

LISTENING AND DIALOGUING IN THE CHURCH: PATHWAYS TO SYNODALITY FOR THE CHURCH IN AFRICA

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Abstract

Numerous tests confirm that we are inefficient listeners. Studies have shown that immediately after listening to a 10-minute oral presentation, the average listener has heard, understood, and retained 50 percent of what was said. Because of this fact, most of the problems today in the Church remain inefficient in listening. It is obvious that listening is the communication skill we use most often; it is also the skill in which we have had little training. We have had much formal training in other major communication skills like writing, speaking, and reading, but very few have had formal training in listening. Speaking, hearing, and listening can always be maintained as a complex process when we know the barriers that hinder it. Listening becomes a vital tool for all kinds of common discussions to be successful, and an important part of listening skills is dialogue. Dialogue helps as a sharing process that allows differing viewpoints to be held side-by-side. The aim is for the participants to gain a deeper understanding of their own and other's perspectives on a topic or issue. Listening and dialogue not only help to exchange information or opinions but also enhance the ability to create mutual learning and action. Mutual learning requires participants to be open to each other's experiences, perspectives, and insights while challenging their assumptions. Pope Francis called all, both within and outside the Church, to "Listen and Dialogue" in prayer Vigil before Synod on Synodality. In search for the best kind of listening efficiency for a synodal Church, this essay titled "Listening and Dialoguing in the Church: Pathways for Synodality in the Church in Africa" anchors on the importance of listening and dialogue.

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1. Introduction

The Church is working towards a participatory synodal Church, and this article tends to present the 'African Palaver' as a model of listening and

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participatory dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church and particularly the Church in Africa. African Palaver is the art of conversation, dialogue, and consensus building in traditional society that can be used in the actual search for a more inclusive and expansive participatory dialogue at different levels of the Church's life.

I will develop this article first by exploring briefly, listening and dialogue from a spiritual point of view. Secondly, I will create the theme with the exposition of African cultural realities and finally conclude by showing how African palaver appropriation could guide the development of a process of listening and participatory dialogue in the Church today and how it could be of help in offering an expansive space for the voice of the voiceless, and the less privileged in our Church.

2. Listening as a Spiritual Exercise

Listening to the world and us is the first thing we should do to take charge of the world. Hence, synodal spirituality must be a form of listening. We do not just listen, but we must listen well, with attention to those we listen to, to what we listen to, and to how we listen. Listening is more than auditory perception; it is connected to the dialogical relationship between God and humanity, as the Bible tells us. In fact, the entire Torah lies on "Listen! Israel" (the Shema) (Deut 6:4). It is a foundational text in both the Christian and Jewish faiths. In Judaism, it is a prayer and a confession to be recited twice a day, and in Christianity, it is part of the greatest commandment². The inventiveness is always that of God, who speaks to us, and we respond by listening first. This listening is eventually made possible by His word, coming from His grace.

This is so obvious that St. Paul affirms, "Faith comes from listening" (Rom 10:17). Believing means seeing what is born of listening. Therefore, according to the Bible, hearing and listening are more important than seeing. The

²According to the Talmud, the prescription to recite the Shema is biblical (*b. Ber. 2a*); it is the first thing that a child must learn to say and the last word that should come out of a believer's mouth before he or she dies (*m. Suk., 42a; m. Ber. 61a*). Although the great commandment pericopes in the synoptics (Mt 22:34-40); Mk; Lk 10:25-28) have been often reduced to a double command, to love your neighbour, it was first expressed with the introductory formula of Deut 6:4 (cf. Mk 12:29). Even in modern historical-critical scholarship, Deut 6:4-5 is crucial to determine introduction to the issues, see J. Ska, *Introduction to Reading the Pentateuch* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006). *Urdeuteronomium* and the dating of the Pentateuchal sources since it is associated with Josiah's reform (cf. 2Ki 23:25). For an excellent introduction to the issues, see J. Ska, *Introduction to the reading the Pentateuch* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2006).

problem with looking is that all you usually see is the cover or highlights. Listening, on the other hand, offers you more of a chance to go deeper.

According to Nurya Martinez- Gayol:

The act of seeing is more imposing. The eye is the organ with which the world is possessed and dominated. Through the eye, the world becomes “our world” and is subordinated to us. We define and label reality. The seer is tempted to impose himself on the object he contemplates, to possess it based on the pre-understanding he has of it, to judge it by its appearance alone. The relation established between the seer and the seen is an objectual relation. Hearing makes it possible to relate to reality in a totally different way. First, because we cannot hear objects, we can only listen to what they communicate, their development, their realisation, their being-in-act; moreover, "we can neither determine nor control" what we are going to hear. The sound, the voice... "the call" comes, arrives, assaults us, surprises us.... Somehow, we are defenceless before its arrival. Only when we see what is born of listening can we see with an interior gaze and believe³.

Through events, reality and through others who speak, God reveals Himself to us. Our only disposition should be that of listening with emptiness by creating a space, abandoning our desire and interest and being ready to receive so that our spirit will be in harmony with His Spirit. Listening generates hope in others because they feel listened to by someone who believes in them, someone who does not pretend to possess control. This is one of the most important aspects of the synodal life of the Church and all our groups. Listening to all and not only those who seem more interesting to me, who have more important functions and positions, power, and influence.

Synodal spirituality must be a spirituality of listening because the first thing we need to do to "take charge of the world" is "listen to it" and "listen to ourselves"⁴. The spirituality of listening really calls for humility, and God remains the paradigm of our listening. Pope Francis affirms: «Listening corresponds to the

³N. Martinez-Gayol, «ACI- Spirituality of Synodality», in *UISG- Bulletin* n.178, 2022.

⁴Ibid.

humble style of God. It is the action that allows God to reveal Himself as the one who, by speaking, creates man and woman in His image, and by listening recognises them as His partners in dialogue»⁵. God hears the cries and complaints of His people as the Bible made us understand, and by that, we become God's interlocutor and partner.

Listening is the capacity of the heart that makes closeness possible⁶. This explains why listening must be from within. The true "cathedral" of listening is the heart. As St. Augustine said: «Do not have your heart in your ears, but your ears in your heart»⁷. St Francis of Assisi also urged his brothers to «incline the ear of the heart»⁸. These explain the qualities of listening. It is a question of accepting the other's truth and reality with the heart.

Listening becomes unavoidably part of our mission. In line with this fact, Pope Francis said: « In the Church, too, there is a great need to listen to one another. It is the most precious and fruitful gift we can offer each other. We Christians forget that the service of listening has been entrusted to us by the one who is the listener per excellence and in whose work we are called to participate»⁹. The Protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer thus reminds us that whoever does not know how to listen to his brother or sister will soon no longer be able to listen to God either¹⁰.

Hence, God, who listens to all, especially the voiceless, becomes the source of spirituality in listening. Whoever is listened to gets his wounds healed, reverses and recreates his narratives as one who is wounded, ceases to be a victim, and regains his dignity and identity. The desire of the Church to change and take charge of the reality through listening and dialogue can only be possible through a commitment to a spirituality of listening.

3. Spirituality of Dialogue

The word dialogue from Latin *dialogus*, from Ancient Greek διάλογος (*diálogos*, “conversation, discourse”), from *διά* (*diá*, “through, inter”) + *λόγος* (*lógos*, “speech, oration, discourse”), from *διαλέγομαι* (*dialégomai*, “to converse”), from *διά* (*diá*) + *λέγειν* (*légein*, "to speak"). Pope Francis, in his homily during the Mass for the solemn opening of the Synod of Bishops at St

⁵Francis, *Message for the 56th world day of social communication*

⁶ Francesco, *Evangelii gaudium*, Esortazione apostolica sull'annuncio del vangelo nel mondo attuale (24.11.2013), in *AAS* 105 (2013)171.

⁷ Saint Augustine, *Nolite habere cor in auribus, sed aures in corde* (Sermo 380, 1. Nuova Biblioteca Agostiniana 34, 568).

⁸ Saint Francis Of Assisi, *Lettera a tutto l'Ordine*: Fonti Francescane, 216.

⁹Francis, *Message for the 56th world day of social communication*

¹⁰Cf. D. Bonhoeffer, *La vita comune*, Queriniana, Brescia 2017, 75.

Peter's Basilica on October 10, 2021, said: "Celebrating a synod means walking on the same road, walking together." If that is the case, then this can only be possible in the mutual speaking/thinking of those people walking together. A synodal spirit becomes a spirituality of dialogue.

Indeed, dialogue can be a spiritual discipline that cultivates deep listening, empathy, and openness toward change and growth.

According to Nurya:

Dialogue is always the co-creation of a narrative that is different from the narratives of the subjects who meet. A word attentive to life, to others, and to everything that happens through it is the one that can get involved in this construction and create a true dialogue that tries to generate "something new" in a joint and open narrative, which passes through the possible polarities – where we always tend to settle-, without dwelling on them, and to reach common meanings that turn words into referents on which we can rely because, after this encounter, they have acquired a new meaning in which we find ourselves more deeply¹¹.

There is a notion that spirituality is strictly one's own business, something cultivated within oneself with God or in the company of others in prayer and *Lectio Divina*. But God's presence can also be felt in active, edifying, challenging dialogue, particularly with those who see things quite differently from me. Because of this, the spirituality of dialogue is important on this synodal journey.

Nurya continues in this sense:

However, in order to enter into this spirituality, we must take the risk of dialogue: the "risk of being together." This means taking the risk of "letting ourselves be affected," which has already begun in listening but does not end there since it is not enough to let ourselves be moved, to welcome the diversity of others and their ideas, motivations, arguments, feelings and experiences... "Letting ourselves be affected"

¹¹N. Martinez-Gayol, «ACI- Spirituality of Synodality»

must transform us, “move the floor under our feet,” shaking our securities and our convictions- not because they unavoidably have to be converted or changed, but because it is necessary to be open to the possibility that there is some truth in what I do not share, do not see, or do not understand¹².

This “risk of letting ourselves be affected” through dialogue becomes a way forward towards a synodal way of life.

The road to Emmaus described in the Gospel of Luke (Lk 24: 1-8), where the disciples experienced a change of heart in a moment of spiritual absence and loss. «Dialogue appears here as a “theological place”. The risen One becomes present “in the space of the shared word,” in the search for unfound answers that remain open questions, in the deep communication connecting two wounds, in the "despair" that provokes the flight, through dialogue, becomes an "exit"¹³. The road to Emmaus invites us to open our eyes to creations of immense beauty and truly believe that a new relationship grounded in mutual respect and Christ-centred dialogue is possible.

Dialogue becomes the appropriate place for the manifestation of the Risen Lord, and it becomes possible because it is open to welcome and include strangers and the unknown. They were listened to with attention by the Risen Lord, who interrupted their conversation without prejudices, criticism, and arrogance. The dialogue from the wounds becomes the avenue for healing because it makes the truth emerge, throws light on the past, builds communion in the present and promises a future hope.

4. Listening and Dialoguing in the African Tradition

General Presentation

In traditional African societies, the term Palaver is used to designate an improvised conference between two groups, typically those without a shared language or culture, family, or tribal meetings, with the sole purpose of tackling an important issue in the life of a community. For instance, this kind of meeting in *Makhuwas* of *Mozambique* corresponds to *muthukumano wananlokoni*, a family meeting summoned and moderated by the *humu* (head of the family). In southern and central Mozambique, families are typically patriarchal. Men make most

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

major family decisions and are perceived as the head of the family. The meeting can also be moderated by *mwene* or *mpewe* (head of the tribe). Bakongo or Kongo of Bantu ethnic group of Congo and Angola have a hut called *Mbongi*. This Mbongi is a "community, house without rooms/walls (without separation), and learning place". Mbongi, moderated by *nzonzi* (tribal chief), teaches us that it is through community that we solve our problems and nourish our creative ideas, suggestions, and innovations. Northern Kenya and Borana of southern Ethiopia have the *hayu* as the moderator when it comes to the family issues and listening process¹⁴.

Among the Massai of Tanzania in East Africa, palaver is designated by the tradition of *enkiguena*. The *enkiguena* is presented as a formal structure of Massai communication, reflecting patterns and rhythms as seen in other less formal Massai verbal exchanges. It provides a template for promoting dialogue as well as a theoretical construct and presentation format for discussing multiplicity and complexity in African natural-social systems.

Among the Igbo of West Africa, there are related terms which specify this tradition, *ikpá nkátá*, *ichikotá úchè onụ*, *ogbáko*, *ibori uka* (discussion, sharing, gathering, deliberation). There is this Igbo proverb that designates the process and practices of a palaver, *ótù áká ànaghị èké ñgwùgwù* (One hand does not tie the parcel). Research reveals that there are many significant aspects of the African palaver found among the Igbo¹⁵. In the dialogic tradition of the Zulu of Southern Africa, it is called Indaba (a conference or consultation between or with native peoples of South Africa). Zulu Indaba, matter for discussion, affair, account.

The book written by Mara J. Goldman and Saningo on the use of *enkiguena* among the Massai, which I will make use of here, helps to portray this rich tradition for consensus-building¹⁶. The need to open enough space in the course of history among the Massai for open discussion and dialogue to resolve conflicts and maintain individual and common interests in a just way led to the emergency of *enkiguena*. Etymologically, the word *enkiguena* could mean any of these: (1) A communitarian process for the healthy and harmonious functioning of society where discussion, meeting, consultation, debate, or counsel take place

¹⁴ Cf. J. Joaquim, <https://imbisa.africa/2022/08/06/listening-with-an-open-mind-and-heart-the-contribution-of-the-african-palaver-to-the-process-of-preparing-the-synod-on-synodality/>

¹⁵ Cf. S. Ilo,

https://www.academia.edu/77795171/Exploring_the_Possible_Contribution_of_the_African_Palaver_towards_a_Participatory_Synodal_Church.

¹⁶ M. J. Goldman - Saningo Miliary, «From Critique to Engagement: Re-Evaluating the Participatory Model with Maasai in Northern Tanzania», *Journal of Political Ecology* 21 (2014), 408–423.

among clan leaders, age-grades, women's groups, youth, family or a *boma* (Massai homestead)¹⁷. (2) A quality that is valued among leaders and followers for the good functioning of the community, which includes the ability to speak and communicate respectfully, listen to others, delegate responsibilities to others in a shared and participatory manner, and openness to including others in deliberation on things that concern them. (3) Coming together under a tree (*palabre*) to discuss a matter that concerns the community and eventually take a decision. Normally, it is used as an occasion to settle disputes between families and individuals. In any case, the aim is to reach a consensus sought, neither by voting nor by horse-trading. «The consensus reached has been described as "an imaginative synthesis" arrived at through dialogue and debate in a non-linear path, rather than through a formal construction of a compromise»¹⁸.

Indaba, in the Zulu tradition of South Africa, and *palaver* are semantically related. Paul D. Nesbitt described *Indaba* as «a process rather than an end in itself. This type of journey involves leaving comfortable assumptions behind and stepping into the cultural context of others who may have very different habits, expectations, and assumptions»¹⁹.

According to the interpretations given by Paul Nesbitt, *Indaba* depicts. (1) Gathering together of the community for a purposeful discussion on the common concerns of all in the community²⁰. It is a way of reconciling differences, enhancing social cohesion in the community, and strengthening the bonds of life in the community through a greater commitment to a shared purpose—the common good²¹. (2) *Indaba* serves as a means for reconciling differences. Nesbitt is of the opinion that «*Indaba* as a form of community engagement comes out of a particular cultural context where both the community and its members have a strong mutual identity and commitment. It assumes that everyone belongs and that differences can be worked out even if not resolved»²². (3) *Indaba* also serves in conflict transformation. Nesbitt points out that *Indaba* is a means of healing wounds in society more especially «long-standing deep wounds and trauma»²³.

¹⁷M. J. Goldman – Sanningo Miliary «From Critique to Engagement», 413.

¹⁸P. Spencer, *Time, space, and the unknown: Massai Configurations of Power and Providence*, NY Routledge, 2000, 249.

¹⁹P. D. Nesbitt, *A way of Listening, Engaging, and Understanding across the Anglican Communion*, Church Publishing, England 2017.

²⁰G. K. Cameron, *Lambeth Indaba 2008 and its Ecumenical Implications*, *One in Christ* 42/2 (2008), 364.

²¹P. D. Nesbitt, *Indaba*, 3.

²²*Ibid.*, 6

²³*Ibid.*, xii

The healing begins when the spirit of *Ubuntu*²⁴ is activated, and that is humanity to others. It is often described as reminding us that "I am what I am because of who we all are".

With regards to this practice in Ashanti (Ghana) and Central Africa, Benezet Bujo writes:

In concrete terms, the cause of illness lies primarily in interpersonal relationships. It is always a sign that something is wrong in the community in its two dimensions: the living and the dead. This means that reestablishing the broken interpersonal cannot be a matter of doctor and patient alone; it demands the participation of the entire community. This is why a palaver is indispensable²⁵.

Palaver provides the ground for fair healing to everyone, both the invisible ancestors and the probable visible ones, because of the bad treatment that needed to be settled and healed in the community so that all will participate in the bond of life to which all must draw as from a good pool²⁶. In all these ethnic groups, this meeting functions to modulate various people's behaviours to maintain order or prevent disputes and to mediate and resolve issues based on ancestral values. Such systems have been created and practised by the African people themselves, and we usually call them "traditional", "customary", or "indigenous" knowledge and institutions.

Hence, the listening dynamics present in the traditional African system referred to as "African Palaver" can help actualise Synodality in the Church. Palaver takes the name "African Palaver model" to depict that communicative community spirit, the interactive dialogue that animates many African community affairs.

According to Bidima:

Palaver is a technical term. It may have derived from the Portuguese word *palavra*, meaning a talk between tribal people and traders, or it may have a close connection with the French word *palabra*, which connotes a lively discussion,

²⁴ Ubuntu is sometimes translated as "I am because you are". It speaks to the fact that we are all connected and that one can only grow and progress through the growth and progression of others. It has since been used as a reminder for society on how we should treat others.

²⁵ B. Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*, trans. Brian McNeil, The Crossroad Publishing Company, New York 2001.

debate, or the process of a tribunal in a village. In whichever case, palaver refers to a participative community debate with the aim of finding solutions. It is a community assembly through which everything that concerns the life of an African is discussed. Through the power of the word in a palaver discourse, Africans discuss public affairs, resolve conflicts, formulate juridical acts, etc²⁷.

The example of the Palaver of the Bakongo, clan gathering of the Borana, Makhuwas of Nampula (Mozambique) and Bridewealth dialogue of the Turkana represents the African palaver. It conforms to four pertinent elements to the theme of listening /dialogue: the speakers, the subject of discussion, the moderator, and the used language.

Speakers in the Process of Listening

The common, most apparent factor in these realities is the significance of the power to speak. «People command aphorisms and metaphors to lend lively rhetoric to buttress their oratory in meetings. At the same time, people are not only skilful in their speech but also listen to others so that they can encourage others to speak up more»²⁸. Everyone participates actively in the debate with reality, experiences, and the future of the community in mind.

The authors continued:

For the opposing parties to agree, the people must persuade themselves as well as the other. The people do not rely on an absolute standard of a legal system that they must always observe. There is no such convenient and omnipotent, fantastically recognisable authority. The reality is such as it is that people try to overcome the misconception that separates the two parties to formulate a consensus. They embrace the earnest match and employ the twin skills of the power to speak and the power to listen²⁹.

²⁶ Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic*, 55.

²⁷ J. G. Bidima, *La Palabre. Une juridiction de le parole*, Michaelon, Paris 1997, 109.

²⁸ Y. Gebre – I. Ohta – M. Matsuda, *African Virtues in the Pursuit of Conviviality: Exploring Local Solutions in Light of Global Prescriptions*, Langaa Research & Publishing Common Initiative Group, Bamenda Cameroon 2017.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 266.

The groups that gather and participate in this type of gathering belong to different ethnic groups, such as Bokongo, Borana, and Turkana. This means they share a common culture and values, but that does not mean the opposing parties will arrive at mutual consent and can understand each other without spoken words. They must speak with each other to guarantee understanding.

«The fixed categories of gender (...) bind no party to a prescribed action and behaviour that will predetermine the outcome of the mutual negotiations. The "other" to these people is always indeterminate and unforeseeable. Because they accept this as a matter of fact, they keep themselves open to the other (...) relationship flourish through mutual negotiation»³⁰. It is taken for granted that the other is a specific person or persons with different characters, names, personalities, and faces. They do not reduce each other to some category but are acknowledged as individual entities. The other is not pre-known. Conflicts and antipathy between self and "other" are taken for granted. Understanding and coexistence are guaranteed when confronted with each other with the power to speak and listen.

Subject for Discussion

Problems relating to the community's life become the subject of discussion. A list is made, and the head of the family helps to prioritise the matters, considering the community's needs. The subject of debate is always pragmatic (a set of rules which guide the listener in interpreting the arguments made by the debaters beyond their literal content) and never theoretical.

Moderator

Normally, the head of the family (humu) or the king (mpewe) becomes the moderator of the gathering. The role of a moderator cannot be delegated, and the reason is very far from centralism (control of the activities under a single authority), but because they have a general summary of the life of the whole family and tribe. There is also a team moderation comprised of two or more people, together with the head of the family (humu) or head of the tribe (mpewe), who moderates the meeting (muthukumano), making sure that the theme arrives at its best and the conclusion is assured. The theme ensures that everybody's interventions are being considered.

Narrating the situation, the above authors say that:

These professionals (moderators) are quick-witted masters of rhetoric and well-versed in sayings, songs, and aphorisms, yet they never

³⁰Ibid.

attack their opponents into silence. They let others talk, they listen, and they quickly grasp the core matter. They would not take sides but keep the discussions from becoming agitated or confrontational and help prod the palaver along to conclude³¹.

In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela narrates how he learnt inclusive leadership from observing the palaver way of the Xhosa Regent and his court at the *Great Place*. The topic of discussion is being introduced during the regular meetings by the regent. Quietly, he listens to the participants, who are mostly married adult men- while:

Everyone who wanted to speak did so. It was democracy in its purest form. There may have been a hierarchy of importance among the speakers, but everyone was heard: chief and subject, warrior and medicine man, shopkeeper and farmer, landowner and labourer. The people spoke without interruption, and the meetings lasted for many hours. The foundation of self-government was that all men were free to voice their opinions and equal in value as citizens (Women, I am afraid, were deemed second-class citizens)³².

The reactions of those present regarding the conclusion made by the moderator are listened to.

Language

Narrative is the style used to tell and expose the subjects. Proverbs, stories, metaphors, and other types of comparison predominate the discussion. Bujo notes that proverbs and poetic speeches are vital not only for their flowery language but also for the wisdom they convey, which is usually embodied by the king or a council of elders. He stresses the importance of poetic speeches like proverbs, fairy tales, and parables in the Palaver. Their flowery messages usually pose an ethical character³³.

³¹ Ibid., 254.

³² N. Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*, 1st paperback ed. (New York: Back Bay Books, 1994), 21.

³³ B. Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality* (New York. Herder & Herder, 2001), 54.

In the same way, regarding the importance of proverbs, Chinua Achebe notes that « among the Igbo, the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten»³⁴. The metaphor of words as food is apt because food is necessary for the sustenance of life, and, as already noted, words are necessary for the on-keeping of community life and interaction. Bujo made it understood that proverbs are vital to the Palaver “since they can make a harsh truth acceptable” for the success of their life; Palaver counts on proverbs. The proverb that does not represent the whole truth in each situation cannot be used. In addition, it is frequent to refer to ancestors to sustain some points.

5. African Palaver Process: A Synodal Way

African Palaver incorporates the theme of the Synod: communion, participation, and mission. Palaver is a model for expanding one's understanding of people or communities and for more inclusive participation of every member of the Church in the synodal movement at all levels of Church life.

In the African palaver process, all the people in the community are invited to a sacred place for a dialogue on how to reach abundant life and battle against unjust practices that hinder the participation of all members in the bond of love. Importance is placed on all people than some people. According to Massamba ma Mpolo, a palaver is a forum where the word that gives life is being shared. Life talked about in this context is understood in many ways, not only human life, not only the living, but a rich and expansive perception that involves the living, the ancestors, not yet born, spiritual entities, seen and unseen creatures, the planet, ecological life, and the entire cosmos. No one is left out when it comes to the contributions to the shared bond of life. Mpolo is convinced that African traditional society has created an inclusive forum for dialogue because « everything revolves around the word, for to speak is to live, to recognise and to affirm the existence of the other person. To be speechless is to be naked, to be

³⁴ C. Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007), 7. The quote, from the narrator's recounting in Chapter 1, of how Unoka calmly interacted with someone to whom he owed money alludes to the highly sophisticated art of rhetoric practised by the Igbo. This rhetorical formality offers insight into the misunderstandings that occur between the Igbo and Europeans. Whereas the latter value efficiency and directness in their dealings, the Igbo value adherence to their cultural traditions, which include certain patterns of dialogue considered inefficient by Western standards. See, “SparkNotes: Things Fall Apart: Important Quotations Explained, Page 3,” accessed May 8, 2024, <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/things/quotes/page/3/>.

deprived of oneself. Loss of freedom to communicate and to transmit life biologically is synonymous with death. Speech is creative because it often engenders life»³⁵. One of the three palaver-based commitments is to open communication, especially truth-telling.

Hence Mpolo said:

The ability to have recourse to speech and to assess the acts of life is, therefore, essential. God becomes flesh in human speech and acts. When it is a matter of blessing and reinforcing life, *mpova* (speech) becomes *Nzambi*, i.e., the human word becomes the word of God. It is a word that brings peace, reconciliation, health, and life, the word which reestablishes the equilibrium of the community when it is in danger of disintegration³⁶.

With the conviction that truth heals, binds the community together, and restores, the African Palaver becomes a ground for truth-telling.

In the African Palaver, the speaker does not take the members of their audience for granted. They seek to maintain contact with them through constant calling upon them to ensure that they remain with them as companion travellers along the conversational journey. They do this by calling for their participation in the community dialogue. As Stan Ilo would have it, «This can help the Church today to move away significantly from a top-down approach to Synodality. This can happen by strengthening and simplifying the synodal process and devolving the power to make decisions to local churches and other intermediate ecclesial bodies in matters specific to them»³⁷. Pointing to the unnecessary concentration of powers, he argues that «the bureaucratic nature of synods in the Church even in local Churches, and the centralisation of power in Rome, or in the hands of diocesan bishops and local parish priests, limits the ability of local Catholic communities, lay groups, and small Christian communities to make decisions and find solutions (...) to the issue that they face»³⁸.

The African palaver practical system beats dualism and provides a space for listening and conversation. It gives hope to those who suffer injustice and

³⁵ M. ma. Mpolo, «Jesus Christ – Word of Life: An African Contribution to the Theme of the Sixth Assembly», *The Ecumenical Review* 35/2 (1983) 168.

³⁶ M. ma. Mpolo, «Jesus Christ – Word of Life», 168-169.

³⁷ S. Ilo, «Exploring the Possible Contributions of the African Palaver towards a Participatory Synodal Church», *Exchange* 50 (2021) 228.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

oppression in the traditional society. Interpreting Palaver as a Christian practice, Kasonga wa Kasonga suggests that the centrality of hope must be drawn to attention: «Hope is a Christian virtue based not on human promises but rather on divine promises (...) Hope must be the main thread orienting the whole process of Christian Palaver. It provides a theological foundation for healing from enslaving situations, granted that healing is one of the hope's realisations»³⁹. This type of hope and healing becomes real when every effort is made to consult and listen to those who feel excluded or marginalised from society and the Church. Palaver aims essentially at reconciling opposed parties by enabling the neutralisation of violence through words and possibly integrating through self-sacrifice. It creates a forum for cultural pluralism, religious freedom, and interethnic, interracial, and intercultural rendezvous.

6. Application of African Listening and Dialogue: Pathways for Synodality in the African Church

African Palaver is distinguished by listening to God and the ancestors. In the Church in Africa, the word of God listened to should be contextualised. It is communicating the Gospel in word and deed and establishing the Church in ways that make meaning to people within their local cultural context.

Palaver is characterised by holistic listening and interventions on community issues. A synodal Church should pay attention to the socio-economic and religious realities of the people. Palaver can encourage the members of the community, thanks to the knowledge that distinguished the intervention and orientation taken. African cultures value language and proverbs because they communicate, and in them, wisdom is passed into the community. African wisdom is important in synodal listening in Africa, and as such, the custodians of African wisdom should be assembled and listened to by the Church with an open mind.

Listening penetrates relationships with God and with others in the African Palaver. The African Church is apt to encourage the spirituality of listening both at the parish and diocesan levels. Listening is decisive because it is one of the greatest needs that human beings experience.

Palaver is used to identify and work out solutions to a family's or a community's problem, not mere listening. Human communication is not a mere exchange of information. It also entails complex processes of managing the information exchanged. This is the reason why the ability to communicate

³⁹ K. wa Kasonga, «African Christian Palaver: A Contemporary Way of Healing Communal Conflicts and Crises», in *The Church and healing: Echoes from Africa*, in D. NWACHUKWU – E. YARTEKWEI (edd), Peter Lang, New York, 1994. 58.

effectively at different levels between the priest and parishioners is a distinctive quality of a healthy Church community. The priest should be able to receive and interpret information in the communication process. Every diocese and parish should stress the importance of listening in every aspect of communication, and this explains probably why the Holy Father Pope Francis exhorts us during 2023 World Communication Sunday to reflect on the theme: “Listening with the ear of the heart”.

The community listening process is not based on theories but on pragmatics. It addresses the concrete realities of the communities here and now. The synodal listening and discussion should address the concrete realities of the Church's life and mission today.

The elders consider the young ones in the Palaver a guarantee of continuity of the values handed down from generation to generation. In the African Church, young people should not be taken as simple objects of listening but as collaborators in the process of listening.

7. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, the words of Pope Francis are encouraging: « In pastoral action, the most important work is the apostolate of the ear»⁴⁰ - to listen before speaking, as the Apostle James exhorts: «Let everyone be quick to hear, slow to speak» (1:19). Synodal process calls for listening to one another and for this to materialise in the African Church, «there is need to pay closer attention to social process, cultural traditions, hidden wisdom in societies in Africa which can be enculturated in the search in Africa and the world Church for a fruitful and workable synodal process at all levels of life of the Church»⁴¹.

⁴⁰Pope Francis, Message for the 56th World Social Communication Day.

⁴¹S. Ilo, «Exploring the Possible Contributions of the African Palaver towards a Participatory Synodal Church, 236.