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Matrimonial Ring in the Catholic Rite of Marriage: Challenges and Opportunities for Alternative African Symbol

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Abstract

The exchange of the ring is the main explanatory rite in the Catholic Rite of Marriage. Yet the symbolism of the ring is not clearly understood by many people. One wonders whether it is a liturgical symbol or a marriage symbol presented at a liturgical function. Tracing the origin of the matrimonial ring and its subsequent use in the Catholic Rite of Marriage, the article explores the challenges related to the use of the ring in celebrating and living marriage. These challenges provide opportunities for inculturating Christian marriage celebrations by incorporating African marriage symbols. The article acknowledges that marriage symbols are not homogenous in many African societies, but they reflect similar values. Among such values are: fruitfulness, procreation, resilience, and communitarian nature of marriage. Any symbol that embodies these values together with love and fidelity could be incorporated into the Catholic rite of Marriage. It makes a contribution to the scholarship in Sacred Liturgy by proposing inclusion of these values in the formularies for the blessing and exchange of the matrimonial ring.

Introduction

A matrimonial ring is a conspicuous symbol of marriage, not only among Christians but also adherents of other religions. Whether it is a liturgical symbol or a marriage symbol presented at a liturgical function remains unresolved, given the fact that its symbolism is not well understood by many

people. In some African societies, the meaning of matrimonial ring is overshadowed by other symbols that are used to express the reality of marriage. The symbols are not homogenous. They vary from culture to culture or region to region. Among the Lugbara of Uganda, such symbols include *lemgbe* (bermuda grass) and *enve* (iron bangle). These symbols signify fruitfulness, procreation, resilience, permanence and communitarian nature of marriage. Incorporating them into the liturgical celebration of marriage in the Catholic faith gives a clear expression of being married. They could even replace the matrimonial ring. This article examines the symbolism of the matrimonial ring, challenges related to its use and available opportunities for enriching the Christian celebration of marriage with relevant African symbols. The first section examines the evolution of the matrimonial ring in the Bible and in church tradition. The second section analyses the use of the matrimonial ring in the current rite of marriage. This use definitely has challenges and loopholes which are explored in the third section. The last part discusses the opportunities for improvement of the rite of marriage with regard to the matrimonial ring, which sometimes is referred to as wedding ring.

The term “matrimonial” is derived from the Latin *matrimonium*, which is made up of two words: *mater* meaning mother or matron, and neuter suffix – *monium* which implies a “state of being” (Glare 2012:1191). From this etymology, *matrimonium* means state of being in motherhood. Adolf Berger translates *matrimonium* as marriage, and defines it as a “union of a man and a woman, an association for whole life, a community of human and divine life” (1968:578). This definition, though legalistic, expresses the basic truth about marriage, “factual union of a man and woman based on *affectio maritalis* (intention to be husband and wife)” (Berger 1968:578). The matrimoniality arises from that fact that the principle object which a woman should propose to herself, and fully to be supported by the man is to become a mother, because “it belongs to a mother to conceive, to bring forth and train herself” (Schlech 1964:1). Debates about such a definition of marriage may be the concern of another article. The focus here is on the ritual aspect of marriage which is enshrined in the term wedding. “Wedding” is derived from an old Anglo-Germanic word “*weldung*” which means “to pledge,” “to wager” and “to espouse.” It came to use when two parts of customary marriage celebrations (betrothal and nuptial) were combined and used in church marriage celebrations (Joyce 1933:50). Wedding commonly is understood as a ritual that

solemnises marriage which initially was a social and legal union of individuals in their families. The married status created by this union came to be called “wedlock.”

From this perspective, matrimonial ring is defined as a circular band worn by the spouses to express the fact of being bonded to one another one with prospects of motherhood and fatherhood. The one who is a father in this bond should portray maternal qualities of love, care, tenderness, compassion, mercy and forgiveness. An examination of the biblical and ecclesiological perspectives of matrimonial ring sheds more light on these maternal qualities.

Matrimonial Ring in the Bible and in Church Tradition

Use of Matrimonial Ring in the Bible

The biblical use of the ring in the context of marriage is found in Genesis 24. A ring was given to Rebecca by the servant of Abraham. It was fastened to Rebecca’s nose (verse 47). Nose rings seemed to have had no special use except for the decoration of the nasal area. Zvi Rosen describes three types of nose rings mainly used for decoration:

One type was "*nezem*" as a small jewel or a golden ring of roughly six grammes of weight was worn through the dorsal part of the right nasal wing...A second type was a chain of golden jewels put in the region of the glabella, and covering the nasal dorsum, or strings of coins worn, by children in particular, on the forehead...A third type was the nasal ring in the mid-line, between the two nares, piercing the membranous and/or the cartilaginous septum (1971:79-80).

The three types are categorised according to the parts of the nose on which they are fixed. Rebecca’s betrothal story does not show on which part of the nose the *nezem* or golden ring was fixed. Definitely, the nasal décor reveals another meaning of nose ring which Rosen has not pointed out. A figurative reference made to nose rings in Ezekiel implies that they were given to girls who were old enough for love (Ezekiel 16:8,12). A nose ring was one of the special gifts that a lover (male) would give to the beloved (female) as a symbol of love.

Nose rings were also a symbol of wealth. According to Bridges, when presented to a young woman like Rebecca, it symbolised readiness to share one's wealth with her (2018). The servant of Abraham deputed Rebecca as the one with whom to share the wealth of the patriarch, through her being chosen as bride for Isaac. One could also take a nose ring as form of insurance against death and divorce, "should a woman's husband die or divorce her, she could sell the ring to provide for herself" (Bridges 2018). The practice of men giving nose rings at betrothal was not only limited to the Hebrews. It was also existent among other tribes, and to this day it is among the Bedouin tribes in the Middle East, and Berber and Beja tribes living in Morocco, Algeria and Mauritania (Bridges 2018; Marten 2012:40).

Ordinary finger rings, though common, were not used in the context of marriage. Finger rings were a sign of authority and restoration of dignity (Genesis 41:42; Esther 3:10; Job 42:11). This is also reflected in the New Testament where rings were used and placed on the fingers as a sign of authority, dignity and freedom (Luke 15:35). In the early Christian community depicted in the Letter of St. James, finger rings were a sign of wealth and fame. But their use led to discrimination and favouritism, prompting James to warn the Christians against partiality based on appearances (James 2:2).

The Egypto-Greco-Roman Influence on Matrimonial Ring

The origin of the use of matrimonial ring can be traced to Egypt, where the tradition began by 2800 BCE. Jessica VandenHouten observes that "the Egyptians twisted and braided sedges, rushes and reeds growing alongside the papyrus into a ring" (2021). The circular shape of the ring depicted that marriage was eternally binding, "a circle having no beginning or no end, signified eternity- for which marriage was binding" (Panati 2016:22). However, these materials were rudimentary and indurable. They were soon substituted for more durable and expensive ones like leather, bones or ivory. The more expensive the material, the more love shown to the receiver (Lichtheim 2006:181-193; VandenHouten 2021). Later, certain Egyptians began to wear golden rings on their fingers to demonstrate their wealth. On the wedding day, a man gave "one of the golden rings to his bride, symbolically conferring his worldly goods upon her...making a promise saying, 'With this ring all my worldly goods I thee endow'" (Davies 1996:1; see also VandenHouten 2021).

In this case, the rings symbolised a willingness to share one's material wealth with one's marriage partner.

For the Greeks, finger rings symbolised punishment and binding. A Greek fable claims that Prometheus was chained to a rock by the god Zeus in Scythia for having stolen fire from heaven and delivering it human beings. Prometheus, after liberation, was still required to wear a link of the iron chain with which he was bound, together with a set of the fragment of the rock on which he was chained on one of his fingers as a ring so that he might still be considered bound to the Scythian rock (Methenthin and Shapiro 2017:205-207; Kunzu 2016:1-2).

Pliny the Elder (23-79 CE) wrote about the Roman custom of wearing finger rings. The Romans “wear rings on a single finger, only the one, that is next to the little finger...in later times it became practice to put rings on the finger next to the thumb, ...and recently again it has become the fashion to wear them on the little finger” (*Naturalis Historia*, 6:81-84). Roman rings were made of gold and iron-*ferreus*. The iron rings- *ferreus annulus*- served as a reminder of possession and belonging (Matz 2008:74). The term *annulus* is derived from *amnulus* (diminutive form of *amnis*-serpent) meaning a small serpent. A serpent was considered as a symbol of fecundity and virility (Dacquino 1984:133). A miniature key welded to the ring entitled the wife to half of her husband's wealth or whatever was in his storehouse (Panati 2016:22). The ring was given in a betrothal ceremony. The betrothed woman wore it on the second smallest finger of the left hand.

Greek influence accounts for the wearing of the ring on the said finger. Counting from the thumb, it would be the called the third finger. Greek physicians believed that a certain vein runs securely from this finger to the heart. This vein would later be romantically called *vena amoris* or vein of love (VandenHouten 2021; Lukwata 2010:82; Gilash and Arora 2022:119). The finger became a logical digit (*digitus logicus*) to carry a ring symbolising the affairs of the heart. The Romans, copying from the Greek anatomy charts, attempted to clarify the ambiguity surrounding the third finger by introducing the phrase “the finger next to the least” (Panati 2016:24). This became the Roman physicians' “healing finger” (*digitus sanandi*), used to stir mixtures of

drugs. The physician would sense the toxicity of the drug in his heart before administering it to the patient.

Influenced by the Egypto-Greco-Roman background, Christians continued the ring-finger practice, but worked out their way across the hand to the *vena amoris*, “a bridegroom first placed the ring on the top of the bride’s index finger, with the words, ‘*In the name of the Father.*’ Then, praying ‘*in the name of the Son,*’ he moved the ring to the middle finger, and finally, with the concluding words, ‘*and of the Holy Spirit, Amen,*’ to the third finger” (Panati 2016:25). This actually began the moment of theologising on the matrimonial ring.

Developing Theology of the Matrimonial Ring

Tertullian (155-220 CE) and St. Clement of Alexandria (150-215 CE) are among the early Christian writers to speak about the matrimonial ring. Tertullian observed that rings for marriage were made of iron, whereas gold rings were worn for adornment or make-up, “we know that rings are made of iron...the value of iron and brass are higher, since their usefulness has been determined in such a way that discharge functions...more necessary for human life” (*De cultu feminarum, Liber 1, 5:20*). Women would own two rings, gold ring for adornment and an iron ring for marriage (Nocent 1997:287). To St. Clement, the ring symbolised the trust the man had in the woman, who was placed in charge of the goods. She used the ring as a seal to mark the goods. Clement prescribed religious emblems for the rings of men, “men might lawfully wear a ring on the little finger, but should bear some religious emblem- a dove, a fish or an anchor” (*Paedagogus 3,11,57*: see also Francis 2003:179-180).

In the non-Roman West, the giving of a ring was a preamble to the betrothal. Philip Lyndon Reynolds tells about two aspects of betrothal. First, it was “a form of preliminary courtship rather than a case of a formal *subarrhatio cum anulo*- pledge with a ring. Secondly, there was a mutual exchange of rings between the bride and bridegroom” (1994:386). Reynolds provides evidence for the mutual exchange of rings in the account of the marriage of King Clovis to the Burgundian princess Clotilde in 493 CE. Through an intermediary, Aurilianus, Clovis sent a ring to Clotilde asking for her hand in marriage. Clotilde accepted the ring, and sent a different one in return to Clovis (Reynolds 1994:386; Martinez 1993:54). But in the Roman world, betrothal was a private

family affair celebrated at a family meal where the exchange of promises was followed by giving of an iron ring by the fiancé to the bride, which she wore on the fourth finger of her left hand (Jounel 1987:186). No rites indicated how the rings were exchanged. But it sets precedence for the practice of double-exchange of ring that in the succeeding centuries became prevalent in the Catholic rite of marriage.

During the patristic period, theological virtues like faith and love began to be attributed to the use of matrimonial ring. St. Ambrose of Milan (339-397 CE) associated a ring with faith. He spoke about the ring in relation to the response of St. Agnes on her feast day, "...I am already betrothed ... he has placed his troth to me with a ring, the ring of his faith" (*De Virginibus* 1,6,12). He seems to point to situation where it was customary for the virgins consecrated to God to wear a ring in memory of the betrothal to their heavenly spouse (Thurston 1913).

Writing in the 7th century, Isidore of Seville (560–636 CE) linked the ring to marital faithfulness and love. He also made reference to the notion of *vena amoris*, the existence of which had become widely believed, "The fact that the man gives his fiancée a ring means that it is a sign of mutual faithfulness...it is placed on the fourth finger, for in that finger, it is said, there is a vein which carried blood to the heart (*De Ecclesiasticis Officiis* 2. 20. 5-8). Hence, the ring was given by the *sponsus* (bridegroom) to the *sponsa* (bride) as a sign of love, faithfulness and as a *pignus* (token).

Papal contributions on the theology of the matrimonial ring are not lacking. Pope Nicholas I (pope: 858-867 CE) in 860 CE decreed that engagement ring, given by the *sponsus* to the *sponsa* at a betrothal, become a required statement of nuptial intent. The betrothed man joined the bride to himself with vows through the finger marked with a ring of faith. Alongside being a symbol of faith, the ring was a sign of bonding between the *sponsus* and the *sponsa*. For Nicholas, a ring of any material or worth would not suffice. The engagement ring had to be a metal of high value, preferably gold, which represented financial sacrifices by the husband-to-be. Forfeiting a ring and breaking off an engagement would be punishable (Panati 2016:24). Up to this time of Pope Nicholas, it was only the engagement ring that was being

exchanged. Where then can origin of the custom of two rings- engagement ring and wedding ring be found?

Pope Innocent III (1198-1216 CE) is claimed to be responsible for the introduction of two-rings custom and that he proclaimed a compulsory waiting period to be observed between engagement and marriage (Cox and Franz 2007:61). However, there are no papal documents of his to support this claim. What perhaps is the “waiting period” is moment of three weeks of announcing the marriage banns that the Fourth Lateran Council (1215 CE) instituted (Denzinger, no. 817).

Pope Francis (2013-2025 CE) advised the couple to meditate on the meaningfulness of the rings that they exchange during the celebration of marriage. He also alludes that there are other signs that are part of the rite (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 216). These “other signs” could be those varying from one culture to another. This meaningfulness is only realised within the context of marital love and fidelity.

Challenge from the Reformers in the 16th Century

The reformers did not have uniform views about the matrimonial ring. Martin Luther (1483-1546 CE) tended to avoid any ceremonials associated with the matrimonial ring. According to the rite that he drew up for his pastors, the couple exchanged the rings at the church door without any blessing or formula. After the exchange of the consent, the booklet instructs, “let them [bride and the bridegroom] give the wedding rings to one another, and join their hands together and say, ‘what God has joined together let no man put asunder’” (Karant-Nunn 2005:13-14).

John Calvin (1509-1564 CE) avoided the use of the ring. This was in accordance with his policy of eliminating all liturgical ceremonies, which he claimed could be interpreted by people in superstitious manners. There was no joining of the hands either. By his time, superstitions concerning the ring abounded in the popular cultures. It was thought that the matrimonial ring was endowed with magical and curative power, and women would carefully avoid ever removing their rings or even washing the finger with the ring (Bradshaw and Hoffman 1995:122; Monger 2004: 234-235).

Another reformer, Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531 CE) used the analogy of the wedding ring to present his teaching on Christ's presence in the Eucharist. For him, the wedding ring is only a sign of the husband who gives the ring to the wife. However, it is only when the wife looks at the ring that it is a sign (Forrester 2003:156). Away from the sight, the ring ceases to portray the ever-enduring and eternal nature of marriage.

The multiplicity of rites reflecting different theologies and symbolisms of the matrimonial ring presented a challenge to the Catholic Church. There was a need to harmonise rites particularly for the celebration of marriage. The Council of Trent (1545-1563 CE) would be an important moment for harmonising and codifying the various existing rites, ushering in a new period in liturgical development.

Council of Trent on the Matrimonial Ring

Although the Council did not give expressive teaching on the ring, it issued the decree *Tametsi* (11 November, 1563) and recommended revision of liturgical books. In accordance with this recommendation, the *Rituale Romanum* was published in 1614 CE. In the *Rituale Romanum*, one ring is mentioned. It was given by the *sponsus* to the *sponsa* as a symbol of total fidelity and a pledge of noble love. This symbolism was embodied in the prayer of blessing the ring (*Rituale Romanum*, no. 236). The prayer reflected the incumbent and reciprocal duties of the spouses. The priest did all the talking while the couple performed the gestures.

The Second Vatican Council (1963-1965 CE) recommended that the rite of marriage found in the *Rituale Romanum* be revised and enriched so as to clearly signify the grace of the sacrament of matrimony, and to teach the spouses their duties and remind them of their equal obligation or commitment to each other (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, nos. 77-78). Implementation of this recommendation led to the publication of the current *Ordo Celebrandi Matrimonium*- Rite of Marriage or Order for Celebrating Marriage. The first Latin edition (*Editio Typica*) of this rite of marriage was published in 1969. In 1991, another Latin edition (*Editio Typica Altera*) with the addition of alternative formulas was published.

Matrimonial Ring in the Current Rite of Marriage

Symbolism of the Ring in the Rite

The *Ordo Celebrandi Matrimonium* (henceforth *OCM*) makes it clear that a ring is not a compulsory symbol in the celebration of marriage. It can be adapted or even omitted in situations where it does not fit in the local culture (*OCM*, nos. 15, 16). It can also be substituted with other rites deemed fit by the Conference of Bishops, as long as care and prudence is maintained. This positivity implies the willingness of the church to be accommodative and accept cultural practices that are not already part of the church's tradition. Through this,

[the church] endorsed as part of the faith practices of a particular people based on the conviction that the spark of divine creativity animates every culture. It also affirms the fact that God can be encountered and worshiped in the myriad ways, many of which have not yet been realised by Christians brought up in the western tradition" (Magesa 2004:195).

The General Introduction or *Praenotanda* of the *OCM* recommends that the couple participate in the choice of the formula for blessing the ring. Three formulas for the blessing the ring are provided. The first is a prayer of a simple invocation over the rings, "*May the Lord bless these rings + which you give to each other as a sign of love and faith.*" (*OCM*, nos. 27, 47, 62; *OCM altera*, nos. 66, 100, 135, 165). The symbolic meaning of the ring is directly expressed: it is a symbol of love and fidelity. As a prayer of benediction, the formula intensifies the solemnity of the exchange. God blesses the union signified. God's hand is present, guiding the love and fidelity between the spouses. This formula is short, simple, and easy to recite. It should not be a wonder if it is the most used. The second formula, adapted from 1614 *Rituale Romanum*, depicts the ring as a token of fidelity and love. The formula also expresses a longing that the spouses remain in God's peace and good will. The prayer underscores the equality between the bride and bridegroom and the mutual character of their relationship in which they take equal initiative. The third formula is a composition for the 1969 edition. The prayer entreats the Lord to make the rings symbols of spouses' faith and reminders of their mutual love. The *fidelitas* is the faith in God's action in the marriage.

The exchange of rings gives a visible expression of what has taken place, that is, the exchange of consent which is the central part of the rite of marriage. It also reinforces and intensifies that exchange. Accompanying the exchange of rings is the formula to be recited by each of the spouses, “N., receive this ring as a sign of my love and faith. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (OCM, no. 48). This is the only formula provided in both editions of the *OCM* for all the formats of the celebration of marriage. This formula is attributed to Archbishop Hincmar of Rheims (802-886 CE), who composed it for the marriage of Judith, daughter of Charles the Bald, to Edilwulf, King of East Angalia in 856 CE (Reynold 1994:168). The formula presents a simple meaning of the ring, that is, “as a symbol of love and mutual fidelity” (Jounel 1987:204), while calling on the Holy Trinity to seal and consecrate the bond. It is notable that the spouses take turns in pronouncing the formula, in contrast to the 1614 ritual. This implies that marriage in its nature is a reciprocal action of the spouses (Antonio 30-31). However, the formula only expresses giving and petitioning the other to receive. The “I accept the ring” or “I receive the ring” is not stated in this formula. A statement of acceptance of the ring as a symbol of accepting the love given by the other would make the formula richer and deeper.

Matrimonial Ring in the Euchological Texts of the Current Rite

The theology of the matrimonial ring is reflected in some of the euchological texts of the rite. These texts are the collects, prayer over the gifts, preface, nuptial blessing and special inserts in the eucharistic prayers, prayer after communion and prayers for final blessing. The 1969 edition of *OCM* provides five collects, all of which have been taken over by the 1991 edition. In content, each of these collects calls to mind one or another aspect of marriage, such as unity, fecundity, mutual love and indissolubility of the sacramental bond. Unity and mutual love are expressed in the symbolism of the matrimonial ring. Love and fidelity are reiterated in the prayer over the gifts. The prayer over the gifts also expresses the relationship between marriage and eucharist, appreciating that marriage reflects the “mystery of Christ’s unselfish love which we celebrate in this Eucharist” (*OCM*, no. 114).

The first special insert in the eucharistic prayers, composed for the 1969 edition and reserved for the Roman Canon in the 1991 edition, makes an appeal to God to bring the couple to the length of days. It also emphasises the

theme of procreation and gift of children. But words pertaining to this theme are put in parenthesis, “gladden them with your gift of children they desire...” (*OCM*, no. 118). This implies that they may be omitted if the couple is beyond the child-bearing age (*superadulti*) or is unable to have children biologically. The second and third inserts, to be used with eucharistic prayers II and III respectively, make reference to the themes embodied in the matrimonial ring. While the second insert prays that God be mindful of the couple so that it lives in mutual love and peace, the third insert petitions that the spouses under the protection of God may always be faithful in their lives to the covenant they have sealed in His presence. The covenant of marriage demands faithfulness from both the bride and bridegroom, while living in peace.

The concepts of love and covenant are expanded in the three proper prefaces provided in the rite (*OCM*, nos. 115,116 and 117). The purpose of love is for the increase of human race and the family of God which is the church. It underscores the fact that human beings were created to love and to share in God’s love. The love between a husband and wife bears the imprint of God’s love. Marriage covenant is a symbol of the new covenantal love that God through Jesus entered with his people (Ephesians 5:32). Whereas it is clear that the ring stands as a symbol of love, how it can be a symbol of covenant and fertility which is vital for the increment of the human family is a gap that can be filled with incorporation of an African marriage symbol that eloquently tells of covenant and fertility.

In the 1991 edition of *OCM*, four formulas are provided for nuptial blessing. Three of these formulas are carried from 1969 edition. A new formula is added for use when the rite is presided over by an officially delegated lay person (nos. 139-140). The blessings follow the tripartite structure of anamnesis, epiclesis and intercessions. It is rather the intercessions that show a relationship with the ring. The intercessions implore God’s grace upon the couple, so that remaining in faith and love, they may fulfil their matrimonial commitments (*OCM*, nos. 33 and 120).

The 1969 edition of the *OCM* provides for a solemn blessing at the end of the mass, with three options. The theme of love and peace are noticeable in the first and second options. The third option gives reference to the presence of Jesus at the wedding in Cana (John 2:1-11). This presence brought joy to the

couple. The prayer invokes that this joy fills the couple and instills in each spouse the joy of the resurrection of Jesus. This is proper when marriage is celebrated during Easter season. Whereas the theme of love is symbolised in the matrimonial ring, those of joy, peace and fecundity, are still to be given adequate reflection.

Challenges Regarding the Matrimonial Ring

Many vernacular languages in East Africa use the word *mbeta* or *mpeta* (from Kiswahili word *pete*) for the ring. The same word is used for both wedding rings and engagements rings. The phenomenon of “modern” engagement rings is new among many African peoples and not deeply rooted, although the elements that symbolised courtship did exist (Mbiti 1989:135). Those who receive engagement rings take it for granted that they are supposed to go for a wedding where they will exchange wedding rings. At a liturgical level the priests who are always invited to bless such rings are not sure what to say, since there are no ritual words used for the exchange of engagement rings. It is up to the priest to coin some words that he may use to bless these rings. After the “blessing,” there are no ritual words that the couple may use for the exchange of engagement rings. Secondly, it is not clear on which finger this engagement ring is to be worn.

The rite does not designate which finger is the ring finger. It is observed that the dominant fingers for wearing the matrimonial ring are the second and third fingers of the left hand (counting from the thumb or even from the least finger). But one can also wear the ring on any finger as long as it fits and one is aware of its importance and meaning. However, some people may not have fingers or even the designated ring finger due to disability and inability. Others have been deprived of the ring finger from birth or due to an accident. The *OCM* does not make provision for cases where a person does not have fingers or hands. Such persons have entered marital unions. What liturgical symbol would be appropriate for them or even for couples who do not have ring fingers?

Rings are of different shapes, sold at different prices and procured from different sources. Some people buy rings on the streets, open shops, or in any place where they come across. They would not bother who is selling the rings,

whether the person believes in sacredness of marriage or not, whether Catholic or non-Catholic. In urban areas, matrimonial rings are sold together with other articles of devotion at church entrances, mostly on Sundays or holidays of obligation. For some people, the type and expense of the ring is a reflection of the amount of love that a person has for the spouse. The more expensive a ring is and the farther the place it is got from, the greater is considered to be the love. With this kind of mentality, noble simplicity of the symbols is put to challenge (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 34).

The rigid size of the ring is another challenge. The human body adjusts in shape and size. Eventually the rings may become narrow for the finger, causing pain. So one may not wear the ring all the time. Due to nature of work of some people, especially household chores or garden work, they prefer to remove the ring. This leads to the risk of it being forgotten or lost. Some people believe that the ring is an article of devotion, and so they wear it all the time. Positively, the ring reminds the wearers of their marital commitments.

There are various types of rings worn by various individuals. This creates difficulty to identify and recognise the true *coniugali*, that is, those who wear the rings for marital status. Many unmarried people are observed to be wearing rings on the fingers designated for matrimonial rings. For some unmarried individuals, it may be for decoration or smartness or pretence to avoid being bothered by those searching suitors. So how can one differentiate between the rings meant for married couples and those for decoration or smartness? If the couple has separated or divorced or one has been widowed, should they continue to wear the matrimonial ring? Pastoral agents need to give answers to such questions so as to help married people in their commitment.

Wearing the matrimonial ring also loses significance when one of the spouses, especially the male counterpart, enters a polygamous marriage which is a common feature among many African peoples. This is against the promise of fidelity which is taken by the spouses when exchanging rings. Whereas many women wear their matrimonial rings despite the husbands having entered polygyny, most men abandon wearing theirs as soon as they start polygynous affairs.

Opportunities for African Marriage Symbol

Universality of the Matrimonial Ring

Despite the challenges surrounding its use, the matrimonial ring is the most universal, visible and eloquent symbol of Christian marriage. Romano Guardini observes that a symbol must express in clear and precise terms that which is interior and spiritual and when it has fulfilled the usual conditions, it must be universally comprehensible and must rise above purely the individual plane (1998:57). This is true and applicable to the matrimonial ring, which in many religions and cultures is comprehensible, enjoying widespread currency and significance in marriage. Any alternative symbol proposed needs to express values that are pertinent to marriage as embodied by the matrimonial ring.

Among many Christians, the ring adds value and dignity to marriage and gives respect and liberty for one to participate freely in church activities and hold certain ecclesial responsibilities. The ring is openly seen by people and is a caution to those who want to be unfaithful to their marital commitment. During marriage celebrations, the moment of exchanging of rings is a moment of great excitement. It is greeted by clapping, ululations and yelling. Many are enthusiastic to carry about their matrimonial rings in the first months of marriage celebration.

Holding onto the universal significance, many adapted marriage rites in certain parts of Africa still maintained the ring. Benezeri Kisémbó, Laurenti Magesa, and Aylward Shorter described examples of adapted marriage rites in Congo, Uganda, and Nigeria (1998:224-226). In these adapted rites, the matrimonial ring features as part of the rite symbolising love and commitment. Much as it is a reflection of the artificiality that these adapted marriage rites are trying to avoid, it shows that the African people have accepted the symbolisms which Christianity came with. Removing the matrimonial ring would deprive the celebration of marriage of such an important element. Yet addition of an African marriage symbol makes it both Christian and African. The marriage symbols to be used as an alternative or alongside the matrimonial ring may vary from one African culture to another. An illustration from an African society of the Lugbara will suffice.

Example of Symbols from Lugbara Traditional Marriage

The Lugbara are a Sudanic-speaking people living astride the Nile-Congo divide, in the northwestern part of Uganda and northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo (Middleton 1998:1; Aluma 2025). The majority of them subscribe to the Catholic faith, and a considerable number to the Anglican faith. The protagonists of the Christian evangelisation of the Lugbara, especially those in Uganda, were the Quakers and Comboni Missionaries. The two groups entered Lugbaraland between 1917 and 1918 CE (La Salandra 2004:26). Before a Christian Lugbara couple can have their marriage blessed in a Christian marriage ceremony and be given matrimonial rings, some symbols would have already been administered in their traditional marriage. Two symbols are prominent. These are the bermudagrass (*lemgbe*) and iron bangles (*enve*). For the Lugbara, bermudagrass stands as a symbol of resilience, fertility, openhandedness and generosity. The ritual of “tying grass” (*lemgbe a’diza*) is performed during traditional marriage arrangements. The grass is tied around the ankle of the bride. In this symbol, the link with nature and creation is emphasised by using plants and their characteristics. What grows around in their environment and vicinity is used. Administering the symbol is primarily the duty of the parents. The bride and the bridegroom are only to give their consent.

The second symbol is an iron bangle (*enve/mele*). The bangle is normally worn or tied at the ankle or the arms of the girl- the future bride. It is also a sign of beauty. It is fixed around the ankle of the bride to signify that she now has a prospective husband. The *inve* is kept around ankle of the girl until the first child is born. Bangles also serve as a symbol of the bond between two clans. It is placed on the arm of the bride-to-be and it proclaims openly that just as the she and bridegroom-to-be are allowed to meet freely, the members of their clans can interact freely.

These symbols may have their challenges, but they speak an eloquent language of generosity and openhandedness, procreation and fertility, resilience and permanence, family and community bonding. *Lemgbe* could be proposed as an optional symbol and the “tying of *lemgbe*” as an optional explanatory rite in the Christian celebration of marriage among the Lugbara. It pertains to the competent ecclesiastical authorities, that is, diocesan bishop and the Conference of Bishops (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, nos. 22 and 41) to

discuss the incorporation of the symbol and the rite in the celebration of marriage. This, of course, should be without neglecting liturgical catechesis.

Avenue for Liturgical Catechesis

Liturgical catechesis is such a broad term that a separate article is required for its exposition. In fact, Gilbert Ostediek advances that “there are as many understandings of liturgical catechesis as there are perspectives that constitute it” (quoted in Raiche 2020:20). Ostediek describes two forms of liturgical catechesis—liturgy itself and a preparation to participate in the liturgy (Raiche 2020:21; Ostediek 1986). These two forms are incorporated into the definition of liturgical catechesis given by the Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1075: “liturgical catechesis aims to initiate people into the mystery of Christ [it is a ‘mystagogy’] by proceeding from what is visible to the invisible, from the sign to the thing signified, from the sacrament to the mysteries” (see also Raiche 2020:25). This states the aim and method of liturgical catechesis. Liturgical catechesis should be understood as deliberate and explicit instruction about the meaning and purpose of words, symbols, signs and actions in the celebration of the liturgy.

In the celebration of marriage, liturgical catechesis is directed to the couple, relatives, friends and well-wishers. The homily provides an appropriate moment to explain the symbolism of matrimonial ring or a liturgical symbol that is considered as an alternative to the ring. In the homily, the meaning of the ring, the action of blessing and the exchange of the ring can be explained. Those who have the responsibility of delivering homilies or sermons during marriage celebrations ought to equip themselves with adequate and relevant information and knowledge about the matrimonial ring and cultural symbols.

Translation of the Latin Edition

Translation of the liturgical texts into the language of the people is a significant step in liturgical inculturation. Anscar Chupungco defines liturgical inculturation as “the process of inserting the texts and rites of the liturgy into the frame work of the local culture” (1992:30). The 1991 edition or the *OCM editio typical altera* has not been translated into many African languages, so its riches are still veiled to many African communities. Where the riches of the liturgical texts remained veiled to people, the people will fill the gap with symbols they have either created themselves or borrowed from elsewhere

with no cultural or even religious significance, hence mutilating the liturgy. Together with translation, incorporation of the possible adaptations can be made. Anomalies noted with the formula for the exchange of rings can also be corrected in this case.

Expanding the Formulas for Blessing and Exchange of Rings

As noted in the foregoing discussion, the second end of marriage, that is, procreation and education of children, is not captured in the formulas for the blessing of rings and their exchange (*Codex Iuris Canonici*, cans. 1055 & 1061 par 1). Those who consent to marriage also consent to both ends of marriage, each of which is “institutional end given by God when He instituted marriage, and each of them is personalistic in its nature, that is designed to draw each of the spouses out of self and grow, by learning to give that self to their spouse and to their children” (Burke 1999:83). As observed by John Mbiti, “procreation and marriage in African societies are a unity; without procreation, marriage is incomplete” (1989:130). Any proposed alternative symbol and formularies for blessing need to have elements of reciprocal giving and receiving, covenant, procreation, and education of children. The *Praenotanda* of the *OCM* support this kind of endeavour by stating that “when the Roman Ritual has several optional formularies, local rituals may add others of the same type” (*OCM*, no. 13).

Conclusion

The matrimonial ring is universal symbol in the celebration of marriage, but it is not a compulsory element in the Catholic rite of marriage. Its remote origins are traced from ancient Egypt where grass was shaped in form of a ring and used in contracting marriage. The Greco-Roman world has had a considerable influence on its use, especially wearing it on the second smallest finger of the left hand. Bringing the matrimonial ring into the liturgical celebration of marriage was itself an important step of inculturation undertaken by the Church. Although the symbolism of love and fidelity is enshrined in the current *Ordo Celebrandi Matrimonium*, other values that are dear to the African people are not captured. An African marriage symbol that incorporates the values of values of love, covenant, fidelity, procreation, and fecundity could even be used instead of the matrimonial ring.

Two symbols, *lemgbe* and *enve*, from Lugbara traditional marriage are identified to be embodying these values. *Lemgbe* proposed as optional symbol for an optional explanatory rite of tying of *lemgbe*. It could even serve as an alternative to the matrimonial ring. But it is the responsibility of the competent ecclesiastical authority under which the Lugbara live to ascertain their incorporation in accordance with the standing principles. Any formularies suggested in the rite in an African context needs to take account of the matrimonial values that are dear to African peoples. In the case where the traditional use of matrimonial ring is retained, the way has to remain open for legitimate variations in the Christian celebration (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 23).

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