of my Father"; both emphasize that this applies to the inner circle are his disciples, among whom figure The Twelve and The Women, who went with him through the towns and villages and all the way to Jerusalem.

Jesus' identification of his family (Luke 8:19-21)

¹ The Greek word *adelphoi* (masculine plural, nominative of *adelphos*) designates brothers and sisters. These could be siblings or as in the Nigerian and African context extended family members or even an entire clan or village. In Ibibio, for instance, the word would be *ndito eka* (the children of the mother, the mother being the one whose parentage cannot be in doubt, though there may be doubt as to who is one's father).

² See Luke 5:17-26; Mark 2:1-12; Matt 9:1-8. Mark says his relatives go to "take charge of him" fearing he had gone out of his mind (Mark 3:20-21; 31-35).

“My mother and brothers and sisters are those who hear and do God’s word” (8:21). The verb forms in present absolute, “those hearing” (*akouountes*) and “doing” (*poiountes*) point to a permanent disposition in the person. It transcends a onetime hearing and points to a disposition of discipleship, of attentiveness and active response to God’s word; for instance; Isa 50:4-5 (“Morning by morning he wakes me to hear, to listen like a disciple; and for my part I made no resistance”). Noticeably, Jesus does not add “father” to the list of those who are his family. Joseph is his legal father by culture and custom.³ In John’s Gospel, Philip from Bethsaida, of the same town as Andrew and Peter, identifies Jesus as “son of Joseph from Nazareth” in Galilee (John 1:45). In Luke the mother of Jesus, finding him in the Temple after three days’ search says to him “My child, why have you done this to us? See how worried your father and I have been looking for you”. In his reply he accepts both as father and mother: “Why did you [*hymeis*, plural] look for me. Did you [plural] not know that I must be after my Father’s business?” (Luke 2:48-49).

In Luke’s Gospel, his townspeople of Nazareth see him as “the son of Joseph” (4:22) whose “father and mother”, according to John are well known to them (John 6:42). After the infancy narratives, Joseph visibly disappears from the picture throughout his public life. Traditional interpretation holds that Jesus omits “father” in the episode under study to underscore that God, not Joseph, is his father (cf. Luke 2:50). A simpler explanation for the omission may be that Joseph, his legal father well known to his audience, was dead at this point in his mission. In his earlier reference to being in his Father’s house, even his parents, Mary and Joseph “did not understand what he meant” (Luke 2:50). Be that as it may, Jesus here defines who constitute members of his family and the criteria for it. The New Jerusalem Bible tags this episode in Luke as “The true family of Jesus”; and in Mark’s Gospel, “the true kinsman of Jesus”. Whoever hears and keeps God’s word according to Jesus is “his mother and his brother and sister”. In Luke the term *adelphos* signifies both brother and sister. Matthew, being a Jew, and Mark said to be Peter’s “scribe”, further specify “sister” (*adelphē*) (Matt 12:50; Mark 3:35).⁴ We not in passing that though Jesus starts with the plural, who is my mother, who are my brothers and sisters, he ends with the singular, who ever hears and does my word is my mother, brother and sister. The actions require a personal response.

Hearing and doing God’s word in Luke’s Gospel

In Jewish, Semitic as in some, if not most African cultures, to hear and keep was to accept and do what the word asks.⁵ Jesus went round the towns and villages proclaiming the good news of God’s kingdom. When therefore he says that his brethren are those who hear and keep God’s word, he means that his relatives are those who listen to his teaching about God’s reign and put it into practice, or live by it. Earlier in the Gospel, Jesus had already given a synthesis of the content of this preaching: to bring the good news to the afflicted; proclaim liberty to captives, give sight to the blind, set free the oppressed, in short, proclaim God’s year of favor (Luke 4:18-19). In sum, Jesus’ gospel is the proclamation of God’s “year of

³ See my extensive study on this matter, Teresa Okure, “‘Joseph Husband of Mary’ (Matt 1:18-25): A Gospel Recipe for Conflict Resolution and Reconciliation for the Church in Africa”. In *Conflicts and Reconciliation in the Bible/Conflits et réconciliation dans la Bible*; VTH PACE Congress, St Gall Major Seminary, Ouidah République de Bénin, 2 – 9 September 2009; Paul Bere, Mary Sylvia Nwachukwu, Anthony I. Umoren, eds; under the direction of Jean-Bosco Matand Bulembat. Abidjan: Panafrican Association of Catholic Exegetes (PACE), 2015. 199-232.

⁴ In Greek usage, *adelphos* is more common for brother and sister than in Hebrew.

⁵ See, for instance, Luke 1:42, 48; 4:15; 11:28; Deut 30:14; John 13:17; 14:23; Rev 1:3 and the parallels to Luke 8:19-21 in Matt 12:46-50; Mark 3:31-35.

favour”, God’s jubilee year or general amnesty to humanity and creation. In the jubilee year everything was to be set free, including slaves, animals and the land itself (Lev 25:8-55).⁶

The first in Luke’s Gospel to hear and keep God’s word in relation to Jesus was his mother, Mary of Nazareth, at the annunciation (Luke 1:26-38). His mother’s ability, disposition and faith to hear and do God’s word brought about his becoming a physical human being, one who could be seen, touch and be touched, heard (cf. Luke 7:38; 18:15-17; John 1:14; 1 John 3:1-4); who had normal human needs such as food and drink (Luke 5:29-32), tiredness (John 4:6), who felt gratitude and disappointment (Luke 17:11-19), sorrow and compassion (Luke 7:11-17) and so forth. Mary became his mother, not by sexual intercourse, but by hearing and keeping God’s word. Besides that, she made it her duty to store up in her heart, reflect upon, seek to discover the full meaning of whatever she heard about her son or from her son (as in the case of the three days loss). The criterion for physically relating to Jesus as his mother and his siblings is through hearing and doing God’s word.

As earlier noted, this saying is situated in Jesus’ parable of the sower which registers different responses to God’s word (Luke 8:4-15), followed by the parable on lighting a lamp to put it on a lamp stand for all to see (v 16-19) and a saying that there is nothing hidden which will not be revealed (v 20). In these short parables or sayings, Jesus invites the crowds listening to him to pay heed “**how**” they hear (v 19), not just **what** they hear. He did the same at the end of the parable of the sower, “Let one who has ears to hear, hear” (8:8). The expression “how you [pl.] hear” draws attention to the disposition with which one receives (internalises and makes one’s own) what one hears from Jesus directly (the audience in the Gospel) or by report about him (as in the case of the Lucan audience which is decades removed from the events in the Gospel).

Hearing and doing the word as beatitude in Luke’s Gospel

Though not mentioned in this episode, this active listening to Jesus’ message confers on one the status of blessedness or beatitude. In the passage under study, the verbs to hear and do are in the present absolute or continuous: My mother and my brethren are those who are hearing (*akouontes*) and doing (*poiountes*) God’s word. The verbs register a permanent disposition of response to God’s word; the disposition of one who is aware of God’s ever active speaking and his or her active hearing or responding to God’s word. As the servant in Isaiah would say “Morning by morning he wakes me to hear to listen like a disciple and for my part I offer no resistance” (50:4-5). I comply; I do what I hear God telling me to do without objecting. Jesus himself, God word incarnate, exemplifies this hearing and doing of God’s word. In Luke, the incident in the Temple and his subsequence going with his parents to listen to and do obey, be subject to them (Luke 2:55) exemplifies this. In John his food, what sustains him is to do and complete his father’s will (John 4:34; 17:4). He lives in perpetual obedience to the God who sent him, doing only what he sees God doing (John 5:19); 8:28-29).

On another occasion when a woman in the crowd blessed Jesus’ mother for being his mother, Jesus also turned the attention of the speaker away from her biological function as mother to what made it possible for her to become his mother, and the blessedness that came from such response (Luke 11:27-28). This nameless woman in the crowd (we notice again “the crowd”) greatly enthused by the kind of person Jesus was, shown in the way he taught (the seven

⁶ See further, Teresa Okure, “‘It shall be for you a jubilee’ (Lev 25:10): The Great Jubilee 2000 and Its Challenges”. Commissioned Paper, CIWA Foundation Day Lecture, 8 December 2005.

demons that returned and found the place well swept), shouted out loud “blessed is the womb that bore you and the breast from which you sucked”. In other words, “Blessed is the woman who gave life to you. She must be a very lucky woman to have a son like you. I wish I had a son like you” (implied). Here too Jesus reversed the blessedness: “Nay rather blessed are those who hear (*akountes*) God’s word and practice (*phyllassontes*). The sentence structure places “God’s word” last, immediately after hearing and practising (*phylasontes*), with no pronoun added, for emphasis. Hearing and doing/practising are synonyms in this context.

On that occasion of the woman in the crowd, the beatitude comes clearly to the fore. Blessed is the womb; blessed are those who hear and do God’s word (cf. the beatitudes in Luke 6:20-26). In relation to Jesus’ mother, Elizabeth was the first to declare her blessed, not because she was the mother of Jesus, but because she believed and accepted God’s word for her. Because she did what God said to her through the Angel Gabriel. The first words that Elizabeth “filled with the Holy Spirit” uttered when Mary visited her (Luke 1:39-56) were “Blessed are you among/in [*en*] women and blessed is the fruit of your womb” (Luke 1:42). Later she explained the reason or cause of her blessedness “Blessed is she who believed that what she was told as coming from God would be fulfilled or realized in her life” (Luke 1:45). Elizabeth here gives her a new name “The-believing-one” (*hē pisteusasa*, perfect); or more literally, “The-has-believed-one”. In the perfect perspective, her disposition to believe remains a permanent construct of her life, with lasting enduring effect. Gabriel had called her “Full of grace” (Luke 1:28). Gabriel’s greeting word is “hail” (*chaire*); *kecharitōmenē* is the name, her proper God-given name, as John Paul II noted.⁷ Some translations that render *kecharitōmenē* as “most highly favored” water down the grace nature of the name. Grace (*charis*) is more than a favor; it is an utterly unmerited gift. Whatever the case, Jesus, in his response to the woman in the crowd (Luke 11:27-28) and Elizabeth (Luke 1:42, 45) both emphasise that Mary’s blessedness grew from and was rooted in her hearing and keeping God’s word. This hearing and accepting in faith made her the biological mother of Jesus.

Worth noting are the different words used for blessedness by Elizabeth and the woman in the crowd. Elizabeth uses *eulogēmenē* (the word, eulogy, high praise, derives from it). Elizabeth refers to the praise that Mary deserves, not so much for being Jesus’ biological mother in the first place, but for her enduring faith which made it possible for her to be “the Mother of my Lord”; 1:43). “My Lord” in this context refers to the Messiah, one greater than David (since “David call shim Lord”). Once a mother, a mother forever of the child to whom one has given birth and greatly cherishes. “As to Mary his mother, she kept these things and pondered, cherished them in here heart”. Like the Psalmist (Ps 119:9-16) she ponders God’s word night and day and keeps it.

The woman in the crowd on the other hand sees Mary’s mothering of Jesus as conferring a beatitude on her womb, woman specificity (*makaria hē kolia*). *Makarios* is the New Testament word for the “beatitude”. Both Luke 6 and Matthew 5 elaborate on this. Though Elizabeth uses *eulogēmenē*, when Mary with a heart overflowing with gratitude picks up Elizabeth’s praise in her Magnificat, she sees the praise as a beatitude (from henceforth all generations will bless me, will sing my being blessed [will beatify me?] *makariou sin*, 1:48); a common translation says “will call be blessed”.⁸ The verb form is difficult to translate. The beatitudes declare blessed those who act according to God’s ways. But Mary says here “others will declare me blessed”! In other words, they will come to recognize the great things that God has done for me. Whatever the translation, on both these other occasions as in

⁷ John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem*.

⁸ This is the traditional translation in The Magnificat of the Divine Office.

Luke 8:19-21, the link between hearing and doing God's word and becoming Jesus' mother and sibling (an inclusive translation for *adelphos*) is clear; both are inseparable in Luke's view. What is this word of God that one needs to hear and do?

Core content of God's word in Luke's Gospel

In the general context of Luke 8 where the episode is located, the word is summed up in the parable of the sower (8:4-8); it is the sum total of Jesus' proclamation of God's kingdom. The people are crowding to Jesus; it is not indicated why they were crowding to him, the indices are that they flock to him for cures. Jesus tells them the parable of the sower perhaps to draw their attention to the genuine reason why they should flock to him: to hear and do God's word. By so doing they give birth to him in their persons, in their entire lives, similar to how Mary his mother gave birth to him physically, in her womb and suckled her with her breasts.

The connection between word and life (a pure gift or grace from God) is very consistent in the Scripture, starting from Genesis. Humanity and the entire creation came into existence by God's creative word. Jesus himself is the word (John 1:1-2, 14)); he became a human being by means of God's word spoken to Mary and received in faith. It would follow therefore that to become his relative, give birth to him in one's life, all that is required is equally to hear and keep; accept and do God's word as his mother did. Though we do not usually connect Joseph with Jesus' birth, because he was not his biological father, Joseph too was the legal father of Jesus in the culture because he too heard and acted by God's word through a dream to take Mary as his wife, for her conception was by the Holy Spirit (Matt 1:18-25).⁹

2. Jesus' Family in Luke's Context

This is not the place to explore further the connection between hearing, doing and bearing fruit in Luke's and other gospels. The key episode and the other passages examined above are in Luke's Gospel. One thing is clear: Luke has a clear and consistent teaching on the connection between hearing and doing God's word and giving birth to Jesus; or becoming thereby his mother and siblings. The Lucan Jesus emphasises that only those who hear and do God's word are related to him by blood (spiritual blood if one may say so). Luke's target audience were Gentiles, or to be specific a "most noble Theophilus" (Luke 1:4; Acts 1:1), a name which means "God lover" or "God loved", "God's Friend".

It was noted earlier that in recounting this episode, Luke, unlike Matthew and Mark, does not emphasize that the inner group of disciples are those who hear and keep God's word and thereby constitute Jesus' family. His narrative is inclusive, "those who hear God's word and keep it". Here as in many other instances, we encounter what I have described severally as Luke's "hermeneutics of self inclusion".¹⁰ He makes it clear in his two volume work (Luke's Gospel and Acts) that the purpose of his writing the Gospel is to include episodes which mean much to those "who were not eyewitnesses and ministers of the word" (Luke 1:4). The purpose of delving into the received traditions and narrating more accurately what was handed down is so that his target audience (Theophilus is believed to be a representative figure of Gentiles; even if he is at the same time an individual) may see themselves as part of

⁹ See further, note 4 above.

¹⁰ For my initial study of this hermeneutics, see Teresa Okure, "Acts 2:1-13: A Lucan Hermeneutics of Self-Inclusion"; WCC Consultation on Interpretation of the Bible in Context. Montego Bay, Jamaica, 17-21 April, 1997. Since then I have referred to it severally in my works. Noted aspects of this hermeneutics are Luke's inclusion of outcasts, Samaritans, tax collectors and women as key recipients and bearers or exemplifiers of the God's gospel as preached by Jesus.

the events; or may see the events as having taken place and having been fulfilled “among us” (Luke 1:1); ultimately so that they may have a solid foundation of the teaching received and thus hopefully believe and keep the received teaching. If there were biological relatives among Jesus’ disciples as in an extended family or village, Luke could not possibly have counted among them. Like Paul he would say that though we knew Jesus in the flesh, we do so no longer (2 Cor 5:16). Luke, as we know, was Paul’s close companion (Acts 16:16; 2 Tim 10);¹¹ though some Western scholars argue the contrary.

By modifying Jesus’ saying in the received tradition transmitted by originally Jewish Christian witnesses, Luke manifests his personal understanding that God’s gospel proclaimed by Jesus knows no boundaries whatsoever but that Jesus’ family transcends those “who have eaten and drunk with him after his resurrection from the dead” (Acts 10:34, 41); to include “anybody of any nationality who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him” ; as he makes Peter declare in the house of Cornelius (Acts 10:24-48). This particular incident ends with God’s manifest acceptance of Gentiles on equal footing with the Jews by baptizing them with the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:44-48). By this act God himself admits them to the family of Jesus.

In short, it was not external forces which motivated Luke to reinterpret the perimeters of Jesus’ family; but his own desire to be part of this family as a pure gift from God. Having believed or received this gift, he set out to explain it more accurately this good news of God’s gift to his fellow Gentiles; thereby encouraging them to appropriate this divine gift, given free of charge. Acceptance of this gift requires change in mentality and a new way of looking at everybody; as Paul says “Even if we knew Christ as a human being, we do so no longer. When anybody is in Christ, that person is a new creation, the old has passed away. Behold the new is here” (2 Cor 5:16-17). An essential dimension of this new creation is that believers are members of God’s one family; even with unbelievers who hear and do God’s word as proclaimed by their conscience or who may not even know God, as Vatican Council II declares, but follow goodness in their hearts.¹² The gift of being Jesus’ family is a free gift, offered to all regardless of religious or other affiliations.

More could be said to buttress this Lucan hermeneutics of self inclusion as a guiding principle of his reception of the gospel. Hearing and doing God’s word permeates Luke’s understanding and reception of the gospel. The evidence is played out in his two volume work. Self-inclusion or appropriation for oneself is an indispensable aspect or the logical outcome of his hearing and doing God’s word. By this hearing and doing he appropriated the gospel for himself and for his largely, if not exclusively Gentile audience. Acceptance in faith which made him an integral member of Jesus’ family, with right to express, proclaim and thus expand the perimeters of this family. The two volume work is the fruit of his personal reception of this good news proclaimed by Jesus. What of today in the Nigerian context?

3. Jesus’ Family in the Nigerian Context

The use of Jesus’ family in the Nigerian context was briefly outlined at the beginning of this study. When compared to the use of this designation as proclaimed by the Lucan Jesus in the

¹¹ The “we passage” which begins in Acts 16:10, is evidence of Luke’s companionship of Paul. But even if as some scholars argue his is not the case, the point remains that Luke is a high beneficiary of Paul’s own fight to include the Gentiles on equal footing with Jesus (Gal 3:28) as something which is integral to the truth of the gospel” (Gal 2:14).

¹² Vatican Council 11, *Lumen Gentium* 2, 16.

Gospel's literary context and in Luke's post-gospel context, this usage leaves much to be desired in our context. From the usage outlined at the beginning, the almost exclusive use of the designation "Jesus' family" is in the context of collecting money for projects; a strategy for making the congregation pay as members of Jesus' family, that is ensure that compared to other groups listed (CMO, CWO, CYON), Jesus family collection tops them all. Since Jesus cannot physically donate the money, his family must do so for him. Yet, if members of Jesus' family pay money in Jesus' name, to whom do they pay the money; to what purpose? Within and outside the liturgical context, little or no effort is made to help the people know that as members of Jesus' family, they should transcend all natural and cultural boundaries. That they cannot be members of Jesus' family if they do not hear and keep the fundamental message of the gospel that in Christ there are no more barriers of race, class and sex (cf. Gal 3:28). On the contrary, the identified grouping that precede this "Jesus' family" reinforce the inherent ethnic, socio-cultural and even religious division in the church community.

The worst part of this scenario is that Jesus' name is being used in the service of Mammon. That the church needs money for worthy projects is not in question. God's major project ate human beings created in God's "image and likeness" (Gen 1:6-27), "formed humanity from the dust of the earth" "or soil of the ground" (NJB) (Gen 2:7) and "built" the woman (Gen 2:22). God's image and likeness is not anchored in money. A common saying proclaims that "the glory of God is human beings fully alive". If the laity truly saw themselves as "Jesus' family", as the Lucan Jesus understood it, there would be no need to use Jesus' name to goad them to donate for any cause. Contributing to building the church, understood first and foremost as "the people of God", the *ecclesia* of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus, would naturally move them to build the material church in the same way that they contribute to building their own families' or individual projects.

Interestingly, unlike Luke who practiced the hermeneutics of self-inclusion, the priests who urge the people to donate as members of Jesus family do not themselves participate in making the donations. Yet some of them may be much, much richer than the people whom they urge to contribute as members of Jesus' family. This point could be and needs to be developed further. CABAN delved into it in its communiqué and plea at the end of its 5th annual convention on *Material Wealth and Divine Blessings in the Bible*.¹³ A follow up to this was a commissioned paper at the Second Annual Conference of the Catholic Bishops Conference and Major Superiors of Nigeria (CBCN and CMSN) on "Abuses of the Bible by Some Catholic Pastors Who Terrorize and Traumatize the Lay Faithful by Their False Interpretation of the Bible".¹⁴ At the time of Jesus, as noted in the paper, rulers levied taxes not on their children; but on foreigners. Jesus raises this question when Peter was asked whether Jesus pays the temple tax (Matt 17:24-27).

This passage is often misquoted to support the practice of taxing members of Jesus' family. Yet Jesus clearly makes Peter acknowledge that rulers levy taxes only on foreigners not on their children. To which answer Jesus observes "Why then, the children go free". The

¹³ Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria, "A Communication and Plea from the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria (CABAN) on the Wrong Use of the Bible for Material Wealth in the Church", in *Material Wealth and Divine Blessings in the Bible*; Acts of the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria, vol. 5 Bernard Ukwegbu, Mary Jerome Obiorah, Vincent Nyoyoko, Cletus Gotan, eds. (Port Harcourt: CABAN Publications, 2014), 265-270.

¹⁴ Teresa Okure, "Abuses of the Bible by Some Catholic Pastors Who Terrorize and Traumatize the Lay Faithful by Their False Interpretation of the Bible", a paper commissioned by the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria at the said joint conference held at the Diocesan Conference Center, Bishop's Court, Effurun, Warri, Delta State, 11-13 September 2014. The commissioned paper was in response to the plea in the 2012 CABAN Communiqué.

children going free is integral to the good news of God's general amnesty to creation which Jesus proclaimed in his inaugural mission statement (Luke 4:18-19). If members of the church which Jesus himself builds (Matt 16:18), and who themselves are God's building, tilling (1 Cor 3:9) and God's work of art (Eph 2:10), truly saw themselves as Jesus' family, they would not need to be prodded to donate to church project as outsiders or observers. Their faith would lead them to become actively engaged in such projects wholeheartedly, not competitively. It would lead them to explore ways of making God's Word become alive and active in the whole of their lives. This awareness and commitment would move them to find ways of living like Christ, of being Eucharist, bread of life for the world, especially for the poor and marginalized to whom Luke has a special love and concern. Above all it would lead them to love and care for one another as "Church-Family of God", a concept which the second African Synod saw as the best model for being church.

Not only did the Synod speak of inculturation, but it also made use of it, taking the *Church as God's Family* as its guiding idea for the evangelization of Africa. The Synod Fathers acknowledged it as an expression of the Church's nature particularly appropriate for Africa. For this image emphasizes care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationships, acceptance, dialogue and trust. The new evangelization will thus aim at *building up the Church as Family*, avoiding all ethnocentrism and excessive particularism, trying instead to encourage reconciliation and true communion between different ethnic groups, favouring solidarity and the sharing of personnel and resources among the particular Churches, without undue ethnic considerations.¹⁵

Conclusion

It may be asked why this presentation has focused on Jesus' family when the synod on the family is about the human family today, fraught with many problems, especially marriage and parenting. Pope Francis is aware that, "The Christian family and marriage are under attack due to growing relativism over the concept of marriage" but he urges that "we must never lose hope".¹⁶ For him, what helps the church to grow and witness as Jesus' family is internal or interior renewal. In addition, from the perspective of this study, what helps the human family to overcome its many and growing problems would be a solid reminder, catechesis, proclamation and internalization of the fact that even members of a natural family are first and foremost members of God's family, siblings of Jesus through baptism. This reminder would help members of any family, especially married couples, to work at their differences as God's children, flesh and blood members of God's family, instead of seeking solutions through separation (or divorce), aware that the devil's "first weapon is disunity".¹⁷

In this year of the family, all believers (church leaders included) need to recommit themselves to what we truly are, Jesus' family. New strategies need to be developed to help people internalize this God-given reality in all dimensions, not just during fund raising at the Eucharistic celebration. A more appropriate or single most important context to promote awareness in all believers that they are conjointly Jesus' family, irrespective of social, ethnic

¹⁵ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Church in Africa and Its Evangelizing Mission towards the Year 2000 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995), no. 63.

¹⁶ Pope Francis, "Marriage Is Under Attack Now More Than Ever Before", a speech made during an audience with more than 7,000 pilgrims belonging to the Schoenstatt Movement, founded in Germany in 1914 and comprising clergy, religious and laity. <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/pope-marriage-is-under-attack-now-more-than-ever-before>. (Zenit 27 October 2014); accessed 4 June 2015.

¹⁷ Pope Francis, *ibid.*

or religious groupings, cannot be found than the Eucharist celebration where believers, though many, form one body with the Lord. The early church demonstrated their union with the Lord and with one another by sharing the one loaf and drinking from the one cup (cf. 1 Cor 10:16-17). Paul strongly decried using the Eucharist as context for promoting factions, as if Christ were divided (1 Cor 1:10-13).

The liturgy, especially the sacrifice of the Eucharist should, therefore, be a privileged context for promoting the true nature of Jesus' family. This concept is too precious to be put under the aegis of money or make money the dominant reason for reminding the people that they are Jesus' family, as a mere ploy to get them to donate for Jesus. This requires solid and sustained catechesis for pastor and people. All need to become aware that the Eucharistic liturgy, in particular, is the means

through which, "the work of redemption is accomplished" and it is through the liturgy, especially, that the faithful are enabled to express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the Church . . . The liturgy daily builds up those who are in the Church, making of them a holy temple of the Lord, a dwelling place of the Spirit (Eph 2:21-22), to the mature fullness of Christ (Eph 4:13). . . a sign under which the scattered children of God may be gathered together, until there is one fold and one shepherd (John 10:16).¹⁸

Every effort should be made, then, to desist from using "Jesus' family" as pretext for making money, in a kind of double taxation, after the people have already been taxed in their several groups. Pastors, in particular need to be evangelist to the people (as Luke was) proclaiming God's gospel to them in all its totality and urging them to hear and keep that word as a way of life, if the truly want Jesus to count them among his family. We pray that we may hear this word of God and keep it daily so that we may be in deed and in truth Jesus' family.¹⁹

¹⁸ Vatican Council II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Austen Flannery, ed. *Vatican Council II*. Volume 1: *Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, 4 December 1963 (Dublin: Dominican publications, 1988 rev. ed.) Introduction, 2.

¹⁹The discussion continues.