

TOWARDS A CHRISTOCENTRIC SYNODAL CHURCH OF CHRIST IN AFRICA

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Abstract

The seed of faith planted by the early missionaries in Africa has, in conformity to the nature of the two Divine Agents of mission (Christ and the Holy Spirit), bore and still bears much fruit, as seen in the manifestations of the increasing surge of Christians and believers in the African continent. Just like every tree that desires to yield its desired fruit undergoes pruning, the Church of Christ in Africa, in the light of the theme of synodality, through its first (Ecclesia in Africa) and second (Africae Munus) synods, has undergone and still undergoing this “signs of the time” as re-advocated by Pope Francis to be “a Church which listens, which realises that listening “is more than simply hearing”... - all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the “Spirit of truth” (Jn 14:17). Thus, to the extent of conformity of the African Church of Christ in her “journeying together”, bearing in mind the injunctions of the Father to His sons and daughters to listen to the voice of the Son (Mt. 17:5) who is the only true Way to the Father (Jn. 14:6) in living out her apostolic mandate is the core of the article.

Keywords: Christocentric, *Ecclesia in Africa*, *Africae Munus*, Journeying together, Listening.

1. Introduction

The First Synod of Catholic Bishops on Africa took place in April 1994 in the wake of the Rwandan genocide. That horrendous fratricide has left a dark spot in the history of Catholicism in Africa, where " - the blood of tribalism is thicker than the water of baptism" -. The Second Synod on Africa, held in October 2009, had as its theme: " - The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace." In Pope Benedict XVI's post-synodal exhortation, entitled *Africae Munus*, he advocates that: "Reconciliation is a way of life and mission of the Church."² The concept of reconciliation according to the will of the Father and a

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² BENEDICT XVI Exhort. *Africae munus*, 2009, no. 34.

type of reconciliation that will be pleasing to the Father is one that cannot escape the perfect model of Jesus Christ, who, obediently doing the will of the Father, subjugated himself to the torture of the cross for the expiation of our sins. He and only He can be our reconciliation with the Father³ as well as the model of a new creation for anyone who is in Christ.⁴

The Church in Africa, in service to reconciliation, justice and peace, must bear in mind that if she wants to be credible, she must extricate herself from the presumptions and assumptions that only true reconciliation can emanate through dialogue. This is notorious in the African mindset and, worse still, a dialogue that is devoid of Christ. She must consciously remember, firstly, that - God and God alone take the initiative for reconciliation. Only after this is ensured can justice and peace find a home in Africa. God is the subject or agent of reconciliation, and reconciliation, being both a gift from God founded on the promises enshrined in His universal covenant, has an eschatological character.⁵ The peace resulting from reconciliation is all about the removal of all the distortion brought about by evil.

This article is set against the background of all forms of distortion affecting the face of Africa as a continent and its people - part of the family of God. It aims to examine the mission and role that the Catholic Church can play in Africa, passing through a Christocentric theology and mindset with regard to the African social question, which encompasses perennial issues on the continent such as ethnicity, religious and cultural hatred, and incessant conflicts resulting in loss of life and developmental setbacks.

However, since the contextual understanding of the nature of the Church of God in Africa cannot be extricated from the concept of the family, it is within this idea that a deep understanding of her mission in this part of the globe emerges. The African Church is part and parcel of the universal mission of the Universal Church, in conformity with the injunction of Christ, who came to enact the will of the Father: "that all men be saved and come to the full knowledge of the truth."⁶ The means towards arriving at the full knowledge of the truth cannot escape the person of the Holy Spirit who proceeded from the Father and Son, and that has come not only to remain with us forever but also to lead us to the complete truth.⁷ Thus, the African Church, in a synodal response to the times as advocated by Pope

³ 2 Cor 5:18

⁴ 2 Cor 5:17

⁵ VORSTER J. M. The doctrine of reconciliation: Its meaning and implications for social life. *In Skriflig (Online)* [online]. 2018, vol.52, n.1 [cited 2024-07-07], pp.1-8. Available from: <<http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?>

⁶ 1 Tim 2:4

⁷ Jn 16:13

Francis, has the responsibility not only to journey together—a style of life that conforms to the life in the Trinity—but also to engage in listening and discernment. This mirrors the relationship within the Trinity, where the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one, as depicted in the words of Christ: “I and the Father are one” and “to have seen me is to have seen the Father”?

In the concept of the African Church of Christ as a family that finds a lot of applicability in the clan and familial lineages within African societies, every person knows their clan and identifies with it whenever they meet new people or need to introduce themselves. The nuclear part of the clan is the home where these values are practised. Members of the same clan call each other “brother” or “one who belongs to my father” - one with whom we share the same blood.

Thus, this framework within the African race, to which the African Church belongs, provides fertile ground for understanding the call of Pope Francis. In his opening address to the Synod on October 9, 2021, His Holiness recounted the core and uniqueness of the mission of the Church's mission. This mission cannot function without the presence and working of the Holy Spirit - the promise of the Father (Jn. 14:16) – who is, - the protagonist of this mission. "May we experience this Synod in the spirit of Jesus' fervent prayer to the Father on behalf of his disciples: “that they may all be one” (*Jn 17:21*). This is what we are called to unity, communion, and fraternity born out of the realisation that all of us are embraced by the one love of God."⁸

2. The Concept of Synod: Understandings and Theological Foundations.

The word “synod” generally signifies a journey together of the Church as the gathering of the people and children of God and, therefore, not limited only to the hierarchy. This synodal journey (pilgrimage) involves searching, unexpected vistas and encounters, and, in short, openness. These notions of “together” and “pilgrim” belong to the very essence of the Second Vatican Council's ecclesiology. *Lumen gentium* emphasises that the Church means, in the first place, the gathering of the faithful. Sharing the baptismal dignity of being vested in Christ and anointed with the Holy Spirit, they make up the Church community. God calls the faithful to communion in confessing the faith and building up the Church.⁹ Therefore, it is important to listen to everyone because every person who has the Spirit of Christ in him a Spirit that confers on the believer his or her

⁸ The address of his holiness pope Francis for the opening of the Synod, Saturday, October 9 2021.

⁹ *kingdom*.

dignity within the mystical body of Christ - has something to contribute. This is well specified in *Lumen Gentium* that the Holy Spirit, the promise of the Father, the answered prayer of Christ, works in each and every member of the Church with special gifts or charisms that are meant for building up of the Church and, more widely, the Kingdom of God.

In an article on the theological foundation of synodality, Joseph Moons, S.J., remarks that the synodal approach first gives priority to the Holy Spirit. Both the frequency with which Pope Francis speaks about the Spirit in relation to synodality and the form of his Pneumatology stand out: he presents the Spirit as an actor with agency.¹⁰ In an interview with Ivereigh, Pope Francis confirms that "What characterises a synodal path is the role of the Holy Spirit. We listen, we discuss in groups, but above all, we pay attention to what the Spirit has to say to us."¹¹ Therefore, "we cannot speak of synodality unless we accept and live the presence of the Holy Spirit."¹² For Pope Francis, this 'presence' must be understood in an active manner.¹³

Thus, the Holy Spirit is the dynamic energy in the mystical body of Christ that unites all voices into the one Will of the Father and that enables the Church to effectively accomplish her divine mandate of going to all nations to proclaim goodness (Mk. 16:15), stands out as the divine solace and succour on our journey together. This journey cannot be divested of its two staurological dimensions, the vertical and the horizontal dimensions. On the one hand, the vertical dimension comprises the earthly pilgrimage of Christ-faithful, aided by the Holy Spirit on the journey towards heaven. On the other hand, the horizontal dimension of the pilgriming people of God to the missions is, - still aided by the Holy Spirit. This enables the mission to be successful and fruitful, making them worthy to be called the children of God. As Jesus said, – "By their fruits born, you are children of God the Father" (Jn. 15:8).

3. Christological insights into the Concept of Synodality

The 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod on synodality has three keywords: *communion*, *participation* and *mission*. Expounding these concepts:

Communion, in the light of the Second Vatican Council document, *Lumen gentium*, expresses the very nature of the Church. It acknowledges that the

L. G. 42.

¹⁰ Jos Moons, S.J.: *A Comprehensive Introduction to Synodality: Reconfiguring Ecclesiology and Ecclesial Practice*, no 78.

¹¹ Ivereigh, *Let Us Dream*, 85.

¹² *Ibid.*, 86.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 88.

Church has received “the *mission* of proclaiming and establishing among all peoples the kingdom of Christ and of God, and is, on earth, the seed and beginning of that kingdom.”¹⁴ It is by His gracious will - that God gathers us together as diverse peoples of one faith through the covenant that He offers to His people. The communion we share finds its deepest roots in the love and unity of the Trinity. The Christological doxology (*Through Him, with Him and in Him, in the Unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honour is Yours, forever and ever*) of the Church at the Eucharistic celebrations sheds light on the plan of the Trinity for the establishment of God's kingdom: - that it can only be '- in Him' (Christ) who reconciles us to the Father and unites us with each other in the Holy Spirit and forming a united body in the Spirit. - Together, we are inspired by listening to the Word of God through the living tradition of the Church and are grounded in the *sensus fidei* that we share. All have a role to play in discerning and living out God's call for his people.

Participation: This dimension presupposes a '*cum*'- *with* (Christ) that emphasises the involvement of all who belong to the People of God, the family of God – laity, consecrated and ordained – to engage in the exercise of deep and respectful listening to one another. This listening creates space for us to hear the Holy Spirit together and guides our aspirations for the Church of the Third Millennium. Participation is based on the fact that all the faithful are qualified and are called to serve one another through the gifts they have personally received from the Holy Spirit. In a synodal Church, the whole community, in the free and rich diversity of its members, is called together to *pray, listen, analyse, dialogue, discern and offer advice on making pastoral decisions* which correspond as closely as possible to God's will. Genuine efforts must be made to ensure the inclusion of those at the margins of society or who feel excluded.

Mission: The Church exists to evangelise as her proper mission stems from Her proper identity of being rooted in the Holy Spirit, the author of life. And since this 'life' which the Holy Spirit lends ardour and splendour to the Church is a good (*bonum*), and 'goodness diffuses itself', it can then be only '*through Him*' can this goodness be diffused and which in turn obliges us on the other hand never be centred on ourselves. Our mission is to witness the love of God in the midst of the whole human family. This Synodal Process has a deep missionary dimension to it. It is intended to enable the Church to be a better witness to the Gospel, especially with those who live on the spiritual, social, economic, political, geographical, and

¹⁴L.G., no 5

existential peripheries of our world. In this way, synodality is a path by which the Church can more fruitfully fulfil her mission of evangelisation in the world as a leaven at the service of the coming of God's kingdom.¹⁵

4. The Church an Africa's Synodal Responses so far

The Church in Africa's synodal approach emphasises inclusivity, community involvement, and the shared journey of faith among its members. Synodality in this context means walking together, listening to each other, and discerning God's will collectively. Here are key aspects of how the African Church embodies synodality:

1. **Inclusivity and Participation:** The African Church encourages active participation from all members, including lay people and religious leaders. This inclusive approach ensures that diverse voices and perspectives are considered in the decision-making process.

2. **Respect for Traditional Structures:** The synodal process respects and integrates traditional African structures and ways of governance, such as councils of elders and communal dialogue, which align with the Church's synodal principles.

3. **Emphasis on Dialogue:** The African Church prioritises dialogue within its communities. This includes conversations between different groups within the Church, such as youth, women, and marginalised communities, ensuring that everyone's voice is valued.

4. **Cultural Contextualisation:** The Church in Africa often contextualises its practices and teachings to resonate with local cultures and traditions. This approach enhances the relevance and effectiveness of the Church's mission and fosters a deeper connection among its members.

5. **Focus on Social Justice and Common Good:** Synodality in the African Church also involves addressing social issues and advocating for justice, peace, and the common good. The Church actively engages in social and political matters to support and uplift its communities.

5. The Way Forward For A More Christocentric Synodal African Church

a) A Re-understanding of her *Esse* as a Christocentric Synodal African Church.

The African man has never doubted the existence of God. Rather, he believed in the existence of the power and workings of many gods to which he

¹⁵ For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality, 07.09.2021.

naturally pays allegiance. This is the core and raw state of the pre-Christian African man that laid a solid foundation for the implantation and growth of the seed of faith that was planted by the missionaries. He, like the old people of Athens whom St. Paul encountered in their raw state of worshipping unknown gods,¹⁶ must re-understand this gift of the Almighty to him, the gift of faith. He must not use it to turn away from God but rather to allow the Word, Christ Jesus, to incarnate in him. This raw state of life is contrary to the level of syncretism as witnessed today in the African environment, and thereupon, its consequential effects are felt concretely in the mystical body of Christ. The Church must see itself as called to get back to the roots and cradle of Christian doctrine and values in order to help lift up the downtrodden and the weakest of the brethren. Since it is only through Christ and consequently through the Church that graces can be dispensed, especially the grace of true conversion, she must see herself as challenged to give up her identity as an agent of the prolongation of Christ's redemptive work or as an inconsequential appendage that has lost its taste with the emergence of science and technology, which now, is gaining grounds to marginalise the Gospel and make irrelevant the gospel values. The synodal African Church must wake up to *christify* the minds of the People of God or risk surrendering what it ought to be if she cannot discern the spirits of the time, listen to the voices of the time, walk along with the time and listen together to the promptings of the God who in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, dwells always amongst us in the power and workings of the Holy Spirit.

B) A Re-defining Parameters of Her *Agere* – Missions in the World.

The first thing we should bear in mind is that with respect to the human sphere, the Church can be described as "God's appointed agency for the salvation of men." This brief statement suggests several important thoughts. It makes clear that, as we indicated earlier, the Church is of divine origin and therefore belongs to God. It is a new creation of God in a world of sin. Besides, it has a task directly assigned to it by God, namely, to be the agency for the salvation of the human race. It is not the effective cause of salvation but the agency of salvation. Its existence presupposes Christ's work of salvation. Finally, the phrase "the Church is God's appointed agency for the salvation of men"- raises a question that we cannot explore here, but worthy of note is that there is no other divine agency for the salvation of humans; it points to the uniqueness of the Church. Obviously, we

¹⁶ Acts 17:23.

may distinguish between the Church and its mission, and in that respect, we say that the Church has a mission to the world.

John Mary Waliggo identifies four main requirements for a mission to become a true local church, and the Synodal African Church must reconsider its in-depth structures with these parameters to remain credible in our times.¹⁷ These requirements include that (a) The Church should have local workers – the clergy and laity alike as members of the one People of God called to journey together - to consolidate the faith within the local communities where it has found recognition, (b) the Christian message – the implantation of the ever valid new doctrines of Christ, the novelty of the Gospel -should be offered in the language and cultural values of local people, (c) the Christian community -formed and gathered by the Holy Spirit who accomplishes the will of the Father in the superlative perfect form -should be briefed on the importance of missions so as not only to receive but also to play a part in missionary work, and (d) the community – the aggregate of the renewed and reformed children of God - should grow into self-supporting in terms of resources and financial formation.

These four dimensions, as enlisted above, can, in any epoch, stand the test of time in her search and journey towards holiness with Christ. This is –because a synodality that fails to foster the call of holiness and the sanctification of the pilgrim people of God lacks a qualitative element to be credible. The Holy Spirit who unites cannot dwell in a home of sin and evil that is prevalently experienced in the African soil as if the Gospel of life and truth that Christ brings to all -has not stepped foot amongst us.

6. Conclusion

One captivating story in the history of salvation, as recorded in the Bible and which buttresses Pope Francis's call on the universal Church (including the Church in Africa), is the Emmaus account found in Luke 24; 13 – 35. These two gentlemen were 'walking together', 'talking together', 'listening to each other' about all that happened and what happened, all about Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of man. And to make a Trinitarian imprint on their synodal structure, Christ came and walked with them, talked with them, and listened together as their hearts burnt within them. This gives us a clear insight into what synodality entails and what should be the content of synodality – Christ, who unites all things, whether on earth or in heaven, makes peace by the blood of his cross.¹⁸ Without a true

¹⁷ John Mary Waliggo, *The African Clan as the True Model of the African Church in The Church in African Christianity: Innovative Essays in Ecclesiology*, 111 – 128.

¹⁸ Col 1:20.

Christification of the mentality of the African mind, which entails a rebranding of our thought patterns to be Christocentric, i.e., having a salvific character and not a 'complaining character,' our eyes will remain shut to our deficits as a race which should have been eradicated with the advent of Christianity to our continent.

Though the African man will argue from an inclusive mindset as her nature grants – but, - what is the content of this inclusivity? Seldom is Christ who ought to be the way out of the quagmire that we have put ourselves into due to a lack of proper and deep acceptance of Christ and His new doctrines. As these men listened and encountered Christ in the Emmaus account, they exhibited the virtue of courage, vigour and relentlessness in the diffusing of goodness to the brethren despite the deep nature of the night. A true synodal encounter that is centred on Christ brings about the liberation of the mind from the shackles of all sorts of weakness, whether man-made or self-attributed weakness. This weakness is common to the black man who has allowed his mind to believe, to some considerable degree, that salvation cannot come from within but only from external sources. Here, we see the ever-valid importance of the call of the Pope in *Ecclesia in Africa*, specifically in no 115:

But at the same time, I also wish to appeal to the youth: Dear young people, the Synod asks you to take in hand the development of your countries, to love the culture of your people, and to work for its renewal with fidelity to your cultural heritage, through the sharpening of your scientific and technical expertise, and above all through the witness of your Christian faith.¹⁹

Thus, as one People of God, let us journey together with Christ to experience a Church that receives and lives this gift of unity and is open to the voice of the Spirit towards the total liberation and salvation of our race. A synodality that ends with appraisal of the old values without openness to the signs of the time, to which the Holy Spirit guides towards its attainment, is more or less a sterile synodality.

Conclusively, as we believe that synodality is an ongoing, long-term pedagogy and a way of life of the Church - by building openness and systems of trust, by changing a mentality of rigidity and building a culture of listening that is open to suggestions and critiques, - the Church in Africa can truly become a renewed Spirit-filled Church, - a living witness to Christ at the service of the marginalised and excluded in our continent and to the world at large, - that welcomes all God's people - *ecclesia semper reformanda* ("The Church is always in the process of being reformed").

¹⁹ JOHN PAUL II, Exhort. *Ecclesia in Africa* no 115