

# THE CATHOLIC VOYAGE

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**COMMUNION, PARTICIPATION AND MISSION  
IN THE CHURCH-AS-FAMILY:  
CONSECRATED LIFE AND THE PATH TOWARDS  
A SYNODAL CHURCH**

*A Publication of the Conference of Major Superiors of Nigeria*

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A SYNODAL CHURCH

A Publication of the Conference of Major Superiors of Nigeria

Motto: *Witness to Truth and Mercy through Love and Service  
with Faith and Reason*

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For contributions and all correspondence, please write to:

The Editor,

The Catholic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life,

P. O. Box 2832, 400001, Enugu, Nigeria

Email: [voyagecmsn@gmail.com](mailto:voyagecmsn@gmail.com)

Tel. (+234) 803 404 7133

Website: [www.tcvafrica.org](http://www.tcvafrica.org).

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## EDITORIAL

**T**he synodal life of the Church is rooted in the Scriptures and Tradition. God calls the whole human race to union with Him. Unity in Him is fulfilled in Jesus Christ and brought about through the ministry of the Church.

In every period of her history, the Church rethinks her evangelizing mission through various councils, synods, and assemblies. She affirms her nature as a pilgrim, always in movement with the vital reality of the society for whose salvation she is responsible. She hears the cry of pain and suffering of the people<sup>1</sup>; therefore, she is profoundly synodal in the fulfilment of her salvific mission.

There are several forms of “synodality” developed in the early centuries and some forms of it are still experienced across Church today. The Churches convoke synods to discuss doctrinal and pastoral issues relevant to their times. Vatican Council II brought the fruit of renewal in the promotion of ecclesial communion, episcopal collegiality, synodal awareness, and praxis, which we must welcome as gifts of the Holy Spirit for the journey of the People of God.

Confirming the desire of the Vatican II Fathers, Pope Paul VI established the Synod of Bishops as a permanent institution in the Church for the pope's consultation and collaboration. The synod is to enliven the Church and to meet the challenges of a turbulent world. The Synod brings together bishops from the entire world to Rome to help inform the pope's thinking and assessment on different matters. Recent Synods discussed specific themes, such as new evangelization, family,

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<sup>1</sup>Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n.1

young people, Church in Africa, and Consecrated Life. However, the present synod discusses the topic of synodality itself.

### **Significance and Purpose of the Synod on Synodality**

In the spirit post-Vatican II synods, Pope Francis opened the Synod of Bishops in October 2021. With this convocation, the Pope invited the whole Church to reflect on a theme that is decisive for her life and mission. The theme of the Synod is: *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission*. The Church-as-Family of God is convoked in the Synod. Pope Francis invites us to open ourselves to the consciousness that the Church is synodal by nature. He calls everyone to undertake a synodal path. *Synod* means a journey together. It is also a way of living a leadership that is shared in fulfilment of the mission of the Church. A truly synodal Church is committed to the recognition of the rights of all faithful and their effective participation in all aspects of the Church, including in decision making. We are all called to feel responsible for the life and mission of the Church.

The purpose of this Synod is:

to inspire people to dream about the Church we are called to be, to make people's hopes flourish, to stimulate trust, to bind up wounds, to weave new and deeper relationships, to learn from one another, to build bridges, to enlighten minds, warm hearts, and restore strength to our hands for our common mission. Thus the objective of this Synodal Process is not only a series of exercises that start and stop, but rather a journey of growing authentically towards the communion and mission that God calls the Church to live out in the third millennium.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, *Vademecum. Official Handbook for Listening and Discernment in Local Churches: First Phase [October 2021 – April 2022] in Dioceses and Bishops' Conferences Leading up to the Assembly of Bishops in Synod in October 2023, n.1.3.*

Its objective “is not to provide a temporary or one-time experience of synodality, but rather to provide an opportunity for the entire People of God to discern together how to move forward on the path towards being a more synodal Church in the long-term.”<sup>3</sup> Reflecting on the Synod, the Archbishop of Benin (Nigeria) notes that the Pope wants this synod to be “a journey in listening to the people of God and not a synod of telling the people what they should do or not do,” considering that, as a matter of fact, the People of God “are the reason for which bishops, priests, and deacons are ordained and appointed.”<sup>4</sup> In this regard, he observes, “the Church in Nigeria has embraced this insight into Synodality”. In his view, “the local church in Nigeria is vibrant and alive” and “she is not shy of confronting any challenges that are peculiar to her.”<sup>5</sup>

In this perspective, synodality is the new *modus vivendi* and *modus operandi*. For Pope Francis, it “is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.”<sup>7</sup>

### **Value and Expectations of the Synod**

One of the essential phases of this three-year journey is the world celebration of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. This phase will be held in two distinct sessions: in Rome on October 2023 and October 2024 respectively. Many expectations are

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> “Interview with the Vatican News: Abp Akubeze: The Nigerian Church Is Not Shy Of Confronting Challenges”, 2022. In <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2021-11/interview-akubeze-nigeria-cbcn-synodality-archbishop.html>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (2 March 2018)

<sup>7</sup> Francis, *Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2015.



placed on the Synod. Thanks to the extension of some of its phases, the Synod will hopefully permit a more relaxed period of discernment on the theme. The Synod of Bishops offers once more the opportunity to deepen the understanding of the Church-as-Family of God, Church-Communion, under the new face of the Synodal Church. The celebration phase will be followed by the implementation phase which will, again, involve all the faithful in local churches. One of the expectations is that, by walking together and reflecting together on the journey that has been made, the Church will be able to learn through her experiences which processes can help her to more effectively live communion, achieve participation, and open her to mission.

For some African Bishops, this Synod is “a dynamic process of convergence that calls for listening and dialogue, leading to greater collaboration, a more profound sense of communion and participation in Church life at various levels”<sup>8</sup>. While the Church recognizes that synodality is an integral part of her very nature, she acknowledges that listening and dialogue are essential and integral components of the synodality. “Faith comes through hearing (Rom 10:17). Listening, therefore, is a necessary prerequisite for faith development.”<sup>9</sup> So, “at the different levels of the Church, the pastors and the people are to cultivate an attitude of patience, attentiveness to and respect for the views of others. This attitude paves the way for genuine dialogue.”<sup>10</sup> Consequently, in practical terms, the Nigerian Bishops suggest the need to devise ways “by which those in the periphery such as the non-literate, materially poor and the quiet members of the Church can be

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<sup>8</sup> Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, *Human Fraternity: Path to Building Sustainable Peace in Nigeria, A Communiqué issued at the end of the First Plenary Meeting of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) (<https://CBCN-ng.org>) at the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria Resource Centre, Durumi, Abuja, 5–11 March 2022*

<sup>9</sup> *A Message Given at the End Of The 3rd National Pastoral Congress On The Theme: Towards A Synodal Church: Communion, Participation And Mission Which Held At Bishop Kelly Pastoral Centre, Airport Road, Benin City, 8–11 November, (2021), n.3.*

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

heard,” while they realistically acknowledge that, “No doubt, wars, dissension, bitterness and acrimony can be avoided by embracing the power of listening and dialogue.”<sup>11</sup>

Other African bishops also express confidence and hope in this Synod. The synod appears as a moment “to break the barriers among the people of God”<sup>12</sup>. It is an occasion in which the Church in Africa has “a voice to make herself heard on Synodality”<sup>13</sup>; perhaps more importantly, she sees “in this process an opportunity for Africa to elaborate her own identity as Church”<sup>14</sup>. Synodality is understood as an awareness of walking together, through some attitudes, and concrete gestures of collaboration and responsibility.

In effect, the Church and the Consecrated Life in Africa face many challenges in the fulfilment of her mission in the world. For instance, there are the sufferings lived by the victims of sexual abuse; difficulties related to abuse of power and of conscience, fratricidal war, the problem of insecurity, uncertain social-political atmosphere, injustices, tribalism, problems relating the religious vows, community life, governance, formation, etc. The people of God are constantly called to address these problems in the battle for survival, peace and reconciliation. In this context, synodality must be approached and understood as a way to respond to these great challenges of evangelization today.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> S. B.L. BAYEMI, Bishop of Obala (Cameroun), in an interview to *La Croix Africa*, 7 October 2021, no.5

<sup>13</sup> A.N. FUNAYA, *Declaration to the Plenary Assembly of the Symposium of the Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar* (SECAM), 25 July- 1 August 2022 at Accra(Ghana). Declaration received by the Editorial Team of ACI Africa, Accra, 27 July 2022.

<sup>14</sup> A.N. FUNAYA, *Declaration to the Plenary Assembly of the Symposium of the Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar* (SECAM), 25 July- 1 August 2022 at Accra(Ghana). Declaration received by the Editorial Team of ACI Africa, Accra, 27 July 2022. Cf. Circular Letter of the National Episcopal Conference.

Certainly, Synodality presents hope for the local churches in Africa. The expectations for a new ecclesial conscience are emerging in Africa. For Nigerian Bishops, the synodal journey, if faithfully undertaken, will lead to “a resurgence of faith and a more profound commitment to the Christian ideals and values”. Moreover, they said, “the ingredients of listening, dialogue and collaboration that flow from the Synod are the bedrock of building human fraternity and a world that will enjoy sustainable peace.”<sup>15</sup>

According to the Bishop of Lolo (D.R. Congo), “the faithful commit themselves to make the Church a place of 'journeying together' and of 'living together'...a commitment to refuse and to denounce all that brings seeds of discrimination, of rejection of the other, of attacks on the integrity of human life and of environment”<sup>16</sup> Therefore, there is a renewed interest and enthusiasm in many dioceses and institutes of Consecrated Life in Africa, as well as a sign of joyous reception of the message of Synodality promoted by the Pope. As the Nigerian Bishops say, “the experiences so far at the local levels have been very refreshing and pastorally enriching”<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, *Human Fraternity: Path to Building Sustainable Peace in Nigeria, A Communiqué issued at the end of the First Plenary Meeting of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) (<https://CBCN-ng.org>) at the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria Resource Centre, Durumi, Abuja, 5 – 11 March 2022, n.5*

<sup>16</sup> Bishop NADONYE, *Interview given to the Communication Commission of the National Episcopal Conference of Congo (CENCO) on the work of the Synod at Buta and Lolo, Democratic Republic of Congo, 7 April 2022.*

<sup>17</sup> Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, *Human Fraternity: Path to Building Sustainable Peace in Nigeria, A Communiqué issued at the end of the First Plenary Meeting of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) (<https://CBCN-ng.org>) at the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria Resource Centre, Durumi, Abuja, 5 – 11 March 2022, n.5.*

## Synodal Church as a cultural challenge

Synods are established, celebrated and develop in context; similarly, synodality is understood, created, lived and grows in context. To achieve the aims of the synod, there is a fundamental need to take into consideration the specificity of African culture as an important step in understanding and living synodality. This is because enthusiasm, without considering the specificity of African culture, is merely ephemeral and undependable sentiment. What must remain imperative in this dynamic is the consideration of the socio-cultural, political, and religious reality of the African milieu. Although it appears that the cultural aspects of *synodality* have not yet been sufficiently developed in recent African debates and studies on “synodality” and “synod”, this theme deserves further discussion in the light of the Church in Africa's strive for inculturation. Inculturation, as the African Synod teaches, is “a movement towards *full* evangelization”; moreover,

inculturation includes the *whole life* of the Church and the *whole process* of evangelization. It includes theology, liturgy, the Church's life and structures. All this underlines the need for research in the field of African cultures in all their complexity". Precisely for this reason the Synod invited Pastors "to exploit to the maximum the numerous possibilities which the Church's present discipline provides in this matter."<sup>18</sup>

## Synodality as a challenge for the Church-as-Family in Africa

The socio-politico-religious context of Africa tells us that synodal Church in Africa is a true challenge, because some cultural elements require a profound work of sensitization and, in addition, the will to make human dignity common to all members of the Church triumph

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<sup>18</sup> John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, n.62. Italics are mine.

and flourish. Much work needs to be done to achieve a greater sense of recognition and acceptance of capacities and gifts of one another, including those at the level of decision-making, for the building of a common mission. Moreover, in many parts of the continent certain cultural dispositions and practices constitute obstacles that are difficult to overcome to live in synodality. But there are also many cultural values and practices or facts that are more favourable to the building of a synodal church. Thus, for several reasons, in an African context a synodal process may not be taken for granted. It can be efficaciously achieved only through the conversion of everyone, after an in-depth study of the cultural elements and values that are present, so that the Church in Africa may take up the practical significance of synodality or reinvent one that is nearer its own reality.

Experience shows that any reflection or efforts to sensitize a people to live and walk according to any value without sufficient efforts to first take into account the cultural foundations and values of that same people, is mostly a work done in “purely decorative way, as it were, by applying a thin veneer”<sup>19</sup>, and that do not yield better results.

Also, there is the question of leadership. Synodality is a dynamic to be developed in the context of a Church whose clerical leadership is vulnerable to the pathologies of power. And, sometimes, the priestly fraternity causes great problems in the daily life of priests and consecrated persons. African cultural context can permit and facilitate, on the one hand, the reinterpretation of the concept of “synodality”, understood with the categories of the culture and the practice of the people, appreciating and respecting their authentic values. On the other hand, this concept can help in the recognition of the realities that must be purified – or, in some cases, discarded - to respond to the divine plan

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<sup>19</sup> Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), no.20.

of salvation. Therefore, African culture presents both obstacles to a synodal way of life and opportunities to promote and strengthen synodality.

As regards obstacles to a synodal way of life these include, but are not limited to, for example, the areas of exercise of authority, and the impact of tribalism. Concerning the former, it is evident that a synodal Church is a church of communion, participation and co-responsibility. It should encourage shared leadership. Consequently, the authority has the responsibility to offer spaces in which the faithful fully participate in the evangelizing mission of the Church, including the process of decision-making. To do this is to recognize in each person the gifts that the Holy Spirit gives to individuals to guide the church, and recognize what is opportune for the common good. The authority must create environments where this diversity of gifts received and mutual listening could be expressed for a journey together. It also means that each member has rights and duties to contribute to the building and growth of the Church-Family of God, the body of Christ, and the fulfilment of the common mission, or indeed to build it together. Thus, authority ought to be exercised as a service of consultation, coordination of different contributions, and common discernment because of the more concerted decisions<sup>20</sup>. In this way a synodal Church shows a way of being and recognition of the rights of all the faithful to participate in the consultative and decisional organs.

In some African countries, the concept of authority is inspired by the notion of “ruler” in the traditional sense where on the base of the culture there is a strong sense of hierarchy. People are comfortable with having a ruler as sovereign. The ruler is the incarnation of the group, a guardian of the temple, as a father, indeed patriarch. The ruler has a

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<sup>20</sup> Cf. Elochuwku E Uzuoku, *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches* (2006)

sacred power and his person is an object of a sort of veneration. He is given special privileges which justify the cult of his person. In this context a distance that is created between “the ruler” and the faithful is legitimated, because of the need to preserve the character of a paramount leader, somewhat mysterious, seen as somebody whom, since he is sacred, no one dares oppose; and to speak about him can be only for motives of praises, otherwise, one would invite misfortunes upon himself. The faithful must only listen to the sovereign leader and obey him. In the African context, it is evident that the traditional concept of sovereign-ruler has influenced, albeit to varying degrees, people's understanding of priesthood and the exercise of ecclesial authority. Such culture excessively lives clericalism. Great importance is given to the clerics at the expense of the lay faithful. This situation, therefore, raises questions. With this presupposition, how can we express synodality in the concrete and daily experience of the Churches in Africa? Would the sovereign leader be able to promote and comprehend what Pope Francis is promoting, such that synodality will be seen and experienced as a vital necessity in the African continent? Here is a challenge for a new synodal culture that needs pastoral attention that creates unity abhorring the spirit of tribalism, regionalism, ethnocentrism and excessive particularism.

As regards tribalism, the sentiment of excessive identification with one's tribe, this practice influences decisions on questions of the common good and even the acceptance of pastors in other ethnic groups. The phenomenon of tribalism divides the Church from within because it is a sentiment that structures the way of think and of reflecting by privileging a person's belonging to one to one or more ethnic groups. In this pejorative sense tribalism is a negation a devaluation of other persons. In other words, tribalism favours a sense of division and discrimination that directs the choices, the preferences and the decisions based on whether or not the reality is favourable to one's tribe. In society this leads to open wars and conflicts between

ethnic groups and tribes. In the church, it is a scourge of destruction of communion. These barriers to synodality -- relating to the exercise of authority and to tribalism -- are present in some dioceses and institutes of Consecrated Life and Society of Apostolic Life.

Concerning cultural practices, it is necessary to think of “synodality” in Africa starting from positive facts or from places of success of listening and dialoguing, such as the enthusiasm and collaboration of lay people in dedicating themselves to the material care of the local churches. In many ways, it is the lay people that are advancing the Church. However, one could ask: doesn't the clerical attitude of pastors not often break this enthusiasm and discourage collaboration in some dioceses and religious institutes?

Consecrated Life is encountering the Synod on Synodality. As a vital part of the Church-Family, the Consecrated life is called to walk in and practice Synodality. It is called to be at the service of fraternity in a wounded world seeking truth, mercy joy and justice. Like the synod, it opens us to the culture of encounter in our religious communities and places of mission. Consecrated Life strives to make us united to the people, welcome and respect their charisms, and attend to the ecclesial mission in the light of the charism of each religious Institute or Society of Apostolic life.

In the diocesan and national phases, consecrated persons, both individually and collectively, have, in different ways, participated in the Synodal process. They have organized conferences and meetings on issues relating to the theme of the Synodality – seen from Biblical, historical, theological, pastoral, canonical, and other perspectives. They explore the experience of synodality in the African church and, in it, in Consecrated Life. They responded to the questionnaire in the synodal process, and they researched and published works. They review their experiences and practices within their institutes, as well as



other important themes relating to synodality from different perspectives and disciplines.

### **Contributions**

*The Catholic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life* (TCV-Africa) enters into this reflection and synodal process. TCV-Africa wants to contribute to reflections on the Synod. The present edition is dedicated to the Synod on Synodality. Its general theme is, “*Communion, Participation and Mission in the Church-as-Family: Consecrated Life and the Path towards a Synodal Church*”. The authors reflect on it, highlighting different specific topics, from different perspectives.

The reflections open with a study on “Synod” in the teachings of Church Fathers. Here, the Nigerian theologian, Margaret Abiodun Fagbamigbe, SsMA, investigates the teachings of the Church Fathers on how Synods and Ecumenical Councils were done to arrive at the lessons for the Synodal Church today. The article affirms the teachings of the Church Fathers about the importance of the Living Tradition of Synods and its processes which are passed on to generations of Christian Communities to settle internal disputes, such as the crisis impinging on the understanding of faith, discipline, and morals through the Synodal processes.

The essay expounds the meaning of synod and ecumenical council. It deliberates on the Church Fathers' processes of the local synod and the decisions of the local synod leading to lessons for the Synodal Church today. The author offers some recommendations.

Turning to the present Synod on Synodality, Maria Regina Osondu takes a critical look at its preparatory document on communion, participation, and mission in the church-as-family of God. She gives special attention to Consecrated life and the path toward a synodal

church. Since the Church is increasingly aware and desirous of her synodal character, the Church wants to listen better to the voices of clerics, consecrated persons, and lay people, and without excluding that of other religious traditions and secular groups. This Preparatory document appears as a guiding star toward the 2022/2023 Synod. Therefore, everyone involved in this synodal process is invited to critically analyze the preparatory document.

Fr Innocent Igbokwe's study postulates it is legitimate to ask the question: What does “a synodal church” mean? Is it the church on a journey or a journey in the church? Following his survey of the people of God concerning the Synod on synodality, he observes that they are filled with a mixture of extreme doubts and exceeding joy. His reflection wants to contribute to the debate and provide footpaths for fruitful and enriching discussions as the synod goes on. In addressing the question of whether the synod is the Church in movement or a movement in the Church, he claims that the Church of the future will be largely determined by the way we see and handle this synod on Synodality.

While looking at the future of the Church, Simon Okanumee investigates the nature of the Church in his study titled, “the path of synodality: walking and talking together as the mystical body of Christ”. He argues that the Church is by nature synodal and “the entire People of God is challenged by its fundamentally synodal calling.”<sup>21</sup> Synodality aims at energizing the life and the evangelizing mission of the Church. Evoking Pope Francis's view, he sees synodality as the path that God expects the Church to follow in the third millennium.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 72.

<sup>22</sup> Francis, *Ceremony Commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, 17 October 2015.

The synodal procedure and events have a beginning, a process and a conclusion, but Synodality “offers a specific description of the historical development of the Church as such, breathes life into her structures and directs her mission.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, the essay expounds on the path of Synodality as a sublime feature of the Church and highlights the important functions of her members - the Hierarchy and the Laity.

To live the synodality of the Church-as-family of God does not require only communion with Christ and one another. It also requires the acceptance and appreciation of the variety of charisms given by the Holy Spirit, and the realization of the mission, mandated by Christ, in the Church and in society. Olabanjo Wole, FSC explores this topic in his study on “Communion, variety of charism and mission in the church”. Starting from Jesus's great commission to the disciples (Mt.28:19), he notes that the mission is given to the disciples, not solely the Twelve Apostles. At various times in the centuries, especially whenever it seems the Church is in slumber, the Holy Spirit gave gifts to some members of His Church to shake up the Church and remind her of her evangelical mission. Different Religious institutes and Societies of Apostolic Life with their originating charisms sprang up to respond in diverse ways to the mission of the Church and in communion with the Church. Synodality is a wake-up call to all members of the Church to discover new ways of fulfilling the mission that Jesus entrusted to his Church. All members participate in the Church's mission to safeguard and transmit Her Teachings and Tradition as well as to renew the Church, shaking out the complacency and mediocrity that inevitably creep into any institution.

The involvement of communities of religious institutes in the Synod on Synodality concerning formation is the theme of the reflection of a

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<sup>23</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 48

group of young candidates in formation with their formators, Rev. Sr. Bridget Saiki, EHJ and Rev. Sr. Roseline Isiocha, EHJ. The authors present a short but practical and insightful reflection. Their reflection appreciates this Synod as an experience of communal participation and mission. The article dwells on the meaning of Synod on synodality; the importance of the Synodal journey for young people in formation houses; the steps taken by the religious institute to participate in the Synodal journey; the way the people of God listen to the Holy Spirit in communities of the institutes; the expectations of candidates in formation from the Synod on Synodality; the disposition and attitude necessary to welcome and live Synodality in Religious Communities; and, finally, some important message and recommendations were offered to fellow candidates in formation and to religious formators.

## **Conclusion**

The Synod on Synodality is a work still in progress. It deserves additional reflections and actions. “Synodality is not simply a working procedure, but the particular form in which the Church lives and operates.”<sup>24</sup> Therefore, the present volume proposes the following studies concerning Synodality, and other reflections may follow, while we await the results of the celebration of the final sessions of Synod. The participation of the faithful, including the laity and Consecrated persons, is evidence of the general interest and hope generated by this synodal process. The enthusiasm and satisfaction of the majority of the faithful should also be appreciated as an expression of the adhesion of the Church in Africa to the dynamic journey together of the Church promoted by Pope Francis.

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<sup>24</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*(2018) , n.42

In light of Africa's socio-politico-religious context, one could say that Synodality in the local churches in Africa is a real challenge but also a great opportunity and motive of hope if we are open to building it starting from the cultural characteristics and values that enable us to understand and practice it. In this perspective, Synodality can be lived as a reality that emerges from culture to respond to the vital problems of a people on the way to the Lord. Lessons from the history of the Early Church relating to the establishment of the “synod”<sup>25</sup> teach us that inculturation of the Synodality is not infeasible in the local churches in Africa: A *Synodal Church* with an African face is possible. In addition, it is heartening that the Synod on Synodality will “provide a greater opportunity for the People of God to have an authentic experience of listening and dialogue,” and for the Church-as-Family of God in Africa to elaborate her own identity as Church. The hope is that these opportunities will be grabbed and made fruitful.

While presenting the following contributions, the TCV-Africa invites our readers to closely accompany the subsequent phases of this Synod on Synodality, which, I believe, will greatly impact the life and mission of the Church and institutes of Consecrated Life for a long time to come.

Finally, ceasing this occasion, permit me to cordially invite you, dear readers, to visit, like and subscribe to our YouTube channel, named *The Catholic Voyage-Africa*.

Enjoy reading.

***Oseni J.O. Ogunu. OMV***

Editor-in-Chief.

[www.tcvafrica.org](http://www.tcvafrica.org)

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<sup>25</sup> The procedures of this synod for instance, after all, were “modelled on the rule of the procedure for the sessions of the Roman Senate”, as Sr. Dr. Fagbamigbe's article indicates in this volume.

## **“Synod” in the Teachings of Church Fathers: Lessons for a Synodal Church Today**

***Sr. Margaret Abiodun Fagbamigbe***

*Member of the Sisters of St. Michael the Archangel*

### **Abstract**

*This article portrays the teachings of the Church Fathers on how Synods and Ecumenical Councils were done in order to arrive at the lessons for the Synodal Church today. It also affirms the teachings of the Church Fathers on the importance of Living Tradition of Synods and its processes which are passed on to generations of Christian Communities to settle internal disputes. It concretely cited how the Church Fathers handled crisis impinging on the understanding of faith, discipline, and morals through the Synodal processes. It examines the understanding of synods and Synodal Church by expounding the meaning of synod and ecumenical council. It highlights the early Church procedural conciliar; it elucidates the theology and power of ecumenical councils. It deliberates on the Church Father's processes of local synod and the decisions of the local synod leading to lessons for the Synodal Church today. The article ends with recommendations and conclusion.*

### **Introduction**

*Synod* is a gathering of bishops that helps the Church to move together in the same direction. The Church Fathers actualized dependable procedures and import the necessity of synods and passed them on to

their progeny through praxes. What the Church Fathers did not utter expressly in words, they disseminated in principles through the various synods and councils and the decisions embarked upon. Their times were precarious, novel, and momentous and they had to surmount various huddles in order to preserve the mandate of faith which Jesus Christ commanded them to pass on. As the community of believers were increasing in numbers, so were the misunderstandings in the process of comprehending the faith in Jesus Christ. In defeating many heresies through the decisions at various synods, the doctrines of the Church were expounded for more clarification and the faith of the people was deepened in Christ Jesus. The doctrinal teachings became didactical through the synods but could not force anyone to accept faith in the Lord Jesus. One may not hold on to one's opinions but must yield to the teachings of the elders of the Church having been appointed and charged with the responsibility of shepherding the flock.

The Church Fathers were men of faith and believed in the divine wisdom that governs the world. It was this wisdom that they used to direct the affairs of the Church in their times and taught their followers to trust and believe in the Holy Spirit who is the Principal Agent of Evangelization. Even though each bishop is autonomous in the governance of the diocese, the decisions of synods are something to be considered because the synods were convoked through the Power of the Holy Spirit and is active in each person and speaks through everyone.

In the contemporary times, Pope Paul VI revived the idea of the synod and established the Synod of Bishops in 1965 with the *Motu Proprio*, *Apostolica Sollicitudo*, a document that empowers the Church authority to call the Synod into session whenever it is advisable and designates the place where the meetings are to be held. The document also ratifies the election of members into the synod.<sup>1</sup> He wrote: “We

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Paul VI, *Apostolica Sollicitudo*, *Apostolic Letter Issued Motu Proprio, Establishing the Synod of Bishops for the Universal Church*, (September 15, 1965), no. I-XII. <https://www.vatican.va>. Accessed : 03/05/2022.

*erect and establish here in Rome a permanent Council of bishops for the universal Church, to be directly and immediately subject to Our (Roman Pontiff) power. Its proper name will be the Synod of Bishops. The Synod of Bishops has, of its very nature, the function of providing information and offering advice. It can also enjoy the power of making decisions when such power is conferred upon it by the Roman Pontiff; in this case, it belongs to him (Roman Pontiff) to ratify the decisions of the Synod.*<sup>2</sup>

### **What is Synod and what is a Synodal Church?**

In the early Church, and specifically, in the first centuries of the Church's existence, "Synod" and "Council" were interchangeable. However, the gatherings of bishops from all over the regions and provinces together in a meeting were called Ecumenical Council and this began with the Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325 AD.<sup>3</sup> *Synod* is a Greek word: σύνοδος (sinoðos) meaning "Assembly" or "Meeting" and is analogous with the Latin word "Concilium" meaning "Council". Thus, a synod is an ecclesiastical meeting of Church leaders set up by those who have the authority to consult on Church matters.

### **There are different applications of the term**

1. When the bishops of the whole world are congregated under the presidency of the Pope, the synod is denominated ecumenical or general council. The general or ecumenical council is either *ordinary* or *extraordinary* general assembly. A synod of bishops gathers in extraordinary general session when dealing with

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Bernard L. Marthaler, et al. Eds., *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Second Edition, vol. 4, (New York: Thomson Gale, 2003), p. 298, s.v. "Councils, General, History of Ecumenical by F. Dvornik.



matters requiring a speedy solution. The ordinary general councils address particular topics affecting the good of the Church worldwide, and the issues to be deliberated are selected by the Pope through the general secretariat who elicits contributions from different Episcopal conferences. The assemblies since 1971 have met every three years.<sup>4</sup>

2. When the hierarchs of all the provinces of a nation assembled, the synod is called national, or, under certain circumstances, *Plenary*. However, if the bishops of an ecclesiastical province meet under the headship of their Metropolitan, the council is termed *Provincial*. This is referred to as *Special Sessions*. The synod summons bishops of a particular region to deal with regional issues.<sup>5</sup>
3. A diocesan synod is an assembly convoked by the bishop in which he gathers together the clerics of his diocese and all others who are bound to attend for the purpose of deliberating on issues that belongs to the pastoral care of the people in his diocese. All the clergy and laity of the diocese are bound by the decrees of the synod.<sup>6</sup>

*Synodality* (process of consultation) denotes a particular style of the Church that describes the people of God (the bishop, clerics and the lay faithful) journeying together in an assembly having been summoned by the Holy Spirit to testify to their communion by working together and discerning how to proceed in the work of evangelization.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Bernard L. Marthaler, et al. Eds., *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Second Edition, vol. 13, (New York: Thomson Gale, 2003), p. 685, s.v. “Synod of Bishops” by J. A. Abruzzese.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> W. H. W. Fanning, “Synod: General term for Ecclesiastical Gatherings under Hierarchical Authority”, *Encyclopedia: Catholic Answers*, 1996-2022. <https://www.catholic.com.encyclopedia/synod> Accessed: 05/05/2022.

<sup>7</sup> Francis, *Synod of Bishops*, “Synod 2021-2023”, <https://www.synod.va> . Accessed: 02/05/2022.

Synodality in the particular Church or general assembly renews and deepens the People of God's awareness of co-responsibility within the Church. A *Synodal Church* follows the rhythm of life, which is movement and pause, walking and meeting in *synodality, in a process of discussing and contacting one another*. A Synodal Church promotes the renewal of attitude of listening, consulting, dialoguing, discerning, welcoming, and exchanging of ideas and, above all, affirming the participation of all the members of the People of God. *The Church* is called to operate synodally at the local, regional and universal levels.<sup>8</sup>

## **Synod and Council in the Early Church**

I. The earliest gathering of the People of God to discuss doctrinal matters and establish ecclesiastical policy was the meetings of the apostles and presbyters with St. Paul and St. Barnabas which is known as the Council of Jerusalem in 52 AD as recorded in Acts 15:1-30. It was not a gathering of all the bishops of the world but it discussed doctrinal issues of a lasting effect among the early Christians; emphasising that new converts were not obliged to observe the prescriptions of the Old Testament in order to be absorbed into Christian fold.<sup>9</sup>

II. The early bishops were inspired by the example of the apostles on the way they handled disputes regarding doctrinal matters. During the first eight centuries of the Church's subsistence, the bishops of different provinces gathered to reach decisions on theological and disciplinary matters and on themes that required clarifications or issues that disturbed the faithful members.<sup>10</sup> For example, there is an extant

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<sup>8</sup> Antonio Spadaro, "Synodal Church", *La Civiltà Cattolica: Union of Catholic Asia News*, 2022. <https://www.laciviltacatolica.com/the-synodal-church>. Accessed: 02/05/2022.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 13, (p. 694), s.v. "Early Church Synod" by P. Joannou.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, (p. 298).

Letter of Clement 1, Clement of Rome (30-100 AD), the First Apostolic Father, the Pope of the time, which was sent to the Presbyters, and Elders, and the People of the Church in Corinth describing a synod that took place. The date of the letter is putatively 68 AD. The synod was to forestall the breaking forth of schism and sedition among the Corinthians. It was an Exhortation Letter which admonished the Christian community to remain steadfast in humility and in the faith because there are rewards of faith that come from God. The Christian community was admonished to obey God rather than the authors of sedition; to cleave to God and to those who cultivate peace with godliness than those who hypocritically profess to desire it. The Letter of Exhortation was sent through some faithful and discreet members known as Claudius, Ephebus, Valerius, and Fortunatus. These men were proved to be faithful witnesses among the faith community.<sup>11</sup>

The letter of Cyprian of Carthage forwarded to Clement of Rome was written in the name of the local Church of Carthage, when the Christians in the community were looking forward to advice from the elder of the community. The response of Clement 1 who is mentioned in Philippians 4:3 as the close associate of St. Paul was read in many ancient Corinthian churches. The letter contains tones of evangelical truth making earnest appeals that penetrate the heart and conscience of the readers. The author promotes the best interest of the Church and imparted undying *koinonia* (Christian fellowship, unity, union) to the early Christians and continued to the later apostolic times and even to the contemporary times.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Philip Schaff, *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, “*The Apostolic Fathers, Justine Martyr, Irenaeus*”, vol. 1, (Christian Classics Ethereal Library: 1885), p. 6-70. <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.html>. Accessed: 29/04/2022.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

## Early Church Procedural Conciliar

### 1. *The Loci*

The places for the meetings/synods were the capitals of the Roman Provinces and were customarily convened by the bishops of the capital city to deal with different doctrinal issues and errors such as Montanism in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century (the principle of montanism alleged that the *Paraclete*, whom Jesus had promised was manifested to the world through Montanus, a prophet of the second century) and to settle the Easter date. In the second and up till the fourth centuries, conferences of bishops of different provinces took place regularly every year.<sup>13</sup>

### 2. *The Procedure*

St. Cyprian of Carthage conveys methods of proceeding of the assembly. The gatherings modelled on the rule of the procedure for the sessions of the Roman Senate.

- i. The presiding bishop assumed the role of the emperor.
- ii. The presiding bishop used the same words for the convocation of the council as were used in the imperial summons for the convening of the senate.
- iii. Instead of the Statue of Victory of Romans, the Bible was placed between the bishops and the emperor.
- iv. The conduct of the debate and responses of the delegates to the council of bishops followed the procedures of the Roman Senate.
- v. The Emperor had no right to vote because voting was the privilege of the bishops in the council.
- vi. The Principal Senator in the council (*Princeps Senatus*) was given to the Pope as the First Bishop among other bishops or his representative.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. vol. 4, (p. 299).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

This adaptation of senatorial procedure to the ecumenical councils preserved the autonomy of the bishops in doctrinal matters and guarantee to the Roman See as the first bishop and confer credence to the conciliar proceedings.<sup>15</sup> The erstwhile Roman custom was observed in the convocation and in the direction of the ecumenical councils in the third century.<sup>16</sup> The Council of Trent (1545-1563 AD) which handled doctrinal challenges and Protestant Reformation issues re-established the composition and convocation of general councils. The Council was convoked by Pope Paul III (d. 1549 AD). The right to vote at the council was given to the bishops, the General of Religious Orders and the representatives of Monastic Congregations. The discussions and decisions were on Religious matters; justification; and Reformations within the Church.<sup>17</sup>

### **Theology of General or Ecumenical Councils**

This theology looks at the implications of the General or Ecumenical Council as lived by the Church Fathers.

1. The Code of Canon Law confirms the teaching of the Church Fathers that the Roman Pontiff convokes an Ecumenical Council, presides over it or sends representative, transfers, suspends, or dissolves a council and approves its decrees, determines the matters to be treated in a council, and establishes the order to be observed.<sup>18</sup>
2. According to *Lumen Gentium*, the Roman Pontiff, as the successor of Peter is the head of the visible body of Christ, that is the Church. This document, following the teaching of the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., vol. 4, (p. 302).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> The Code of Canon Law, <https://www.vatican.va>, no. 338, par. 1&2.

Church Fathers, affirms that the Pontiff has the power of Primacy over all. He has full, supreme, and universal power over the Church. The bishops with the Roman Pontiff form a college; form an assembly under one head, expressing the unity of Christ.<sup>19</sup>

3. The supreme power in universal Church is exercised in a solemn way in an ecumenical council. A council is not an ecumenical unless the council is convoked and confirmed and accepted by the successor of Peter. The Roman Pontiff convokes these councils, presides over them in person or through his representative and confirms them. The bishops, living in all parts of the world, in their various metropolises exercise the collegiate power with the popes when the head of metropolis (the archbishop) calls the bishops together for collegiate action in the spirit of synodality.<sup>20</sup>
4. This collegial union is apparent in the mutual relations of the individual bishops in particular churches with the universal Church. It is the duty of all bishops to promote and safeguard the unity of faith and maintain discipline which are common to the whole Church.<sup>21</sup> The bishops receive their specific power and mission from God. They act as shepherds in service of their flock. The Roman Pontiff is the principal and foundation of the unity of the body of Christ. Without his office, there could not be a universal council, there would only be a meeting of local episcopate without the synergy, support, and authority of the supreme power.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 22. <https://www.vatican.va>. Accessed: 02/05/2022.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, no. 23.

<sup>22</sup> Bernard L. Marthaler, et al. Eds., *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Second Edition, vol. 4, (New York: Thomson Gale, 2003), p. 303-306, s.v. "Theology of General or Ecumenical Councils" by L. M. Orsy.

5. A local or particular synod concerns the regions or part of the Church. An Ecumenical or General Council concerns the issues of the whole Church. The pope acknowledges the universal council, confers the universal character expressly or tacitly by the reception of the decrees and decisions of a council as binding on the universal Church. The matters of faith and disciplines formulated and proposed for the approval of the pope must express the faith of the universal Church.<sup>23</sup>
6. If the decisions of a local gathering of bishops are not approved by the Roman Pontiff as binding the whole Church, a council remains a particular one, regional, national or provincial.<sup>24</sup>

### **The Power of an Ecumenical Council**

The individual power of a catholic bishop is an Episcopal power over his diocese which is supernatural in nature that is given to him by Christ through the act of consecration. This is the power to sanctify, teach and rule the people of God. The collective power of the episcopate extends over to the universal Church when this collective power is exercised in a solemn way when there is an ecumenical council.<sup>25</sup> The manifestation of the supernatural power is reposed in the formulations of decrees, decisions, constitutions and other forms of juridical pronouncements. This is a blend of natural and supernatural powers which reflects the divine and human characters of the Church.<sup>26</sup>

The power of an ecumenical council is a power that regulates the manner of worship in the Church, and directs the administration of the sacraments; the power to teach the faith and the power to govern the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

Church. The established laws from the ecumenical councils are binding in conscience of the people. The disciplinary decrees have permanent values insofar as they express unchangeable truth. If the decrees are not on the immutable truth, then they are subject to change by later councils or by the pope.<sup>27</sup> From the foregoing argument, an ecumenical council has full power over the Church and is the supreme council in the Church which exercise its power in a collegiate way through the collective power of the bishops in union with the Roman Pontiff.<sup>28</sup>

When there is a crisis of understanding of the faith or a moral necessity for an ecumenical council to be convoked, this council is the highest manifestations of the unity and diversity of the Episcopal body. An ecumenical council is not a body distinct from the Church; rather, it is an organ of the Church. It is the part of the greater unity of the whole Church, the mystical Body of Christ. Through this council, the faith of the Church is authentically expressed and the teachings of Christ are made manifest for God's people. The council is a great manifestation of the continuing gift of renewal that God offers to humanity.<sup>29</sup>

### ***The First Four Ecumenical Councils***

#### ***1. NICAEA 325 AD***

This council was convoked by Emperor Constance 1 (d. 350 AD) under Pope Sylvester 1 (d. 335 AD). The Emperor, Constance 1, the bishops and delegates gathered in Nicaea in 325 AD for the First Ecumenical Council against Arius who had denied the divine nature of Christ. The agitation had spread and had impinged on other religious

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.



issues and hence the need to involve the entire empire in order to address the stir through the participation of everyone in the empire.<sup>30</sup>

## *2. The Council of Constantinople 1 381 AD*

This council was convoked by Emperor Theodosius 1 (d. 395 AD) under Pope Damasus 1 (d. 384) against the heresy of Methodius regarding the Person of the Holy Spirit. The council defined the nature of the Holy Spirit.

## *3. The Council of Ephesus 431 AD:*

this council was convoked by Emperor Theodosius II (d. 450 AD) against Nestorius under Pope Celestine 1 (d. 432). The council defined the Motherhood of the Blessed Virgin Mary as *Theotokos* and voted six canons (decrees, laws).

## *4. The Council of Chalcedon 451 AD*

This council was convoked by Emperor Marcian (d. 457) under Pope Leo 1 (d. 461). The council defined the Person of Christ as having two natures- human and divine and voted eight doctrinal canons (decrees, laws).<sup>31</sup>

Pope Gregory 1 (d. 604) affirmed that the first four Ecumenical Councils deserved the same respect as the Four Gospels.<sup>32</sup> In the early church, the Christian emperors were recognized as representative of God on earth and had the responsibility to exercise material and spiritual role and had the duty to lead the people to God. They followed the established procedure of the Roman Senate in the council of bishops.<sup>33</sup> It was at the 16<sup>th</sup> Ecumenical council, the Council of Constance 1414-1418 AD which was convoked to end the Schism of

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 299.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 300-302.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

the Western Church that legislated that councils should be held at fixed intervals.<sup>34</sup>

From the first ecumenical council in 324 AD up till the 21<sup>st</sup>, which is the Second Vatican Council 1962-1965, the council Fathers voted on decisions concerning the understanding of the Sacred Scripture and the Living Tradition of the Church, on original sin, the issue of Justification and the sacraments including decrees on the reformation of the Liturgy.

### **Development in the Ecumenical Council**

Many doctrinal and disciplinary problems were handled in the early church by the Church Fathers and the Church's work and mission is ongoing. It was in the 21<sup>st</sup> ecumenical council (Vatican II) that the representatives of other churches and lay men and women attended the council sessions as observers. The council came to be known truly as ecumenical council in number of attendance and by broad representation of various Christian traditions.<sup>35</sup>

### **Church Fathers and the Local Synods**

#### *The Local Synods*

The practice of convoking ecumenical councils developed from the practice of local synods in order to make important decisions. The local synods were recommended to hold twice a year in the fifth canon of the Council of Nicaea 1 325 AD. The Metropolis or the Western Church or Patriarch of the Eastern Church convoked bishops under their jurisdiction to deliberate on disciplinary and doctrinal issues.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

The Church Fathers wrote Theses and taught by examples. In their pastoral expertise, pastoral consultations among the bishops were a regular occurrence especially among the bishops of Asia, Palestine, and Gaul particularly on doctrinal matters. For example, yearly synods were held in Cappadocia and in Asia Provinces which were laden with various heresies. There were instances of frequent, yearly gathering of bishops in synodality in the 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries in all the established provinces.<sup>37</sup> The frequent synods were needed to preserve the integrity of faith and to emphasize the obligation of observance of the canon and moral regulations and promote ecclesiastical unity. Hence, there was the necessity to organize regularly the gatherings of metropolitan; provincial; and regional synods throughout the universal Church.<sup>38</sup>

#### *Representation and Decisions in Synods*

The bishops were not seen as the representatives of their different dioceses but were the bearers of the Episcopal gifts of grace through whom God communicated His presence and who were able to arrive at various decisions with the help of the Holy Spirit who was piloting the affairs of the Synods. The bishops made decisions in the name of the Church because they were acquainted with the problems which were pummelling the flock and were enlightened by the Holy Spirit to come up the solutions. The decisions were reached by voting and sometimes with unanimous acclamation. Their regulations were recorded as the Church's canons or laws.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Methlader et al, (vol. 13) p. 694-695.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

### **Sample of Local Synod by St. Cyprian of Carthage**

There was a synod in early Northern African Church concerning absolution of *lapsi* and re-baptism of apostates under Pope Cornelius (d. 253 AD). There were series of synods organized by St. Cyprian of Carthage between 251 and 253 and a subsequent one in 254 AD. The issue was about the practice of readmitting to Holy Communion any *lapsus* who was in danger of death.

Between 249 and 250 AD, the emperor Trajan Decius (d. 251 AD) sent an edict which required the inhabitants of the Roman Empire to sacrifice to the gods. He also inaugurated empire-wide persecution of Christians. St. Cyprian who was the bishop of Carthage went into hiding. Many Christians including clergy complied with the edict and some obtained false written letter which attested to their fulfilment of the edict's demand. When St. Cyprian returned to Carthage in 251 AD, he had to resolve the prevalent problem of whether to admit those who lapsed and had repented and were in danger of death and wanted to return to the Christian fold. They were referred to as *lapsi*. Some bishops in the region re-admitted them while others did not.

St. Cyprian's response was to call a synod of bishops together with the clergy and the laity to discuss the issue. The synod confirmed the practice of readmitting to communion any *lapsus* who was in danger of death; it readmitted to immediate communion those people who performed penance; and it made decisions in favour of the people who were to perform penance until being readmitted to communion before death.<sup>40</sup>

After the decisions were made, there were some people who opposed these resolutions and they were in two sides. On one side, those who

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<sup>40</sup> Geoffrey D. Dunn, "Censuimus: Cyprian and Episcopal synod of 253", *Latomus*, T. 63, Fasc. 3 (July–Sept., 2004): p. 672-688.

followed Novatian who was the alternative bishop of Rome denied any reconciliation to the *lapsi*. On the other side, those who followed Fortunatus, one of the rival bishops which were set up in Carthage offered reconciliation to all of the *lapsi*.<sup>41</sup> Hence, there were the two camps identified as laxists and rigorists.

When there were too many dissents on decisions of the 251 AD synod, another synod was convoked by Cyprian in 252 AD to reconsider the decision of the previous synod. The lay people, presbyters and deacons together with their African bishops were in attendance and were present at the intervening synods that followed up till 256 AD.<sup>42</sup>

At the subsequent synod in 252 AD, the bishops decided that they would offer immediate reconciliation to those *lapsi* who had performed penance for the past few years. The purpose was to equip the *lapsi* for the impending persecutions and prepare for the struggles which were approaching. St. Cyprian thought that the Christians ought to be equipped with the strength that comes from the Body and Blood of Christ. He believed that the shepherds must not abandon their sheep at such perilous times but gather them together. In the name of his fellow bishops, St. Cyprian confirmed the pastoral and priestly responsibilities of a bishop.<sup>43</sup>

The Synod adjudged to “examine the cases of each one, and to grant peace to the lapsed, rather than furnish arms to those were about to fight...”<sup>44</sup> This decision as contained in the 53<sup>rd</sup> Epistle of St. Cyprian of Carthage is the letter expressing the decision of the entire African synod on the matter at the time.<sup>45</sup> The Synod reached an agreed policy

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Philip Schaff, ed. *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 5, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, (Grand Rapids, MI: 1819-1893), p. 826. <https://www.ccel.org>. Accessed: 01/05/2022.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

but St. Cyprian accepted the freedom of bishops in the implementation of the decision. He admonished all the bishops to comply with the decisions. He admonished them that if they would persist in not following the agreed policy, they would give an account of themselves before God.<sup>46</sup>

According to Geoffrey Dunn, St. Cyprian described the outcome of the synod through the use of the verb “*censere*.” In classical usage, it is used to express an opinion, a proposal or piece of advice, an order, a resolution or decree. *Censere* could be used by individuals or by deliberative bodies as a whole. Sometimes, it could refer to an opinion or recommendation that could be accepted or rejected. Sometimes it indicates a recommendation of which rejection would have serious consequences. Sometimes it amounts to an order to be carried out and sometimes the precise force of the matter is not obvious.<sup>47</sup>

Geoffrey explains further that St. Cyprian's usage of the verb *censuimus* in the presence of 42 bishops in 253 AD translates into “We proposed” “We recommend”, “We advised”, “We resolved”, “We approved”, “We decided”, “We decreed”, “We have agreed”. The word *Censuimus* has a force of a decision. The synod has its own power of enforcement. The Synod's decision was for all the churches in the region as a resolution to the problem of the *lapsi*.<sup>48</sup> The synodal decisions could not be expressed as legislative or as an executive directive that were binding. The synod did not have the authority to impose the decision on individual bishops or to enforce the decree in different particular churches because each bishop has/had the freedom of acceptance.<sup>49</sup> St. Cyprian expected and hoped that every bishop would agree in principle and abide by the synod's decisions as morally

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<sup>46</sup> Geoffrey D. Dunn, “*Censuimus*”, p. 681.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p. 683.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 686-688.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

binding. The synod issued a decree but was robed in the language of recommendation.<sup>50</sup>

### **Lessons for a Synodal Church Today**

1. The important lesson for us today is not on how to translate “*censuimus*” but that we consider the force or the *impact* of what was decided. The decision counted as nothing unless the individual bishops are *persuaded* to support the decision. St. Cyprian did not want the bishops to sidetrack the decisions. He did not want them to ignore the advice.<sup>51</sup> St. Cyprian hoped that the bishops will dutifully fulfil their pastoral duties by *concurring in the implementation of the decisions of the Synod*.
2. The Post-Synodal consultations and letter-writings of the Epistle 50-53 of St. Cyprian of Carthage were the ways in which the bishops of Carthage promoted unity among the local churches. The Synod communicated the decisions to the bishops to be implemented and expressed the decision in a phrase that portrays respect and autonomy of the local churches. The synod had decided what to do but could not order it to be done. It could only appeal to the generosity and pastoral acumen of the *bishops to do what was necessary in order to fulfil the pastoral and moral obligations to the Christian communities*.<sup>52</sup>
3. A bishop exercises his pastoral ministry in conjunction with other bishops through vigorous negotiation, debate, persuasion, and patronage. From the example of the early Northern African bishops in 253 AD, there was an episcopally-led Christian churches where bishops interacted with each other on the *basis of persuasions and not on power control*.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

## Recommendations

1. Whether it is a local or ecumenical assembly, a synod has three phases of development: listening, decision, and action. This means that when a synod is convoked, the participation of all God's people is expected to be activated through consultation in all the processes of preparation of the synod with the aim of listening to all the voices that are an expression of the People of God in the local Church. The all round participation gives a meaningful and balanced image of the local Church, reflecting different vocations, ministries, charisms, competencies, social status, and geographical origin.<sup>54</sup>
2. In the synodal Church of today, Pope Francis encourages each particular Church to undertake a resolute process of discernment, purification, and reformation.<sup>55</sup> *The reformation appertains to the synodal and missionary conversion of the entire People of God.* This reformation of the Church requires making *a step forward in adopting a renewed synodal praxis* that is able to engage everyone. This requires, among other things, an updating of synodal structures, processes and procedures. It implies, in particular, a renewal of doctrine, the norms and the praxis of the synod of bishops, so that this collegial institution can express and animate a Church that is more synodal and missionary.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Antonio Spadaro, "Synodal Church", *La Civiltà Cattolica: Union of Catholic Asia News*, 2022. <https://www.laciviltacatolica.com/the-synodal-church>.

<sup>55</sup> Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation: Evangelii Gaudium*. On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's world, November 24, 2013. <https://www.vatican.va>. Accessed: 02/05/2022.

<sup>56</sup> Antonio Spadaro, "Synodal Church", *La Civiltà Cattolica: Union of Catholic Asia News*, 2022. <https://www.laciviltacatolica.com/the-synodal-church>.



## **Conclusion**

“Synod” comes from the Greek word *syn-hodos*, meaning “the same road” or “the same path.” Synods were common in the first centuries of Christianity which gave the Church Fathers the opportunities to meet and discuss issues of importance for the life of the Church. Synod is not about meeting to produce documents or decrees, but an exercise of faith gingering the bishops to listen to one another, collaborate and forge a renewed form of life for the entire people of God. A synod is a process in which the bishops and the people of God come together to address a particular issue facing the people of God guided by the Holy Spirit for deeper evangelization in the history of revelation and salvation. It is therefore a religious meeting in which the deliberations are on theological issues. The purpose is to provide pastoral care and common pursuit for the Church with universal validity.

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## **Communion, Participation, and Mission for a Synodal Church: A Critical Analysis of the Preparatory Document of the Synod**

***Sr. Maria Regina Osondu, DMMM***

### **Abstract**

*In the second half of the twentieth century, through divine inspiration, Pope Paul VI instituted the synod of bishops as a permanent institution in the Church. Synod of Bishops is to enliven the Church and to meet the challenges of a turbulent world. In earlier centuries, synods were the patrimony of the hierarchies of the Church – the Bishops, Cardinals, and the Supreme Pontiff. But today, the Church has become one global family and synods have included all members of the divine family to participate collaboratively in synodal discussion for the spiritual, moral, and general well-being of each member according to each one's state of life. Hence the Church is fully becoming a synodal church that listens to the voices of clerics, consecrated persons, and laity. To enable appropriate discussion that would lead to the spiritual and moral growth of the family of God, His Holiness. Pope Francis developed a preparatory document. This document is a guiding star toward the 2023 General Assembly or Synod. Everyone entrusted with this synodal process should critically analyze this document with the guidance of the Holy Spirit.*

## **Introduction**

From the era of the first apostles of the Lord Jesus, the Church had called assemblies to discuss matters that affect the growth of the Body of Christ. The apostles convoked the first Council in Jerusalem to discuss the disagreement between Paul and Jewish converts to Christianity. The Jewish converts to Christianity insisted that the Gentile converts should observe the Jewish law of circumcision to become Christians. At the end of the council of Jerusalem, the apostles decided that circumcision is not a criterion for the Gentiles to become Christians. From then on Popes had convoked several general councils or synods. Each of these synods unveiled new dimensions of the life of the Church without contradicting prior doctrines. Hence, His Holiness, Pope Francis convoked the 16<sup>th</sup> Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops entitled “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission,” to be held in 2023, and on July 9<sup>th</sup>, 2021, he released its preparatory document to give the faithful the opportunity to read, meditate, reflect, pray, listen, and hear the Holy Spirit speaking to their hearts, (Inspiration). This reflection period will give the participants the opportunity to accurately interpret the document to promulgate sound doctrines that will advance the spiritual and moral growth of the people of God. There is also the silence dimension in studying this document. Christ, though God, made important decisions after he spends private hours in communion with his Father. Therefore, participants in the analysis of this synod document should treasure moments of interior silence to hear the whispering voice of 'Truth' like Elijah the holy prophet of God.

Although participants in the preparation of the synodal document work collaboratively, topics with ambiguity or have double meaning need experts for authentic clarification. Such clarifications will broaden the perception of participants of the important assembly before their decision making. As a synodal community of God, participants should

prayerfully immerse themselves into the spirit of the Lord since they have embarked a journey that to the spiritual and moral of members of a divinely united family. Hence, experts in various parts of the document should scrutinize every response from participants in the light of the scriptures and traditions of the Church. As the title of this synod is “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission,” His Holiness, Pope Francis calls for honest contribution on issues militating against local churches in various parts of the world. Accurate contribution will enable the Church of this millennium to mitigate problems she had encountered and build up the faithful as did synods and general assemblies in previous millennia.

### **A critical Analysis of the Preparatory Document of 2023 Synod**

In every generation, there has arisen in the Church the need to convoke a general assembly or synod. Convocation of synod assemblies invigorate the faithful when the spark of faith is fading or if there is need to promulgate important articles of the faith. Celebrated under the sovereign Pontiff, Paul III, on the thirteenth day of the month of December 1545, was the Council of Trent in which the Church promulgated important articles of faith that the Church values, believes in and practices to the present. At the council of Trent, the Church promulgated decrees from manner of Christian living, The Trinitarian symbol of faith, indissolubility of matrimonial sacrament ..., to the offering prayers and petitions for the souls in Purgatory -the last session of the Council of Trent. (1-25 sessions of the Council of Trent, 1545 - 1563).<sup>[1]</sup>

The dogmatic Constitution on the Church, (*Lumen Gentium*), promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on November 21, 1964, called the faithful to believe that Christ is the light of all the People and Nations. In *Lumen Gentium*, the Church addresses the issue of Christ as the light that all men should follow. The synod states that since the

Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race, it desires now to unfold more fully to the faithful of the Church and to the whole world its own inner nature and universal mission, (Lumen Gentium, The Mystery of the Church, #1)<sup>[2]</sup>. Although man lost his original grace due to his fallen nature, God the eternal Father, who in his wisdom and goodness created the world did not leave man to himself but ceaselessly offered helps to salvation through Jesus Christ (Lumen Gentium, #2)<sup>[3]</sup>

On March 25, 1996, John Paul II convoked the Vita Consecrata, (Consecrated life), a synod that revealed that the life of consecration-the evangelical Counsel, practiced by non-clerics, men and women is unmistakable evidence that consecrated life is not something isolated and marginal, but a reality which affects the whole Church. In this general assembly, the synod fathers stated that the evangelical nature of consecrated life and in effect, the consecrated life is at the very heart of the Church as a decisive element for her mission is consecration is the manifestation of the nine calling of the members of the Church as a Bride toward union with her one Spouse, (The consecrated life: a gift to the church, #3, Vita Consecrata).<sup>[4]</sup> the fruits of different synods convoked by different Popes yielded immense spiritual fruits that had given substance to the life of the faithful.

### **Preparatory Document**

His Holiness, Pope Francis produced an elaborate guideline as beacon for the synod participants during their deliberations. This guideline is to aid the synod members to listen and consult the faithful in their particular or local churches because this synod is a journey that will renew the face of catholicity during this century and beyond. Number three of this document outlines and clarifies prominent characteristics of the contemporary context, biblical references aimed to nourish

meditation and prayerful reflections, illustration of the fundamental theological references for a better comprehension and practice of synodality, (The Preparatory Document, #3) <sup>[5]</sup>. This document is methodologically set out to be an indispensable handbook for uniformity and unity of purpose in all deliberations.

It is appropriate that as each millennium evolves with problems peculiar to it, the reigning Pontiff should challenge such problems with their corresponding measures. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has convoluted problems that erupted at the implementation phase of the second Vatican Council. Therefore, His holiness, Pope Francis deems it apposite to include the implementation phase of the results of Vatican II, that he calls a gift and a task, when says “It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium, (Preparatory document:16<sup>th</sup> Ordinary General Assembly, #1) <sup>[6]</sup> This journey follows in the wake of the Church's renewal proposed by the Second Vatican Council is both a gift and a challenge to that the synodal Church, in Communion, Participation, and Mission, (Preparatory document,16<sup>th</sup> Ordinary General Assembly, #1) <sup>[7]</sup> The Synodal Church ought to determine suitable measures that meet and exceed the challenges posed by practicing the recommendations of the second Vatican in local churches throughout the world. Recommendations such as greater participation of the laity in the Church and the celebration of the various liturgies in vernacular that enables every member of the family of God to hear the Word of God proclaimed in his own Language as on the day of Pentecost, (Acts 2:6). <sup>[8]</sup> The apostles of the Lord waited in prayer to receive strength through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit before they began to proclaim the Gospel. Likewise, participants in this synod of Communion, Participation, and Mission that is a journey of unity ought to be one in faith and intensify their listening ability through prayer to hear the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit as did Elijah the prophet of God, (1 kings 19:11-13). <sup>[9]</sup>

## **The Call to Journey Together**

The Catholic Church is the unity of all believers under one visible head on earth and one invisible head, the Lord Jesus Christ. Under the visible head on earth, the Church is hierarchical- the bishop of Rome that is the bishop of the Universal Church, the bishops of local Churches, and the bishop of nuclei-Church who is the father of each family. The universal Church comprises the clerics, the religious, and the laity. These multilevel of the Church such as Universal and local, clerics, religious, and laity will pose challenges to the synodal participants solve the problems peculiar to the Church of this millennium amenable. Therefore, the call to journey together is a universal invitation to members of the Church throughout the universe deliberate on issues that will renew the universal Body of Christ. Synodality deliberative journey can only be effective when synod participants listen to and understand the directives of the Holy Spirit. On one hand the synod fathers and participants need to see themselves and each other as fellow custodians in listening, hearing, and perceiving the voice of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, they need to realize that each should remain open to the surprises the Holy Spirit who, like the wind “blows where it wills; you can hear its sound but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes” (Jn 3:8 Preparatory Document for the 16th Ordinary General Assembly, #2).<sup>[10]</sup> The call to journey together is fulfilling the recommendations of the second Vatican Council, which among other things, called for a greater participation of the Laity in the ministry of the Church. His Holiness, Pope Francis expects 16<sup>th</sup> General Assembly to a bring greater unity and harmony among all the members of the Catholic Church, Christians of different communions, other children of God that are not in the Christendom without compromising the authentic teachings entrusted to the apostles through the ages.

The Church had always lived and socializes harmoniously with believers and none-believers in communities. However, faith is



different from worldly socialization although faith in God can shape social behavior. Worthy of note is that worldly socialization is not congruent with Catholic faith and reverence for holy place of worship. As people of other Christian faith, heathens, Muslims, and atheists are ignorant of reverence for holy things, they cannot revere, value, and cherish what they do not believe. To admit into the Lord's presence will be setting up a desolating abomination in the House of God. When an ecumenical council is proclaimed, it should be celebrated outside the house of God so the holy and unholy people in the conference can move and circulate at will because such a place has been allotted for them according to the book of Revelations, "But exclude the outer court of the temple; do not measure it, for it has been handed over to the Gentiles, who will trample the holy city for forty-two months", (Rev. 11:2).<sup>[11]</sup> On the other hand, the Church should not desecrate her holy of holies due to a purported unity of all that has been created with soul and body, otherwise the prophecy of Daniel may be fulfilled as it is written, "But when you see the abomination of desolation standing where it ought not, then let them that live in Judea flee to the mountains," (Mark 13:14).<sup>[12]</sup> Societal norms might change following itself, but the word of God abides forever. The world wants immediate gratification. It has no patience, and it is afraid to struggle; the Church as a spiritual guide ought not compete with them. The Church should continue to redirect the steps of the world and remind it to remember to strive to enter through the narrow gate that leads to life for broad is the road that leads to destruction (Matt. 7:13).<sup>[13]</sup> As the Church embarks on synodal journey as one, she can create and regenerate Christian communities, promote Christian charity and love, and the oneness for which Christ prayed without throwing her precious germs to the swine or give holy things to dogs because the swine or dogs will trample them underfoot and tear you to pieces, (Matt. 7:6)<sup>[14]</sup>. Pagan or cult leaders and Muslims worldwide do not introduce Christians and non-members into the core

premises. Muslims believe that Christians and any non-adherent to Islamic faith are infideles, (def.2).<sup>[15]</sup>

This 16<sup>th</sup> General Assembly is an invitation for the universal Church to grow and proclaim the Gospel according to the mission entrusted to her and to encourage inclusivity. Thus, those that deem themselves marginalized now have opportunity to express themselves through positive contributions. The ecclesial process, as far as it calls for reaching out to believers and non-believers, Christians of other communion, Muslims, and Hindus, ought to adhere to the Church's authentic gospel message. When a Catholic Christian's behavior accords with his preaching, non-Catholics can be edified and will begin to reflect to become converted. The global pandemic, COVID-19, a global invisible terrorist, did awaken the spirit of oneness of humans living in our universe and undoubtedly reminded people who isolate others that all are one and no one lives and dies for himself only, (Preparatory document, #5).<sup>[16]</sup> Scripture stated that if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's (Romans14:8-9)<sup>[17]</sup> can be interpreted to mean believers in the Lord. When Christians immerse themselves in the love of one another without the dichotomy that springs up because of color, race, or nationality, the Church will become really one because she has conquered the non-biblical elements that breed division. When the Christians live in harmony, people outside the faith might observe and comment on such fraternal love with admiration and begin a reflection and conversation on conversion. The Master, the Shepherd himself, speaks of other flocks that are in different fold, he himself will carter for them so that there should be one flock and one shepherd, (John 10:16).<sup>[18]</sup>

The Church though not deliberately, had hurt people both within and outside the church. Some of such wounds are deeply rooted in the consciousness and subconsciousness of the victim especially when the

perpetrator is hierarchy of the Church. The victims need complete healing, but in what form will the healing come that can restore their hope and confidence? How can the Church destroy the innocence of Minors, the weak, and the vulnerable that the clerics and religious stole from them and their families? How can the Church heal the wounds of the Poor from whom the Church wriggle her meal for the day by enforcing Annual Mission Collection (AMC), or whose family members are denied Christian burial due to unmet Church financial obligation? The universal Church has the obligation to fix these uncharitable practices of local bishops and priest enforce as the law of the Church; so that local bishops and priests should care for real widows, orphans, and visitors. The Church has sustained more internal injuries through corrupt practices that could make the members loose faith. Worth of mention are the sufferings of Minors and the vulnerable “due to sexual abuse, the abuse of power, and the abuse of conscience perpetrated by a significant number of clerics and consecrated persons,” (Preparatory Document, #6).<sup>[19]</sup> These wounds need healing to radiate infectious joy in the countenance from her members that will induce even pagans to confess the authenticity of Christian life. As written in the preparatory document, “For too long the cry of the victims has been a cry that the Church has not been able to hear sufficiently.”<sup>[20]</sup> These are deep wounds that are difficult to heal and constitute obstacles, to advance in the direction of “journeying together.” Therefore, as the Church embarks on this synod of Communion, Participation and Mission, all her members should dispose themselves to the direction of the wind of the Holy Spirit to heal the wounds inflicted.

### **Infidelity of the Church and the Action of the Holy Spirit**

The Church is a community of saints and sinners. Members of the Church are humans created in original innocence but corrupted by the

original fall. Since the fall, God did not relinquish man entirely. He promised man victory over the tempter's deceit, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, your offspring, and her offspring. You will bruise her heel and she will crush your head, (Gen. 3)"<sup>[21]</sup> The incarnation, birth, passion, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ fulfilled the promised redemption and to remain with His Church to the end of time and sent the Holy Spirit, the advocate. Yet man continues to drown in various forms of infidelity that has wounded the Church of the 21<sup>st</sup> millennium. However, through the wounds and pains inflicted by the consequences of sin, the Holy Spirit has directed the Church, not only to heal wounds but also to find theological interpretation that will enable the reformation of the Church, (Preparatory document, #7),<sup>[22]</sup> Prior articulations of the previous synods such as inclusion of the laity in ministries of the Church are yielding positive fruits in the Church. Youth ministries, the institution of Catechists, and greater participation of women in church's ministries is a clearer indication of the successful acceptance of outcomes of the synodal assemblies of 2018 and 2019. Youths ministering to youths in the Catholic Church have greater impact on them more than when they hear the message of the kingdom from only adults.

## **21<sup>st</sup> Flaws of the Church**

The Church in the 16<sup>th</sup> century experienced sexual abuse of children and females. To prevent this crime against holy things, the Church created cubicles that prevented physical contact between the confessant and the confessor. Weitse de Boer wrote that in the early 16th century that Erasmus, a Dutch scholar lamented that the faithful often fall into the hands of priests who, under the pretence of confession, commit acts which impure acts. Erasmus continues that the confessional secrecy and immunity from legal actions produced the fertile ground that breed the unchecked predators that included monks

from prestigious and well-respected orders in the church, such as Jesuits, Franciscans, Augustinians, etc.<sup>[23]</sup> By the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Church Law proclaimed solicitation of unseemingly things (sexual abuse, *sollicitatio ad turpia*) as a form of sacrilege against the sacrament of penance and a potential sign of heresy, and actions that are worth of prosecution, (Erasmus).<sup>[24]</sup>

Clerics and religious have of the 21<sup>st</sup> century repeated the sexual abuse of female and children the Church suffered in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The harm that the present sexual abuse has caused is greater due to the communication highway that exposes everything good or evil. Yet the victims have almost irreparably wounded. However, the Church has presently prosecuted to the extent of defrocking pedophile scandalous clerics, from the lowest to the topmost. Will this prosecution induce wholehearted repentance or prevent the unexposed predators from further hurt to the Church of our Lord Jesus Christ? How would the synodal Church journeying as a family prevent further hurt from hierarchical members entrusted with the spiritual and moral growth of their brothers and sisters? Our Lord Jesus, in the gospels according to (Luke 7:2, Matt. 18: 6),<sup>[25]</sup> says that it would be better for a millstone hung around the neck of a man and thrown into the bottom of the sea than that he should cause one of the little ones to sin. What weapons can the Church give to her ministerial priests and indeed, any Christians plagued by the epidemics of irresistible appetite of lust? Solution to stop sexual predators in the Church could be more crucial in healing the wounds and bringing forgiveness than to desecrate the House of God with the presence of non-believers, Atheists, Moslems, or Hindus.

## **Persecution of the Church**

Although the Church accommodates people of other faiths and religions, the church is marginalized or even persecuted especially in countries where they are in minority. How can journeying together

reimage the mindset of those preoccupied with how to stop the saving mission of Christ? The challenge of the Synod fathers of Communion, Participation, Mission, is to devise means to promote healing and forgiving. They are to devise theological apologies that could heal the wounded in the Church as well as to forgive those that are obsessed with her destruction. Although the Church has endured persecution from the beginning, even from the hand of Saul that became the apostle of the Gentiles, consequently, the Church endured persecutions from the hands of her enemies. Enemies that did not wish the seed of Christianity to germinate. Prominent among them was Saul who approved of the stoning of St. Stephen. Saul was not satisfied with the death of St. Stephen, so he set out to Damascus to imprison believers. He was blinded with the light from heaven on his way to Damascus to persecute the believers. This early persecution of the Church lead to his dramatic conversion, he became Paul and apostle of the Gentiles, (Acts 9: 3-5) <sup>[26]</sup> Mark Galli wrote a Gallery of the Persecuting Emperors of early Church:

1. Nero, (54–68) Savage madman martyred Peter and Paul at the peak of his drunken persecution committed suicide.
2. Domitian (81–96) who alluded in the book of Revelation as a hideous beast. He persecuted both Jews and Christians. In addition, in 95 AD he executed and exiled Flavius Clemens, Consul and his wife, Flavia Domitilla, who were Christians. However, Clemens, Stephanus an ex-slave murdered of him.
3. Trajan (98–117) Skilled ruler, established policies for treating Christians even though relatively temperate. He became the first emperor known to persecute Christians as fully distinct from the Jews. St. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, among others suffered death during his reign.

4. Severus, though friendly toward Christians from the onset of his reign later developed great hostility for Christians. In 202 he issued an edict that forbade further conversions to Judaism and Christianity and the persecution of Christians followed, especially in North Africa. During this persecution, Severus martyred Perpetua and her servant Felicitas, Clement of Alexandria, and the father of Origen. At the death of Severus, the Early Church experienced peace for fifty years under the reign of Maximus (235-238).
5. Under Marcus Aurelius (161-180). anti-Christian literature flourished for the first time. Prominent of them was 'the True Doctrine' by Celsus. Aurelius allowed anti-Christian informers to multiply, and this resulted in the fierce persecution of Christians in various regions of his empire. He martyred the local bishop of Lyons and Justin the first Christian philosophy, (Mark Galli).<sup>[27]</sup>
6. Emperor Valerian, (253-260) blamed Christians for inciting civil strife in his empire. Because of this he ordered the persecution and execution of Pope Sixtus and Lawrence in Rome and Cyprian in Carthage. He condemned Christians to tenants of imperial estates to the mines confiscated their property. His reign of terror and persecution of Christians ended with his captivity.

Despite these persecutions the Church of Christ still invigorates according to Christ's promise that the gates of hell will not prevail against his church and that he would be with his church to the end of the world, (Matt. 16:18, 28:20).<sup>[29]</sup> The synodal church of this millennium should have the faith as little a mustard seed, she would move mountains and dispel the prevalent problems that cloud the Church of our time. She should listen to the voice and action the Lord Jesus during his teaching on the Eucharist, "Amen, Amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his Blood, you will not have

life within you. . .” (John 6:53).<sup>[30]</sup> The Lord did not compromise his teaching to impress the crowd that withdrew from his discipleship. Defense of the Church that Christ entrusted in the hands of the apostles is a collective responsibility and it begins with the hierarchy of the church to the laity

There are questions that demand calculated, honest, reflective answers. How will the Church become color-blind as not to differentiate between colors that makeup her members? How can She not know that this person is a European while the other is an African? How can the Church not select my country, nephew, or a person from my vicinity when her qualified members are to fill key positions in the Church? When will the Church – the local bishops and priests relieve the burden of the poorest of the poor in their dioceses and parishes, and visit them with love and compassion and mitigate their burden of compulsory annual mission collection, (AMC) but accept their widow's might? How would Christians not understand that their fellow Christian is from a forbidden caste and is not worthy of association? The church may have grown with these flaws when there were no communication highways, when people thought that Rome was in heaven, and the Vatican, the Citadel of God. In this millennium, the global family has shrunk so much that the Church's and societal ills are instantly exposed.

Effective synodal journey needs complete re-engineering of masked hatred members have for each other camouflaged in compulsory Church law. Then would the Church raise one voice in supplication and her Lord who not a God of violence will defend her. Then she will, from the strength from her lord have courage to welcome people of different faiths and beliefs without compromising the sacredness of the house of God. The Church will not need, as in the eleventh century, (1099), Knight Templers, a Christian army, to defend her. The Lord Jesus did not however promise peace and tranquility to his Church. He assured her that she would experience trials and tribulations in the world,



nevertheless, she should take courage because he has conquered the world, (John 12:3) <sup>[31]</sup> This is consoling as the synodal family journey together that the Lord clearly understands the Church's tribulation and would not abandon her on the turbulent sea.

## **Conclusion**

The call to Communion, Participation, and Mission in the Church as a family that is a consecrated life and pathway toward a synodal church is consistent with the Church practice since the apostolic era. They called assemblies to discuss matters that affect the Spiritual and moral growth of the body of Christ. The Council of Jerusalem discuss the disagreement between Paul's mission among the Gentile converts and the observance of Jewish custom of circumcision as insinuated by Jewish converts to Christianity. The Council mandate sets the Gentile free from circumcision obligation before adherence. The second Vatican Council called the laity to greater participation in the ministries of the Church. The Church expects the outcome of this 16<sup>th</sup> General Assembly to help in healing the wounds that the vulnerable members of the Church sustained from the hands of priests and religious leaders, the hurt felt by the weak and the marginalized, the poor and needy. This synod should determine how to involve or bring people of different religion, atheist, Muslims, and indeed, all humans closer into God's House without throwing her pearls to swine that would trample the pearl and come after her. Therefore, participants of this important Council should work collaboratively, spend time in prayer, observe positive silence that help them to hear the still small voice of God that the holy Spirit communicates. Above all everyone should see each other as possessing the gift of the Holy Spirit to enable the universal Church to hear and understand them speaking in their native Language, to the Glory of God and salvation of man, Amen.

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## **Endnotes**

1. (1-25 sessions of the Council of Trent, 1545 -1563).
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3. Lumen Gentium, #2
4. The consecrated life: a gift to the church, #3, Vita Consecrata
5. The Preparatory Document, #3
6. Preparatory document: 16<sup>th</sup> Ordinary General Assembly, #1
7. Preparatory document, 16<sup>th</sup> Ordinary General Assembly, document #1
8. Day of Pentecost, (Acts. 2:6)
9. Voice of the Holy Spirit as did the Elijah the prophet of God, (1Kings 19:11-13)
10. The Holy spirit blows where it wills, Jn 3:8 Preparatory Document for the 16th Ordinary General Assembly, #2.
11. ... the place has been allotted to the Gentiles, (Rev. 11:2)
12. Then let them that live in Judea flee to the mountains, (Mark 13:14).
13. The way is easy that leads to destruction and those who enter by it are many, (Matt. 7:13).
14. Do not give what is holy to dogs and do not throw your pearls to swine (Matt. 7:6).
15. Christians or persons who do not accept the Islamic faith; kafir to be infidels (def. 2)
16. all are one and no one lives and dies for himself only, (Preparatory document, #5).
17. whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's (Romans 14: 8-9).
18. there should be one flock and one Shepherd, (John:16)
19. Sufferings inflicted to the vulnerable members of the Church by clerics ... (Preparatory Document, #6)
20. For too long the cry of the victims has been a cry that the Church has not been able to hear sufficiently."
21. Enmity between the woman and the serpent (Gen.3)
22. Confessional secrecy and immunity from legal actions produced the fertile ground that breed unchecked predators in the church

23. Priests, under the pretense of confession, commit acts which are not fit to be mentioned
24. designating as sacrilege and worthy of prosecution, soliciting impure things in the confessional (Ersamus).
25. it would be better for a millstone to hung round the neck of a man and drown ..., (Luke 17:2, Matt. 18:6)
26. conversion of Paul, the apostle of the Gentiles, (Acts
27. In addition, Justin, the first Christian philosopher, was also martyred, (Mark Galli)
28. During the reign of Emperor Valerian, (253–260)
29. The gate of hell will not prevail against his Church and that he would be with his Church to the end of the World, (Matt. 16:18, 28:20).
30. . Lord Jesus during his teaching on the Eucharist (John 6: 53 -),
31. . the Church should take courage because Christ has conquered the world, (John 12:3).

## **A Synodal Church: The Church in a Journey or a Journey in the Church?**

***Innocent Joshua Chiawa Igbokwe, OCD, PhD.<sup>1</sup>***

### **Abstract**

*Observation after facilitating few sessions of the people of God on the synod on synodality shows that it fills the atmosphere of the Church with the mixture of extreme doubts and exceeding joy. This article, therefore, is an attempt to contribute to the debate and provide footpaths for fruitful and enriching discussions as the synod goes on. The question that is most prominent in this discussion is whether the synod is the Church in movement or a movement in the Church. This goes on to point out that the Church of the future will be largely determined by the way we see and handle this synod.*

**Keywords:** Church, Holy Spirit, Journey, Synodality.

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### **<sup>1</sup>About the Author**

Innocent Joshua Chiawa Igbokwe of the Holy Spirit is a Carmelite priest. He hails from Imezi-Owa in Ezeagu Local Government of Enugu State. He holds bachelor degrees in Co-operatives and Rural Development; Philosophy and Theology; a post-graduate diploma in Education; a masters degree in Theology; a masters degree in Education, and a doctorate in Education. He has over 50 international and national publications to his credit, with some book chapters. His areas of interest are: Leadership and Management in Education, Artificial Intelligence in Educational Management, Conflict Resolution Practices, Teacher Assessment, Entrepreneurship Education, Educational Policies and Planning, Quality Assurance, Critical Thinking, Mentoring, Christian Spirituality, Mystical Theology, and Child Protection and Safeguarding. He was a lecturer at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, and also a writer of motivational and spiritual books. He is currently the Provincial Delegate of the Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites in Nigeria and Ghana.

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## **Introduction**

The call for a synodal Church is a hope for the world and an attempt to rediscover the true face of the Gospel, to know who is truly a Christian. Unfortunately, not all the sons and daughters of the Church have this understanding of a synodal Church. Infact, “a lot of Catholics are, if you haven't noticed, somewhat ambivalent about the Synod on Synodality”[1]. This ambivalence is filled with doubts, questions and suspicions. This has nothing to do with conservatives or progressives. Some conservatives, progressives and neutralists are excited about the synod while some are sad. Some have joyfully keyed into the process with enthusiasm while some reluctantly cooperated. Others declined participation and jettisoned it all together. Some embrace it with higher expectations as others participate with doubts and suspicions. Some people are apprehensive. Others are expectant. Some see it as an opportunity to strengthen doctrine while some see it as opportunity to deconstruct it. Some see it as opportunity to enhance ecclesial communion while some see it as opportunity to endanger it. Some see it as an opportunity to develop inculturation while some see it as opportunity to expunge it. Some see it as an opportunity to reaffirm the tradition while some see it as opportunity to discard it. Some see it as an opportunity to refocus on the universal priesthood of every member of the faithful as agents of evangelization while some see it as opportunity to undermine it.

However, no matter what one thinks about the synod and the outcome of the synodal process, the potential dangers and abuses, the enormous promises of the synod cannot be ignored. Therefore, Catholics , great and small, rich and poor, saints and sinners are encouraged to give in their best of bests and engage actively, passionately, prayerfully, wisely, and honestly on the synod and the synodal process. This will bring about purified, balanced and enriched outcome for the Church.

## **Synodality and the Synodal Church**

Stephen White, a fellow in the Catholic Studies Programs at the Ethics and Public Policy Centre is convinced that even the Pope's definition of synodality as “a Church walking together” needs further clarification and so, “it remains somewhat unclear just what the Holy Father means by synodality and a synodal Church”[2]. In *America Magazine*, the delegate of Cardinal Blase Cupich's for formation and mission in the Archdiocese of Chicago, Fr. Louis Cameli, asks pertinent questions: “Where is a synod on synodality leading us? We are on the road together, but where is that road taking us? What is the destination? In the end, are we bound to be disappointed?” The Conference of Nigeria Bishops (CBCN) thinks that the answer to the questions lies in the synodal journey itself, how the journey is undertaken. According to the Bishops, “we firmly believe that if the synodal journey is faithfully undertaken, there will be a resurgence of faith and a more profound commitment to the Christian ideals and values.”[3] In other words, if the synodal journey is not faithfully undertaken, we may not only be disappointed but divided, disunited and dismantled. The roadmap to undertaking of the synodal journey faithfully is to fully understand what the synodal journey meant for Pope Francis – Is it the Church in a journey or a journey in the Church?

## **The Synod of Pope Francis**

Pope Francis clarifies that “the Greek word syn-hodos explains its meaning as 'the same way' or 'the same path,' it is through the path of synodality, the Church has to go ahead in the third millennium”. [4] According to White, Pope Francis “seems to have in mind something more than the Synod of Bishops, which has met to advise popes in the years since the Second Vatican Council. He does not see a synodal Church as a democracy, nor a synod as a sort of plebiscite or parliament.”[5] The Pope tries to see how the entire Church, lay or

cleric can engage in a meaningful dialogue as people of God explicitly defined in the second Chapter of the Vatican II document, *Lumen Genti*. He is calling the universal Church, Catholics everywhere to gather together to re-learn how to walk together and the ways of staying together and being together. This is to promote the culture of the family of God, encounter, innovation, listening and communal discernment today. Therefore, he sees the synod as a way of creating spaces of mutual openness and engagement in listening and dialogue, which integrates the charisms of all the baptized Catholics wherever they are for faithfully renewing of the Church as guided by the Holy Spirit.

The Synod of Pope Francis differs from the other recent Councils because of its invitation of lay people as the people of God, to be part of the synod proceedings and preliminary sessions. The Pope launched a three year process of dialogue and discernment. This will be culminated in a synodal gathering in Rome in October 2023. According to Professor Myriam Wijlens[6], the synod of Pope Francis has answered the long troubling question Cardinal Josef Suenens of Belgium asks during Vatican II Council: “We forgot to invite the other half [the lay faithful]”? This journeying together is what keeps the Church in faithful movement to Jesus. It is what re-aligns the Church to her true nature and mission. It is what restores the Church to her original copy envisioned by Jesus and lived by the early Church. The Pope says, “by journeying together and reflecting together on the journey that has been made, the Church will be able to learn through Her experience which processes can help Her to live communion, to achieve participation, to open Herself to mission. Our “journeying together” is, in fact, what most effectively enacts and manifests the nature of the Church as the pilgrim and missionary People of God.”[7] I am in agreement with Stephen White who insists that Pope Francis is convinced that synodality describes the “shape” the Church of the future must take.[8] So this “journeying together” that repositions to



its original model envisaged by Christ is not stationary but progressive, not partial but holistic movement.

### **A Journey Together in the Church**

A journey together in the Church is the movement of a particular people in the Church for a particular purpose. The purpose is usually assumed to be positive. The purpose may be cultural, political, religious, psychological or otherwise. It may not be directly beneficial to the universal Church. It may be for a season. It is certainly for a reason. It may be to refute error, expound doctrine or strengthen faith. It is usually to solve problems, answer questions or proffer solutions. It may be in form of establishing a commission or formation of a society or association. The target is not usually for the whole Church. It does not always cut across people of every age, status, vocation or profession. The Commission set up by St. John Paul II to re-investigate the trial of Galileo was a journey in the Church and so many other commissions fall into this category. Charismatic Renewal is a movement or journey in the Church. This does not deny strong and well-intentioned efforts by Pope Francis to see the Charismatic Renewal as the Church in movement, the new Pentecost. Anyway, it started as a journey in the Church, a journey towards the Holy Spirit, the same old reality. So many other gatherings, commissions, associations or societies in the Church can be described as journeying together in the Church.

### **The Church in a Journey Together**

The Church in a journey together is the movement of the entire Church according to the Gospel through the same path towards the kingdom of God. The Church in a journey together is the most enactment and manifestation of the nature of the Church as the pilgrim people of

God.[9] The Church in a journey or movement is about finding the best goodly way to follow the path of the Gospel looking at the changing contexts of the time. The Church in a journey together is not about changing of the traditional truths of the Christian doctrine but finding the most appropriate and godly way to apply them in our context. The movement of the entire Church towards the kingdom is about the affirmation that the traditional Catholic doctrine and tradition is constant in context.

### **The Church in a Journey and a Journey in the Church**

The Church in a journey together is holistic but a journey together in the Church is particularistic. The Church in a journey together is in a non-directional movement but a journey together in the Church is a directional movement. The Church in a journey together is unpredictable but a journey in the Church is predictable. The Church in a journey together can spurn unpredictable surprises. As Pope Francis envisages, the Church in a journey “together requires listening to the Holy Spirit, who like the wind “blows where it wills; you can hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes” (Jn 3:8), remaining open to the surprises that the Spirit will certainly prepare for us along the way.”[10] The Church in a journey together is not to produce documents and communiqués but primarily to change lives, to show a new way of living the Gospel values in the light of today. The Vademecum says, “the purpose of this synod is not to produce more documents, rather, it is intended to inspire people to dream about the Church we are called to be, to make people's hopes flourish, to stimulate trust, to bind up wounds, to weave new and deeper relationships, to learn from one another, to build bridges, to enlighten minds, warm hearts and restore strength to our hands for our common mission.”[11]

To this point, one can say that this synod is not just a journey together in the Church but the Church in a journey together. If we see this synod as a mere journey in the church, we shall be tempted to be trapped by the processes that are supposed to renew us. The synod is beyond a journey in the Church. It is the Church in a journey. To reduce the synod to a journey in the church will be a miscalculation of the beautiful intention of Pope Francis. It will reduce the synod to an event, a transient event created to solve problems and satisfy our temporal immediate needs. It will reduce the synod to a tendentious movement preconceived by a few for a premeditated outcome. The synod is beyond a journey in the Church. It should be seen as the Church in a journey. It is the Church struggling to follow the same old good path. It is the Church trying to understand herself better by creative listening and dreams of hope. It is the Church struggling to find out how she has deviated from the same way of Jesus, the Gospel.

If the synodal journey is well understood and the processes well implemented we shall, no doubt, have a better face of the Church. If some virtues are promoted during these processes and preliminary sessions of the synod, the fruits of the study will definitely be harvested. If this synod is to be seen as the Church in a journey and not just a journey in the Church, certain virtues must be promoted and some vices prevented.

### **Virtues of the Church in a Journey together**

These are the virtues of the Church in a journey together that makes the journey the symbol and characteristic of a pilgrim Church. The *Vademecum* for the synod on synodality views it as the principles and attitudes of synodality.

## **Listening and Dialogue**

This is the key to the synodal journey. We must listen to one another and to the Holy Spirit if this synod is going to be truly the Church in a journey. The Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria affirms this in a recent document, “This Synod is a dynamic process of convergence that call for listening and dialogue, leading to greater collaboration, a more profound sense of communion and participation in Church life at various levels.”[12]

Pope Francis on his address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops on 7 October 2015 says that “dialogue involves coming together across diverse opinions. Indeed, God often speaks through the voices of those that we can easily exclude, cast aside, or discount. We must make a special effort to listen to those we may be tempted to see as unimportant and those who force us to consider new points of view that may change our way of thinking.” The question is: Is the Church ready to listen? Is the Church interested in dialogue? Maybe! Let us see an example. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of January, 2022, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) posted a question to help the discussion on the synodal journey in her twitter handle and requested for comments from the public. This is it: “Here are seven attitudes we can all adopt as we continue our synodal journey together. Which one inspires you the most? Let us know in the comments below.” The seven attitudes listed graphically in a vertical descending order are –

- Innovative Outlook
- Inclusivity
- Open-mindedness
- Listening
- Accompaniment
- Co-responsibility
- Dialogue

In splits of moments, comments flashed instantaneously but colossally against the so called inspirational words. The negative reactions were unbelievable. Even though some of these comments were beautiful Christian alternate proposals, at one point, the USCCB Twitter handler turned off the comment button. Listening and dialogue? Commenting on the entire saga, Stephen White, “as a whole, they only serve to convince Catholics (and plenty of non-Catholics looking on, by the way) that the whole Synod process is precisely the sort of bureaucratic, political enterprise the Holy Father keeps insisting it must not be”. [13]

One would have expected the USCCB twitter handler to lead by example. One would expect the USCCB to keep to the rules of engagement: listening and dialogue, but the reverse was the case. Turning off the comment session was resisting the core values of the synodal journey. It was opposition to listening and dialogue. If this happened in a country, the most acclaimed democratic nation on earth where freedom of expression is uppermost regardless of religion, imagine what could happen in countries in Africa, Asia, South America and so on, where the order of the day is suppression and domination. One may ask, “is the *fruit* (final document) of this synod on synodality going to be hijacked or staged managed by the hierarchy and wrapped with the paper of the laity to give it imprimatur and coloration of the people of God, the case of Esau's hand and Jacob's voice?”

If this synod is going to be the Church in movement, in a journey together, then the entire Church must move together. Nobody should be left out; otherwise, it becomes a mere movement or journey in the Church by a few, an attitude that runs contrary to the intention of the Pope for this synod. In this context, the part cannot truly represent the whole. Beyond this, the Church in a journey together must be ready to listen to the excluded, the victims of war, of poverty, of abuse, the physically challenged, the oppressed, the divorced, the remarried, the

marginalized and women. It is obvious that “listening to those who have the same views as we do bears no fruit. Dialogue involves coming together across diverse opinions. Indeed, God often speaks through the voices of those that we can easily exclude, cast aside, or discount”. [14] In this synod, everyone in the Church has right to speak and to be listened to. God speaks through each of us.

## **Openness**

Openness is a function of truth and transparency. It is a value against rigidity. It is one of the greatest virtues of the Church in a journey together. One who engages in dialogue must be open to change. The people of God who are actively involved in the synod on synodality must be willing to accept the better and new ways of living out the Gospel in our time. Openness improves transparency and makes truth attractive. Without openness, listening becomes superficial, dialogue becomes fruitless and discernment becomes impossible. We must be willing to embrace newness of insights, ideas, methods and things. We must be open to accept new ways of doing things and new ways of staying together. According to *Vademecum*,

Dialogue leads us to newness: We must be willing to change our opinions based on what we have heard from others. Openness to conversion and change: We can often be resistant to what the Holy Spirit is trying to inspire us to undertake. We are called to abandon attitudes of complacency and comfort that lead us to make decisions purely on the basis of how things have been done in the past. Synods are an ecclesial exercise in discernment: Discernment is based on the conviction that God is at work in the world and we are called to listen to what the Spirit suggests to us. We are signs of a Church that listens and journeys: By listening, the Church follows the example of God himself, who listens to the cry of his people. The Synodal Process provides us with the opportunity to open ourselves to listen

in an authentic way, without resorting to ready-made answers or pre-formulated judgments.

### **Inclusiveness and Sharing**

The Church in a journey together is a process of inclusiveness. Inclusiveness is a beautiful way of giving voices to those whose voices are hardly heard in the Church. This process of this synod must be willing to give opportunity for the people of God to get adequately involved in the administration and governance of the Church. The synod will be able to suggest how far the laity can go in this direction today in the light of the Gospel. It will consider opening more spaces for women and physically challenged.

No matter the state of the people in the Church, the Spirit of God is present in all. The Pope maintains that “all the members of the Church are active subjects of evangelization and 'missionary disciples'”(EG §120). Therefore, the process of the synod must find ways of overcoming the excuses that prevent the lay people from sharing the charisms in the service of the Church and stop the adverse effects of clericalism or “an excessive clericalism which keeps them [the lay people] away from decision-making” in the Church (EG §102). The synod must empower the lay people with those roles that do reflect “a greater penetration of Christian values in the social, political, and economic sectors”, tasks with “a real commitment to applying the Gospel to the transformation of society” (EG §102).

Again, efforts should be made to re-examine the role of women today in the light of the Gospel. This synod must make legitimate spaces for women in the heart of the Church. We must find ways of overcoming the tendency to exclude women in some cultures, in the decision making and administration of the Church. Pope Francis acknowledges “that many women share pastoral responsibilities with priests, helping

to guide people, families and groups and offering new contributions to theological reflection.” He adds that, “we need to create still broader opportunities for a more incisive female presence in the Church. Because “the feminine genius is needed in all expressions in the life of society, the presence of women must also be guaranteed in the workplace” and in the various other settings where important decisions are made, both in the Church and in social structures”.[15] The *Vademecum* for the synod captures it well: “Being synodal requires time for sharing: We are invited to speak with authentic courage and honesty (parrhesia) in order to integrate freedom, truth, and charity. Everyone can grow in understanding through dialogue”[16] and “it is vain to try to impose one's ideas on the whole Body through pressure or to discredit those who feel differently”.[17]

## **Respect**

The aim of the synod is to find the truth of the Gospel so as to apply it appropriately in our time. This cannot be done in disorder and violence. The Church in a journey together must make the journey together in peace, love and fairness. This is to say that the process of the synod must be protected with the virtue of respect. Rights and dignity of people must be respected. We must respect one another as we journey together. We must speak our mind in love and listen to what others have to say. Everyone has something to say.

In this journey together, disagreement and argument are bound to occur from time to time. We must not allow our anger rise to high as to speak without respect. We must not attack anyone with different opinion as we walk along. Dialogue is defeated if we all have the same opinion. It is through dialogue that we can discern who we are, what we ought to do and where we need to stand in the changing world of our time. It is through dialogue done in love and respect that we can discern where we have deviated from the Gospel. The *Vademecum* says, “We must make



a special effort to listen to those we may be tempted to see as unimportant and those who force us to consider new points of view that may change our way of thinking”.[18] Nobody should be disrespected or discountenanced. Everyone is a temple of the Holy Spirit.

## **Discernment**

Discernment is another important virtue of the Church in a journey together. The processes of the synod on synodality must be coated with the fruits of discernment. One can describe the disciples' journey together on the Road to Emmaus as a classical example of synodality. It was a journey of doubts, tensions, and questions. They did not know what was going to be the outcome. But they were ready for surprises. It was a process of discernment. The revelation, insight, awakening and awareness came at the moment of prayer. At the celebration of the Eucharist, the process of discernment yielded result. Let us say that the two disciples withdrew for a retreat. To think about what was happening and see if they could understand it. Surprisingly, during prayer, the revelation came. The process of this synod must not take prayer for granted. There is no revelation, no discernment without prayer. Church communities must organize sessions for prayer, reflections or practice of silence. If possible, people should go on retreat or have a quiet time. It is then that one can recognize the Spirit when it speaks. It is then that one can effectively listen to God and understand what others are saying. According to Vademecum:

The Synodal Process is first and foremost a spiritual process. It is not a mechanical data-gathering exercise or a series of meetings and debates. Synodal listening is oriented towards discernment. It requires us to learn and exercise the art of personal and communal discernment. We listen to each other, to our faith tradition, and to the signs of the times in order to discern what God is saying to all of us. Pope Francis

characterizes the two interrelated goals of this process of listening: “to listen to God, so that with him we may hear the cry of his people; to listen to his people until we are in harmony with the will to which God calls us.”[19]

## **Freedom**

One of the fundamental virtues of the synod is freedom. The freedom of the people of God in Christ must be requirement for every contribution in this synod. There must be no coercion. None should be forced to speak. None should be made to say anything under duress. This is how the Brazilian Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, Prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, puts it “Pray, reflect, discuss and share your experiences, insights and desires. Do it with the freedom of those who place their trust in God and are thus able to overcome timidity, a sense of inferiority or worse still, reproaches and complaints”.[20] Discussions and sharing of experiences, desires, and proposals should be made in freedom.

## **Humility/Simplicity**

Cardinal João Braz de Aviz encourages that the synod discussions and sharing be done in simplicity, without arrogance: “Let it be done in all simplicity, moved by the Holy Spirit, avoiding arrogance, without presumption but always having a sense of co-responsibility”[21]. As has been expressed so far that listening is the method and format is dialogue through participation. Listening, dialogue and participation cannot bear fruit without humility.

An important virtue that helps us to journey together is humility. People of God must be humble and simple. These are good attitudes for

the synod. Only a humble person can listen to others and listen with sincerity. Only a humble person knows that others may have better opinions. Only a humble person can respect the views of others. Only a simple person is able to honestly engage others in dialogue. The *Vademecum* puts it this way:

Humility in listening must correspond to courage in speaking: Everyone has the right to be heard, just as everyone has the right to speak. Synodal dialogue depends on courage both in speaking and in listening. It is not about engaging in a debate to convince others. Rather, it is welcoming what others say as a way by which the Holy Spirit can speak for the good of all (1 Corinthians 12:7).[22]

### **Vices of a Journey in the Church**

The vices of a journey together in the Church can be seen as various stumbling blocks to our achieving the goodly desires of the synod on synodality. The *Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality captures these vices as temptations or pitfalls that we must do well not to fall into during the process of this synod.

### **Clericalism and Bureaucracy**

One of the dangers or stumbling block that the synod on synodality will face is the tendency to undermine the laity. The aim of the synod will be defeated if the laity is not fully carried along. It is when all the sons and daughters participate in the process of the synod that the fruits of the walking together will be fully realized. This is no time for excessive bureaucracy or hierarchical clericalism. We cannot say that the synod is the Church in a journey but a journey in the Church if it is hijacked by the hierarchy and clerics. The Church in a journey should actually depict the synod-synodality of Pope Francis where the Church is seen “as an inverted pyramid, the top is located beneath the base”[23] to

show the centrality of the people of God, the ecclesial communion taking the place of collegial government, and the greatest taking the place of the least. The synod should neither be dominated by the clerics nor by the laity. The *Vademecum* pleads:

Overcome the scourge of clericalism: The Church is the Body of Christ filled with different charisms in which each member has a unique role to play. We are all interdependent on one another and we all share an equal dignity amidst the holy People of God. In the image of Christ, true power is service. Synodality calls upon pastors to listen attentively to the flock entrusted to their care, just as it calls the laity to freely and honestly express their views. Everyone listens to one another out of love, in a spirit of communion and our common mission. Thus, the power of the Holy Spirit is manifested in manifold ways in and through the entire People of God.[24]

### **Labelling and Stereotyping**

Another vice that the participants of the synod on synodality must overcome is the tendency to label and stereotype people and places. The Church in a journey together walks in unity and not in disorder. Labelling and stereotyping puts people or places in categories and creates divisions. The synod is to enhance peace and not to create crises. No one should be condemned or perceived as irredeemable. The *Vademecum* for the synod on synodality warns: “Leave behind prejudices and stereotypes: We can be weighed down by our weaknesses and sinfulness. The first step towards listening is freeing our minds and hearts from prejudices and stereotypes that lead us on the wrong path, towards ignorance and division”.[25]

## **Secular Humanism**

One of the vices that may rise up during this synod is the tendency to give opportunity to secular humanism while every attention will be on the human person and thereby overlooking the work of the Holy Spirit. Synodality is actually the revelation of the Holy Spirit. It is centered on listening to the Spirit. There may be temptation to shift the attention to ourselves and try to direct ourselves. Such temptations must be avoided. Otherwise, the synod may just end up as a mere journey together in the Church and not the Church in a journey. The *Vademecum* admonishes on what to avoid:

The temptation of wanting to lead ourselves instead of being led by God. Synodality is not a corporate strategic exercise. Rather it is a spiritual process that is led by the Holy Spirit. We can be tempted to forget that we are pilgrims and servants on the path marked out for us by God. Our humble efforts of organization and coordination are at the service of God who guides us on our way. We are clay in the hands of the divine Potter (Isaiah 64:8).[26]

## **Myopism**

Another vice of a journey in the Church is what the author calls the vice of myopism. A journey in the Church usually focuses on matters of immediate concerns. The synod on synodality is like to fall into the temptation of defective narrow minded vision. The synod is not just about matters of few weeks to come. It is a journey of foresight. It is the journey of the future, the journey of eternity. It must be reduced to matters of immediate concerns. The emphasis of the synod must be to discern the 'shape' of the future Church and not just the Church of few hours. This synod must have foresight and think long-term concerns. *The Vademecum* has something to say:

The Synodal Process is an opportunity to open up, to look around us, to see things from other points of view, and to move out in missionary outreach to the peripheries. This requires us to think long-term. This also means broadening our perspectives to the dimensions of the entire Church and asking questions, such as: What is God's plan for the Church here and now? How can we implement God's dream for the Church on the local level?[27]

## **Reductionism**

Reductionism is a vice of a journey in the church that entails reducing the intention of the synodal journey to something else. It could be in form of reducing the synod into mere problems fixing project or structural re-organization project or undermining the objective altogether. The Church in a journey together does not focus on fixing problems or building structures or forget that its aim is to discern what the Spirit is saying to the Church. It does not overlook problems or structure, its aim is essentially to lead to a renewal or conversion experience in the lives of the people of God that will reset the image of the Church the way it was originally designed by Jesus. The *Vademecum* admits:

The challenges, difficulties, and hardships facing our world and our Church are many. Nevertheless, fixating on the problems will only lead us to be overwhelmed, discouraged, and cynical. We can miss the light if we focus only on the darkness. Instead of focusing only on what is not going well, let us appreciate where the Holy Spirit is generating life and see how we can let God work more fully. ...The Synodal Process will naturally call for a renewal of structures at various levels of the Church, in order to foster deeper communion, fuller participation, and more fruitful mission. At the same

time, the experience of synodality should not focus first and foremost on structures, but on the experience of journeying together to discerning the path forward, inspired by the Holy Spirit. The conversion and renewal of structures will come about only through the ongoing conversion and renewal of all the members of the Body of Christ.[28]

## **Exclusion**

Exclusion is one of the vices of a journey in the Church whereby a cross-section of the Church is entirely overlooked in collective discernment and decision-taking. This is what the synod on synodality must avoid. It must overcome the tendency to listen to some persons, people and group and overlook others. There must be wider consultations. This is the intention of the pope.[29] It must overcome the temptation to forget the contribution of those who are less active in the Church. It must avoid the tendency to exclude non-Catholic who have invaluable contributions to make on the basis of their expertise and knowledge. Even the *Vademecum* speaks against such tendency that may harm the process of the synod on synodality. It says: “Synods are a time to dream and “spend time with the future”: We are encouraged to create a local process that inspires people, with no one excluded to create a vision of the future filled with the joy of the Gospel”[30] and again, “a Synodal Process is a time to dialogue with people from the worlds of economics and science, politics and culture, arts and sport, the media and social initiatives. It will be a time to reflect on ecology and peace, life issues and migration. We must keep the bigger picture in view to fulfil our mission in the world. It is also an opportunity to deepen the ecumenical journey with other Christian denominations and to deepen our understanding with other faith traditions”.[31] The synod must overcome the vice of exclusion.

## **Politicization**

This vice of a journey in the Church is the temptation of viewing every discussion and processes of the synod from political point of view. We must avoid the tendency to turn the synod into a seemingly political party convention. The tendency to categorize the participants as winners or losers, create factions and divide the people of God. In the words of the *Vademecum*, we must not “treat the synod as a kind of parliament. This confuses synodality with a 'political battle' in which in order to govern one side must defeat the other. It is contrary to the spirit of synodality to antagonize others or to encourage divisive conflicts that threaten the unity and communion of the Church”[32]. The synod should be a time to build bridges beyond the walls that divides us.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, the process and procedures of engaging this journeying together of the people of God will determine the Church of the future. How this listening or journeying together goes will be greatly determined by the processes and procedures that will be activated and adopted for the synod. It will determine whether the synod is the Church journeying together or simply a journeying together in the Church. It will decide whether the Church of the future will become the work of the Holy Spirit or the creation of selfish religious people. It will decide whether the Church of the future is the making of the Spirit or the making of post-modern humanistic people. It will decide whether the Church of the future is the making of the people of God or the gods of people. It will decide whether the Church of the future is the work of the family of God or the gods of families. It will decide whether the Church of the future is the design of God or the construction of the media. It will decide whether the Church of the future is the image of the universal church or the image of a particular church. It will decide



whether the Church of the future is the Church in renewal or the renewed Church.

By and large, if this journeying together in synodality is going to be a lasting work of the Holy Spirit, we must try to discern and practice together the virtues of the Church in a journey and prevent the vices of a journey in the Church. In any case, our faith and assurance is that divine providence will not allow the fruits of our synodal aircraft to be hijacked by unscrupulous elements within and outside the Church to a scandalous demonically arranged airport. Afterall, the Holy Spirit is in each of us and this Spirit is the principle of communion and mission. This is the faith of the Church. This we must confess with confidence and great expectation.

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  - [15] *Evangelii Gaudium*, Nos. 103.
  - [16] *Vademecum*, 2.3.
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- [28] *Vademecum*, 2.4.
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## **The Path of Synodality: Walking and Talking Together as the Mystical Body of Christ**

***Simon Peter N. Okanumee, SMMM<sup>1</sup>***

### **Abstract**

*The Church is by nature synodal and “the entire People of God is challenged by its fundamentally synodal calling.”<sup>2</sup> Synodality is established to energize the life and evangelising mission of the Church in union with Christ.<sup>3</sup> The fact that in practice she might be lacking in synodality sometimes or in some places, does not invalidate this attribute. According to Pope Francis, “it is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, “while synodal procedure and events have a beginning, a process and a conclusion, synodality offers a specific description of the historical development of the Church as such, breathes life into her structures and directs her mission.”<sup>5</sup> Hence, the purpose of this essay is to throw more light on this sublime feature of the Church (the path of synodality) and to bring out into fuller light the important functions of the members (the Hierarchy and the Laity) who are walking and talking together with Christ, their Head, and with one another as “the Mystical Body of Christ.”*

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<sup>1</sup>Rev. Fr. Simon Peter Nnamdi Okanumee, SMMM, is a member of Sons of Mary Mother of Mercy Congregation. He has written many published academic articles, authored and edited many books and contributed “Chapters” to some others.

<sup>2</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 72.

<sup>3</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 103.

<sup>4</sup> Francis, Ceremony Commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015.

<sup>5</sup>International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 48

**Keywords:** Synodality, Collaboration, Dialogue, Mystical, Communion, Participation, Mission

## **Introduction**

The Mystical Body of Christ is one of the biblical images of the Church. In her age long history, a host of interrelated images have been used to speak of and describe the inexhaustible mystery of the Church. Among these designations, the biblical images have preference. In the Scriptures, the images taken from the Old Testament and the New Testament are many. All of the images find a new center in the imagery of “the Mystical Body of Christ,” taken as the most fitting image that best describes the Church. The comparison of the Church with a body casts light on the intimate union between Christ and his Church and among the members of the Church. Not only is the Church gathered around Christ, but she is also united in and with him. Thus, the Church is described as a Body: Christ is the head of the body, which is His body, and the people of God are the members of this Body.

However, to make distinction between the Church as “the Body of Christ” and other usages of “Body of Christ” in the Scriptures, the term “Mystical” was added to designate the Catholic Church. Thus, the Catholic Church is the “Mystical Body of Christ.” In the Encyclical, *Mystici Corporis Christi*, Pope Pius XII clearly states that “the Mystical Body of Christ is the Catholic Church.”<sup>6</sup> Leo XIII, in his Encyclical *Satis Cognitum* argues that “the Church is visible because she is a body. But a body calls also for a multiplicity of members, which are linked together in such a way as to help one another.... So, in the Church the individual members do not live for themselves alone, but in mutual collaboration for the common comfort and for the perfect building up of the whole Body.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, there is need to always toe the path of synodality in the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ.

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<sup>6</sup>Pius XII, [Encyclical, \*Mystici Corporis Christi\*](#) , the Mystical Body of Christ (June 29, 1943), n. 1.

<sup>7</sup>Pius XII, [Encyclical, \*Mystici Corporis Christi\*](#) , the Mystical Body of Christ (June 29, 1943), nn. 14 & 15.

Christ recognized the importance of the path of synodality in the Church; that is why prayed three times, as his parting wish: “that they may be one” (John 17). For instance, any performing choir that is not united in its diversity ends up producing cacophony instead of melody. The Scriptures underscore the path of synodality among first community of believers. Thus, “as a result, all the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had ... that there were no needy persons among them” (Acts 4:32-34).

The time to reroute towards the path of synodality in the Church is long overdue. Little wonder the Church is preparing to embark on a special synod which is expected to focus on the theme of 'Synodality' in the life and mission of the Church. Already inaugurated in September 2021, it is designed to sample the contributions of the Laity, the Religious, the Clergy, National Bishops' Conferences and Curial Officials. This explains the essence of two years long wide consultations and profound discernment that will climax in October 2023 assembly proper. At present the Church is in prayers for this auspicious event; a synod of Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church that is centered on the well-timed theme: For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission.

Providentially, the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Mystici Corporis Christi*, issued by Pope Pius XII on 29 June 1943, during World War II, will be celebrated next year - 2023. This encyclical “teaches that both lay people and the leadership have a role to play in the Church. Lay people are at the forefront of the Church, and have to be aware of 'being the Church', not just 'belonging to the Church'. At the same time, the Pope and bishop are responsible for providing leadership for all the faithful. Together, they are the Church and work for the good of the Church.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Pius XII, Discourse, February 20, 1946:AAS 38 (1946) 149; quoted by John Paul II, CL 9.

Likewise, next year, the 16<sup>th</sup> Ordinary General Assembly of Synod of Bishops, known as 'Synod on Synodality,' will focus on how the Church can chart anew 'the path of synodality' in her life and mission. The latter informed choice of the theme: *The Path of Synodality: Walking and Talking together a Mystical Body of Christ*.

## **The Path of Synodality**

At the first glance, the phrase “synod on synodality” sounds tautologous. Many people seem to be familiar with the word 'synod' but not 'synodality.' According to Catholic News Service, “Synodality,” which literally means “walking together,” has become a key topic of Pope Francis' pontificate, but one which has raised questions and even confusion.”<sup>9</sup> Surprisingly too, although the practice of synodality is as old as the Church, the term “synodality” is missing from the whole documents of Vatican Council II. The reason is that the term “synodality” is a neologism, a fruit of subsequent theological reflection. Yet, it authentically translates and summarizes the ecclesiology spirit of communion expressed by Vatican Council II and practiced in the early Church.<sup>10</sup>

On March 2, 2018, the International Theological Commission, endorsed by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, published a document titled: “*Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*.” According to this document, “in the theological, canonical and pastoral literature of recent decades, a neologism has appeared, the noun “synodality,” a correlate of the adjective “synodal,” with both of these deriving from the word “synod.” Thus, people speak of synodality as a “constitutive dimension” of the Church or *tout court* of the “synodal

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<sup>9</sup> National Catholic Reporter: Internet source (<https://www.ncronline.org/news/quick-reads/pope-chooses-synodality-theme-2022-synod>), Assessed on 25<sup>th</sup> July, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 6.

Church”<sup>11</sup> .... synodality is the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the People of God, which reveals and gives substance to her being as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelising mission.<sup>12</sup> Thus, while 'synod' is only a part, 'synodality' is the whole.

### **“Collaboration” as Walking Together**

When it comes to walking together, which this segment tries to x-ray, “the great challenge for pastoral conversion that follows from this for the life of the Church is to intensify the mutual collaboration of all in evangelising witness based on everyone's gifts and roles, without clericalising lay people and without turning the clergy into lay people, and in any case avoiding the temptation of “an excessive clericalism which keeps them [lay people] away from decision-making””<sup>13</sup> This is what the above document on “Synodality” means when it uses concepts like: participation and co-essentiality.

Accordingly, “in this perspective, the participation of the lay faithful becomes essential. They are the immense majority of the People of God and there is much to be learnt from their participation in the various forms of the life and mission of ecclesial communities, from popular piety and generic pastoral care, as well as their specific competency in various sectors of cultural and social life.”<sup>14</sup> Among the laity, there is another special group whose life closely resembles the

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<sup>11</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 5.

<sup>12</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, nn. 6, & 7

<sup>13</sup> Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Joy of the Gospel, (Nov 24, 2013), n. 102.

<sup>14</sup> Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Joy of the Gospel, (Nov 24, 2013), n. 126.



clergy, the Religious. Hence “there also needs to be a decisive promotion of the principle of co-essentiality between hierarchical gifts and charismatic gifts in the Church on the basis of the teaching of Vatican. This entails involving communities of consecrated women or men, the movements and new ecclesial communities.”<sup>15</sup>

### **“Dialogue” As Talking Together**

The other branch-off on the path of synodality is dialogue, which implies talking and listening. Dialogue offers the opportunity to acquire new perspectives and points of view to shed light on the solution of the matter in question. Hence, “the criterion according to which “unity prevails over conflict” is of particular value in conducting a dialogue, managing different opinions and experiences... making it possible to “build communion amid disagreement.”<sup>16</sup> Synodal dialogue depends on courage both in speaking and in listening. It is not about engaging in a debate where one speaker tries to get the better of the others or counters their positions with brusque arguments, but about expressing whatever seems to have been suggested by the Holy Spirit as useful for communal discernment, at the same time being open to accepting whatever has been suggested by the same Spirit in other people's positions, “for the general good” (1 Corinthians 12, 7).<sup>17</sup> This is true since “communication needs to become explicit through the community listening to the Word of God in order to know “what the Spirit is saying to the Churches” (Apocalypse 2, 29).”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 4; cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, 10.

<sup>16</sup> Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Joy of the Gospel, (Nov 24, 2013), n. 228.

<sup>17</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 111.

<sup>18</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 111.

Finally, an essential attitude in synodal dialogue is humility, which inclines each one to be obedient to God's will and obedient to each other in Christ.<sup>19</sup> Thus, "a synodal Church is a Church which listens.... The faithful People, the College of Bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other; and all listening to the Holy Spirit."<sup>20</sup> Because truth – as Benedict XVI emphasized - "is *lógos* which creates *diá-logos* and hence communication and communion."<sup>21</sup> Most importantly, for the Blessed Paul VI, true dialogue is spiritual communication, which requires specific attitudes: love, respect, trust, and prudence. "Dialogue thrives on friendship and most especially on service".<sup>22</sup>

### The Mystical Body of Christ

The image of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ is a sound theology. Christ, the one Mediator, established and continually sustains here on earth His holy Church, through which He communicated and communicates truth and grace to all. The Church is a Causal Conjunction of two principles, the one spiritual and supernatural, and the other material and sensibly perceptible. It is this amalgam of the latter two elements that makes her the Mystical Body of Christ: duality in unity or unity in duality.

Thus, "the Mystical Body of Christ" is not a *metaphor* for the Christian community of believers or *mysticism* for the hypostatic union of Christ and the Church. When Paul refers to the Church as "Mystical Body of Christ," he means it is a *mysterious reality* – "this is a *profound*

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<sup>19</sup> Benedict of Norcia, *Rule* 72, 6.

<sup>20</sup> Francis, Ceremony Commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter, *Caritas in Veritate*, 29 June 2009, 4, *AAS* 101 (2009) 643.

<sup>22</sup> Blessed Paul VI, Encyclical Letter, *Ecclesiam*, 6 August 1964, 83 -87, *AAS* 56 (1964) 644.

*mystery*; but I am speaking of *Christ and the Church*” (Ephesians 5:32; 22-32). As a *mystery*, closely tied to the central Christian Mystery of the Incarnation, we should not expect to fully comprehend it, but God does expect us to believe everything He has revealed about it in His Written Word, the Bible.

To this end, if we would fittingly define or describe this true Church, the Body of Christ - which is One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic - we shall find nothing more noble, more sublime, or more divine than the expression "the Mystical Body of Christ:" an expression which springs from and is, as it were, the fair flowering of the repeated teaching of the Sacred Scriptures and the Holy Fathers.<sup>23</sup> The question is: why is “the Mystical Body of Christ” the most sublime biblical image in discussion about the Church? To answer this question, what follows shall dissect the concept of “the Mystical Body of Christ” into its three constitutive components: “the Body,” “of Christ” and “the Mystical.”

### *The Church as “the Body”*

The concept and composition of “a body” describe very fittingly the unique nature of the new people of God - the Church. Thus, “that the Church is a body is frequently asserted in the Sacred Scriptures: “Christ,” says the Apostle “is the Head of the Body, the Church.” The Church is described as a body because there is unbroken unity in it. Paul says: “Though many we are one body in Christ” (Romans 12:5). However, it is not enough that the Body of the Church should be an unbroken unity and intimate bond; it must also be something definite and perceptible to the senses like the body is.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Pius XII, [Encyclical, \*Mystici Corporis Christi\*](#), the Mystical Body of Christ (June 29, 1943), n. 13

<sup>24</sup> Pius XII, [Encyclical, \*Mystici Corporis Christi\*](#), the Mystical Body of Christ (June 29, 1943), n. 14.

To this end, “the comparison of the Church with the body casts light on the intimate bond between Christ and his Church. Not only is she gathered around him; she is united in him, in his body. Three aspects of the Church as the Body of Christ are to be more specifically noted: the unity of all her members with each other as a result of their union with Christ; Christ as head of the Body; and the Church as bride of Christ.”<sup>25</sup> To this extent, “as in nature a body is not formed by any haphazard grouping of members but must be constituted of organs, that is of members, that have not the same function and are arranged in due order; so for this reason above all the Church is called a body, that it is constituted by the coalescence of structurally untied parts, and that it has a variety of members reciprocally dependent. It is thus the Apostle describes the Church when he writes: “As in one body we have many members, but all the members have not the same office: so, we being many are one body in Christ and everyone members one of another.”<sup>26</sup> This highlights unity in diversity.

A common aphorism has it that “united we stand and divided we fall.” The latter truism on the beauty of unity in diversity within the Mystical Body of Christ, reminds me of an Aesop's Fable, titled – “The Belly and the Members:” One day it occurred to other Parts of the body that they were doing all the work while the Belly had all the food. So, they held a meeting and decided to stop giving the Belly food. For a day or two, the Hands refused to take the food, the Mouth refused to receive it, and the Teeth had no work to do. After a day or two, all the Parts of the body became weak and in poor condition: the Hands could hardly move, the Mouth was parched and the Legs unable to support the rest of the Body. At this time, it became clear that the Belly was doing a work too in keeping the body going. Hence, all Parts are equally important. What Paul said of the physical body can be applied to the Mystical Body: “The head cannot say to the feet: I have no need of you” (1 Cor. 12: 21).

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<sup>25</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, par. 789.

<sup>26</sup> Pius XII, [Encyclical, \*Mystici Corporis Christi\*](#), the Mystical Body of Christ (June 29, 1943), n. 16.

*The Body “as Christ's”?*

According to Pius XII, in his encyclical, *Mystici Corporis Christi*, the body is qualified as Christ's because Christ is the Founder, the Head, the Support; and the Savior of this Body.<sup>27</sup>

*Christ as the Founder:* For the Divine Redeemer began the building of the mystical temple of the Church when by His preaching He made known His Precepts; He completed it when he hung glorified on the Cross; and He manifested and proclaimed it when He sent the Holy Ghost as Paraclete in visible form on His disciples- appointed their Chief and His Vicar on earth (Acts 20:28).<sup>28</sup>

*Christ as the Head:* That this Mystical Body which is the Church should be called Christ's is proved in the second place from the fact that He must be universally acknowledged as its actual Head. "He," as St. Paul says, "is the Head of the Body, the Church." He is the Head from whom the whole body perfectly organized, "groweth and maketh increase unto the edifying of itself."

*Christ as the Support:* After Christ's glorification on the Cross, His Spirit is communicated to the Church in abundance through which all the parts of the Body are joined one with the others and with their exalted Head. To the members He is present and assists them in their various duties and offices, and the greater or less degree of spiritual health which they enjoy. It is He who, through His heavenly grace, is the principle of every supernatural act in all parts of the Body (cf. Jn. 15:5).

*Christ as the Savior:* The final reason why the Body of the Church is given the name of Christ is because Christ is the Divine Savior of this

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<sup>27</sup> Pius XII, [Encyclical, \*Mystici Corporis Christi\*](#) , the Mystical Body of Christ (June 29, 1943), n. 25.

<sup>28</sup> Pius XII, [Encyclical, \*Mystici Corporis Christi\*](#) , the Mystical Body of Christ (June 29, 1943), n. 34.

Body (Eph 5: 23), even though we must add with Paul: "especially of the faithful" (1 Tm 4:10), since, before all others, He has purchased with His Blood His members who constitute the Church (Acts 20:28).

*The Body of Christ as "Mystical"*

The expression "Body of Christ" is used by Paul to refer to three ideas in the Sacred Scriptures, namely: the natural body of Christ (*Corpus Christi Naturale*), the Sacramental Body of Christ (*Corpus Christi Sacramentale*) and the Mystical Body of Christ (*Corpus Christi Mysticum*). Hence, the reasons why the adjective "mystical" is used in describing the body of Christ, which is the Church, are namely: to make clear distinctions among the latter three usages of "the body of Christ" and to distinguish it from any other body, that of the Church is qualified with the adjective "Mystical."

The Mystical Body of Christ is a Society whose Head and Ruler is Christ, the physical body of Christ is the one born of the Virgin Mother of God and now sits at the right hand of the Father and the Sacramental Body of Christ, is the one born of the Virgin Mother of God and now is hidden under the Eucharistic veils. The word "Mystical," makes it clear that the Church, a perfect society of its kind, is not made up of merely moral and juridical elements and principles. Her juridical bonds in themselves far surpass those of any other human society, however exalted; they are far superior to all other human societies as grace surpasses nature, as things immortal are above all those that perish.

To this end, Pope Francis has inaugurated the 16<sup>th</sup> Ordinary General Assembly of Synod of Bishops with the central theme: *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission*. This synod promises to reroute the Church towards the path of synodality in her life and mission. What follows shall attempt to dissect the latter synodal theme and establish its connection with the theme: "The Spirit of Synodality: Walking and Talking together a Mystical Body of Christ."

## **For a Synodal Church**

The word "Church" is derived from Latin word "*ecclesia*" meaning to "call out of." It implies an assembly of people for a religious purpose. In the Greek Old Testament, it stands for assembly of the Chosen People before God; in which case God is present among them. By calling itself "Church" in the New Testament, the first community of believers recognized itself as heir to that assembly of the Chosen people in which God is invisibly present in their midst. The Scriptures say: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who CALLED YOU OUT OF" darkness into His wonderful light (1 Pt. 2:9).

The equivalent Greek term for Church "*Kyriake*," means "what belongs to the Lord." Hence, in the Church, Christ "calls together" his people; those who belong to God, from all the ends of the earth. In Ecclesiastical usage, the word "Church" is used to designate, namely: the liturgical assembly or the local churches or the whole universal Church. These three meanings are inseparable because Christ says: "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Mtt. 18:20).

In Scriptures, there are many images and figures through which the inexhaustible mystery of the Church has been described. The images taken from the Old Testament are variations on a profound theme 'the People of God;' since "at all times and in every race, anyone who fears God and does what is right has been acceptable to him. He has, however, willed to make men holy and save them, not as individuals without any bond or link between them, but rather to make them into a people."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (21 Nov. 1964), pars. 7 & 3

According to Pope Francis, “if we understand as St. John Chrysostom did, that “church and synod are synonymous,” since the Church means nothing other than the common journey of the Flock of God along the paths of history towards the encounter of Christ Lord, then we understand that within the Church, no one can be raised up higher than the others. On the contrary, in the Church, it is necessary that each person be “lowered” in order to serve his or her brothers and sisters along the way.”<sup>30</sup> In other words, while the concept of synodality refers to the involvement and participation of the whole People of God in the life and mission of the Church, "Being truly 'synodal', therefore, means moving forward in harmony, spurred on by the Holy Spirit."<sup>31</sup> This entails communal participation in mission.

## **Communion**

Communion is at the center of synodality. Hence, “pastoral conversion for the implementation of synodality means that some paradigms often still present in ecclesiastical culture need to be quashed, because they express an understanding of the Church that has not been renewed by the ecclesiology of communion. These include: the concentration of responsibility for mission in the ministry of Pastors; insufficient appreciation of the consecrated life and charismatic gifts; rarely making use of the specific and qualified contribution of the lay faithful, including women, in their areas of expertise.”<sup>32</sup>

The path of synodality manifests the 'pilgrim' character of the Church. The image of the People of God, gathered from among the nations

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<sup>30</sup> Francis, Ceremony Commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015.

<sup>31</sup> J. Ratzinger, “Le funzioni sinodali della Chiesa: l'importanza della comunione tra I Vescovi”, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 24 January 1996, 4.

<sup>32</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 105.



(Acts 2, 1-9; 15, 14), expresses its social, historical and missionary character, which corresponds to the condition and vocation of each human person as *homo viator*.<sup>33</sup> Three aspects of this relationship and their significance are noted in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, as follows: Unity with Christ and among members (can be categorized into external and internal dimensions); Christ as head of the Body and the Church as bride of Christ.<sup>34</sup>

### **The Internal Dimension (Unity among all the Members)**

By partaking of the body of Christ in the breaking of the bread they are taken up into communion with Him and with one another. The unity of the Mystical Body produces and stimulates charity among the faithful. From this it follows that if one member suffers anything, all the members suffer with him, and if one member is honored, all the members together rejoice (cf. 1 Cor. 12:26). The unity of the Mystical Body of Christ triumphs over all human divisions: “for as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3: 27-28). This unity does not do away with the diversity of its members. Thus, “in the building up of Christ's Body there is engaged a diversity of members and functions. There is only one Spirit who, according to his own richness and the needs of the ministries, gives his different gifts for the welfare of the Church.”<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 49.

<sup>34</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 789.

<sup>35</sup> Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (21 Nov. 1964), pars. 7 & 3.

## **The External Dimension (Unity of the Members with Christ)**

In the mystical Body, Christ unites with believers through the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist. They are united in a hidden and real way to his paschal mystery in baptism. By partaking of the body of the Lord in the breaking of the Eucharistic bread, they are taken up into communion with Him and with one another. In this communion of Christ with believers in the Church (the Mystical Body), Christ is the head of the Mystical Body, and the Church is the Bride of Christ.

## **Christ as the Head of the Church**

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Christ "is the head of the body, means that:<sup>36</sup>

1. He is the principle of creation and redemption. Raised to the Father's glory, "in everything he is preeminent", especially in the Church, through whom he extends his reign over all things.
2. Christ unites us with his Passover: all his members must strive to resemble him, "For this reason are taken up into the mysteries of his life that with him we may be glorified."
3. Christ provides for our growth: to make us grow toward him, he provides in his Body, the Church, the gifts, and assistance by which we help one another along the way of salvation.

## **The Church as the Bride of Christ**

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Church is the Bride of Christ means that:<sup>37</sup>

1. Christ referred to himself as the "bridegroom." Using the model of a man loving his wife, "Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her."

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<sup>36</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 792 – 794.

<sup>37</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 796.

2. Using the metaphor of the bride and the Bridegroom, Christ has joined her bride with himself in an everlasting covenant and never stops caring for her as for his own body.
3. The Church, in her turn, is subject to her head. The bride respects and loves back the groom. The Church is subject to Christ as the Bride is subject to the bridegroom.

## **Participation**

A synodal Church is a Church of participation and co-responsibility of all the members in the one mission of Christ. In exercising synodality she is called to give expression to the participation of all, according to each one's calling, with the authority conferred by Christ on the College of Bishops headed by the Pope. Participation is based on the fact that all the faithful are qualified and called to serve each other through the gifts they have all received from the Holy Spirit.<sup>38</sup> According to Robert Bellarmine, the Church is most beautifully organized thus: Christ as the Head, the Holy Spirit as the heart, Mary as the neck, the baptized as the parts of the body and the hierarchy as the shoulder.<sup>39</sup>

### *1. Christ as the Head*

What is the function of the Head in the body? It is the principle and governing force of the Body. The head gives sense and movement to the other members. So, Christ is the Head of the body, the Church, because He freely gives life and movement to the faithful members who compose His Body.

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<sup>38</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 67.

<sup>39</sup> John A. Hardon, *Communion of Saints: St. Bellarmine on the Mystical Body of Christ*, (cf. [Catholicculture.org](http://Catholicculture.org))

## 2. *Holy Spirit as the Heart*

The heart is the source of life's vitality. Leo XIII says: "Let it suffice to say that, as Christ is the Head of the Church, so is the Holy Spirit her soul."<sup>40</sup> He works in many ways, to build up the Church using many graces ("charisms"), by which he makes the faithful fit and ready to undertake various tasks.

## 3. *Virgin Mary is the Neck*

What is the function of the neck in the body? The neck connects the Head to the Body. Mary connects the Church to Christ because she has merited God's favour, who decreed that "all the graces which proceed from Christ (the Head) should pass through her to the rest of the Body (the Church).

## 4. *The Hierarchy as the Shoulder*

What is the function of the shoulders in the body? We are accustomed to placing burdens on our shoulders. Christ also placed the burden of the Church's governance on the shoulders of the Apostles and by extension on the Church's hierarchy: the Pope, Bishops, Priests, and Deacons.

## 5. *The Laity as the Other Parts*

The laity and the hierarchy form the Body of Christ. They become, in the words of Christ, branches of the Vine which He is. For St. Paul, they are the eyes, hands and feet of the Body and Christ is the Head. In building up the Body, the Spirit gives various gifts to these diverse parts of the body.

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<sup>40</sup> Pius XII, [Encyclical, \*Mystici Corporis Christi\*](#) , the Mystical Body of Christ (June 29, 1943), n. 34.

## **Mission**

Synodality is lived out in the Church in the service of mission. The Church exists in order to evangelize.<sup>41</sup> The whole People of God is an agent of the proclamation of the Gospel.<sup>42</sup> Every baptized person is called to be a protagonist of mission since we are all missionary disciples. The Church is called, in synodal synergy, to activate the ministries and charisms present in her life.<sup>43</sup> Thus, “all the faithful are called by virtue of their baptism to witness to and proclaim the Word of truth and life, in that they are members of the prophetic, priestly and royal People of God.... The anointing of the Holy Spirit is manifested in the *sensus fidei* of the faithful. "In all the baptized, from first to last, the sanctifying power of the Spirit is at work, impelling us to evangelisation.”<sup>44</sup>

Taking up the ecclesiological perspective of Vatican II, Pope Francis, sketches the image of a synodal Church as "an inverted pyramid" which comprises the People of God and the College of Bishops, one of whose members, the Successor of Peter, has a specific ministry of unity. Here the summit is below the base.<sup>45</sup> "Synodality, as a constitutive element of the Church, offers us the most appropriate interpretative framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself.... But in this Church, as in an inverted pyramid, the top is located below the base. Consequently, those who exercise authority are called 'ministers', because, in the original meaning of the word, they are the least of all."<sup>46</sup> Christ is the one whom the Father anointed with the Holy Spirit and established as priest, prophet, and king. In union with the

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<sup>41</sup> Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Evangelisation in the Modern World, (8 December, 1975), n.14.

<sup>42</sup> Vatican II, Decree *Ad Gentes*, n. 35.

<sup>43</sup> International Theological Commission, Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church, n. 53.

<sup>44</sup> International Theological Commission, Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church, n. 56.

<sup>45</sup> International Theological Commission, Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church, n. 57.

<sup>46</sup> International Theological Commission, Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church, n. 57.

head, all the members of the mystical body of Christ participate in these three offices of Christ, bearing the responsibilities of mission and service that flow from them.<sup>47</sup>

## Evaluation and Conclusion

From the foregoing, synodality is like a triangle with three dimensions. At the top of this triangle is Communion, which stands on two legs of Participation and Mission, as the triangular base. The latter features support the designation of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ, where different parts Commune with one another and Participate according to their various states in the same Mission. The latter is the sense of an internal corporation. On the external level, synodality includes the ecumenical efforts of the Catholic Church with other Christian denominations towards Christian unity and solidarity. Thus “synodality is at the heart of the ecumenical commitment of Christians: because it represents an invitation to walk together on the path towards full communion and because - when it is understood correctly - it offers a way of understanding and experiencing the Church where legitimate differences find room in the logic of a reciprocal exchange of gifts in the light of truth.”<sup>48</sup>

Above and beyond the immediate goal of Christian unity, “the People of God is journeying towards the end of time (*Matthew* 28, 20) and towards the ends of the earth (*Acts* 1, 8). The Church lives through space in the various local Churches and travels through the time of Christ's Passover until His *parousia*. She is a single historical subject; already present and working in her are the eschatological destiny of definitive union with God and the unity of the human family in

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<sup>47</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 783.

<sup>48</sup> International Theological Commission, Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church, n.9

Christ.”<sup>49</sup> Thus, synodality captures the entire mission of the Church, on earth, which is always in line with the mind of “God who desires that all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tm 2:4).

Accordingly, the Church is by nature synodal. Pope Francis teaches that “to walk together is *the constitutive way* of the Church; *the figure* that enables us to interpret reality with the eyes and heart of God; *the condition* for following the Lord Jesus and being servants of life in this wounded time. The breath and pace of the Synod show what we are, and the dynamism of communion that animates our decisions; only in this way can we truly renew our pastoral ministry and adapt it to the mission of the Church in today's world; only in this way can we address the complexity of this time....”<sup>50</sup>

Hence, “the renewal of the Church's synodal life demands that we initiate processes for consulting the entire People of God... This axiom should not be understood in the sense of conciliarism on the ecclesiological level or of parliamentarianism on a political level. It is more helpful to think in terms of exercising synodality at the heart of ecclesial communion.”<sup>51</sup> Synodality is established to energize the life and evangelising mission of the Church in union with and under the guidance of the Lord Jesus ... The synodal renewal of the Church happens through the re-vitalization of synodal structures...: formation for the spirituality of communion and the practices of listening, dialogue and communal discernment; ... in building a social ethos based on fraternity, solidarity and inclusion.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. International Theological Commission, *Select Themes of Ecclesiology* (1984),

Francis, Address at the Opening of the 70<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Italian Episcopal Conference, 22 May 2017.

<sup>51</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 65.

<sup>52</sup> International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 103

Finally, in his address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis called on Catholics for prayers in these words: "First of all, let us ask the Holy Spirit for the gift of listening for the Synod Fathers, so that with the Spirit, we might be able to hear the cry of the people and listen to the people until we breathe the will to which God calls us."<sup>53</sup> Likewise, as the Church prays and prepares for the forthcoming 16<sup>th</sup> Ordinary General Assembly of Synod of Bishops ("Synod on Synodality") in October 2023, to reflect on the Path of Synodality in the life and mission of the Church, we equally fly to the patronage of Mary, the Mother of God and Mother of the Church, who accompanied the early Church in her 'first synod of synodality' at the Upper Room after Christ's Ascension and seek her intercession as the Church strives to reroute towards the Path of Synodality: Walking and Talking together as the Mystical Body of Christ.

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<sup>53</sup> Francis, Ceremony Commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015.



## Communion, Variety of Charism and Mission in the Church

**Rev. Bro. Olabanjo Wole, FSC**

*De La Salle Brothers International Scholasticate,  
Nairobi, Kenya*

### Abstract

*Jesus commissioned the disciples to “Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” (Mt. 28:19). The mission of the Church has its root from this great commission. The mission is given to the disciples, not just the Twelve Apostles. Whenever it seems the Church is in slumber, God steers His Spirit in the hearts of some members of His Body, the Church, to shake up the Church and remind her of her mission. This is how different Religious Congregations with their originating charisms spring up to respond in diverse ways to the mission of the Church and in communion with the Church. Synodality is a wakeup call to all members of the Church, the Body of Christ, to discover new ways of fulfilling the mission that Jesus entrusted to his Church. It is a call to all, not just the hierarchy of the Church, because the Holy Spirit is not restricted to any group. “For the purpose of safeguarding and handing on tradition, a system with established offices of leadership is needed. But it is equally true that for the purpose of shaking the Church out of the complacency and mediocrity that inevitably creep into any institution, the Church needs the charismatic intervention of the Spirit.”<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Francis A. Sullivan, *Charisms and Charismatic Renewal: A Biblical and Theological Study* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd., 1982), 47.

## Introduction

The promise of Jesus Christ to be with His Church even to the end of the ages seems to manifest itself in the numerous Religious Congregations being formed in the Church to respond to the variant and diverse challenges that try to destroy humanity and reduce the *imago Deo* in us. From the earliest time of the Church, God steered His Spirit, like Daniel saving Susan (Dan.13), in the hearts of men and women to respond to the needs of His people by forming Religious Order/Congregation in communion with the Church, with a specific charism, for a particular mission, and originating in a particular geographical area, before spreading abroad.

Not only did Jesus promise to be with His Church, He also assured Peter, the first Vicar, that He Jesus, will be with him, Peter, to strengthen his faith; and that he, Peter, in turn should strengthen the faith of his brothers and sisters. God continues to steer up His Holy Spirit in our time. Besides the different Religious Congregations responding to the challenges of our time through their unique charisms in communion with the Church, God steers His Spirit in the heart of the Church leadership to remind His people their mission on earth. The invitation of the Holy Father, Pope Francis, to Synodality, is another way God steers His Spirit in the hearts of His people. By Synodality, the Holy Father invites all the people of God that is the Church “to reflect together on the journey that has been made so far, so that collectively, we will be able to learn from one another's experiences and perspectives, guided by the Holy Spirit. Enlightened by the Word of God and united in prayer, we will be able to discern the processes to seek God's will and pursue the pathways to which God calls us – towards deeper communion, fuller participation, and greater openness to fulfilling our mission in the world”<sup>2</sup> Synodality is a call to Religious

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<sup>2</sup> For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission. *Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality Official Handbook for Listening and Discernment in Local Churches (Published by Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops Via della Conciliazione 34, Vaticana), 6.

Congregations that “we are to be at the service of fraternity in a wounded world and to open us to the culture of encounter in our religious communities and places of mission and make us be united to the people, and attend to the ecclesial mission according to the charism of each Institute or Society.”<sup>3</sup>

This article therefore looks at how the various charisms in the Church are for the mission of the Church, and therefore should be in communion with the Church. The article explores Synodality in connection with charism; it concludes with suggestions for maintaining and promoting the mission of the Church together as 'People of God'.

### **What is Synodality?**

Throughout the history of salvation, God has a way of responding to the needs of His people, as an individual and as a nation. When it seemed, the ship is completely submerged by water, God in one way or another, “steers up His spirit” to the rescue. This happened in the history of the Israelites after the death of Joshua. Judges were raised up to rescue the people from the hands of their enemies, (Judg. 1;4). After so many years of enslavement in Babylon, God “roused His spirit in Cyrus, the king of Persia...” (Ezra 1:). In the same vein, when it seemed the righteous and innocent child of God was almost condemned unjustly, God “roused his spirit” in Daniel to rescue Susana (Dan. 13). The call for Synodality by His Holiness Pope Francis, could be looked at as a new way God 'roused' His spirit in order to revive His Church. With the numerous challenges facing the Church in recent years, there seems to be a need for a “new Pentecost”; a new and diverse way of evangelization; a new and deeper way of being and seeing ourselves as

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<sup>3</sup> The Catholic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life, A Publication of the Conference of Major Superior of Nigeria, 'Call For Papers 2023'

Catholics and responding to being Catholics together today. “It is more urgent than ever today to preach Christ in the great modern areopagus of culture, science, economy, politics and the mass media. The evangelical harvest is great and the laborers are few (cf. Matthew 9:37). This vital field of action for the Church requires a radical change of mentality, an authentic new awakening of conscience in everyone.”<sup>4</sup>

The conveying of the Council of Jerusalem (cf. *Acts* 15:4-29) is an example of the Synodal life of the Church from the beginning of the Christian Community. Faced with a decisive pastoral and doctrinal challenge – the movement calling for conversion to Judaism – a community and apostolic method of discernment under the guidance of the Holy Spirit took place (cf. *Acts* 15:28). Participating in that decisive meeting, in different roles, were “the apostles and the elders with the whole Church” (*Acts* 15:4, 6, 22). This is an indication to us that the Church belongs to all, not just the hierarchy, but to all 'People of God'.

Synodality is that new way of evangelization; New and more profound ways of responding to the challenges of the Gospel in today's world of digital and technological explosion. “The evangelization of today's world is a task in which the Church places great hope; yet the Church is fully aware of the innumerable obstacles she faces in this work due to the extraordinary changes happening at a personal and social level, and above all, to a postmodern culture in serious crisis.”<sup>5</sup> Synodality configures the Church as the *People of God on a journey and as an assembly called by the Lord*. Synodality refers to the People of God walking and planning together so as to bring about the project of the Kingdom of God and to evangelize peoples, celebrate the risen Lord and to discern together, the mind and message of God's Holy Spirit to

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<sup>4</sup> Stanislaw Rylko, “Ecclesial Movements and New Communities: The Response of the Holy Spirit to Today's Challenge of Evangelization”, Address in Bogota 2006

<sup>5</sup> Stanislaw Rylko, “Ecclesial Movements and New Communities” Rome.

our present generation. In the words of Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich “Synodality is entering into an ever greater 'us', it is seeking what builds us together as a community, as People of God”.<sup>6</sup>

By Synodality, the Church, 'People of God', is called to find new, better and inclusive ways of living and spreading the Good News. New and better ways that are open to all People of God. In the word of the Holy Father: “It is precisely the path of Synodality that God expects of the Church of the third millennium.... What the Lord is asking of us is already in some sense present in the very word 'synod'!”<sup>7</sup>

The word “Synod” itself is a Greek word composed of the preposition *syn* meaning “with” and the noun *hodos* meaning “path.” It is about a path taken together, under the guidance of the risen Lord, by all the People of God with the wide variety of its members and a responsible and converging exercise of the various charisms and ministries for the sake of the common good. Synodality can therefore be described as a pathway undertaken in communion with the whole People of God in responding to the spiritual, social, economic needs of God's people in a modern technological world. Synodality is a way of following the footsteps of the Apostles. The crisis that rocked the early Church necessitated the Apostles to call the first Jerusalem Council. However, the participants were not restricted to the Apostles alone, participating in that decisive meeting, in different roles, were “the apostles and the elders with the whole Church” (*Acts* 15:4, 6, 22).

In the view of Antonio Spadaro, “Synodality does not denote a mere operational procedure, but rather the specific way of living and working (*modus vivendi et operandi*) of the Church as the People of God, who make manifest and realize concretely the people's being in

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<sup>6</sup> Jean-Claude Hollerich SJ, General Rapporteur of the 2021 Synod. -2023, during the inaugural session, in the synod hall, Vatican City, Saturday, October 9, 2021

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

communion in walking together, in reuniting in assembly, and in participating actively in the evangelizing mission. Synodality expresses and brings about the nature and mission of the Church in history oriented to the fullness of the Kingdom already present in Christ. So, “Church” is a name that means “Synod,” and “Synod” is a name that means “Church.”<sup>8</sup>

This indicates that Synodality is the total being of the Church. It is the being of a Church that does not exclude anyone; a Church that is inclusive; a Church that is open to all her children, not minding your statute, your background, and the position you occupy in the Church or in the society. All are invited and all are welcome and all are expected to take an active role in the mission of evangelization. Marking the 50th anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis said: “The journey of Synodality is the journey that God wants from his Church in the third millennium. A synodal church is a listening church, aware that listening is more than hearing. It is a reciprocal listening in which each one has something to learn.”<sup>9</sup>

The need to find a better and more inclusive way of proclaiming and living the Gospel values is more urgent today than it was many years ago. The Second Vatican Council envisaged this need when it stated that “The present-day conditions of the world add greater urgency to this work of the Church so that all men, joined more closely today by various social, technical and cultural ties, might also attain fuller unity in Christ.”<sup>10</sup> The call for Synodality invites all and sundry to collaborate and work together in making the Gospel message reach every corner of the world.

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<sup>8</sup> Spadaro, Antonio, SJ and Carlos Galli. “The Synodal Church.” <https://www.laciviltacattolica.com/the-synodal-church/> 26 October 2018/Last Updated on 4 March 2021, copied on April 25, 2022.

<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, *Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, October 17, 2015, No. 9: cf. w2.vatican.va.

<sup>10</sup> Lumen Gentium 1.

## **Charism**

The word 'charism' is used in a general way to designate gifts bestowed by God gratuitously (Rom. 1:11; 5:15; 6:23; 11:29; II Cor. 1:11). From the point of view of Saint Paul, charisms are not privileges reserved for some individuals. In the view of Francis Sullivan, there are two ways the Holy Spirit breathes life into the Body of Christ, the Church. The breath of the Holy Spirit could come through "Covenant relationship with the Church, guaranteeing the effectiveness of its sacraments and official ministries; and, by his unpredictable and often surprising charismatic interventions."<sup>11</sup> All Christians are open to receive these gifts and use them for building up the community. Charisms are not extraordinary gifts, but the recipients may use them in extraordinary way. However, without charity within which the recipients have to operate them, charisms are nothing.

Charisms are free gifts of the Holy Spirit intended for the building up of the Church, the Body of Christ. The gifts of charism proceed from the Holy Spirit, (I Cor. 12:4-11). 'Building up of the Body of Christ' is the end result of charisms. This has been the primary function of the Church throughout history, "to stand up against social system structured by domination or sin, or historical entities characterized by these, in order to set them on a new course of becoming more perfect systems so as to prepare for the Coming of the Lord in his Parousia."<sup>12</sup>

The call to Synodality is therefore, a call to revisit the primary mission of the Church, part of which is "to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to tell the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord" (Lk. 4:18-19). Charisms are

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<sup>11</sup> Francis A. Sullivan, *Charisms and Charismatic Renewal: A Biblical and Theological Study* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Ltd., 1982), 47.

<sup>12</sup> Ericque Dussel, *The Differentiation of Charisms*, in *Charisms in the Church*, ed. Christian Duquoc and Casiano Floristan (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), 41.

therefore the gifts through which the Spirit structures the Church by rousing from within the Church the services and functions needed to accomplish this primary task of the Church, according to the diversity and qualities of each member.

### **God's Spirit, A Paradigm for Authentic Charism for the Mission**

In the first chapter of the Bible, the Spirit was introduced to us: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was a formless void, there was darkness over the deep, and God's spirit hovered over the water.” (Gen. 1:1-2). According to Catholic teaching and tradition, “the term 'Spirit' translates the Hebrew word *ruah*, which in its primary sense, means breath, air, wind.”<sup>13</sup> The Spirit is the breath of God, the wind that 'hovered over the water'.

In His encounter with Nicodemus, Jesus affirmed that the Spirit of God is truly *ruah* that blows wherever it wills. “The wind blows wherever it pleases; you hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. That is how it is with who are born of the Spirit.” (Jn. 3:1-8). The Spirit of God that 'hovered over the water' at the beginning of creation, the same Spirit 'blows wherever it pleases.' But as the Spirit blows, it fills those who 'are born of the Spirit' and empowers them to be called 'children of God.'

The Church Magisterium teaches that “When the work which the Father gave the Son to do on earth was accomplished, the Holy Spirit was sent on the day of Pentecost in order that he might continually sanctify the Church, and thus, all those who believe would have access through Christ in one Spirit to the Father (cf. Eph.2:18). He is the Spirit of Life, a fountain of water springing up to life eternal, (cf. Jn.4:14; 7:38-39)”.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>*The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 1994), 193.

<sup>14</sup> Lumen Gentium 4, A Document of Vatican II.



At baptism Christians receive the Holy Spirit that makes them recognize “Jesus is Lord” (1Cor. 12:3); and makes them “Cry out Abba Father”. Through the same Spirit, Christians become children of God, members of Jesus' family, the Church. This same Spirit is renewed and re-energized in the Sacrament of Confirmation. The Baptized received seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. Prophet Isaiah foretold these gifts, which the Messiah would manifest, (Is. 11:1-4). The seven gifts are: Wisdom, Understanding, Knowledge, Counsel (Right Judgement), Fortitude (Courage), Piety (Reverence or Love), Fear of the Lord (Wonder and Awe in God's presence).

These seven gifts of the Holy Spirit produce some fruits in the individuals that allow the Spirit to work in them. Saint Paul, in his letter to the Galatians (5:22-23), enumerated nine fruits of the Holy Spirit as: Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Generosity, Faithfulness, Gentleness, and Self-Control. The fruits of the Holy Spirit are what all Christians need to live a genuine Christian life and face the challenges of daily living, (Eph. 4:11-12; 1Cor. 12:4)

Though these gifts are 'special' gifts that all baptized and confirmed Christians received at the reception of the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, yet their efficacy depends on the cooperation of the individuals with the Spirit. Because the Spirit of God does not force itself on us. The Spirit of God comes like a gentle breeze, (1Kgs.19:11-12), whispering to the ears of those who cooperate with it. The same Holy Spirit is with the Church “Till the end of time” (Mt. 28:20). The Holy Spirit guides, unifies the Church in communion and works of ministry. He equips and directs the Church hierarchy with charismatic gifts and his fruits.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Lumen Gentium 4.

It is this Spirit of God that manifested himself in the lives of the Founders of various Religious Congregation. The Founders of Religious Congregations discovered that they are capable of perceiving the Divine beyond the world of matter and energy, time and space. They perceive God in everything and everyone around them. Founders are like, as Loren Eiseley suggests, the Brazilian amphibian fish whose eyes have two lenses, one for seeing under the water and one for seeing above the water.<sup>16</sup> With the second lens, the Founders are able to see, discover, and respond to the needs of their environment, putting their gifts of the Holy Spirit into practical use. The second eyes have been given to all human, what we call 'inner eyes.' Unfortunately, most of us most of the time have cataracts on our second lens; and so, we see but we don't perceive.

Not only do the Founders see with the 'second lens', they are deliberate in compassion, “intentionally placing oneself in situations where people are struggling and need help, and being present to that experience.”<sup>17</sup> Such experience, for them, becomes transformative, life-changing. This is the essence of spirituality, the essence of Christian life. The Christian life is not about doing good to please God the judge. The Christian life is not “about believing now or being good now for the sake of heaven later. It is about entering a relationship in the present that begins to change everything now. Spiritual life is about this process: the opening of the heart to the God who is already here.”<sup>18</sup> This is compassion. This is what Saint Paul refers to when he speaks of the greatest of the spiritual gifts as love.

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<sup>16</sup> Loren Eiseley, *The Invisible Pyramid* (New York: Charles Scribner and Son, 1970), pp.119-120.

<sup>17</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *The God We Never Knew, Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith* (New York: HarperCollins Publisher, 1998), p. 127.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.128.

Spirituality – a life of relationship with the Spirit of God – must definitely lead to compassion. If spirituality does not lead to compassion, “then either it is a life in relationship to a different spirit or there is a lot of static in the relationship.”<sup>19</sup> Charism is therefore, that practical ways of living the spiritual life; a practical way of living the greatest of the spiritual gifts. Hence, charisms are more profound than the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Synodality is a call to both the Church and community of consecrated life to be re-founded daily. Just as the call for conversion comes to us daily, so is the call for the Church to be re-founded, to be renewed daily. The call however, is both collective and individual. All members of the Church are called to re-examine their lives. Family is the smallest unit of the society. When every family lives the gospel values, then the work of evangelization becomes easier, faster, and deeply rooted.

The spirit behind Synodality could be likened to the experience of Saint Francis. When Francis was told by the figure on the cross in San Damiano to repair the Church, Francis took it to mean the church edifice. Later, “Francis came to learn that he was being asked not just to improve a building, to re-found his own Christian life and to found a new community. He was also being asked to re-found the Church itself.”<sup>20</sup>

Synodality is a call to every member of the Church to live up to their baptismal promises. It is a call to every Religious Community to live their charismatic gifts more charismatically. This means that Religious Congregations must live in a way that is visibly full of the faith, the hope, the love, the joy that comes from finding and re-finding the pearl of great price (Mt.13:46).

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 129.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Lane CM, *The Cry of Christians: Tradition & Transition*, (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2000), p.166.

Synodality is calling the whole Church to be more religious. The Consecrated are not the only ones called to be religious. Synodality calls all Catholics to be religious. “Religion is about ties. True religion improves the quality of our ties with God, with other people, with the communion of Saints, with the whole human family, with the whole of creation.”<sup>21</sup> Synodality calls all Catholics to make ties and connections between our spiritual searching and the religious celebrations that, far from being empty rituals, should ensure the worship of God 'in spirit and in truth' (Jn. 4:24).

Synodality is a call to each and every member of the universal Church to live and preach the Good News in their own particular locality. Jesus' ministry, for the most part, was limited to the Jews of His time. “Our own task is to bring the Good News of the Kingdom to our own historical context – our global village, the world.”<sup>22</sup>

In his address to all 'renewal movements' in the Church, on Pentecost Sunday in 1998, Pope John Paul II reiterated the role and importance of the Holy Spirit in the life of individual Catholics in particular and the Church in general: “Whenever the Spirit intervenes, he leaves people astonished. He brings about events of amazing newness; he radically changes persons and history. This was the unforgettable experience of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council during which, under the guidance of the same Spirit, the Church rediscovered the charismatic dimension as one of her constitutive elements.”<sup>23</sup> This is clearly stated in *Lumen Gentium* long before the Pope declared it: “It is not only through the sacraments and the ministrations of the Church that the Holy Spirit makes holy the people, leads them and enriches them with his virtues. Allotting his gifts according as he wills (cf. 1 Cor 12:11), he

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>22</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *Listening to the Spirit in the Text* (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co. 2000), 174.

<sup>23</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Pentecost Sunday*, Rome, 1998

also distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank...He makes them fit and ready to undertake various tasks and offices for the renewal and building up of the Church.”<sup>24</sup>

No Religious Institute is founded for itself. Religious Congregations are founded for the mission of the Church. Religious Life is an integral part of the Catholic Church, founded with a particular charism to respond to particular problems confronting the Church in a particular locality. It is God that breathes His Spirit on the founder to respond in practical way, to the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit.

### **Charism and Synodality, an Invitation to Authentic Gospel Value**

Charisms are gifts distributed by the Spirit to each person as God wills. Charisms are practical ways and manners of responding to the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Charisms are deeper and more profound than the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the sense that charisms are giving to the individuals, but not for the use of the individuals. When a gift is giving, it belongs to the recipient, and the recipient can do whatever he/she likes with the gift. A charism as a gift, is meant for the growth and development of the group. In charism, you 'have your cake, but you cannot eat the cake, the cake has to be shared with all.'

This is exactly what the Catechism of the Catholic Church says: “Whether extraordinary or simple and humble, charisms are graces of the Holy Spirit which directly or indirectly benefit the Church, ordered as they are to her building up, to the good of men and to the needs of the world.” (CCC 799) “Charisms are to be accepted with gratitude by the person who receives them, and by all members of the Church as well. They are a wonderfully rich grace for the apostolic vitality and for the holiness of the entire Body of Christ, provided they really are genuine

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<sup>24</sup>*Lumen Gentium*, n.12.

gifts of the Holy Spirit and are used in full conformity with authentic promptings of this same Spirit, that is, in keeping with charity, the true measure of all charisms.” (CCC 800)

Synodality call is a renewed call to go back to the origin, the source, the basic reason of our Christianity. In other words, to be another Christ to the poor, the needy; to involve everybody in the evangelization process, and to get involved. Jesus proclaimed the gospel to the poor. Following this example, the Church has always been in support of the poor, the marginalized. In fact, no Religious Congregation came into existence if not to serve the poor. Hence, Vatican II invited all Religious Congregations to return to their root, return to their *raison d'être*.

In his apostolic letter, 'Witnesses of Joy', Pope Francis invited all Consecrated persons to look to the past with gratitude, and re-live their history. “All our Institutes are heir to a history rich in charisms. At their origins we see the hand of God who, in His Spirit, calls certain individuals to follow Christ more closely, to translate the Gospel into a particular way of life, to read the signs of the times with the eyes of faith and to respond creatively to the needs of the Church. This initial experience then matured and developed, engaging new members in new geographic and cultural contexts, and giving rise to new ways of exercising the charism, new initiative and expressions of apostolic charity.”<sup>25</sup>

This is an invitation to consecrated men and women to return to their root, understand their charisms, and develop creative ways of responding to the needs of the people of our days. There is need for charism maturity and diversification so as to respond effectively to the

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<sup>25</sup> Pope Francis, Witness of Joy, *Apostolic Letter of His Holiness, to All Consecrated Persons on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life* (Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2015), 1.1.

needs of the Church in modern world and be useful to the present society. Charism maturity is a developmental process which entails “strong awareness of self, purpose, place in society, and limitations, as well as the capacity to adapt to historical and cultural changes while remaining established in one's root.”<sup>26</sup>

Synodality is therefore, a call from the Holy Father to all Consecrated Religious to take cognizance of their origin, be creative in living their charisms today, be creative in responding to the needs of the time without losing focus of their charisms. It is a call to share their charisms, their spirituality with people they work with. A call to be open to the movement of the Spirit today. It is a call to individuals, groups within the Church, and the Universal Church, to be open to new conversion of heart. A conversion that means “the re-orientation of the soul of an individual, his deliberate turning from difference of an earlier form of piety to another, a turning which implies a consciousness that a great change is involved, that the old was wrong and the new is right.”<sup>27</sup>

### **Synodality, Charism and Mission; Way Forward**

It is clear from what has been said so far that the call for Synodality is a call to look for better ways of propagating the faith, a profound way of spreading the Good News proclaimed by Jesus Christ and handed on by the Apostles, a better way of inclusive evangelization where everyone in the Church and society is allowed to contribute to the spread of the Gospel. It is also clear that charisms are practical ways in which the Holy Founders responded to the needs and challenges of their times,

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<sup>26</sup> Reginald Cruz, 'Charismatic Maturity and Its Impediments: Considerations on a Persistent Challenge for Consecrated Life in Africa', in *Consecrated Life in Africa* (Nairobi Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2016), 60.

<sup>27</sup> Jack T. Sanders, *Charisma, Converts, Competitors: Societal and Sociological Factors in the Success of Early Christianity* (London: SCM Press, 2000), 73.

and sharing the charisms with those who believed in them, leading to the formation of Religious Congregations. The Religious Congregations developed, matured and gradually spread everywhere, to fulfill the mission entrusted to the Church by Jesus Christ: “Go therefore, and make disciples of all nations...” (Mt.28:19ff). The mission of the Church is therefore “to bring the light of Christ to all men, a light brightly visible on the countenance of the Church.”<sup>28</sup>

However, the call for Synodality is necessitated by the fact that, the Holy Father, Pope Francis, sees the need for the Church to change in her methods and process of evangelization. In Africa for instance, despite the fact that there is increase in number of dioceses, number of indigenous Bishops and Priests, increase in number of candidates in major seminaries and Religious Formation Houses, yet we cannot turn blind eyes to the great number of Catholics leaving the Church to join Pentecostal Churches of African origin, different sects, Islam and even African Traditional Religions.

***As a way forward therefore, I propose the following:***

*a. Understanding the Originating Charism*

Members of Religious Congregations must understand that Charisms are neither the properties of their Founders nor that of the Congregations. The charism of a Religious Congregation does not originate from the Founder. Charism finds its origin in the “Holy Spirit who gratuitously gives his passion and compassion to a world beset by sufferings – illness, ignorance, enslavement, marginalization, etc. – and indifference – be they social, psychological, or spiritual.”<sup>29</sup> Consecrated men and women must understand that the charism of their

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<sup>28</sup> *Lumen Gentium* 1, A Document of Vatican II.

<sup>29</sup> Reginald Cruz, 'Charismatic Maturity and Its Impediments: Considerations on a Persistent Challenge for Consecrated Life in Africa', in *Consecrated Life in Africa* (Nairobi Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2016), 69.



congregation is giving for the sake of the People of God, giving to be able to respond to the People's needs in all ramification. The originating charism is therefore, "that action of the Holy Spirit which is the institute's founding gift – the charism that determines its particular type of spirituality, life, apostolate, and tradition."<sup>30</sup> So, members of Religious Communities must be willing to share this gift with whoever desires it among the People of God.

*b. Differentiating between Charism and Mission*

Religious must strive to understand and be able to differentiate the charism of the congregation from the mission approved for them by the Church. Mission is understood to incorporate: (1) the people and places where the Holy Spirit bids the religious to bring the Good News; (2) what the congregation aspires to achieve once its members are in these places and in touch with these people and; (3) the ministries that are appropriate for the congregation to undertake in the light of the marks of the congregational charism. Charism on the other hand, is the *raison d'être*, it is the motivating spirit, it is the Being of the Congregation. A charism is what differentiates one Religious Congregation from another. "The way the word charism is used is quite ambiguous and frequently a source of misunderstandings and errors. Often charism is identified with the specific ends of the institute –that is, its ministries –with the danger of overshadowing the significance of consecration for the institute and how consecration and ministries are related to each other. Other times, the word is intended to emphasize only the inspirational spiritual aspects [of the congregation], but making no reference to its history or its juridical system."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>31</sup> Vincenzo De Paolis, *La vita consacrata nella Chiesa* (Venice: Marcianum Press, 2010), 207

c. *Developing Strong Charismatic Maturity*

The saying that “You cannot give what you don't have” is very true here. Signs of charismatic maturity are very weak in Religious Congregation where the members do not know or have fundamental understanding about charisms in Consecrated Life. Such a situation is analogous to health care workers lecturing about Alzheimer's syndrome while having little or no understanding on how the brain basically functions. This is the case with Consecrated Religious speaking about charism of their congregation but with no knowledge about the theology of charism. It will definitely be a case of the blind leading the blind. “The Church itself assesses that when charisms are ill-described, consecrated persons would become part of the life of the Church in a vague and ambiguous way.”<sup>32</sup> Hence the need for Religious Congregation to develop strong charismatic maturity, and have formidable understanding of the theology of charism and the Church's teaching on charism.

d. *Charism, a Gracious Gift Gratuitously Given*

Charism is a free gift of God, giving gratuitously to all the Baptized. Charism is not limited to Consecrated Religious alone; it is the Holy Spirit that gives charism to whoever he pleased. The ministerial Priesthood should therefore, elaborate on this to the lay faithful. “The noble duty of pastors toward the laity consists not only in shepherding them but also in recognizing their ministries and charisms.”<sup>33</sup> Consecrated persons do not have charisms because of profession of vows; rather, the Holy Spirit entrusts charisms to them by virtue of baptism.

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<sup>32</sup> Reginald Cruz, 'Charismatic Maturity and Its Impediments, 62.

<sup>33</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, n.30

*e. Charism is for the Benefit of All*

Charisms should not be understood the way gifts are generally understood. A gift is generally something given by one person to another, and the receiver can personally keep or enjoy the gift. Charisms are not like that. Charisms are not for the benefit of the recipient. In charisms, 'you have your cake, but you cannot eat it alone'; it has to be shared with others. "All the members of the faithful are called to discover, accept, nurture and share these gifts – whether they are ordinary or extraordinary – to the Church for the sake of its renewal."<sup>34</sup>

*f. Charisms, Instruments for the Mission of the Church*

The end result of charism is "Building up of the Body of Christ" and for the Church to succeed in carrying out this mission, all the baptized must join hands together. Charism is a moving force, the engine that keeps the People of God going on the mission. Synodality invites all Catholics to join hands together and develop new and more inclusive ways of evangelization. Religious Communities must be at the fore front of this. "The evangelical harvest is great and the labourers are few. This vital field of action for the Church requires a radical change of mentality, an authentic new awakening of conscience in everyone. New methods are needed, as are new expressions and new courage."<sup>35</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The promise of Jesus to be with His Church to the end of ages continues to be sustained and fulfilled, despite the numerous challenges facing the Church in our time. As ways of fulfilling this promise, God continues to steer His Spirit in the hearts and minds of His people at one time to another, even when the individuals are unaware or unprepared.

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<sup>34</sup> Reginald Cruz, *'Charismatic Maturity and Its Impediments'*, 64.

<sup>35</sup> Stanislaw Rylko, *Ecclesial Movements and New Communities*:

God keeps reminding His Church through different means to be focused on her mission. Definitely, the Church cannot undermine the role of her hierarchy but at the same time, there is need to carry every member of the Church along in every decision making, there is need to allow God to steer His Spirit in the hearts of the faithful, besides the hierarchy of the Church. “For the purpose of safeguarding and handing on tradition, a system with established offices of leadership is needed. But it is equally true that for the purpose of shaking the Church out of the complacency and mediocrity that inevitably creep into any institution, the Church needs the charismatic intervention of the Spirit.”<sup>36</sup>

In the encyclical *Laudato Si'* (LS) Pope Francis states that the exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* was for “all the members of the Church with the aim of encouraging a process of missionary reform that is yet to be carried out” (LS 3). The call to Synodality is a call to look at the methods of evangelization that will be involving and inclusive, not just the hierarchy but all Christians. The call for Synodality is a realization of the saying of Jesus about “the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both new and old.” (Mt.13:52). Synodality is a return to the basic message and challenges of the Gospel; but involving something new and distinctive, a new way of meeting the challenge of the Gospel, a fresh approach, more appropriate to the needs of the time. It is to bring about this newness and freshness that characterize charisms of each Institute of Consecrated Life; not for the Founders, but for the growth and development of the mission of the Church. The originating charism of each Religious Congregation started from among the people of a local Church, to respond to the needs and growth of the evangelization of the people of that particular local Church.

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<sup>36</sup> Francis A. Sullivan, *Charisms and Charismatic Renewal* 47.

Pope Francis told the gathering of Bishops during the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, that, “The world in which we live and which we are called to love and serve, even with its contradictions, requires from the Church the strengthening of synergies in all areas of its mission.”<sup>37</sup> The Church's response to the challenges of our times requires 'New Wine in New Wine-skin.' The making of this new wine requires the collaboration of all members of the Church, the Body of Christ. Because, through the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation all members of the Church have been anointed by the Holy Spirit and it is when we work together like this, the “entire Christian community is infallible when its members discern together and speak with one voice on matters of faith and morals.”<sup>38</sup> This makes the call for Synodality more important and urgent. A call that requires all Catholics, young and old, male and female, Religious and Lay, ministerial Priests and all Baptized to wake up and together develop a new way of responding, preaching and living the Gospel of Jesus.

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<sup>37</sup> Pope Francis, *Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, October 17, 2015, No. 9: cf. w2.vatican.va.

<sup>38</sup> Pope Francis, *Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*, October 17, 2015, No. 9: cf. w2.vatican.va

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## **Synod on Synodality and Consecrated Life: Communal Participation And Mission**

***\*Rev. Sr. Bridget Saiki, EHJ & Rev. Sr. Roseline Isiocha, EHJ***

### **What is the Synod on Synodality?**

Synod is from a Greek word "Concilium" which is at the ideal of renewal. It is an ancient and vulnerable word which denotes working together, the church stands for a name working together, it is all about equality.

The term synod simply means a journey by companion marked by fellowship and sharing and corresponds to the image of the church as a pilgrim people.

Synod in the Catholic Church refers to an event, like gathering of Bishops and other bodies to discuss some challenges that faces the church and also look for a way forward.

Synodality on the other hand refers to a character of the church. It has to do with listening, dialogue, collective discernment and journeying together. Therefore, the synod on synodality is an event in the church that deals with the ways to build a more synodal church; a church that can journey together with the tools of listening and dialogue.

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\* Rev. Sr. Bridget Saiki, EHJ, Novice Mistress; and Rev. Sr. Roseline Isiocha, EHJ, Scholasticate Mistress. This reflection has the contribution of the Novices and Temporary Professed Sisters (2022 Set) of the Eucharistic Heart of Jesus Institute (EHJ), to whom goes our appreciation for their collaboration (*Editor's Note*).

In journeying together in communion, participation and mission, the synod on synodality is undoubtedly a mandate to listen and to learn, to love and to live, to let go and to let God.

The synodal church is where there is unity in faith and where all participate actively in the prophetic mission, a mission of evangelization and proclaiming the Good News of salvation and liberation, of announcing the gospel of life of Justice and peace.

Synodality is established to bring the people together. A fulfilment of having the Lord Jesus present, since people are gathered in his name. “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” (Matt. 18:19–20.)

The Synod on Synodality is a two-year process that Pope Francis began in October, 2021. Officially known as “Synod 2021-2023: For a Synodal Church,” it is a process that allows bishops to consult with Catholics – from Parishioners all the way up to Priests – in a spirit of collaboration and openness. This includes official dialogue with some activists who actively dissent from Church teachings.

Synodality is a style, a culture, a way of thinking and being that reflects the truth that the Church is led by the Holy Spirit who enables everyone to offer their own contribution to the Church's life. This synod process seeks to “strengthen cooperation” in all areas of the Church's mission, to enhance communion, participation and mission.

While “Synodality is an expression of the Church's nature, her form, style and mission” (Pope Francis, 18 September 2021), the Church in our day lacks the habit and practice of synodality. This is what Pope Francis invites us to examine and discern for the future.

Synodality is also reflected in a synodal style of governance, in which people participate in decision making, share responsibility for the



Church's mission, and cooperate and collaborate more in the day to day life of the Church. Some call this “co-responsibility”. Church is neither a monarchy nor a democracy. Pope Francis has made clear that the synod is not a parliament, or a convention, or an opinion survey. Although it has many elements familiar to political and similar processes – listening, speaking, taking votes – what differentiates a Synod is that it is a spiritual process that takes place within the Church. “The Synod is an ecclesial event and its protagonist is the Holy Spirit. If the Spirit is not present, there will be no Synod” (Pope Francis, 09 October 2021). (Synodus Episcoporum, 2021)

### **How important is the Synodal Journey for young people, including those in formation houses?**

Synodal journey enable us journey together. This happens through listening to one another in order to hear what God is saying to all of us. It is realizing that the Holy Spirit can speak through anyone to help us walk forward/together on our journey as the People of God.

The Synodal journey helps young people to be open to change. This change is not an outward change but one that leads to personal and communal fulfilment. This change happens when there is dialogue and when people journey together. The synodal journey will teach those in formation houses to cultivate the spirit of dialogue and journeying together so as to achieve communal fulfilment.

“For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” (Matt. 18:19–20.) Our communal prayer is a typical example. This expresses the Church's constant conversion and response to his grace in order to journey through life in fulfilment of his kingdom. This response includes formation for the spirituality of communion: i.e learning to live together as one family in Christ who is one with the Father and the Holy Spirit, living in Communion will bring about the spiritual.

Furthermore, the following are outlined as the importance of Synodal Journey for young people, including those in formation houses.

- It gives a sense of belonging to the young and makes the young take religious/spiritual matter (s) to heart.
- It enlightens the young and influences a positive growth in their relationship with Christ and the things of the Church.
- It encourages unity and promotes the united nature of the Church.
- It exposes the youth to be more equipped in the knowledge of the Church; to promote the doctrines and traditions of the Church; and to get their opinions and ideas on the matters of the Church.

### **What steps were taken in your institute to participate in the Synodal Journey?**

Designated members of the institutes have sent out questionnaires regarding synodality and some discussions have also been made. This shows some of the tools of synodality namely: dialogue and listening. The questionnaires and the dialogue help to understand how individuals feel with regard to synodality and the ideas they have to make the church a synodal church.

### **How are the people of God listening to the Holy Spirit in communities of your institutes?**

Through Common Prayers/Daily Meditation and the Eucharist; Community meetings; Spiritual Direction/Consultations; Seminars and Spiritual Readings among others.

The Common Eucharistic Celebration; Prayers; Daily Meditation help members of the community to listen to the Holy Spirit. Listening to the

Holy Spirit in the breaking of the Word of God and also taking part in the same Communion.

Community meetings also help the community to discern the Spirit. Community meetings always start with a prayer to the Holy Spirit. The community will ask the Holy Spirit to guide them in their discussion and in the decisions they will take.

Superiors also have personal meetings with members in form of consultation and seminars are also conducted. These have helped and are helping the community to listen to the Spirit of God.

Our daily Spiritual Readings from the Bible (sharing)/Spiritual Books is another avenue through which we listen to the Holy Spirit.

Research into different documents of the Church and the communal living and practice of synodal requirements are also channels of listening to the Holy Spirit.

### **What do candidates in formation want from the Synod on Synodality?**

1. Candidates in formation will like to be more involved in the Church's activities/the mission of the Church. This is because formation is for mission.
2. Candidates expects that the Synod on Synodality should be able to relegate the problems of differences and divisions in the way to celebrate the liturgy.
3. They will also want Synod on Synodality to heal the polarization and the marginalization that exists in the Church; to promote the unity and standard of the Church; and discourage tribalism and embrace unity.

4. The principle of subsidiarity should be observed especially in rural areas
5. The act of politicization should be discouraged.
6. Internal affairs resulting to misunderstanding should be amicably settled within the Church.
7. The Mission mandate of the Church should be the priority
8. Communal relationship between the priest, religious and the lay faithful should be promoted
9. There should be equality in the Church.

**What are the disposition and attitude needed to live Synodality in Religious Communities?**

1. Openness: Community members are called to be open and to share their views and their difficulties. This will help to live a synodal life in the community.
2. Ability to listen to others: Community members should be able to listen to the ideas and problems of other community members
3. Creating time to share: The community should create time for coming together to discuss.
4. Overcoming certain beliefs and mentality: Members of the community should not hold on to a particular style and pattern of carrying out an activity. The community should be flexible in decision making.

5. The disposition and attitude needed to live Synodality in Religious Communities can also be outlined as qualities/virtues as follows:

- Understanding
- Togetherness
- Equality
- Communication
- Openness
- Faithfulness
- Attentiveness
- Love
- Forgiveness
- Interpersonal relationship
- Acceptance
- Humility and
- Sacrifice.

**What message do you have for fellow candidates in formation and formators?**

We encourage our fellow Candidates in formation and Formators to be fully involved.

The Candidates and Formators should always be interested in participating in the synodal life of the Church.

Candidates in formation and Formators should try to have/create time for dialogue and they should be open to the Holy Spirit. They should come together for common prayers, meals and recreation. This will help to build a synodal spirit, thereby fostering the church's desire to become a synodal church. It is from the communities that we can *foster synodality in the church*.

Consistency and Commitment is key.

**Note:** Charity Begins at Home.

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