

SYNODALITY, THE LAITY AND THE ECOLOGY OF RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CHURCH

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Abstract

Synodality is anchored on the vision of the Church as communion and calls for the optimal functioning of its structures. Saint Pope John II taught us that making the Church the home and school of communion is a great challenge, that is, if we wish to be faithful to God's plan and respond to the world's deepest yearnings. Collaborating with this, Pope Francis holds that the path of synodality is what God expects of the Church in the Third Millennium. While there are several works that have reflected on synodality in a general sense, this paper distinguishes itself by anchoring the discourse on synodality on the conversion of the structure of the Church in relation to the laity for a better understanding of the place and indispensable responsibility of the laity in the life of the Church, and for greater output in terms of the mission of evangelization. For the purpose of this paper, the theoretical framework employed is that of the Church as a family, the Church as a new people vivified by the Holy Spirit, the Church as the Body of Christ and the Church as a sacrament. The analytical and hermeneutic approaches were also employed to achieve the aim and objectives of this paper. The paper discovered that there is need for a better management of the involvement of the laity in the life of the Church for a greater output in the evangelization mission of the Church.

Keywords: Synodality, Laity, Structures, Communion, Mission

1. Introduction

The Synodal Church is anchored on the vision of the Church as communion, and, therefore, calls for an optimal functioning of the structures put in place by the

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Second Vatican Council. The idea of communion, in this case, points to unity in difference, with difference being a precondition for the possibility of conflicts, which is also not inevitable. When differences are managed or harnessed, rather than being a source of conflict, it becomes the source of creativity, dynamism and enrichment. Saint Pope John II had observed that: "...to make the Church the home and school of communion: that is the great challenge facing us in the millennium, which is now beginning if we wish to be faithful to God's plan and respond to the world's deepest yearnings."². Collaborating this, Pope Francis wrote: "It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church in the Third Millennium."³

Saint Pope John Paul II, in his *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, wrote that: "... the spirituality of communion, by prompting trust and openness wholly in accord with the dignity and responsibility of every member of the people of God, supplies institutional reality with a soul."⁴ This affirms the need for mutual respect, dialogue, fairness and commitment to the good of all. It was also in this regard that Pope Paul VI taught that collaboration within the Church is the work of human persons, which is more effective if such persons are imbued with a sense of Church (*sentire cum ecclesiae*), a supernatural attitude of hearts and minds rooted and founded upon charity.⁵ Charity is very fundamental in this case because its prescriptions exceed the bounds of justice as it gives all for the good of others.

This paper is in line with the teaching of Pope Francis, who calls for the conversion or activation of the structures of the Church for the evangelization mission of the Church. The conversion of the structure of the Church is in relation to the laity of the Church for a better understanding of the place and indispensable responsibility of the laity in the life of the Church. This is very important as they constitute the largest members of the body of Christ. There is an African proverb that says: "a piece of broom cannot sweep a room", another says, "A tree cannot make a forest." These point to the importance of the functioning of the different dimensions of the structure of every organism. This discourse on the place of the laity in the life of the Church is anchored on the spirituality of synodality.

²Peter Cardinal Okpaleke, 2023. *The Church in Nigeria and the Spirit of synodality: Conversion of structures of communion for mission*. Nigeria: Catholic Bishop's Conference of Nigeria, 14.

³ Pope Francis, 2015. *A ceremony commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops*.

⁴Pope John Paul II, 2001. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana: Rome, 45.

⁵Pope Paul VI, *Christus Dominus*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana: Rome, 35

2. Theological Frameworks for the Hermeneutic of Structures of Relationships

The development of thoughts in this paper will be weaved around a few basic theological truths already established and known, especially as it concerns the image of the Church: the Church as the family of God, the Church as a new people vivified by the Holy Spirit, the Church as the body of Christ and the Church as a Sacrament.

a. The Church as the Family of God

The image of the Church as a family is at the heart of the teaching of the First African Synod and the Post Synodal Apostolic document *Ecclesia in Africa*. This idea of the Church is first based on the African culture, which gives a special place to the family. However, at the doctrinal level, God is spoken of as family, that is, the Trinitarian family: Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. This family is a mystery of unity and communion in diversity.⁶ The Father is the Supreme Creator who communicates life in abundance to all men and women. The Son is the Incarnate Word, who, by the mystery of His incarnation, death and resurrection, ascension and sending of the Holy Spirit, became an elder brother and an ancestor of a multitude of God's children. It is He who made us brothers and sharers in the life of God. Finally, the initiation into the family of God is made possible by the action of the Holy Spirit.⁷

At the level of Scripture, there is an abundance of scriptural references, texts and images which convey the idea of the Church as a family. An example is the commandment of love; Christ gave us a new commandment to love one another (Jn 13:34; 15:12-17). At the level of the Eucharist, the Eucharistic meal is the centre of unity, a place of gathering of the children of God. It brings God's entire children home at the table of love, where the very life of God is offered to all co-members of God's family. The Church as family, therefore, receives its fundamental identity in the Eucharist, not only because it is a sharing in the body and blood of Christ, and in the life of the family, but also because it constitutes the centre around which the family gathers in order to evoke its ancestral memories.

b. Church as a New People Vivified by the Holy Spirit

A major theological foundation is the understanding of the Church as a new people vivified by the Holy Spirit.⁸ From the time of the descent of the Holy Spirit

⁶ Kanu, I. A. and Ezenweke, O. E. 2010. "The Dynamics of Human Suffering in Operative Theology". *International Journal of Theology and Reformed Tradition*, Vol. 2. 168-182.

⁷ Cecil, M. 1995. *What Happened at the African Synod*, Nairobi: Pauline, 23.

⁸ Kanu, I. A. 2017. Theological foundations of mutual relations. In Kanu, I. A. (Ed.). *Collaborative ministry in mission: A reflection in the light of Mutuae Relationes* (1-6). Abuja: Conference of Major Superiors of Nigeria, 1.

on the apostles on Pentecost day, there exists in the world a *new people*⁹, which, vivified by the Holy Spirit, assembles in Christ in order to have access to the Father. She is gathered from all nations and merged into such an intimate unity by the power of the Holy Spirit that its reality cannot be explained by recourse to any mere sociological formula, for real *newness*, transcending the human order, is inherent in it.¹⁰

c. Church as the Body of Christ

The understanding of the Church as the body of Christ is very fundamental to this course. As the body of Christ, unity in Christ involves a mutual communion of life among her members. God, in fact, "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."¹¹ The very life-giving presence of the Holy Spirit builds up organic cohesion in Christ. Indeed, He unifies the Church "in communion and in the works of ministry, He bestows upon her varied hierarchic and charismatic gifts, and in this way directs her; and He adorns her with His fruits."¹²

d. Church as Sacrament

A sacrament can be simply defined as an outward sign with inward grace. If the Church is referred to as a visible sacrament, it means that there are outward and inward dimensions of the Church which are ultimately related to each other. Thus, there is the visible social organism and an invisible divine presence intimately united. This is similar to the very mystery of Christ. In fact:

... as the assumed nature, inseparably united to Him, serves the divine word as a living organ of salvation, so, in a somewhat similar way, does the social structure of the Church serve the Spirit of Christ who vivifies it, in the building up of the body.¹³

The images of the Church as the Church as the family of God, a new people vivified by the Holy Spirit, the body of Christ and a Sacrament will contribute to providing a theological foundation for a discussion on the building up of a structure of relationship in the Church where all her members will feel at home.

⁹Lumen Gentium. 1964. In A. Flannery (Ed). *Documents of the Second Vatican Council*. Dublin: Dominican Publications, 4.

¹⁰Lumen Gentium. 1964. Op. Cit. 9.

¹¹Lumen Gentium. 1964. Op. Cit. 4.

¹²Lumen Gentium. 1964. Op. Cit. 9.

¹³Kanu, I. A. 2017. Op. Cit. 3.

3. The Synod on Synodality

The synod on synodality was solemnly opened on 9th – 10th October 2021 in Rome by Pope Francis. He was joined by the dioceses around the world in celebrating the opening of the Synod at the local level on the Sunday after October 17, 2021. The convocation of this period of the synod on synodality by Pope Francis was an invitation to the entire Church to reflect on synodality, which is necessary for the life and mission of the Church. The Pope announced that this Synod was going to be unlike any other;¹⁴ it will be very inclusive and about journeying together in order to harvest the fruits of the Spirit through listening dialogue and community discernment, in which every baptized person can participate and contribute to the mission of the Church.¹⁵ The synod is a way of renewing the Church from her deepest roots, in order to be more united with one another and better carry out our mission as a church.¹⁶

Pope Francis states that the goal of this synod is the achievement of a synodal Church. He writes: “It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium. It is a journey in synodality, a learning process for the entire people of God of putting synodality into practice.”¹⁷ It is based on processes of listening, dialogue, and community discernment, in which each and every baptized person can participate and contribute to the mission of the Church.¹⁸

The uniqueness of this synod is in the process it adopts and the level of inclusion that it calls for in the Church. It adopted a two-year synodal process for the entire people of God, which will include processes of listening, dialogue, and community discernment. It will also be inclusive in character in the sense that all the members of the Church will be given an opportunity to contribute.¹⁹ It will not be a synod for Bishops alone or a one-month event. The door was thrown open for all the baptized in the Church.²⁰ The Synod also adopted a pedagogical and

¹⁴ Pope Francis, Ceremony Commemorating The 50th Anniversary Of The Institution Of The Synod Of Bishops. Commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops, October 17, 2015

¹⁵ Pope Francis. 2015. Op. Cit

¹⁶ Pope Francis. 2015. Op. Cit

¹⁷ Pope Francis. 2015. Op. Cit

¹⁸ Pope Francis. 2015. Op. Cit

¹⁹ Obiefuna, A. B. C and Kanu, I. A. 2022. Achieving The Strategic Goal And Objectives Of The Synod On Synodality: a Nigerian Perspective. Ohazurume: UNIZIK Journal of Culture and Civilization. 1. 1. 149-163.

²⁰ MARYSYLVIA Nwachukwu, DDL, *On the path to synodality: Communion, participation and mission*. A paper presented at the Annual General Meeting of the Joint Conference of Major Superiors of Nigeria at DRACC Emene, January 12 2022

pastoral approach, so that with everyone's involvement it becomes not only an event that happens once in a while in the life of the Church but one in which everyone feels and gets a sense of what the Church is and should be; and if possible, become a method of decision making in the life of the local and universal Church.²¹ It also put synodality into practice.

4. The Laity in the Life of the Church

Laity is from the Greek word *laikos*. It speaks of those whose primary ministry lies in the profane theatre. The Fathers of the Church used it within the context of those who are outside of the leaders of the worshipping community. According to Justine the Martyr²² and Clement of Alexandria²³, the laity are those who say 'Amen' to the prayers of the leaders of the Church.

The Scripture does not use the word laity. However, the laity has a distinctive place in the life of the Church. For instance, the Prophet Isaiah says: "And it shall be, as with the people, so with the priest" (24:2). The Prophet Jeremiah also makes this distinction between the priests and the laity when he prophesies: "Then the priests and prophets said to the princes and to all the people" (26:11). The distinction made by the prophets is not as regards dignity, status or class, for there is, a common baptism, one people of God, a common grace, a common vocation, a common dignity.²⁴ It is rather an attempt to specify the sphere of the laity's mission- the secular. This is a very important dimension of the mission of the Church as they serve to bring the good news proclaimed in the Church to the whole world.

About 98% of the Church are lay people. Thus, the Church can achieve very little without the lay faithful.²⁵ Addressing the Episcopal Commissions for the Laity in Rome in 2024, Pope Francis describes their indispensable responsibility in the Church thus,

The lay apostolate is, above all, a witness! Testimony of one's own experience, the testimony of prayer, the testimony of service to those in need, the testimony of closeness to the poor and lonely people, and the

²¹ Obiefuna, A. B. C and Kanu, I. A. 2022. Op. Cit. 149-163.

²² Justine the Martyr. *Apologia*, 1. 67.5

²³ Clement of Alexandria. *Strom*, VI.5. 42. 2

²⁴ Paul VI. 1964. *Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana: Rome, 30.

²⁵ Paul VI. 1964. *Lumen Gentium: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana: Rome, 30-31.

testimony of acceptance, especially on the part of families. And so we are formed for the mission: going towards others. It is training "in the field" and, at the same time, an effective way of spiritual growth. (...) The tragedy for the Church today (is) that Jesus keeps knocking on the door, but from within, so that we let Him go out!²⁶

During a plenary assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Laity on June 17, 2016, Pope Francis taught that:

We need well-formed lay people, animated by a sincere and clear faith, whose lives have been touched by the personal and merciful love of Christ Jesus.²⁷

Speaking further, he exhorted:

We need lay people who take risks, who get their hands dirty, who are not afraid of making mistakes, who go forward. We need lay people with a vision of the future, not confined to the little things of life.²⁸

The image that may describe the place of the lay faithful is the image of the feeding of the Five Thousand in the Gospel. Jesus' role can be compared to that of the priest- he blessed the bread, however, the people were already seated in their fifties, and there was a need to bring the bread to the people.²⁹ The role of the lay faithful is comparable to that of those who brought the bread to the people who were already seated. When the Word of God is broken at the table of the word on a daily basis by the priest, it is the responsibility of the lay faithful to diffuse this word to the corners of the earth, bringing it to the hearts of men and women in the world through proclamation and action. Thus, where you have an active lay faithful, you would have an active Church, but wherever you have a passive lay faithful, you would have a passive church.³⁰

²⁶ Pope Francis 2024. Address to the Episcopal Commissions for the Laity. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2023-02/pope-francis-calls-for-greater-lay-protagonism-in-the-church.html>

²⁷ Pope Francis. 2016. *Address to participants at the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the laity*. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2016/june/documents/papa-francesco_20160617_plenaria-pc-laici.html

²⁸ Pope Francis. 2016. Op. Cit.

²⁹ Kanu, I. A. 2016. *The Role of the Laity in the Jubilee Year of Mercy*. A Paper Delivered at the Apapa Deanery Laity celebration of the Year of Mercy, Saint Vincent Catholic Church, Olodi, Apapa, 3-5.

³⁰ Kanu, I. A. 2016. Op. Cit. 3-5

5. The Structure of Relationships: Challenges

The idea of the Church as family, which has become the identity and model of the Church in Africa, is the foundation upon which the Church and its relationships must be built. The absence of this would create a bipolar concept of the Church that does not conform to the image of family.³¹ Okure raises questions that require the attention of the Church in Africa:

What concrete action can we take with deep humility to promote reconciliation, justice and peace within the Church of God? To what extent does the notion of 'Church as a family of God' actually affect our manner of being Church in Africa? ...what sustainable gospel-based ways can we adopt as church-family of God in Africa... so that we can truly be 'salt of the earth' and 'light of the world?'³²

The understanding of Church for the people in Africa is intrinsically connected to her mission, and until the meaning of the Church as family is gotten right and received wholeheartedly, the role of the Church in the areas of reconciliation, justice and peace will not be achieved.

Tied to this poor self-understanding are the practical problems that we face today around governance, the exercise of authority and power, financial and ministerial accountability, and interpersonal relationships among the clergy, with the lay faithful and women. Even the issue of sexual abuse may not be understood entirely outside of this. According to Teresa Okure, "The issue of internal and structural relationships between the different bodies in the Church still remains to be courageously addressed Christologically from the gospel perspective."³³

Pope Benedict XVI wrote about the laity thus: "Through her lay members, the Church is present and active in the world. Lay people have an important role to play in the Church and in society."³⁴ Unfortunately, even among theologians, when the word Church is used, it is usually not in relation to the People of God or the Family of God, but in relation to the hierarchy in exclusion of the laity.³⁵ This

³¹ Kanu, I. A. 2024. "A Reassessment of African Theology in the period after *Africae Munus*". *Innovations*, No. 76. March. 1083-1101.

³² Okure, T. 2011. Church-Family of God: The place of God's reconciliation, justice and peace. In Orobator, A. E. (Ed.). *Reconciliation, justice and peace: The second African Synod (13-24)*. Orbis Books: New York.

³³ Okure, T. 2011. Op. Cit. 13-24

³⁴ Pope Benedict XVI. 2011. *Africae Munus*. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation. Kenya: Paulines, 128.

³⁵ Okure, T. 2008. The Church in the world: A dialogue in ecclesiology. In Haers J. and Mey de P. (Eds.). *Theology as conversation: Towards a relational theology*. Leuven: Leuven

concept of the Church does not take into cognizance that the laity are "the faithful who have been fully incorporated into the Church through baptism, confirmation and communion,"³⁶ or as members with gifts, offices and ministries of the Holy Spirit given for exercise in harmonious collaboration within the Church for the common good (1 Peter 2:9-10; 1 Corinthians 12: 4-13; Romans 12:3-8).

As Church as a family (the clergy, consecrated persons and laity), we belong to a community or family of believers, and discernment within this context is the prerogative of all the members of the community. Care must, therefore, be taken to avoid a rigid separation between the teaching Church (*ecclesia docens*) and the learning Church (*ecclesia discens*). Discerning together as a Church would require listening to the people of God, and this listening must be distinguished from hearing.³⁷ It is a listening that respects all, given that the laity shares in Christ's prophetic office. This is also based on the ancient principle of the Roman law which holds that: *quod omnes tangit ab omnibus tractari debet* (what concerns all must be treated by all).

6. Synodality, the Laity and Structure of Relationship: Implications

The Synod on Synodality builds on the vision of the Church as communion and calls for the optimal functioning of the structures of the Body of Christ. It, therefore, has several implications for the structure of relationships in the Church, especially as regards the laity. Some of these implications include:

1. The Synod on synodality affords us the opportunity to reconnect with the experience of synodality in action and as a way of being Church. This experience should allow the Holy Spirit to transform our hearts and minds, influence our vision and projects, and animate our leadership styles and practices, which will deepen and give rise to a new way of relating with the laity, among others.
2. In the face of eminent differences in relationships within the structure of the Church, the Synod on synodality introduces a new age. It is an age that does not allow differences to degenerate into indifference, opposition, subjugation and exploitation. It is an age that harnesses differences well, making it a source of creativity, dynamism and enrichment. It is an age that creates the aperture for the optimum contribution of the laity towards the growth of the Church.

University Press, 398.

³⁶ O'Collins, G. and Farrugia, G. E. 2000. *The Concise Dictionary of Theology*. London: T & T Clark, 814.

³⁷ Pope Francis. 2013. *Evangelium Gaudium, Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in the Modern World*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana: Rome, 119.

3. The spirituality of communion that makes the Church a home and school of communion, and which the synod on synodality reemphasizes has the capacity to prompt the trust of the laity and to create an openness that is wholly in accord with the dignity and responsibility of every of the people of God. It is this trust and openness that supplies the institutional reality with a soul.
4. The spirituality of synodality presents the Church as journeying together. This implies involvement, participation and communion of all the co-travellers, including the laity. This also involves discernment, an *aggiornamento* through *ressourcement*, learning from the history of past relationships in the Church. This discernment is the prerogative of the whole community: clerical, religious and laity. Journeying together in this sense is towards Christ Jesus, who insists that whatsoever you do to the least of your brothers and sisters you do it to me (Matt 25:31-46).

7. Conclusion

The Holy Father, Pope Francis, understands synodality within the context of the Church journeying together; listening to one another and together to the Holy Spirit. This is a kind of listening that goes beyond just hearing. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn with the aim of walking the Gospel and evangelizing in such a manner that we all participate actively in the salvific mission of Christ.

Significantly, the Pope Francis announced that the synod on synodality is going to be unlike any other; it will be very inclusive and about journeying together to harvest the fruits of the Spirit through listening, dialogue, and community discernment, in which every baptized person can participate and contribute to the mission of the Church.

It is this understanding of the spirituality of the synod on synodality that animated the present paper. Discussing the place of the laity in the life of the Church was done in the light of basic theological frameworks necessary for the achievement of the vision of the synod on synodality. These frameworks include the images of the Church as the Family of God, a new people vivified by the Holy Spirit, the Church as the body of Christ, and the Church as a sacrament. This is with the objective of inspiring a new way of relating with the laity in such a manner that does not allow differences to degenerate into indifference and, more importantly, to create a home for the laity in the Church where they will be inspired to optimally towards the growth of the Family of God.