

## **SYNODALITY IN ACTS 15: THE SOUL OF ECCLESIAL COMMUNION AND THE CHURCH IN AFRICA**

**Paul Qlátúbòsún ÀDAJÀ, Ph.D**

Faculty of Theology,  
Loyola University, Chicago  
adajapaul@yahoo.com

### **Abstract**

*Pope Francis's recent pronouncement that synodality is a constitutive dimension of the church's life is a significant renewal of the idea of Synods in the Church. A historical analysis of the synodal experience in the church shows that Francis' synodal outlook is not only rooted in scripture but also in our tradition. This article takes up Francis's understanding of synodality. It explores ways in which this understanding can lead to a greater understanding of the synodal experience between the Church in Africa, the church in the West and the Universal Church with concrete proposals about how this can happen.*

**Keywords:** Acts, Ecclesia, Experience, Francis, Synodality, Africa, Mission.

### **1. Introduction**

The focus of this work is to discuss the soul of ecclesial communion and the Church in Africa with the exposition of synodality in Acts 15<sup>1</sup>. Historically, the church has always used dialogue, inspired by the Holy Spirit, to find her path as a

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<sup>1</sup>In this paper, I will be using Nigeria as a touchstone to mirror the continent of Africa. In a lot of ways, Nigeria, being the most populous country on the continent with a significant Catholic population, reflects the continent. However, I am fully aware that the similarity of different realities does not translate as the sameness of the said realities. That being the case, the desire of the different Episcopal conferences on the continent (i.e. Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar- SECAM) to present a common response to some pastoral issues underscores my argument. There are enough similarities to use Nigeria as a case study in my position on synodality on the African continent. See, for instance, the response to *Fiducia Supplicans*: —SECAM: “NO BLESSING FOR HOMOSEXUAL COUPLES IN ALL CHURCHES IN AFRICA” SECAM SCEAM

pilgrim in the world. These dialogues have assumed several names in Church history, including Synods, Councils, and Ecumenical Councils.<sup>2</sup> As usual in history, reality precedes the naming of reality, and this holds true in the case of dialogue in the church.<sup>3</sup> Initially, the major Church dialogue involved elders and other relevant representatives of the church, but with time, it became restricted to Bishops.<sup>4</sup> With Pope Francis, however, there is a move to return to the original nature of dialogue in the church, which involves relevant representatives at every level of the Church life, and he has called this synodality. In this paper, I will be arguing using both Scriptural and historical evidence that Pope Francis' move is not only scripturally and historically sound but also the most healthy way forward for the Universal Church. One of the implications of this argument of mine is synodality as a reality if practised in the Spirit of Pope Francis, will lead to a healthier relationship between the Church in Africa (and the global south) and the church in the West. This relationship will fulfil one of the hopes of Jesus that “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have a love for one another.” (See John 13:35).

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<sup>2</sup>Han Feichtinger notes that Pope Leo the Great grew up with synods being held twice a year in the City of Rome. According to Canon 5 of the Council of Nicaea: “It is decreed that in every province synods shall be held twice a year, in order that when all Bishops of the province are assembled together, such questions may by them be thoroughly examined... And let these synods be held, the one before Lent (that the pure gift may be offered to God after all bitterness has been put away), and let the second be held about autumn.” See Han Feichtinger, “Synodality: Then and Now—In Rome and in Germany” *Communion: Winter 2021*, 727–763. Here 729.

<sup>3</sup>In terms of naming a reality, I would like to distinguish between what I will be calling the Synodal experience and a Synodal event. A synodal experience is every realisation of a dialogue under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This will cover experiences like the parish council meeting, even a finance council meeting, lay apostolates, or pious organisation meeting. This usually, though not exclusively, has implications for a local church. A Synodal event is a realisation of a dialogue under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit with implications for the Universal Church.

<sup>4</sup>The council of Chalcedon (October 451), for instance, was at the direction and under the supervision of the praetorian, the urban prefect, the Master of Offices, a number of senators and patricians whose names were even displayed before those of most senior Bishops in the *Acta*. These lay people “set the agenda, questioned witnesses, silenced disorderly arguments among participants, and generally ran the proceedings with an iron to ensure that everything would be done according to proper judicial procedure.” Cf. Michael Gaddis, *There is No Crime for those who have Christ: Religious Violence in the Christian Roman Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 316. Feichtinger writes that “Leo acknowledged that the imperial family had a crucial role to play in how councils are organised, conducted, promulgated, and enforced. The emperors and their families represented the whole empire, in which, by God's gift, they exercised power and had a mission.” Feichtinger, “Synodality: Then and Now.” Here 738.

The church is essentially a community.<sup>5</sup> This harks back to her primordial name, *Ecclesia*, which is the most common word used to describe the church in its early history.<sup>6</sup> The word *Ecclesia*, from the Greek word ἐκκλησία, denotes a community called by God. Many of the models used to describe the church have always prioritized its communal nature.<sup>7</sup> In recent years, the Church in Africa has been able to contribute significantly to the understanding of the church as a community by calling her *Family of God*.<sup>8</sup> To capture how early Christians saw the church as a community, we get a description from one of the Church Fathers:

It is a bad world, Donatus, an incredibly bad world.  
But in the midst of it, I discovered quiet and good  
people who had learned the great secret of life.  
They have found joy and wisdom that are a  
thousand times better than any of the pleasures of  
our sinful lives. They are despised and persecuted,  
but they are not. They are masters of their souls.  
They have overcome the world. These people,  
Donatus, are Christians, and I am one of them.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to the idea that the church has a communal character, the church has also always seen itself as synodal in outlook. While there has been more buzz around the words 'synod', 'synodal' and 'synodality' nowadays, the

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<sup>5</sup> Edith Stein notes that “The notion of the Church as a community of the faithful is the most accessible to the human reason.” See Edith Stein, *The Collected Works of Edith Stein Essays on Woman*, Volume 2. trans. Freda Mary Oben, ed. Lucy Gelber and Romaeus Leuven, (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1987) 237.

<sup>6</sup> The word ἐκκλησία originally was used to describe a legislative assembly of citizens among the Greeks with no religious connotation. It was adopted by the Septuagint (LXX) to translate the Hebrew word *kahal*. It is often used with the Hebrew Tetragrammaton (YHWH) to describe Israelites as the assembly of the Lord. It occurs about 100 times in the LXX, twice in the Synoptics, twenty-three times in the Acts of the Apostles, Sixty-five times in Pauline literature, four times in Johannine materials, and twenty times in the Book of Revelation. Cf. Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 579–580. See also William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 303.

<sup>7</sup> Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Random House, 2002). In this seminal work, Cardinal Dulles identified six models of the church (a. Institution; b. Mystical Communion; c. Sacrament; d. Servant; e. Herald; f. Community of Disciples), with each of these models expanding an aspect of the Church community.

<sup>8</sup> *Ecclesia in Africa* (September 14, 1995), John Paul II (Vatican.va). In this 58-page document, the word 'family' in relation to the church occurs a record 48 times.

<sup>9</sup> Letter attributed to have come from St Cyprian to Donatus (mid-3rd century).

reality of a synod is almost as old as the church itself. Synods have always been the coming together of the church in history to have a conversation about her realities. While many synods have been held in an atmosphere of doctrinal clarification or, in some cases, heresy hunting, modern realities suggest that it need not be so. Nicholas J. Healy Jr. perfectly captures how the synodal reality has presented itself in the history of the church when he writes.

The word “synod,” derived from the preposition “συν” (with) and the noun “ὁδος” (path), suggests the notion of the “common” journey of Christians or the assembly of those who have been called together by God. More specifically, the word “synod” refers to “ecclesiastical assemblies convoked on various levels (diocesan, provincial, regional, patriarchal, or universal) to discern by the light of the word of God and listening to the Holy Spirit, the doctrinal, liturgical, canonical and pastoral questions that arise as time goes by.”<sup>10</sup>

It is, therefore, no exaggeration to state that the history of the church, her understanding of God's action in the church, and her doctrinal, liturgical, canonical, and pastoral development cannot be understood outside of her synodal experience. In the history of synods, the council at Jerusalem sets the tone for the synodal understanding of the church and her ultimate identity. This synodal gathering is the source and origin and, in many ways, the benchmark for subsequent synodal experiences in the church.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. The Council of Jerusalem

At the time of the Council of Jerusalem, the church had expanded into non-Jewish territories, and questions arose about the conditions of membership of the new community, given that circumcision was the main condition of membership in the Jewish *Ecclesia*.<sup>12</sup> In the words of David Seccombe,

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<sup>10</sup>Nicholas J. Healy Jr. “Communion, Sacramental Authority, and the Limits of Synodality” in *Communion: International Catholic Review*, Volume XLVIII, ((2021)): 663–685. Here 667. Roch Kereszty sees the word synod as meaning “going on the same way.” See Roch Kereszty, “Synodality, The Magisterium, and the Faith of the People of God.” *Communion: Winter 2021*, 638-662. See also **σύννοδος** (*synodos*), meeting; *conjunction; fellow traveler*. Heb. equiv. fr. LXX: סַבְדָּה according to Rick Brannan, Ed., *Lexham Research Lexicon of the Septuagint*, 2020.

<sup>11</sup>Scott R. Swain notes that “Throughout its history, the church has followed the example of Acts 15 on many occasions. One thinks not only of the ecumenical councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus, Chalcedon, and so forth but also of the Westminster Assembly. When the church followed the example of the Jerusalem council, it was further discovered that councils are a God-ordained means for promoting the peace and purity of the church and the furtherance of the gospel to the greater glory of God.” See Scott. R. Swain, “The Jerusalem Council” *Tabletalk Magazine*, March 2010: Acts of the Apostles (2010): 23.

<sup>12</sup>F.F. Bruce notes, and I agree that “there were indeed some Jews in those days who thought that the

what precipitates the Jerusalem Council is not simply that Gentiles were being evangelised, but more importantly, the *conditions* of their membership in the messianic community. Must Gentiles become 'naturalised Jews,' that is, Jewish proselytes, and live like Jews in order to have a place in the people of God?<sup>13</sup>

It is obvious that there were various groups with diverse views about circumcision. On the one hand, Paul and Barnabas, who had been leading the evangelisation among the non-Jews, have been arguing for the relaxation of the rule for the non-Jews. On the other hand, we had a party in Jerusalem that held that this must be a requirement. Acts 15:1 notes that "Then certain individuals came down from Judea (emphasis mine) and were teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."<sup>14</sup> As can be seen, the question of membership of the community is closely related to the salvation of the individual. The author of the Acts captures the troublesome nature of the situation by using not only the Greek word for both debate or dispute (ζητήσεως) but also the word for uprising, riot, revolt, or rebellion (ζητήσεως). It would not be an exaggeration to see a modern corollary of this situation as a debate on the floor of the British parliament.

Therefore, the stage was set for a turning point in the history of the early church, with Paul and Barnabas heading out to Jerusalem to present this issue before the apostles and elders (πρὸς τοὺς ἀποστόλους καὶ πρεσβυτέρους). This shows that at this stage, the apostles were not the only decision-making body among the early Christians. In an extended commentary on the role of 'Apostles and elders', Scott R. Swain avers

Note, first, who is responsible for deciding the issue at hand: "the apostles and the elders." Luke repeatedly draws our

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outward rite of circumcision might be omitted if only its spiritual significance was realised, but these formed a negligible minority." Cf. F.F. Bruce, *The Book of Acts, NICNT* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 286. The fact that circumcision precipitated a synodal conversation and continues to generate controversies even after the council underlies, in a significant way, the importance of circumcision among the First Century Jews.

<sup>13</sup> David Secombe, *The People of God*, 'in *Witness to the Gospel: The Theology of Acts*, ed. I Howard Marshall and David Peterson, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 1998, 365.

<sup>14</sup> Bruce put it in perspective when he writes, "If Paul and Barnabas neglected to bring the requirements of the Law to the attention of the Gentile members of the church of Antioch and her daughter-churches, there were those in the Jerusalem church who were ready to repair this omission, and they went to Antioch, the citadel of Gentile Christianity, to repair it there." Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 286–7.

attention (5 times) to the role played by the apostles and the elders at the Jerusalem Council (vv. 2, 4, 6, 22–23). It is not remarkable, of course, that the apostles would play an important role. After all, they had been responsible for leading the Jerusalem Church from its inception (2:42–43; 4:33, 35, 37; 5:29; 6:1–6; 8:1, 14; 9:27; 11:1). What is perhaps remarkable is the role of the elders, a group only mentioned for the first time in Acts 11:30. What is the significance of the elders' role at this stage of the story? It seems Luke wants to show us that a transition in leadership is taking place as the apostles' foundational role in establishing the church is coming to an end (consider how Peter disappears from Luke's narrative after Acts 15), the leadership of the early church is in the process of transitioning into the hands of the elders (20:17–38). Along with the apostles, they now bear the responsibility for deciding the matter at hand.<sup>15</sup>

In expanding the composition of the decision-making body in the church, precedence is now set for each age and time to adapt its deliberative conversation to include relevant characters in its synodal experience.<sup>16</sup> The decision of the Council of Jerusalem announced by James is as follows:

Therefore, I have reached the decision that we should not trouble those Gentiles who are turning to God, but we should write to them to abstain only from things polluted by idols and from fornication and from whatever has been strangled and from blood. (Acts 15: 19–20).

The text clearly shows that James's role in the council was one of the main decision-making characters after the conversation or debate, as the use of the verb judging indicates (κρίνω).<sup>17</sup> A very significant part of James' decision-making process is his interpretation of the Scriptures. This exegesis of James is best read in light of Luke Timothy's comments.

What is striking about James' citation of Amos 9:11–12 is not simply the dependence on the lxx version or the way in which that version enables James to perceive a mission to

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<sup>15</sup>Swain, *The Jerusalem Council*, 21.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Acts 6, in which the Apostles were the only ones who "called" others in the community. No mention was made here of the elders.

<sup>17</sup>The use of ἐγὼ in ἐγὼ κρίνω as an emphasis leaves no room for doubt as to who has the final say. This, again, complicates the dynamics of decisive leadership in the early Christian

the Gentiles after the “restoration” of David's tent, but the way in which James puts the case. He says that “the prophets agree with *this*” rather than that “this agrees with *the prophets*” (15:15). In other words, it is the experience of God revealed through narrative which is given priority in this hermeneutical process: the text of scripture does not dictate how God should act. Rather, God's action dictates how we should understand the text of scripture.<sup>18</sup>

Obvious in this case is that attention has been paid not only to scripture but also to the cultural and sociodemographic realities of the new movement. This again sets the template for the future of other synodal experiences in the church. The church, in this case, did not proceed from *a priori* theological principles but did reflect on what was happening among them as identified as the action of God. The movement was from the action of God as seen in their contexts to developing theological mandates. This is very close to understanding that the law of prayer guides the law of belief as prayer becomes a contextual experience.<sup>19</sup> The early church's synodal experience called the Christian community to be transformed by the story of what God was doing among non-Jews and in the church. What we have in Acts 15 is that the authoritative role of scripture is intertwined with the experience and concrete needs of the Christian community.<sup>20</sup> As Dean Flemming notes, the church's task in every culture and age is to allow the gospel to transform its world while utilising the stories and cultural resources at hand.<sup>21</sup>

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community, especially as it concerns Petrine primacy. Bruce's idea that “the eyes of all now turned to James, the brother of the Lord, a man who enjoyed widespread respect and confidence. If the elders of the Jerusalem church were organised as a kind of Nazarene Sanhedrin, James was their president, *primus inter pares*,” shows that the early Christians might not have fully explicated the Petrine primacy at the moment of her first Synodal experience. Cf. Bruce, *The Book of Acts*, 239.

<sup>18</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Acts of the Apostles Sacra Pagina*, (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press), 1992, 271.

<sup>19</sup> Lex Orandi, *Lex Credendi*. In a highly perceptive message while noting Leo Tolstoy's later years' approach to the New Testament, A. N. Wilson notes that “from the beginning to the end, the New Testament is caught up in mystery. Its difficulties will never be solved by scholars, though there is no harm in their trying. Glints of what the mystery was, and is, are only discernible through worship.” A. N. Wilson, *Tolstoy: A Biography* (New York: Norton, 1988), 326.

<sup>20</sup> Johnson, *Acts of the Apostles*, 271.

<sup>21</sup> Dean Flemming, *Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission*, (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2005), 44–5.

Brian Rosner notes the importance of the Council in Jerusalem: “The Book of Acts without Chapter 15 would be like a wedding ceremony without the crucial pronouncement. Everything that happens in Chapters 1–14 leads to this high point, and what follows merely traces the implications of the decision.”<sup>22</sup> The literal and geographical structure of the book itself attests to this as:

Chapter 15 is both the midpoint and the turning point in the book of Acts. By counting the number of pages in the UBS Greek text, one can see that this chapter begins almost exactly at the midpoint of the text. More importantly, it is the turning point in the book of Acts, and this can be seen in several ways: (1) Jerusalem is no longer central. Until the time of the Jerusalem Council (Chapter 15), all roads led either to or from Jerusalem, but after Chapter 15, Jerusalem is mentioned only once (Chapter 21), and there it is in connection with the story of Paul. (2) Peter is mentioned for the last time in Chapter 15, and Barnabas, who may be regarded as representative of Jerusalem Christianity, is no longer active in the narrative after this chapter. In fact, Barnabas has a dramatic break with Paul, around whom the rest of the narrative of Acts is centered. (3) The apostles no longer hold a high position in sending forth the Christian message (they are last mentioned in 16:4), and "the elders" of the various churches have now become the recognised leaders of the Christian movement. (4) The Gentile mission, which had its beginning in Antioch (11:19 ff.) and which was again forced upon Paul and Barnabas after their experiences in Antioch of Pisidia (13:46 ff.), now receives primary focus throughout the remainder of the book.<sup>23</sup>

The reaction of the early Christians also justifies the argument that this event was a monumental one, as they were described as happy (ἑχάρησαν). This signifies that the synodal experience has affirmed that the Christ movement among them is truly a work of God. It is a confirmation that the experience of God of those on the margins or those in the 'developing' church would be recognised

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<sup>22</sup>Brian S. Rosner, “The Progress of the Word,” in *Witness to the Gospel*, 227.

<sup>23</sup>Barclay Moon Newman and Eugene Albert Nida, *A Handbook on the Acts of the Apostles*, UBS Handbook Series, (New York: United Bible Societies, 1972), 287. Acts 15 has been called the “ihr Herzstück”, which means the 'heart piece' (centre/midpoint) of the Book of Acts. Cf. C. K. Barrett, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles ICC* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004), 696.



and affirmed. In this light, given that the many decision-making organs of the Catholic Church are in the West given their age-long cultural assimilation of Christianity, it is not hard to see that the Church in Africa, among other Churches in the developing world of the Southern Hemisphere has taken the position of the non-Jewish Christians of the Acts of Apostles.<sup>24</sup> What are the experiences of God in the Church in Africa that call for recognition and affirmation, especially in the light of contemporary synodal experience? Before I note these experiences of the Church in Africa, I would like to note some developments in the church's understanding of the synodal experience. While many of the developments in the Churches have been quantitative, the papacy of Francis has introduced what I can call a qualitative leap. Apart from the early church's expansion of the deliberative council to include the elders, we had to wait about 2,000 years after with Pope Francis to posit a theological understanding of the synodal experience that has now fulfilled the concept of the synodal experience.

### **3. Synodal Experience in History**

The direction of the synodal experiences is the direction of the church. Major doctrinal, canonical, liturgical, and pastoral decisions have resulted from what can be called synodal conversion.<sup>25</sup> While the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem was one of the first synodal experiences in the church, it is not the only one. Apart from the Jerusalem council, the Universal Church has had at least 21 additional synodal experiences called Ecumenical councils. The first after the Apostolic age was held in Nicaea in 325 CE. As Pope Francis notes in his bull for the start of the Jubilee of Hope, 2025 will be the 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first great Ecumenical council, that of Nicaea. This council decided the creed of the faith and discussed the date of Easter.<sup>26</sup> The last ecumenical council was that of the Second Vatican Council, which discussed the appropriate role of the church in the modern world. It positioned itself in a way that made the church adapt to the religious and spiritual needs of the modern world and also addresses what it calls 'anxiety of consciences',<sup>27</sup> As the council notes in one of its documents, *Gaudium et Spes*:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties  
of the men of this age, especially those who are

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<sup>24</sup>See my argument in Paul Olatúbòsún Àdajà “The Victim, the Robbers, and the Neighbor in Luke 10: 25–37: A Humanizing Biblical Scholarship in the Light of Africae Munus 9,” *Africae Munus: Ten Years Later* ed. Maurice A. Agbaw-Ebai and Matthew Levering. (South Bend, IN: St Augustine's Press, 2022). 21–42.

<sup>25</sup> “Instrumentum laboris” della XVI Assemblea Generale Ordinaria del Sinodo dei Vescovi (vatican.va)

<sup>26</sup>Spes non confundit - Bull of Indiction of the Ordinary Jubilee of the Year 2025 (9 May 2024) | Francis (Vatican.va)

<sup>27</sup>Gaudium et Spes (vatican.va), 47.

poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. Hence, this Second Vatican Council, having probed more profoundly into the mystery of the church, now addresses itself without hesitation, not only to the sons of the church and to all who invoke the name of Christ but to the whole of humanity. The council yearns to explain to everyone how it conceives of the presence and activity of the church in the world of today.<sup>28</sup>

This council also acknowledged and made bold moves to repair the mistakes of the past, as evidenced in the document *Nostra Aetate*.

However, the church's wealth of synodal experiences is not exhausted by the experience of ecumenical councils. In fact, while the council is the largest expression of the synodal experience, it is not the only one. At every local expression of the universal church, there have been conversations that have always been synodal in character. However, one expression of the synodal experience of the church that the Second Vatican Council inaugurated is the Synod of Bishops.

The Synod of Bishops was established by Pope Paul VI with his Motu Proprio *Apostolica Sollicitudo. Christus Dominus*, which is one of the decrees of the council, describes the Synod of Bishops thus:

Bishops chosen from various parts of the world, in ways and manners, established or to be established by the Roman pontiff, render more effective assistance to the supreme pastor of the church in a deliberative body which will be called by the proper name of Synod of Bishops. Since it shall be acting in the name of the entire Catholic episcopate, it will, at the same time, show that all the bishops in hierarchical communion partake of the solicitude for the universal church.<sup>29</sup>

Although there have been amendments of the nature and functions of the Synod of Bishops over the years, it was Pope Francis who made the most significant reform of the synod of Bishops with his *Episcopalis communio*. In this

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<sup>28</sup> Gaudium et Spes (vatican.va), 1–4

<sup>29</sup> Christus dominus (vatican.va), No 5.

document, Francis spelt out and fulfilled the meaning of the synodal experience of the church since he has now placed the synodal experience, which is called synodality, as a constitutive dimension of the church at all levels of her existence. This new understanding of the Synod of Bishops means that

The synod is understood as a process composed of three parts: the preparatory phase, in which the People of God consult on the themes indicated by the Roman Pontiff; the celebratory phase, characterised by the meeting of the assembly of Bishops; and the implementation phase, in which the conclusions of the synod, once approved by the Roman Pontiff, are accepted by the local churches.<sup>30</sup>

The major innovation here is that the Synod of Bishops would now take into consideration active listening to the faithful, and not just an assembly of Bishops. It also means that synodality goes far beyond the meeting of Bishops. It is now an acknowledged way in which the life of the church is lived. It is the life of the church to be now a synodal life. σύνοδος (*synodos*) is the way God reaches out to the ἐκκλησία and it is also the way that the members of ἐκκλησία reaches out to one another. This also means σύνοδος (*synodos*) is the path that leads to the mission. Immediately following this reform of the Synod of Bishops, Francis called for a Synod of Bishops entitled “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission” from 2021 to 2024. Instead of having only one single ordinary synod, this synod will be a three-year synodal process to enable listening to the entire people of God with three levels of consultation.<sup>31</sup>

For Francis, the idea of synodality is much more than the celebration of ecclesial meetings and Bishops' assemblies or a matter of simple internal administration within the church; it 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>32</sup>

This does not mean that the church is now a participatory democracy. It is so much more than a democracy. The *Instrumentum Laboris* for the 2024 Synod of Bishops explains this more as it writes:

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<sup>30</sup>Episcopalis Communio (15 September 2018) | Francis (vatican.va).

<sup>31</sup>Roch Kereszty, “Synodality, The Magisterium, and the Faith of the People of God,” *Communio* Winter 2021, 638–662. Here. 638.

<sup>32</sup>“Instrumentum laboris” for the Second Session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (October 2024) (Vatican.va)

The consultation of the People of God does not imply the assumption within the church of the dynamics of democracy based on the principle of majority because there is, at the basis of participation in every synodal process, a shared passion for the common mission of evangelisation and not the representation of conflicting interests. In other words, this is an ecclesial process that can only take place “at the heart of a hierarchically structured community.”<sup>33</sup>

When the church gathers, especially in the context of a synodal experience, it is not just composed of human beings; it is so much more. Therefore, democratic principles will not always be enough to capture the reality of the church's decision-making. The church's understanding of the hierarchy is not about power but about the exercise of an office.<sup>34</sup>

The reception of the renewal and expansion of the Synod of Bishops by Francis and his idea of synodality as a constitutive dimension has been mixed. There has been massive participation in the process by many, if not all, local churches, religious institutes, and other relevant juridical bodies of the church. Some theologians have also been concerned that the consultation process is a sociological outlook which translates the *sensus fidelium* as a kind of public opinion 'ascertainable by modern polling methods, rather than 'faith professed by the church everywhere, always and by everyone (*quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*).<sup>35</sup> For Michael Hanby,

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<sup>33</sup> “Instrumentum laboris” for the Second Session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (October 2024) (Vatican.va)

<sup>34</sup> An interesting note by the Secretary General of the Second Vatican Council, Archbishop Pericle Felici, captures this understanding: "In his consecration a person is given an ontological participation in the sacred functions [munera]; this is absolutely clear from Tradition, liturgical tradition included. The word "functions [munera]" is used deliberately instead of the word "powers [potestates]," because the latter word could be understood as a power fully ready to act. However, for this power to be fully ready to act, there must be a further canonical or juridical determination through the hierarchical authority. This determination of power can consist in the granting of a particular office or in the allotment of subjects, and it is done according to the norms approved by the supreme authority. An additional norm of this sort is required by the very nature of the case because it involves functions [munera] which must be exercised by many subjects cooperating in a hierarchical manner in accordance with Christ's will. It is evident that this "communion" was applied in the church's life according to the circumstances of the time before it was codified as law."

<sup>35</sup> Michael Hanby, “Synodality, Sociologism, and the Judgement of History” *Communio* Winter 2021, 686–726, here 715.

Whether the implementation of synodality is faithful to the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council is impossible to say with finality as of yet. What can be said is that it is impossible in principle to be true to the council by forcibly imposing upon the whole church, whether through the ecclesiastical power of the media, one side of a polarity that the council sought to transcend and overcome. This would be no less a betrayal than the restoration of a traditionalism that rejects Vatican II together.<sup>36</sup>

Although it is understandable that with the excitement of the press, social media and some Catholics about any single announcement that comes from Francis as an innovation of the church, I do not think that the consultation called Francis' idea of synodality is an idea of public opinion. Many Catholics have truly felt unheard all their lives. The horrible cover-up of sexual abuse in the church is a prime example of the church hierarchy always turning deaf ears to her sons and daughters. The very idea of consultation is embedded in the very first synodal experience of the church when the author of the Acts of Apostles noted that “the whole assembly kept silence and was listening (ἤκουον) to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles,” (Acts 15:12).<sup>37</sup> This has not been the reality of many Catholics in recent times. As I mentioned earlier, when the church meets, it is not just human beings, even when it is a situation of consultation. Listening and consultation in the church is more than a public opinion (Matthew 18: 20). Amanda Achtman notes that 'transformation in Christ depends on moments of confrontation, turning points, and moments of decisions.' The greatness of these events is often hidden in our souls. 'So even on the journey together, we might have serious debates.'<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Hanby, “Synodality, Sociologism, and the Judgement of History”, 725.

<sup>37</sup>The translation is the New Oxford Annotated Bible with an alteration of the word listened to were listening by me. I prefer the word were listening to listened because ἤκουον is an active, imperfect indicative verb. The Imperfect tense in Greek "portrays the action from within the event, without regard for the beginning or end. See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1996), 541.

<sup>38</sup>Thomas Merton writes, "This innate *fear of being wrong* and that every false step may mean the collapse of our faith is the greatest weakness of Catholics today." See *A Life in Letters: The Essential Collection-Merton* ed. William H. Shannon and Christine M. Bochen (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2008), 307.

The Second Vatican Council also recognised that the church must consult experts on some issues, and some of these experts are sons and daughters of the church. The council notes that.

Thus, the ability to express Christ's message in its own way is developed in each nation, and at the same time, a living exchange between the church and the diverse cultures of people is fostered. To promote such exchange, especially in our days, the church requires the special help of those who live in the world, are versed in different institutions and specialties, and grasp their innermost significance in the eyes of both believers and unbelievers. With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the entire People of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish and interpret the many voices of our age and to judge them in the light of the divine word, so that revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood and set forth to greater advantage.<sup>39</sup>

While it is also not out of place that, given the current polemical situation, we have found ourselves in the world, every single attempt at consultation in the church is greeted by some with panic and by others with ecstasy. It is good to be reminded that it is okay to consult without any fear of the erasure of the substance of our faith. In this regard, it is good we listen to Edith Stein, whom I consider the most underrated woman Catholic Philosopher:

The concept which assumes that everything in the church is irrevocably set for all times appears to me to be a false one. It would be naïve to disregard that the church has a history; the church is a human institution and, like all things human, was destined to change and evolve; likewise, its development often takes place in the form of struggles. Most of the definitions of dogma are conclusive results of previous intellectual conflicts that lasted for decades and even centuries. The same is true of ecclesiastical law and liturgical forms—especially all objective forms reflecting our spiritual life. The

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<sup>39</sup>Gaudium et spes (vatican.va), 44

church, as the Kingdom of God in this world, should reflect changes in human thought. Only by accepting each age as it is and treating it according to its singular nature can the church bring eternal truth and life to temporality.<sup>40</sup>

It is, therefore, important for the Church in Africa to take advantage of Pope Francis's important reform of the reality of synodality and look inward and see how the reality of synodality can be lived out in our church. As I have argued so far, the end of the current synod does not mean the end of synodality in the church. The question is now how we will live out this constitutive dimension of the church, which has been forgotten or, in some cases, suppressed.

#### **4. Synodality and the Church in Africa**

I will be exploring synodality and the Church in Africa under two themes: Synodality, the Church in Africa, and the Church in the West: The Hierarchy and Synodality among the Catholics in the Church in Africa. A major thread that runs through these two themes is listening, and this is a major component of the idea of synodality.

##### **4.1. Synodality, the Church in Africa and the Church in the West.**

Sometimes, it is very easy to confuse the church in the West with the Universal Church. This might be because many of the organs running the Universal Church are in local churches located in the West. The Church in the West is the Church in Europe and North America. The Universal Church is not coterminous with the church in the West. Although the reality is changing, the Church in Africa often finds herself unlistened to often by the church in the West. While it is true that the church in the West, in spite of its declining church population, is wealthier than the Church in Africa and has often come to the aid of the Church in Africa, it is important that we do not equate the action of the Holy Spirit to wealth, or even worse to consider financial aid as a form of listening. We have some examples of the Church in Africa being unlistened to.

There are complaints from many priests who have gone to the West to study the rampant racism they have faced at the hands of our brothers and sisters in the West. In fact, some of the returnees back to the Church in Africa have less faith when they return than when they left. These experiences are not just a form of not being listened to; these are also wounds in the body of the church. We cannot walk in the same way (σύν-οδος) if we do not treat each other with respect. This is not to

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<sup>40</sup>Stein, *Essays on Woman*, 169.

say that some of our brothers and sisters in the church in the West have not really helped the Church in Africa. My point here is that there are a lot of experiences of discrimination and racism experienced by African brothers and sisters in the West, and they are afraid to speak out so as not to jeopardise the financial benefits to their various Dioceses in Africa.<sup>41</sup>

Another form of being unheard is also when the Church in Africa hears that she has nothing to contribute theologically to some issues of the church. A prime example of this was the interview granted by Walter Cardinal Kasper in 2014 in response to the Church in Africa's view of same-sex unions, and this is what he has to say:

The problem, as well, is that there are different problems in different continents and cultures. Africa is totally different from the West. Also, Asian and Muslim countries, they're very different, especially about gays. You can't speak about this with Africans and people of Muslim countries. It's not possible. It's a taboo. For us, we say we ought not to discriminate; we don't want to discriminate in certain respects.<sup>42</sup>

When the Church in Africa, which is home to about 265 million Catholics, which is about nineteen per cent of the Universal Church, reads words like this from a prince of the church, how can she not but feel not being listened to?<sup>43</sup> In his words, there is not only a suggestion that there are some things the church in the West should never discuss with the Church in Africa (for whatever reason) but that the West 'does not want to discriminate.' I will let the irony speak for itself. I also think that painting the whole Church in Africa with a single brush is symptomatic of the lack of desire to listen to the Church in Africa. A Nigerian Dominican priest

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<sup>41</sup>To get a more accurate picture of this anecdotal experience, I suggest that Episcopal conferences in Africa and the West conduct anonymous surveys to capture the experiences of nuns, priests, and laypersons who have come to study in the West.

<sup>42</sup>Statement on Cardinal Kasper Interview - Edward Pentin

<sup>43</sup>In spite of the outrage when Cardinal Kasper's statements were released, 9 years after the Vatican released the document *Fiducia Supplicans*, which came to a near disaster in the Church in Africa. The Church in Africa was listened to not before but after the document was released. Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo Besungu, the president of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM), had to fly to Rome in early January 2024 to meet with the Pope. He also met the Prefect for the Dicastery of Faith, Cardinal Fernandez, who wrote in an email that the meeting with the African Cardinal allowed Cardinal Ambongo "to better understand the point of the Dicastery, and for me to understand African cultural sensitivity much better." If only the Church in Africa has been listened to.



and theologian, Father Akinwale, observed that Kasper's dismissal of Africa's contribution to the universal Church 'continues to echo' in the minds of Church leaders on the continent. According to him, 'I know a few people, who think that that is still the agenda.'<sup>44</sup>

I would suggest that the church in the West (following their civil laws) should have standardised procedures for foreign priests, nuns and laypeople who either come to study and work to ensure that some of the problems of discrimination and racism or sometimes blatant cases of priests and nuns being taken advantage of in terms of their pastoral work are addressed. If we are not good witnesses to one another, how can we be good witnesses to the world? I also think that one way of being listened to is to ensure an increase in the number of members of the Church in Africa in the various decision-making organs of the Universal Church. If we do not have anyone on the table, no one will speak for us. The Gentile church would never have anyone speaking for them in Jerusalem if Paul and Barnabas were not there.<sup>45</sup> When I speak of increased representation, I am not only talking about more Bishops in Africa being raised to princes of the church but that African priests and, nuns and lay people should be well represented in all the organs in the Vatican and other bodies. There should be a significant effort by the church to relate with our seminaries and other organs of Church leadership in Africa to acknowledge and recognise the massive work of mission going on in the Church in Africa. If the Church in Africa is growing, it is not because we are poor, as some have assumed, but we must be doing something right. I think it is sad to locate the action of God in the Church of Africa with poverty and lack of development when we can see God at work. There should be at least a representation commensurate with our Church population. This is not a question of democratic principle but a matter of justice, which, according to Wole Soyinka, is the first condition of humanity.<sup>46</sup>

In the last few years, many churches in Africa have also experienced an upsurge in persecution, and many Catholics in Africa have been killed 'on account of their faith'. There were, for instance, Catholics who were bombed to death during a Christmas Mass in St. Theresa Catholic Church, Suleja, Nigeria, in 2011. There was also another killing at a Mass at St Francis Catholic Church in the ancient of Owo in my home state of Ondo State, Nigeria, in 2022. Is there a way that these Catholics who have suffered deaths 'on account of their faith' are

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<sup>44</sup> Same-Sex Blessings Controversy: Catholic Church in Africa's Influence is Growing, but Is Vatican Leadership Ready for It? | National Catholic Register (ncregister.com)

<sup>45</sup> In light of footnote 38, what if the Church in Africa did not have Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo Besungu to represent her before the Pope and the Prefect?

<sup>46</sup> Wole Soyinka, *You Must Set Forth at Dawn: A Memoir*, (New York: Random House, 2006), 35.

recognised as martyrs? This might be a case of even the dead being listened to by the Universal Church. (Revelation 6:9–11). By doing this, we can increase the roll call of those who have shed their blood for the Lamb in the Church in Africa.

#### 4.2. The Hierarchy and Synodality among the Catholics in the Church in Africa

The hierarchy here does not just mean the bishops but also includes priests and religious. It is very important that lay people feel that they are being listened to. When Catholics in the Universal Church say that they are not being listened to, this also includes Catholics in the Church in Africa. Listening to our people also means that we can recognise their talents and use them creatively. *Gaudium et Spes* notes that

Let the layman not imagine that his pastors are always such experts that to solve every problem that arises, however complicated; they can readily give him a concrete solution, or even that such is their mission. Rather, enlightened by Christian wisdom and paying close attention to the teaching authority of the church, let the layman take on his own distinctive role.<sup>47</sup>

The Church in Africa is very rich in terms of various lay apostolates and pious associations. Apart from pious organisations like the Block Rosary Crusades, Legion of Mary, Confraternity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and the Immaculate Heart of Mary, we also have associations such as the Catholic Men's Organization, the Catholic Women's Organization, and the Catholic Youth Organization.<sup>48</sup> All these groups and bodies should feel listened to. The Parish Pastoral Council and the Finance Council should not be instituted to rubber stamp Church decisions or, worse still, as a press conference for lay members in which the hierarchy's decisions are *fait accompli*. Administrative and organizational structures in the church should never be a façade for collaboration. Every meeting in the church should be an avenue to listen to God and one another.<sup>49</sup>

A major part of the church that has always spoken out as being neglected and not being listened to is our female religious in the Church in Africa. Sometimes, in some local churches, the main civil war is between the nuns and the

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<sup>47</sup>Gaudium et Spes (vatican.va), 43.

<sup>48</sup>I am only using my knowledge of my experience in the Diocese of Ekiti in Nigeria, where I grew up with myself and my family members of these Associations.

<sup>49</sup>Merton has a lot to say on this. He writes: "While in fact there are a lot of Superiors who think themselves infallible, and are absolutely incapable of understanding what it means to really find out what their subjects need and desire (they consult only yes-men or people who have

priests. It would be very interesting to have statistics on nuns who are members of pastoral councils, finance councils, or who work in Diocesan Chanceries. While we continue to ask that female congregations have robust academic formation similar to what is obtained in the seminaries, we already have in our midst very qualified nuns who can and should be acknowledged.

There is also the idea that some priests are not being listened to by their local ordinary. Since the relationship between Priests and their Bishops is so paramount to the growth of the church, it will be good to sometimes have surveys of what Priests think of their relationship with their Bishops and the direction they think their local churches are going. These surveys should be anonymous. A similar survey in the church in the United States found that "a significant percentage of priests have issues with burnout, distrust in their bishop, and fears of being falsely accused of misconduct".<sup>50</sup> It is good to listen to our priests, too.

An area where listening is very important is also the area of finance. Considering that the hierarchy of the hierarchy of the church is the custodian of the temporal goods of the church, it is very good that members of our local churches have an idea of the financial status of the church. The public trust in many African governments is already low when it comes to finances, and we should avoid that low trust from being extended to our church. Public publication of our finances is the keystone to accountability and transparency. The Church in Nigeria has been praying the 'Prayer against Bribery and Corruption in Nigeria' for decades, and it is fitting that transparency in the church's finances may be a good answer to that prayer.

There is also a lot of work to do about listening to Catholics in Africa. Sometimes, it is the people who don't listen to their priests or even Catholics who don't listen to their fellow Catholics. Sometimes, civil wars in local parishes are the bane of evangelisation or pastoral progress. This also extends to the various Dioceses and Episcopal conferences in Africa and theological Associations.

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made the grade by never rocking the boats), there is a new bunch coming up that sincerely wants to help change things, but obviously can't do everything they would like to do either. And then there are the good Joes who want to go along wherever the church seems to be going even if they don't really understand what it is all about... The moment of truth will come when you will have to resist the arbitrary and reactionary use of authority in order to save the real concept of authority and obedience, in the line of renewal... Authority has simply been based too long in the Catholic Church, and for many people, it just becomes utterly stupid and intolerable to have to put up with the kind of jackassing around that is imposed in God's name. It is an insult to God Himself, and in the end, it can only discredit all ideas of authority and obedience." *A Life in Letters: The Essential Collection-Merton*, here 272 & 289.

50 Major survey of Catholic priests finds trust issues, burnout, fear of false allegations | Catholic News Agency. See also, <https://catholicproject.catholic.edu/well-being-trust-and-policy/>

Already, among the lay faithful, there is an increase in the number of events across dioceses at the national level in many of our churches. We can only ask that this be maintained.

## **5. Conclusion**

In this paper, I have strongly argued that Pope Francis's understanding of Synodality is scripturally and historically rooted in the experience of the church. I have also been able to argue that synodality should not just be a gathering of Bishops or widespread dialogue for Synod of Bishop. Synodality should encompass the life of the church as a whole. In light of this, I have identified that synodality for the entire church is not only a goal we should strive at but also a challenge we should live up to with examples of where the Church in Africa, the church in the West and the Universal Church should work on strengthening the experience of synodality. This way, the church will not only experience peace but also be a witness to the world and an example of peaceful co-existence.

It is important to note that the first synodal experience in the church was actually not the council in Jerusalem. It was the response of the Apostles to the disenfranchisement of Hellenist widows as 'Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food' The response of the Apostles was to call together the community (προσκαλεσάμενοι δὲ οἱ δώδεκα τὸ πλῆθος τῶν μαθητῶν). It was a convocation of the assembly of the early church. The Apostolic response was that the community should 'select from among themselves' men of good standing full of Spirit and wisdom to handle the daily distribution of food to restore equity and peace. The end of that story is this: 'The word of God continued to spread, the number of disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and many priests became obedient to the faith' (Acts 6:7).

The immediate result of the first synodal experience in the church was an increase in the church and enrichment of the experience of God in the community. This means that if we want to die as a church, the best way to do it is to stop listening and walking (σύν-οδος) with one another. If some of our churches are dying, maybe it is because we have erased the synodal experience in which we listen to each other. We either listen and walk (σύν-οδος) with one another or die.