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Challenges of Parenting Responsibility and the Competing Priorities

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Abstract

The current parenting challenges in Kenya make uncertain the future of young people, the family, the church and the stability of our society. The loud outcry for social harmony, integrity justice and peace has been drowned out by corruption and pursuit for wealth and personal happiness, which has also led to high unemployment rates, poverty, drug cartels, and growing and uncontrolled hunger for wealth and uncontrolled desire for pleasure among other competing priorities. These societal ills pose a significant threat to parenting responsibility. Kenyan parents also seem to lack awareness that parenting responsibility is their primary responsibility, irreplaceable and non-transferable, which requires minimal delegation because nothing can replace it. Some coaching will be necessary for parents to paint a picture the type of future they desire for their children; what strategies they need to put in place today in preparation for that future. Parents need to become aware of what they are doing well and what they need to do differently. Awareness of the obstacles of their vision actualization will help them think of the options there is to counteract the obstacles and identify appropriate support system they need to put in place to assist them in the journey towards their vision realization. Raising awareness of what parental availability and presence or absence in the family mean to their children and the whole society is necessary. A clear vision and well reflected goals will assist them in managing family priorities and other priorities, help them develop a plan of action, create an accountability plan. Nevertheless, parenting is a collective societal responsibility. The society too enjoys both its success and shares the consequences of its failures as well. The ideas shared in this paper come from personal experience and reflection and what I have read in the literature.

Key Words: *Parenting, Demands, Responsibility, Priorities, Challenges*

1.0 Introduction

A number of scholars have written about parenting and have highlighted a number of challenges and offered recommendations. Many of them have shared their own experiences in an effort to find a lasting solution to parenting challenges. However, parenting challenges are a global issue which makes the future of young people and their families, the church and the whole of society uncertain. Competing priorities also call for parent's attention to be divided. In their struggle to

provide for their children, parents tend not to have the time to guide their children's growth and development. The delegation of parenting responsibility to different institutions and individuals like school and church often is not fruitful. Ignorance or inadequate knowledge of what is expected of them in the midst of a society void of stable moral standards, makes parenting much more challenging. Some of the indicators that our youth are struggling include involvement in drug abuse, addiction to social media watching phonography or unhealthy material for growth and development of morality, very many cases of suicide, murder, criminal activities, and destruction of life and property.

While some parents may not be in a position to adequately provide for their children, others provide almost everything for their children even when they are adults. In whichever way, life requires a balance. Doing everything for children may encourage unhealthy dependency syndrome that can result to high rate of laziness, ignorance, poverty, idleness, irresponsible behaviors or the inability to complete school, for example, research shows that most of the reckless actions in the modern youth are blamed on poor parenting especially inadequate parental guidance and absence in the lives of their children especially in their tender age. This paper will begin by looking at why some individuals choose to become parents while others do not, what parenting mean. The study to discuss parent's responsibility toward their children and the challenges they face.

1.1 Why have a child?

For some people, having a baby is one of the most unexpected and overwhelming moments in their lifetime. For others, it is just expected. The desire to model their parent's beautiful experiences of love, tenderness and dedication in them as they grew up prompts some people to want to have children of their own. Others are longing for completeness, happiness and a reciprocal personal attachment gained by siring and raising a child. Child-bearing and rearing bring with it an unfathomable experience unmatched to any other for some people. Some reasons are tied to our African traditions, which define complete womanhood or manhood as fulfilled when one becomes a parent.. The cruelty of the mentality of African tradition to childless individuals, which John Mbiti talked about in 1969, remains still a burden to Africans up-to-date in 2019 even at a higher degree. This mentality leaves some people with no choice rather than having children to avoid this cultural pressure; no one wishes to be branded barren even when it's their choice not to have children. Surprisingly, none of the modern psychology, technology, philosophy, education, or even religious ideas related to the matter has been able to change this mentality. "In some societies, marriage is not fully recognized or consummated until the wife has given birth. The first pregnancy becomes therefore, the final seal of marriage, the sign of complete integration of the woman into her husband's family and kinship circle. Unhappy is the woman who fails to get children, for whatever qualities she might possess, her failure to bear children is worse than committing genocide: she has become the dead end of human life, not only for the genealogical line but also for herself."¹

¹ John Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, (Nairobi, East African Educational Publishers,.1969), 108.

The type of stigma is real even among the most educated and highly informed members of the society. A child in the African tradition remains more valuable than any precious stone in existence. The high value African culture places on having children creates a lot of tension for those uninterested in having children of their own. They have them anyway even when they know they will not commit themselves to raising them as expected.

1.2 Why opt to remain Childless?

Apart from health limitations or infertility issues which may deny one the possibility of having a child or membership or religious reasons like being in religious life, whose members do not marry or have children; there are other reasons why people don't want to have children. For instance, for some people their career or their marriage relationships are the most important thing to them and therefore having children would interfere with their happiness, and life goals. To others is about the economic investment attached to parenting from infancy to adulthood. For others, the fear that they may not be competent parents so they never wish to have children. Well, having or not having a child is not something that should be forced to anyone because the joys and demands attached to it, cannot be substituted or loaned out.

2.1 What does Parenting Mean?

Becoming a parent, I would say in normal circumstances is an act of will, in which man and a woman legally come together, choose and plans to produce legitimate children as fruits of their love union. In the past, regardless of whether the conception was intended or not, becoming a parent was viewed as a blessing. Bearing and raising children as some people testify is one of the toughest tasks and yet the most fulfilling jobs in the world and the one for which one may be least prepared. Parenting is said to be overwhelming and yet very exciting. Parenting can be described as an art of child bearing and rearing that requires a self-driven will, natural ability to nurture, heroic sacrifice and commitment to the responsibilities attached to being a parent. In most of African traditional cultures, having or not having a child was not a choice one was free to make but an obligation, which highly promoted the dignity and acceptability of the couple by the relatives and the members of the society.

Each family is unique as each individual is unique. It follows therefore that, parenting is also unique depending on what values each human family deem most important. We can also say that, there are no perfect parents so one does not need to be infallible to be a parent. Although many people have shared their experience about parenting, I tend to think that there is no fixed formula on parenting which can be considered standard. However, each human family and community of people has general and specific stipulated norms and principles/values which determine what is acceptable and that which is not in regards parenting. For instance, some of these agreed norms explain why individuals must have children, what is expected of the parents and how they must prepare for child arrival. However, all these does not guarantee a challenge

free parenting. Many parents think that, one cannot prepare enough to be a parent but the initial preparations give them reasonable confidence to parents to keep on.

Man and woman is used here because it is the most traditional way of begetting a child. The researcher is aware of the complex situation now facing single parents in which many children are demanding the knowledge and presence of their fathers or mothers in their lives. It is becoming a very difficult parenting issue to single parents and also teachers to keep up with the demands of children who feel incomplete with one parent and therefore threatened to hurt themselves if their incompleteness is not resolved. This means the current trend of divorce and separations in the contemporary society is not only affecting seriously the parents but also creating a restless and wounded generation with many unresolved personal issues. A man or woman who in the current society thinks that they can give birth and raise a child quietly and peacefully alone lies to themselves because a great sorrow awaits them as soon as the child arrives at the age of reason. It is a generation which squarely demands answers restlessly without fear of any authority.

3.1 Parenting as a Vocation in Christian Understanding

Christianity teaches that marriage love is the means through which a man and a woman acquire children of their own. Parenting of these children is believed to be one of the primary vocations in which married people commit themselves to each other and their children if they have any. Parents are expected to use their talents and potentials to provide basic needs and education for their children. The call to care for each other and their children is unique, irreplaceable and non-transferable. Parenting is said to be so demanding. As Pope John Paul II puts it, it is grounded on the teachings of St. Paul in his first letter the Corinthians 13: 4-8. He teaches us that love is so demanding - it demands "patience" and "kindness," and yet in the end, "love endures all things." [1] The beauty of love is manifested in the ability to commit oneself and heroically make great sacrifices in the process of achieving its end. This is what it means to accept the fruit of a loving union and patiently taking all the responsibilities attached to bringing this fruit to the full realization of the self as a grown up. John Paul II explains the meaning of love and responsibility argues that there is no way that one would choose love and avoid liability since willingness to be a parent is an indispensable condition of love. He contends that, "Take away from love the fullness of self-surrender, the completeness of personal commitment, and what remains will be a total denial and negation of it."² On the same note, the Pope tells the married people, "Responsible parenthood is the necessary condition for human love and is also a necessary condition for authentic conjugal love because love cannot be irresponsible. Its beauty shaped by his tough childhood experience, being brought up by a single dedicated woman, elevates parents and parenting above all other engagements he has.

Carson says he loves speaking to parents "Not just because parents are some of my favorite people but because I think parenting is the most important job in the world". Although he acknowledges the prestigious value attached to his profession as a surgeon but he opines ... "I have come to the conclusion that what I do as a parent in my own home is far more important than anything I can accomplish in the operating room... no matter what we do for a living, when it comes to how much we can best impact the world today and shape its future tomorrow,

² John Paul, Love & Responsibility, 12

chances are our parenting will have the greatest, most lasting influence on others. I know the difference parenting can make.”³ If parents realize, the beauty and the nobility attached to parenting as a vocation their dedication into it will be as paramount as Ben Carson who though occupied with a huge responsibility in his job he has not lost his parenting vision.

4.1 Major Parenting Responsibilities

I imagine the first parent’s responsibility is the knowledge of what type of children they want to raise by visualizing the end from the begging. Having a clear plan on what preparations they need to put in place and why they must achieve this end as it is in their dream/vision or even better. Knowing what one wants and how to do it, why, when and with who is very important for a parent as the first stage of laying the foundation.

I assume that it is the greatest desire of any parent who intends to have children and to raise them holistically though sometimes the outcomes may not be as expected. It is also true that society in general though it may not take an active role in raising a child, is attracted to disciplined, morally, well groomed, and healthy; physically, emotionally, psychologically, and intellectually sound children. Parents long to raise mature and responsible children who will be acceptable in the society and to make their contribution in building a healthy society as adults. Unfortunately, sometimes this reality is not realized in some families. Sometimes because of some uncontrolled external factors which may influence children negatively even with some reasonable guidance of the parent. Other times due to ignorance of the most important values in raising children and other times due to inadequate knowledge on what is expected of parent in raising children in different stage in the child’s development period.

Parents are endowed by nature with the ability to develop a unique personal relationship which gives them a non-transferable obligation to their children. Driven by natural paternal and maternal instincts they are aware that they have to provide their children with the best of everything including quality and healthy food, clothing, shelter, security, religious values that is (if they believe in the existence of a higher being than themselves) moral values, emotional and psychological needs.

Parenting responsibility will be more challenging if one lacks knowledge of who they are, and what their major role is, both specific and collective in this business of parenting. It is their responsibility to look for support systems. For instance, some parenting coaching may be needed to create awareness of what success or failure means, to them, their children and the society in general. A clear set of goals on what needs to be done and must be done, who does it and when, and, for what reason would it be important and help them set priorities.

It is their core responsibility to decide what core values they need to inculcate to in their children which they cannot accept being compromised. It is their duty to clearly communicate these values to the entire family including their caretakers as their partners and the children themselves. As the Swahili saying goes, “*Kuzaa si kazi, kazi ni kulea mwana.*” which literally

³ Ben Caron, *The Big Picture*, (Michigan, Grand Rapids, 1999),100

translates that “Bearing a child is not work, the task is to raise a child.” The main task lies in active involvement in all the aspects of their children’s growth from infancy through to adulthood. This means even when they delegate some of their responsibilities due to their other competing priorities, their full involvement, availability, presence and commitment is paramount. John Paul II teaches that, “The right and duty to give education is ecclesial, since it is connected with the transmission of human life; it is original and primary with regard to the educational role of others, on the account of uniqueness of the loving relationship between parents and children; and it is irreplaceable and inalienable, and therefore incapable of being entirely delegated to others or un-spurred by others.”⁴ Pope Pius XI says adds, “children should be begotten of love, tenderly cared for and educated on religious atmosphere... and not only this but “increase the church of Christ...Gods household”...because children are a talent committed to their charge by God...they are forbidden to leave unfinished this work and so expose it to certain ruin”⁵

If therefore, absence from home is a perceived obstacle to parenting due to employment or other competing priorities of both parents, alternative options to counteract this obstacle must be sought to bridge the gap. Employment is one of the major competing priorities to parenting; it cannot be avoided if parents will have to provide quality basic needs to their families. Parents thus aware of their first priority, being their children, must evaluate their goals related to their roles, to know how to compensate for their absence at home for their children welfare. Pope Francis gives some core recommendations to parents as he tries to answer the question, “Where are our children”?⁶

It is the responsibility of each parent to exhaustively understand the meaning of both their presence and absence to the children growth. Here in Kenya availability may mean, intentional presence which has an objective and a goal. Some of the objectives may involve telling their children moral stories, helping them complete their assignments, and signing their report books, teaching them how to read, attending their educational clinics to monitor their academic progress, playing and dancing with them, teaching them the basics of their religion like how to pray, reading for them the story of faith: the bible for Christians, which are important spiritual exercises for spiritual discernment. It may be planning for what household assignments they can handle, who does it, and when. It can also involve discussing and communicating family rules, rewards and punishment for achievements and failures respectively, and their consequences or even planning for holiday’s trips or activities together or learning to care for animals or tendering to flower or vegetable gardens. All these activities with their value clearly communicated by parents include what responsible parenting and intended availability may mean to some parents; to some parents it may mean different valuable activities.

This type of business can prove overwhelming if parents have not planned well and if their goals are not clear to all parties involved. Parents have an obligation to come up with a plan of how

⁴ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, (Nairobi, Paulines Publication, 1981), 40.

⁵ Pope Pius XI *Casti Canubii*, (Vatican, Libreria Edtrice 1930), no. 10-16

⁶ Pope Francis, *Amoris Letitia*, (Nairobi, Paulines Publication Africa), 129-141

they would hold themselves accountable. It may be by evaluating what milestones they have made and revisiting their goals, to find out how much they have achieved, what they have done well and what they need to do differently in relation to what has not worked well, then establish a support system.

A support system to parents may mean identifying trusted educators in different skills important to children such as learning music skills, writing, public speaking, drama, sports, or even faith based education activities institutions that can offer support. Nonetheless parents must be conscious that, they have an upper hand in everything they delegate. This means they should not entirely withdraw from whatever activity they have delegated. They need to keep on checking to find out what is happening. Another sensitive delegated responsibility is babysitting which is a very delicate matter. Often times, awful cases of child abuse by caretakers and relatives have been reported. Parents have to do everything possible within their power to make sure their children are safe and that they receive the best in their absence because that is their own responsibility and their first priority.

Parents should know that, above all the philosophical ideas and thinking of the society, and the world the responsibility and autonomy over their children belong to them. It does not concern so much the hired people or relatives. Neither, the school nor the church not even the government can substitute their part of responsibility over their children. I agree with Mellissa Moschella when she argues that, “the bonds between parents and children in themselves give rise to parent’s direct and weighty special obligations to care and educate their children... For her., caring for children requires making decision on their behalf, and thus exercising authority over them... Thus it follows that, parental authority is natural and original, primary over children and in no way derived from it.”⁷

In African tradition, different from the current reality, parenting, responsibility was made lighter by the fact that children belonged not only to their biological parents but also to the extended family and to the whole community. The fact that there has been a great disintegration of the traditional family structures which held together members of the same family has disadvantaged parents, especially those living in urban cities, whose culture does not support neighborly concern. Close family members, like grand parents, cousins, aunties and uncles owned elder siblings owned the delegated responsibility as their own. Mbiti tells us that, “nature brings the child into the world, but the society creates the child into a social being. For the community, which must protect the child, feed it, bring it up, educate it and in many other ways incorporate it in to the wider community... The birth of a child is, therefore a concern not only of the parents, but of many relatives.”⁸

This is not practical in the modern society. On the contrary, the *Relatio Finalis* of the Bishops Synod contended that, “we are aware of the principal tendencies in anthropological-cultural changes in which individuals, in their emotional life and life as a family, receive increasingly

⁷ Mellissa Moschella, *To whom do Children Belong?* (United Kingdom, Cambridge University Press, 1917), 23.

⁸ Mbiti, *African Religion and Philosophy*, 108.

less support from social structures than in the past. On the other hand, we must also take into consideration the development of an exaggerated individualism which distorts family ties, giving precedence to the idea that one can make oneself according to one's own wishes, and thus weakens every family tie. We are thinking of mothers and fathers, grandparents, brothers and sisters, immediate and distant relatives and the bonding of two families at every wedding. We must not forget the lived reality: everywhere, strong family ties continue to give life to the world”⁹

5.1 Parenting challenges

I think parenting is a huge project and the worst enemy of it, just like any other responsibility, is ignorance of what the whole project entails. In addition, a poor parent's vision of how their whole parenting journey looks like to them, and laying out an action plan on how to achieve it is also a challenge. If parents working environment does not promote a sense of being in a family, where one finds happiness and fulfillment but rather gets frustrated, affects the biological family. Parents may be tempted to transfer the same frustration home, or find themselves, drained of energy and happiness, needed by their children.

Sometimes government policies do not respect family institution and its affairs. It is always unfair when a young parent is appointed so far from home which becomes a challenge to meet his/her family often. Also when some critical family needs that demand immediate attention arise the family may suffer this type of separation which may lead to other complications life infidelity and cohabitation. Parenting is also threatened by the current religious ideologies which brain wash young people and lures them into inhuman activities of terrorism and suicide, as promoted by fundamentalists. Economic challenges also cause a lot of strain to parents making them unable to provide quality health care, security, food and clothing and education to their children. Sometimes parents lack clear defined moral value system to guide their children and failing to clearly communicate them at the right time. Lack of proper moral guidance may make young people be taken over by other competing attractive vices availed by uncensored social media.

There is an inadequate number of acceptable role models, which the young people would look up to for guidance. The culture of the modern society, which encourages the uncontrolled desire, for pleasure, comfort, beauty, competition, cheap wealthy without a responsibility attached to it, is a big threat to parenting. Values such as hard work and accountability is not something parents in Kenya insist on, instead, especially those families who can afford cheap labor higher servants for even for simplest jobs including cleaning houses and their children clothes. Many Kenyan children face it rough when left by their own since they have developed dependency. Some of them, if their families become financially unstable, get frustrated and run away from home because they cannot survive hard work. Others get hooked into drugs if their parents die when they are young because they were never trained to be self-reliant or independent. Family dysfunction has made several young people lose interest in taking responsibility or any

⁹ Relatio Finalis, *Fourteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, (Nairobi, Paulines Publication Africa, 2015), 5.

commitment related to the family in fear of failure as well as inadequate support systems for it.. The moral decadence, disrespect to the rule of law and corruption in Kenya also posed a huge challenge to parents because it is all over in the media including, mismanagement of public funds, a series of unexplained deaths, increased suicide among the young people and children, the powerful cartel of harmful drugs abused by many young people and children in schools and universities and open injustice in the society, poses a big threat to the future of the family, church and the society making it uncertain. To restore the sanity of family and parenting responsibility, we need a collective commitment of every individual and each institution of the human society- from the family, the church the government to consciously make family and parenting responsibility an agenda in every of our meaningful conversation, both in public and in private.

6.1 Parenting Competing Priorities and their Outcomes

Some of the competing priorities include, work or employment, family investment, pursuit for personal development, solidarity with others, personal happiness, social media. The important of these priorities depends on what value individuals attach to them, nevertheless there is need to develop a performance balance and also prioritize them all.

If parents fail in their responsibility to inculcate in their children what they think is best for their future, they may have lost them. There may never be another time for correction. As the Swahili say, "*Maji yakimwangika hayazoleki*" meaning that when water has poured cannot be collect back. Meaning that if one has lost their power to control their children's behaviors at an early stage, in the later stages it may not be possible. Akamba proverb "*Muti ukonzawa wi mwiu, wooma ndukonzekaa.*" Directly translated that, "A tree can only be bent when its young, when it matures it can't bend, instead it breaks." This means, if parents want to make any impact in their children, it is possible when they are young because it is possible to mold, instruct, and teach them than at a later age.

To invest is a priority for parents-to prepare for their own future and that of their children. Nevertheless, some parents have placed this need among the first priorities after work so that they spend a lot of time at work, then in their business and miss time with their children. Others are working to compete or attain a social status they admire, parents of this kind spend so much time and energy and sometimes they get frustrated and sad. By the time they are home children are asleep, and by the time they wake up children have left to school or for trips. In this way the children are disconnected from the reality of their parent's existence. Some other people and peers who may not be communicating the right values to them, may be making impact and by the time the parents realize it, the damage is huge.

Each human person has an urge for personal development in deferent ways; some of them through education, writing, and music among others. Some parents have gone back to school when their children are so young and thus need them the most. Some come back home and lock themselves in their rooms to complete their assignments or office work or spend many hours out in the evening and weekends, others come back and are taken over by TV or social media, denying their children their right to parental availability and presence. Most of their physical and emotional needs remain unmet by those delegated to care for them adequately. By the time the parent wakes up in life, the child is already an adult disconnected from the realities of life and

already with formed opinions about life, which many times are wrong because the children missed it out at an early age. Kenyan Parents take children to school or baby classes as early as two years of age in which a child needs parental love, warmth, attention to their emotions, tantrums, desires, expectations, fears and understanding. At this stage, the child has just started learning on how to speak, to express their needs in different ways to feed and to use a toilet. At school these needs cannot be addressed as the parents would, with love, care and understanding. They are handled by so many people and sometimes the experience disorients them. They become afraid, and lonely. They cry and sleep, wake up again to cry because nothing can console them except their parent's warmth. This affects their emotional development and self-esteem.

Government policies which insist on the intellectual performance part, said, to determine one's career path affect other areas of growth such as creativity ability, and emotional, physical, spiritual, and psychological growth of children. Parents should reject such policies including the denial of parents to discipline their own children in school and at home.

Parents have a biological right and obligation to decide the type of discipline they want for their children and to practice it, provided they do it in moderation. They also have a right to delegate their responsibility in some aspects of their children life and withdraw if their boundaries are not respected. Nonetheless as the Swahili proverb says, "Mtoto umleavyo, ndivyo akuavyo", and another says that "Asiyefunzwa na mamaye ufunzwa na ulimwengu" the two proverbs directly translate that, "the way you raise up a child is the way she/he ends up being" and "he whose mother does not teach, is taught by the world." The two proverbs imply that, the parents will determine the end of a child in terms discipline and if parents do not train a child on how to behave, the world will do it and it will be very painful.

In many cases if the parents allow the government or education policies to dictate the way they raise their children and compromise their right of children autonomy, when these policies fail as they do many times, the burden falls on them. When the child defies the school authority, they send them home to the parents, because this is where the child belongs. If they break the law because they were never trained to behave well, the police will arrest them and sent them to jail. If they die in crime the parents bear the shame, the pain and burden alone. This is why the parents should never compromise their authority and autonomy over their children discipline so long as they do it within the expected limits. In this way, it is certain that, the rights of a parent over their children are in no way transferable and replaceable, "their role as educators is so decisive that scarcely anybody can compensate for their failure in it."¹⁰

7.1 Conclusion

Following this discussion, we realize that children are supreme and the ultimate gift that God gives a parent after life. They must be desired and needed so as to be loved and cherished. Parenting is a vocation unique to an individual and attached to a special responsibility. This gift of love demands love, provision of life most important necessities, and education both formal and informal which socializes them making them responsible and acceptable members of the

¹⁰ John Paul II, Familiaris Consortion, (Nairobi, Paulines Publication, 1981) 40

society. None of parent's priorities should transcend that of a child's welfare. A conscious awareness of who one is and their responsibility helps one to set clear goals and objective to know what is the most important for one's children and why it is essential, and drawing a clear vision of how success looks like to them will help parents to set their priorities right, and follow their path to achieve the main goals of their parenting responsibility. The availability and intentional presence of a parent to their children are not debatable if they are to make their plans and realize their vision successively.. Parents need support systems which give them opportunities for open discussions about their challenges and together come up with action plans on how to manage these challenges for parenting responsibility is not something substitutable.

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