

A Life-Giving Vision of Synodality from African Consecrated Women
ACWECA Leadership Listening and Discernment Retreat on Synodality
Nairobi, Kenya
May 2022

Introduction

At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. (Luke 1:39-40)

A group of leaders from the Association of Consecrated Women in Eastern and Central Africa (ACWECA) gathered in Nairobi, from 26 to 28 May 2022, for a retreat on synodality. The aim of this retreat was to provide a space for them to pray, reflect, discern, and propose a vision of synodality from their perspective as African consecrated women. Using the methodology of spiritual conversation, they listened to each other and discerned together on the synodal Church they wish for. This convening was facilitated by the African Synodality Initiative (ASI), a partnership between the Jesuit Conference of Africa and Madagascar (JCAM), the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) and the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa (AMECEA).

ACWECA is the umbrella body of national conferences of consecrated women from 10 English-speaking countries of Eastern and Central Africa. The ACWECA Region comprises of over 30,000 women religious serving the Church in various capacities. The following is the communique from the synodal retreat of the leaders of ACWECA.

I. A Blessed Encounter

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear!" (Luke 1:41-42)

We, the retreat participants, and ACWECA in general, greatly appreciate this synodal moment in the life of the Church and Pope Francis' invitation to let the Holy Spirit inspire our encounters. Like Mary and Elizabeth, our coming together reminds us of the blessing of our

vocation as consecrated women. We are a special gift to the Church and we have many talents and gifts that are important for the growth of the Church. We acknowledge, embrace, and celebrate the beauty and richness of consecrated life and that of women in the Church.

Through our sisterly encounter of synodality, we have become more aware of the importance of actively participating in the life of the Church and society, as well as speaking up as led by the Spirit. We feel that the Holy Spirit is in all that is happening – unearthing the truth in the Church. It is like the birthing of new life and we would like to be part of this life-giving process. We are grateful for this opportunity to share our joys and concerns. We are being called to examine ourselves closely, with our own internal transformation happening first, so that we can authentically accompany others in communion, participation, and mission.

II. Listening and Discerning Together

But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. (Luke 1:43-44)

As daughters of Mother Africa, our roots tell us we belong to one another. Our sharing reminded us that we are connected in many blessed ways. We have similar joys and hopes. But we also have sorrows deeply entrenched in our souls. In our listening and discerning, we thanked God for the support we get from different circles within and outside the Church, to continue being authentic witnesses of the Gospel values in our changing society. We also asked ourselves: What are the obstacles that stand in the way of our flourishing and fulfillment as consecrated women in the Church today? Why are we not seen as equal members with our brothers, bishops and priests, yet we are all created equally in the image and likeness of God? Why are we not welcomed to fully participate in all the decision-making processes that build up the People of God? We feel that there is no way true synodality can happen in the Church if women religious are not considered as equal partners.

We believe that the Church is not only hierarchical but belongs to the People of God too. When too much power is vested in the hierarchy, it oppresses the People. We question if some sections of the Canon Law, which have to do with authority in the Church, could be reviewed to ensure that power and authority are not abused but understood as stewardship.

Consecrated women enrich the Church with their service and contribution yet are not always acknowledged or appreciated. We have suffered from disrespect and our authority being undermined when bishops override the decisions of General Superiors of Congregations or when priests show outright disrespect and humiliate Sisters in public and during homilies. In a number of cases, we have silently suffered and have been scandalised by the extent of abuse of power and lack of response from our brother bishops on the cries/issues of Superiors due to the non-interference policy within areas of jurisdiction. These negative experiences cause pain and lead to poor relations. Yet for us to be a unified body of Christ, we need to work together to heal and reconcile our wounded Church.

As consecrated women, we clearly hear the invitation to renew our calling and to stand up for our womanhood, in all aspects of life. We desire that the pain, suffering, fears, and anxieties that we experience as women religious are heard and taken seriously. We are convinced that the synod process is an opportunity for women religious to be recognised and appreciated in the Church, as part of the body of Christ, and as equal partners in the evangelisation mission so that we can be more efficient and influential in our mission of evangelisation.

III. A Church that Values and Believes in Us

Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her! (Luke 1:45)

Having listened to the voice of the Holy Spirit as consecrated women, this is the message we desire to address to the Church in order to become a synodal Church that journeys and walks together, with the gifts and talents of consecrated women. We propose that there be:

1. Mutual respect and dialogue in decision-making processes at all levels in the Church. In the spirit of participation, consecrated women should be involved in pastoral councils at parish, diocesan and national levels, as well as be involved in decisions that affect the Sisters at all levels.
2. Attention and solutions given to the clerical abuses of consecrated women in the following forms:
 - Economic abuse in remuneration for the services and projects of Sisters

- Physical abuse
 - Sexual abuse
 - Spiritual abuse
 - Abuse of power through discrimination, intimidation and obstruction.
3. Recognition and respect of our rights to ownership of land and property.
 4. Emphasis on structured ongoing formation and education of all agents of evangelisation and the laity. We also encourage the formation of priests to understand and appreciate the role of consecrated women in the Church so that the practice of synodality becomes the ordinary way we live, work and journey together to foster mutual relations and communion.

Conclusion

*Spirit of life, come unto me. Sing in my heart all the stirrings of compassion.
Blow in the wind, rise in the sea; move in the hand, giving life the shape of justice.
Roots hold me close; wings set me free; Spirit of life, come to me, come to me.*

(Song written by Carolyn McDade)

We, the participant Sisters, truly believe that this path of synodality is what the Church is being called to today. The Church will respond better to her mission to the poor by heeding the invitation to listen to the Holy Spirit, foster inclusive participation and practice deeper communion with all the People of God. We call on the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Life, to guide us on this path. We fully commit ourselves to promote, build and live a culture of synodality within our congregations and in all the areas we serve. We shall also be available to continue working together with others in the next synodal phases and beyond.

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