

**Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria (CABAN)
Seventh Annual Convention: The Family in the Bible**

President's Opening Remarks on the Convention Theme

Your Excellences, distinguished guests, dear sisters and brothers, members of the CABAN family, I welcome you in the name of God from whom every family in heaven and on earth has its origin (Eph 3:14-15) to this seventh Annual Convention of the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria (CABAN). In particular, I sincerely “welcome” with gratitude, our generous host and member, Most Rev Michael Apochi, the Bishop of this Otukpo Diocese and an alumnus of the Catholic Institute of West Africa whence the idea of CABAN originated.¹ We thank his Excellency for very generously hosting our Seventh Convention free of charge. We pray that God may bless him and the Diocese by increasing their spirit of generosity according to the measure of God’s riches and “glory in Christ Jesus” (Phil 4:19).

God Gives the Family Its Identity and Worth

The theme of our convention is “The Family in the Bible”. Originally the executive committee had formulated it as “The Bible on the Family”. On second thoughts we felt that given our people’s propensity to ask “Is it in the Bible?” it would be best to reframe the theme as “The Family in the Bible”. The slight difference between the two formulations is that while the first invites us to look for what the Bible says about the family, as an outsider to the subject, so to speak, the second invites us to discover in the Bible, God’s word and Owner’s Manual for humanity, what it means to be family according to God’s will, God being the author, foundation and source of the family.

The Scriptural motto of our convention cited in the posters and flyers of this convention speaks to this foundational and fundamental place of God in any effort to understand family. “For this reason I bow on my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name” (Eph 3:14-15). God in creation constituted the social unit called family when he created man and women to be joined together as one body and in line with other living creatures, even plants, to propagate their own kind with their seed, their own life principle, inside them (cf. Gen 1:11-13, 22, 28). Any effort to understand family which leaves God out of the picture or relegates God to the background and tries to manipulate God under whatever pretext betrays the true meaning and purpose of family. Further, God did not only create the family exteriorly. From Ephesians 3:14-15 just cited, God is and remains the origin of family. The family is by origin and nature rooted and anchored in God. God sustains the family and gives it its true and lasting meaning.

The Family in the Vision and Mind of the Church

The Second Vatican Council lasted for three years, 1963 -1965. Last year Pope Francis called for a synod on the family which would last for two years: the **Extraordinary Synod** which started on 5 October 2014, with the theme “*Pastoral challenges of the family in the context of evangelisation*”; and the **Ordinary Synod in 2015** with the theme “*Jesus Christ reveals the vocation and meaning of marriage*”. The fact that this synod alone lasts two years, that is, two thirds the duration of the Second Vatican Council, underscores the importance of family in the life of the church and society. Arguably no other synod in recent years has attracted so much universal interest and diverse interests of all God’s people, Catholics and non Catholics alike,

¹ See Teresa Okure, “Reflection on the Birth of CABAN”, in *Alive and Active: Images of the Word of God in the Bible*, Acts of the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria (CABAN), Maiden Edition (Port Harcourt: CABAN Publications, 2012) 173-189.

as this synod. The family is a most thorny and hotly debated issue in the church and the world today, especially with regard to the key issues of marriage and parenting.

CABAN's Engagement with the Family in the Bible

Our 2014 convention is taking place concurrently with the Extraordinary Synod. This synod started before the convention and will end two days after it, October 26th. Since synods generally take place in October, our 2015 convention may also be taking place concurrently with the synod of that year, if the traditional dates and three week duration of synods are maintained. Our research is done in service to the church and according to its mind, powered by the injunction, mission and encouragement which the church gives to exegetes. As a missionary disciple, the church “needs to grow in her interpretation of the revealed word and in her understanding of truth. It is the task of exegetes and theologians to help “the judgment of the Church to mature.”² Consequently, the outcome of our 2014 convention should be a contribution to the two year synod process.

The position of the church on our responsibility to mine the Scriptures with our faith-based expertise as Catholic exegetes is this clear. In working on our topics, we take very seriously what the church expects of us, to bring forth insights that will promote the church’s “understanding of the truth” and thus help its “judgment” to “grow” and “mature” so that it can address the diversity and complexity of issues that relate to the family today, especially in Africa. To this end, we conduct our research and discussions with the freedom that the Spirit gives; the Spirit that leads the church “to the complete truth” (John 16:13).

In our search to unveil the truth of the Scriptures rooted in Christ (God Word Incarnate), we do not just repeat what has been said before, even by the magisterium; for the magisterium sees itself as “servant”, not “master” of Scripture³. In the opening ceremony of the Extraordinary Synod, Pope Francis encouraged the Synod Fathers to speak out their minds openly. They seem to have done so, judging from reports on the proceedings of the synod. Most comprehensively, the summary of the Message issued on October 18th, feast of St Luke Evangelist (though the 28th Sunday of the Year supplanted the celebration of the feast), lays out some of the important concerns of the synod, conducted with frankness, and often terse and intense discussions.

We have prepared our presentations on diverse aspects of the family in the Bible, based on our expertise in the OT, NT and Intertestamental Literature. Nonetheless, the church, following Jesus himself (John 5:39) reminds us that Jesus Christ gives unity and ultimate meaning to Scripture and that there is a need to study “how the different meanings of this expression [the word of God] are interrelated, so that the unity of God's plan and, within it, the centrality of the person of Christ, may shine forth more clearly”⁴. Further, in searching for meaning, “we also learn, within the church's great tradition, to see the unity of all Scripture, grounded in the unity of God's word, which challenges our life and constantly calls us to conversion” and pay heed to “the internal unity of the entire Bible as **a decisive criterion for a correct hermeneutic of faith**”.⁵ We also recall that relating the meaning of a text to the entire Bible is “an important principle of biblical interpretation which recognizes that the Holy Spirit has inspired not just a part of the Bible, but the Bible as a whole”.⁶

² Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG 40); citing *Dei Verbum* (DV) 12.

³ Vatican Council II, *Dei Verbum* 10; Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* 47.

⁴ Pope Benedict, *Verbum Domini* (VD) 7.

⁵ Pope Benedict XVI, VD 39; bold face added for emphasis.

⁶ Pope Francis, *EG* 148.

On the necessity to **relate sound exegesis to life on the ground**, we bear in mind that as “Catholic exegetes [we] must never forget that what they are interpreting is the *word of God*. Their common task is not finished when they have simply determined sources, defined forms or explained literary procedures. They arrive at the true goal of their work only when they have explained the meaning of the biblical text as God's word for today.”⁷

The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation indicates three fundamental criteria for an appreciation of the divine dimension of the Bible: 1) the text must be interpreted with “attention to *the unity of the whole of Scripture*”; 2) account is to be taken of “*the living Tradition of the whole Church*”; and, finally, 3) respect must be shown for “*the analogy of faith*”. Only where both methodological levels, the historical-critical and the theological, are respected, can one speak of a theological exegesis, an exegesis worthy of this book”.⁸

In his *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis adds that “our own aim is not to understand every little detail of a text; our most important goal is to discover its principal message, the message which gives structure and unity to the text”. Recognition of this “central message” that “the author primarily wanted to communicate . . . calls for recognizing not only the author’s ideas but the effect which he wanted to produce”.⁹

These sample excerpts help us to focus our discussions on what the Bible says about the family so that our findings can provide a much needed service to the church to equip it to better carry out its mission to proclaim God’s Gospel (Jesus of Nazareth), for humanity in today’s world. We are not afraid to search for and stand by “the truth of the gospel” (Gal 2:14) in an era when globalisation, the forces of the market, the media, tenacious attachment to unevangelised cultures and the post-modern world tend to rule our world, substituting human beings and science for God, dictating what the family should be. For, as Benedict XVI puts it, “the family is under threat from those who seek to banish God from our lives”.¹⁰ Instead we seek to discover God’s loving will for humanity rooted in the family, the first human institution to be established by God (Gen 2:24). Aware also of the cultural backdrop of the texts we study.

The CABAN Family

Third World Theologians have long held a self evident truth, that experience of life is the first school of theology. An excellent way for us to experience family in the wider biblical sense, one that cuts across all barriers and boundaries of race, gender, culture or any other affiliations to be “the family of God”, as the first African synod put it, is for us CABAN members to truly relate to each other as family, the CABAN family of Jesus. We are family, not because we have formed an association, but because God, in the first place, has given us birth and constituted us as God’s beloved children, out of God’s own good, gracious will and pleasure.

We are family not as a club without a center or core reality to unite us, but as siblings of Jesus, heirs of God and coheirs with Christ and with all God’s children worldwide (Rom 8:14-17; Gal 4:4-6). We are family because as people configured to Christ at baptism “by an indelible mark”

⁷ Benedict XVI, *VD* 34, citing Pontifical Biblical Commission (PBC), *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, III.C.1.

⁸ Benedict XVI, *VD* 34.

⁹ Pope Francis, *EG* 147.

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus* (*AM*, Africa’s Gift to Christ), Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation on The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace “You are the salt of the earth . . . You are the light of the world (Mt 5:13-14 7) (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2011), no 7.

(Canon 849), we are flesh and blood brothers and sisters, siblings, to each other, in the blood of Christ. We are no longer Ibibio, Anang, Efik, Housa, Yoruba, Igbo, Tiv, Idoma, and so forth, but “one in Christ” (Gal 3:28). Christ has incorporated us to himself as members of his body (1 Cor 12:12-30) and branches of his vine (John 1:1-17). In him we are bonded together in his blood that nourishes us daily in the Eucharist. We are family, because whether we like it or not that is what we are by God’s choice and doing, and we can do nothing about it (though we may reject it and deprive ourselves of the immense benefits of relating to each other as siblings).

Beyond the research into what the Bible holds and teaches about the family, let us model in our mutual relationship what it means to be family in biblical perspective and thus show forth that it is possible to be and live as family, natural family that helps us to live as God’s family. Let us deal a death blow in our minds, attitudes and memory to any new or lingering thoughts that may stand in the way of our realising to the full, this precious gift of family to us. In this way, we will be able to discuss the problems of family in the Bible in our Nigerian and church contexts with free mind, collaboratively, seeking to promote the research skill of each other. We will be open to any interventions on our paper, sweet or sour, knowing that it is done out of love. As we engage in the discussion on the family, we pray that we may be open to the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit and learn from this Spirit by attentively listening to each other, even if that involves critical listening.

In sum, we pray that as CABAN family, we may not simply discuss what it means to be family in biblical perspective, but that in all our interactions, in the formal and informal discussion, in the open plenary and in members only business sessions, we may model what it means to be a family that takes its name and origin from our loving God who has delightfully chosen to make us his children. When we live the experience of family beyond cultural and ethnic boundaries, we will credibly help our people, the church and the world to give the family the unique place and value which it holds for humanity.

Note: The summary of the “Message of the Extraordinary Synod on the Family” by the Vatican Information Service (VIS) (18 October 2014) was part of this President’s Opening Remarks. See Appendix I.

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CABAN