

EDITORIAL

The 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 people¹; 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,

¹Vatican 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.²

²Secretary 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.”³ 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.”⁴ 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.”⁵

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.”⁷

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

³ Ibid.

⁴ “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>

⁵ Ibid.

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

⁷ 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”⁸. 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.”⁹ 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.”¹⁰ 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

⁸ 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*

⁹ *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.*

¹⁰ *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.”¹¹

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”¹². It is an occasion in which the Church in Africa has “a voice to make herself heard on Synodality”¹³; perhaps more importantly, she sees “in this process an opportunity for Africa to elaborate her own identity as Church”¹⁴. 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.

¹¹ Ibid.

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

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ 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.”¹⁵

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”¹⁶ 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”¹⁷.

¹⁵ 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*

¹⁶ 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.*

¹⁷ 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."¹⁸

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

¹⁸ 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”¹⁹, 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

¹⁹ 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 decisions²⁰. 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

²⁰ Cf. Elochuwku E Uzukwu, *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 t 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.”²¹ 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.²²

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

²² Francis, *Ceremony Commemorating the 50th 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.”²³ 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

²³ 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.”²⁴ 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.

²⁴ 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”²⁵ 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.tcv africa.org

²⁵ 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.