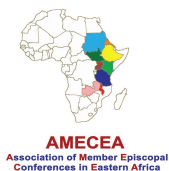


# **A POCKET COMPANION TO SYNODALITY: VOICES FROM AFRICA**

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## African Synodality Initiative



For a synodal African Church



**An African Synodality Initiative Publication**

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# The Path toward a Synodal Church: Reflections on Synodality from an African Perspective

## Introduction

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This collection of short essays is a contribution to the synodal process by the African Synodality Initiative (ASI). ASI is 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).

The goal of ASI is to generate creative ideas and resources that will support local churches in Africa and enable them to engage fruitfully and constructively in the synodal process. ASI fulfils this goal by developing informative media productions, organising webinars that support the formation of the faithful, and convening various groups to reflect critically on synodality from an African perspective.

In line with ASI's goal, these essays provide reflections on key thematic themes that express various aspects of "lived synodality" as identified in the preparatory documents of the synod. While taking into account the diverse ecclesial context of Africa, they highlight synodal experiences in Africa, explore the links between synodality and culture in Africa, and deepen a theology of synodality in harmony with the notion of the Church as family (*jamaa*) of God.

As a resource material, this book is simple enough to be used

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in a variety of settings such as Small Christian Communities, parish communities and groups, and formation programmes for seminaries, convents, and religious communities and schools. At the end of each essay are questions for further reflection and discussion in groups to deepen their prayer, formation, and conversation. Ecclesial leaders will find this resource useful in deepening their understanding of synodality and in exercising their mission of leadership and service to the Church in a synodal manner. The aim is to promote learning opportunities, extensive consultation, greater inclusion, and active participation.

Ultimately, this resource material is meant to promote and support a wide and inclusive listening of all the People of God in keeping with the vision of Pope Francis of synodality as “a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the ‘Spirit of truth’ (Jn 14:17), in order to know what he ‘says to the Churches’” (Rev 2:7).<sup>1</sup>

*\*...this resource material is meant to promote and support a wide and inclusive listening of all the People of God\**

ASI is grateful to an anonymous Catholic family foundation for its generous support that made this project and publication possible.

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1. "Address of His Holiness Pope Francis at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops," 17 October 2015. <https://bit.ly/3RqKz2G>



# Walking Together as Companions in Ecclesial Discernment

**Josée Ngalula and Wilhelmina Tunu**

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*In the Church and in society, we are side by side  
on the same road.*

## **Introduction**

The ecclesial desire to walk together that lies at the heart of the synodal process has two theological foundations: the relational nature of human beings and the family communion initiated by salvation in Jesus Christ. This relatedness in an African perspective is essential for the success of the process of synodality; it reflects unity in diversity drawn from the Trinity. It is in this context that our reflection focuses on the ecclesiological implication of walking together and particularly in ecclesial discernment.

## **Theological Foundations of the Relational Nature of the Human Being**

The human being is created as a relational being. God did not create a lonely person; from the beginning, he created them male and female (Gen 1:27). By nature, we are social beings, and, without relations with others, we cannot develop our qualities. Therefore, “humanity means a call to interpersonal communion” (*Mulieris dignitatem* 7).

The relational nature of the human being implies the need to build a community marked by the communion of people aware



of their equal dignity and in their assisting each other. The human being who wants to make a success of his or her life on this earth walks with others to discern together the challenges and face them as this African proverb emphasises: “If you want to go fast, walk alone, but if you want to go far, walk together.”

As Noluthando Honono and other contributors mention, discernment as an act of finding God in real-life situations is important in this synodal path because it is in discerning that believers attach themselves to God and walk in communion with others. In Luke 9:57–62, the three situations bring the attention of detachment from attachments to make a proper judgment in the synodal journey of communion, participation, and mission. Detachment is thus essential in discerning the will of God. This journey requires an undivided heart so that Christians are capable of receiving the power of Christ, who established a family of God by spending his entire stay on earth in communion with humanity. Christ not only saves individuals; he also establishes a “family of God” whose members are introduced into a fraternity without borders (Eph 2:17–22), as Nicholas Segeja and Laurenti Magesa point out in their articles.

*\*...discernment as an act of finding God in real-life situations is important in this synodal path... believers attach themselves to God and walk in communion with others\**

In this Church family initiated by Christ, all members are invited to live a journey that conforms them more fully to their Saviour (Rom 8:29, 13:14; Gal 3:27; Phil 2:5). They live this journey as the body of Christ specifically because of the community and family dimension of Christian life. Walking in discernment therefore



demands that we have the ability to see through every circumstance and allow the Holy Spirit to lead us in expressing our vocations to live, work, and walk together as people of the Way in Christ, who is the Way (Jn 14:6).

In the spirit of synodality, Christians are called to show the true face of God by living in communion. This human communion originates from the relational communion of the triune God, where members show respectful listening, openness, and honest sharing of insights for the common good.

In communal discernment, Christians ought to have time to share about the call of God at this particular moment of the synod in the context of the local church and the realities of the world. They need to share personal experiences in the midst of the vice of individualism by reclaiming the sense of communion and participation and walking together. Attentiveness to what is happening within the self is essential to allowing the Holy Spirit to take charge in communal discernment. Hence, as Marcel Uwineza mentions, we need the grace to set aside personal fears, negative desires, and prejudices and to embrace the freedom of God's children in walking together. This walking together is not done in just any way; the Holy Spirit engages the Church in active missionary communion, which notably involves ecclesial discernment.

### **Walking Together in Missionary Communion**

The Synod on Synodality indicates that at the current time, there is need to scrutinise the signs of the times and to journey in communion as a faithful and universal family guided by the Holy Spirit.



This Church in communion reveals a reality open to missionary work (Mt 28:19–20; Jn 17:21–23). When Jesus sends the disciples on mission, he invites them to walk together toward the whole truth (Jn 16:12–13), and thus in the mission, their unity will be a reflection and a witness of the communion of divine persons (Jn 17:21–23; Acts 2:42; 1 Jn 1:3).

To build up this Church in mission, the Holy Spirit distributes God's complementary gifts (1 Cor 12:1–11), which must be received with gratitude and with a great sense of responsibility. Moreover, the Christian is a steward of the Lord's goods (Lk 16:1,



3) called to share what he or she has graciously received (Acts 4:32) to be of service.

Through global calamities such as the COVID-19 pandemic, we have learnt that we are one human family in which one person's concerns are the concerns of all. The synodal path is a thus wake-up call to allow the Holy Spirit to talk with us and enlighten our minds and hearts to embrace one another toward salvation. Once the Holy Spirit guides our path, we are assured of overcoming the dark clouds overshadowing our lives.

In *Fratelli tutti*, Pope Francis talks of the “dark clouds over a closed world.” They include states of depression, conflict and war, poverty, bad governance, manipulative economies, corruption, tribalism, nepotism, neo-colonialism, despair, calamities such as the COVID-19 pandemic, global warming, etc.; they are the socio-political and cultural structures dominating the world at the expense of the human dignity and relations.

The Synod on Synodality stands as a light that shines through these dark clouds. To actualise this synodal path, Pope Francis envisages an opportunity for growth when he calls the whole Church to walk together and to listen to the Holy Spirit and to one another to be educated and transformed. Walking together in this synodal path is an appeal for all members to bring fellowship to the centre of human life in the Church and society.

The synodal path is an invitation to embrace the spirit of companionship in our journey of faith. We need to listen to the



Spirit, who speaks and transforms us into true prophetic witnesses of love. The value of companionship is essential to strengthen our faith in building the kingdom of God.

### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. What are the new ways of listening to the Holy Spirit today that could lead us to walk together as companions on the journey?
2. As Christians, how do we live communion to achieve participation in the mission?
3. As religious leaders entrusted with the care of the faithful in the synodal path, how do we exercise our mission in the Church to foster unity and love?





# Listening with an Open Mind and Heart: The Synodal Practice in the Church in Africa

**Leonida Katunge**

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*Listening is the first step, but it requires having an open mind and heart, without prejudices.*

## **Introduction**

Pope Francis inaugurated a two-year synodality process that prioritises the practice of listening. To achieve this goal, the Church needs to listen to and learn from the experience of the early church, where all cared for and listened to one another and no one lacked anything (Acts 4:34). Far from being a one-off event, the Synod on Synodality is an extended process of inclusive and mutual listening guided by a discernment in common with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. How can the practice of listening enrich the experience of the Church in Africa as we walk together as God's people?

## **What Is Listening in the Synod and in the Scriptures?**

Listening is hearing what other people say and being psychologically involved with those who are speaking. It entails a sincere desire to understand others with respect, acceptance, and a mind open to seeing things from other points of view. Genuine listening is founded on love and concern for all, even for those who do not share the same faith. This kind of listening challenges us to listen to those who hold different opinions and invites us to listen to those we may be tempted to see as unimportant or those who force us to consider new points of



view that may change our way of thinking (Vademecum, 2.2). This kind of listening requires an open mind and a heart free of prejudice.

*\*Genuine listening is founded on love and concern for all, even for those who do not share the same faith\**

Listening to others and all listening to the Holy Spirit to learn what the Spirit “says to the Churches” (Rev 2:7) calls us to be attentive to the voices of the poor, the sick, orphans, widows, and others. We are called to sit at the feet of Jesus, as Mary did, and listen to one another (Lk 10:41). Mary of Nazareth is a model of listening (Lk 2:19). Listening is the basic attitude to the Word of God in the scriptures as we see in the example of the two disciples in Emmaus (Lk 24:13–35).

## **What Attitudes Hinder Listening in the Church in Africa?**

### ***Clericalism***

The Church of Christ was not ordained to be clerical but a “synodal one that challenges us to change and transform clericalist practices where one person or a group of persons in the Church put together decisions without listening and consulting.”<sup>2</sup> The true nature of the Church is not about command or control. As Laurenti Magesa points out in his essay, every exercise of authority in the Church is to be at the service of all People of God regardless of status.

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2. Geevarghese Kaithavana, “The Joy of Listening and Walking Together,” 1 December 2021.

<https://catholicethics.com/forum/joy-of-listening/>

## *Fear*

Marcel Uwineza has examined the negative effects of fear on the synodal process. Fear inhibits us from expressing ourselves freely; the clergy fear the laity and vice versa. Pastors should not be afraid to listen to the people under their pastoral care even if they hold differing opinions. There is no competition in evangelisation; each one is called to assume and perform his or her mission with mutual respect and reciprocity as Magesa also points out.





## ***Culture***

Some cultural practices affect the way we relate in the Church. The family, age sets, and clans have shaped the way we think as Christians. In some cultures, women are not allowed to speak. This negative practice is present in the Church and communities of religious women. Children and youth are not allowed to address their elders. These practices hinder effective dialogue.

## ***Lack of Dialogue***

The inability to welcome difference and diversity can hinder dialogue and result in violence. Failure to listen and learn has significantly impacted the faithful and has even undermined participation in the Church.

## ***Negative Silence***

Keeping silent even when one is called to speak is common in the Church in Africa. Such negative silence exacerbates problems such as sexual abuse and violence against women and children. Victims opt for silence for fear that no one will listen to them. Religious women who have been used by the clergy to do work without remuneration or have been abused sexually are compelled to remain silent in the name of protecting the reputation of the Church.

## **The Benefits of Good Listening**


Synodality is not lobbying but listening and understanding the situation of people. Listening is a prerequisite for the emergence of a synodal Church that creates communion, facilitates participation, and empowers people for mission. This translates into multiple benefits.

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1. Listening will enable the Church in Africa to hear what the Spirit desires for the Church, where many are suffering and in need of a listening ear.
  2. Genuine listening enables the Church to overcome the scourge of clericalism and allows the members of the Church to have an open discussion about their identity, mission, and belonging to the Church. Pastors and people engage in a mutually respectful and beneficial dialogue.
  3. When members of Christ's body listen to one another, they create listening spaces for constructive debates that allow each one to welcome what others say as a way by which "the Holy Spirit can speak for the good of all" (1 Cor. 12:7).
  4. True dialogue will lead to newness based on what each one will have learnt from others as they listen to them (VD, 2.3). Consecrated men and women will be heard, and their lives will be transformed.
  5. The synodal process in Africa gives us an opportunity to open ourselves to listen in an authentic way, without resorting to ready-made answers or preformulated judgments (VD, 2.3).

Synodality calls the Church to leave behind prejudices and to facilitate a listening process that frees minds and hearts from prejudices and stereotypes and overcomes ignorance and division.

### **Listening from the African Context: Some Key Concepts**

As some contributors to this volume have pointed out, the African *palaver* ethics of communication is vital to understanding the practice of synodality in a synodal Church,



where all people together discuss matters that pertain to the Church guided by the Holy Spirit.

Similarly, the concept of *ubuntu*, which recognises the dignity and mutuality of human beings, calls the Church in Africa to an understanding of the importance of treating one another as humans and listening to all regardless of status.

*Ujamaa*, familyhood, offers the synodal Church a means of empowering all people to understand that they are brothers and sisters whose dignity and purposes are enhanced through mutual listening and respect.

In conclusion, the Church in Africa needs to discern through listening and creating space for the guidance of the Holy Spirit at all levels of the Church.

### Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What practical means can we develop to ensure that listening and dialogue in the Church become inclusive and sustainable?
2. What structures does the Church need to put in place to facilitate listening to the poor, victims of sexual abuse, immigrants, refugees, those with physical and mental challenges, consecrated men and women, and others?
3. What lessons can the synodal Church learn from African concepts and practices including *palaver*, *ubuntu*, and *ujamaa*?



## Speaking Out

**Marcel Uwineza**

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*All are invited to speak with courage and parrhesia, that is, integrating freedom, truth, and charity.*

The contributions of our synodal pilgrimage might be weakened if we do not pay attention to who is left out and the factors that prevent people from speaking out. A synod is a journey of discernment of the will of God, not only on a personal basis but also as a Christian community.

A synodal Church is the People of God founded by Jesus Christ and guided by the Spirit on a journey in history toward an encounter with God. It must be mindful of the maxim: “What affects all must be addressed by all.” In what follows, I speak out against sin, fear, and pride – hindrances to our synodal process.

Contemporary culture is suspicious of anyone who speaks about sin. The masked culture says in essence, “Who are you to remind us that something is wrong?” Yet scenes of people wounded by unjust structures are too familiar. Unfortunately, we can become numb to those sights. Our people hear sermons telling them that Jesus died for every person, “for the high, for the low, for the rich, for the poor, for the bond, for the free ...”<sup>3</sup> but some have asked me, “Father Uwineza, do you think Jesus died for us too since we feel excluded? Did he die for certain ethnic groups, professions, sexual minorities, etc.?”

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3. M. Shawn Copeland, “The Cross of Christ and Discipleship,” in *Thinking of Christ: Proclamation, Explanation, Meaning*, ed. Tatha Wiley (New York: Continuum, 2003), 177–93, at 188.



Beyond moralisation, my intention is to remind us that we do not sin against a moral code; we sin against a person – God revealed in Jesus Christ. We also sin against the people for whom Christ died. Sin is a refusal to hear God, who calls out to Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?” (Gen 4:9). Sin destroys collaboration and solidarity. Sin ravages harmony in creation. Sin hides by making people focus on the symptoms rather than the roots of problems. The biblical accounts of the killings of Uriah, Naboth, and John the Baptist (2 Sam 11; 1 Kgs 21:1–16; Mk 6:17–29) illustrate these points.

In our synod, we must be concerned why some people are missing and do something concrete about it. I can no longer go to Mass and not be concerned about who is sitting next to me. If we have friends, relatives, or neighbours who are alienated from the Church, it must be painful. As Laurenti Magesa reminds us, we must re-examine ourselves and “create concrete organisations in the Church to facilitate conversation, listening, and practical forgiveness.” These organisations are to promote dialogue as an authentic expression of humanity, a path to be “undertaken with patience in order to transform competition into collaboration.” Speaking out in a synod entails making it clear that evangelisation is a project for every baptised person – from laypeople to bishops – and for the central institutions of the universal Church.

*\*In our synod, we must be concerned why some people are missing and do something concrete about it\**





The Church must preach the sin that the cross reveals and the abundant grace that discloses God’s love. As Magesa notes, “The most important condition for achieving practical synodality or ‘walking together’ as Church is, as much as possible, to bridge the mental and practical socio-structural gap between the general faithful and official leaders in the Christian communities.”

The clergy are invited to realise that being set apart does not mean being set above. Their job description is that of foot-washing (Jn 13:12–17) through a culture of fellowship and encounter. An African proverb says it rightly: “Those who eat at the same table do not eat one another.”

In Luke’s gospel, we find Jesus at a Sabbath table, a dinner guest of a Pharisee. Jesus told his host, “When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, and you will be blessed because they cannot repay you” (Lk 14:13–14). Jesus spoke out for those missing from the conversation table.


I dream of a church in which synodal contributions echo sentiments similar to those of Jesus toward the woman who anointed him: “Wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told in memory of her” (Mt 26:13). If we would sit at Jesus’s table, we must live in solidarity and walk with the little ones, who are the “only sure signs of his presence among us in our efforts to prepare for the coming of the reign of God.”<sup>4</sup> We must make room for the discarded and the excluded in our synod.

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4. Archidiocèse de Kigali, *Charité, Réconciliation, Fraternité, Je n’oublierai jamais que tu es mon frère* (Kigali: Imprimerie de Kigali, 2002), 76–100.

Speaking out in a synod is a medicine to paralysing ecclesial fear. As Leonida Katunge mentions in her essay, fear inhibits listening to how people understand the Church, what they need, what they think should be done, and what can help renew evangelisation. There must be a respectful reminder that the hierarchy should be an inverted pyramid at the service of communion. An inverted pyramid fosters people's participation in decisions that affect their lives. This requires the bishop and his collaborators to appreciate that he is as much a teacher as he is a disciple, who listens to that same Spirit, who speaks to the people of God. It is never one without the other.





St. John Paul II said, “Let us listen to what all the faithful say, because in every one of them the Spirit of God breathes.”<sup>5</sup> The hierarchy must go before God’s people pointing the way and keeping their hopes up. They are urged to stand in their midst with modesty and merciful presence. There are times when a bishop has “to walk after them, helping those who lag behind and above all, allowing the flock to strike out on new paths.”<sup>6</sup>

Fear is prevalent in the Church. People are afraid of being judged, embarrassed, not listened to, and not taken seriously. Church leaders should therefore let the people speak and listen to them; if there is anything to correct, that can be done afterward. Jesus urged us to know the truth because it sets us free (Jn 8:32). “What he meant was the bad news of sin and the good news of divine love.”<sup>7</sup>


The laity needs to be respected and encouraged to speak because their synodal participation is not an addendum. Speaking out admittedly takes courage. We need to create pastoral counselling structures in which those who are not as articulate can have a space to speak without fear. We should acknowledge the diverse ways people speak. Speaking happens not only through the use of words and language; it can also be done through poetry and other creative works. It is through encouraging other forms of speaking out that everybody finds his or her voice.

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5. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte*, no. 45. <https://bit.ly/3xGD8LK>

6. Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 31. <https://bit.ly/3QucvSV>

7. Dean Brackley, *The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times: New Perspectives on the Transformative Wisdom of Ignatius of Loyola* (New York: Crossroad, 2004), 2.



Frank synodal dialogue is impossible where pride reigns. Pride refers to contempt, selfish ambition, a desire for power. It means believing not just that we are important (we are, after all), but that we are more important than others. Once we catch this disease, “we are on the slippery slope to ‘all other vices’” (St. Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises* no. 142). Some televangelists, prelates, and politicians have ended up arrogant because of pride. To speak out against pride requires us, in Pope Francis’s words, “to spare no effort to educate toward respectful openness regarding others, recognising their rights and fundamental freedoms”<sup>8</sup> so that despite differences, we can coexist in mutual integration.

In our synod, we should ask: With whom do I stand? With those whom society honours or with those it holds in contempt? We should pray for the grace of humility to identify with the outcast, to follow Christ’s downward mobility, that is, a call to be a Church of the poor, the forgotten, and assuming their cause as Christ did (Phil 2:6–8), and that leads to synodality.

### Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What fears do you have about this synod, and how might we overcome them together?
2. What strategies would you recommend to encourage people to speak out in this synod?
3. How can the gap between the clergy and the faithful be bridged in a synodal process?

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8. Pope Francis, “Pope: Future rests on education toward mutual respect” (November 4, 2021). <https://bit.ly/3tkUKVJ>



## Celebration

**Nontando Hadebe**

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*Journeying together is only possible if it is based on communal listening to the Word and the celebration of the Eucharist.*

Celebrations are part of our lives. We have all been to different celebrations – weddings, birthdays, graduations, anniversaries, cultural events – and cherish memories of these shared experiences. One cannot celebrate alone. Celebrations are communal events at which people who know each other as family or friends, work colleagues, or group members gather for special occasions. Everyone participates freely in different ways: dancing, cooking, cleaning, singing, giving speeches, and so on. Thus, there are three aspects of celebration: preparation, participation, and presence.

Preparation includes various aspects: physical (clothes to wear, hairstyle, grooming), mental (anticipation, understanding the purpose and significance of the event), and social or communal (recognising the bonds of relationships that bind those attending the event).


Participation is being an active contributor to the event in ways that connect with others so the event will be transformed into a celebration where all are involved and no one is excluded.

Presence means being fully immersed in the event with one's whole being – body, mind, and spirit – in unity with others who

are present. In cultural events, for example, everyone is immersed and participates fully, and no one is left out. There is no fear in celebrations; everyone feels free to express himself or herself. Celebrations bring people together in a special way.



Celebrations are at the heart of our faith practices and beliefs as Catholics. These celebrations include Mass, Baptism, First Holy Communion, Confirmation, profession of vows for consecrated life, marriage, anniversaries, and the liturgical calendar of celebrations and feast days. The three aspects of celebration are also present: preparation, participation, and presence. As Laurenti Magesa explains in his essay, there is unity as all are members of the body of Christ. Just as the body is made up of



different parts with different roles yet united in one body, each one is different with distinct gifts and roles in service to others. Paul explained how each of us is different and yet connected with others: “For just as the body is one and has many members and all the members of the body though many are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptised into the one body – Jew, Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” (1 Cor 12:12–13). The relationship and status of each one is elaborated on in 1 Corinthians 12.

### **There Is No Inferiority or Inequality**

“Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot were to say, ‘because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,’ that would not make it any less part of the body” (1 Cor 12:14–15). There are groups that have experienced inferiority such as sexual minorities, women, and people with disabilities. Their voices and experiences are often not heard. However, without their voices and participation, the witness of the Church is incomplete.

### **There Is Diversity, Not Uniformity**

“If the whole body were an eye where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be?” (1 Cor 12:17) Uniformity excludes and is oppressive as it fails to acknowledge and celebrate diversity and difference.

### **Mutuality and Interdependence**

“The eye cannot say to the hand – ‘I have no need of you’ nor again the head to the feet ‘I have no need of you’” (1 Cor 12:21).



There is no one who is disposable, or unimportant, or not needed. All members have an important role to play; exclusion results in malfunctioning of the body.

### **What Affects One Person Affects Us All**

“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it” (1 Cor 12:26). For example, gender-based violence, vilification of sexual minorities, killing of persons with albinism, xenophobia, racism, and tribalism violate the body of Christ, affect all members, and require all to act justly: “If you see wrongdoing or evil and say nothing about it, you will become its victim.” (African proverb).

This brief description of the communal nature of celebration in and outside the Church provides the background for the theme of celebration in the process of synodality. Celebration is one of the ten thematic themes. It is described as “journeying together” and “is only possible if it is based on communal listening to the Word and the celebration of the Eucharist” (Preparatory Document, 30 (iv)). We journey together through preparation, participation, and presence. Preparing for and celebrating the Eucharist is not limited to Sunday mornings but is the daily practice of living out our faith in our families, workplaces, and communities in ways that bring the light of Christ into our everyday lives and interactions with the world around us.

*\*Preparing for and celebrating the Eucharist is not limited to Sunday mornings but is the daily practice of living out our faith in our families, workplaces, and communities\**






All life is sacred as it provides opportunities for encounters with Christ in the daily circumstances of our lives and contexts in which we live. This includes listening to the voices of those on the margins of society so that Christ is encountered through their joys and sorrows.

There are opportunities during the week to reach out to fellow parishioners to strengthen the bonds of love and oneness so that the Mass becomes truly communal, not a meeting of strangers. The bonds cultivated during the week among parishioners and in relationship with the world around us become the source of unity at Mass and solidarity in the mission to serve and include marginalised communities.

This is how to prepare for Mass, which translates into a celebration where journeying together produces spiritual growth, unity, and service to each other and the world. From preparation, participation, and presence, journeying together becomes a reality experienced in the celebration of the Eucharist; it transforms the community into a family of God united in its diversity and joined in a shared mission of evangelisation and justice.

The theme of celebration calls us to cease being a gathering of strangers but to be truly communal in expressing the unity that exists as members of the body of Christ – diverse, equal, and connected in bonds of love and shared vision of service to one another and the world. This means ensuring that all voices are heard and safe spaces are created to enable this to happen.

In sum, the theme of celebration calls us to prepare, participate,



and be present in our liturgical celebrations so that we can truly journey together with no one excluded or marginalised so that all voices are equally heard and together we can fulfil the three goals of the synod – communion, participation, and mission.

The following questions will guide reflections on the theme of celebration as we search for ways of encountering one another as a synodal Church in preparation, participation, and presence, where we listen to one another and become companions journeying together as the body of Christ. A synodal Church discerns how prayer and liturgical celebration inspire and empower the community's active participation in our communal mission.

### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. How do prayer and liturgical celebration inspire and direct our journeying together?
2. How do we genuinely listen to one another and create spaces where all feel safe to speak and share their experiences without fear?
3. How do we promote the active participation of all the faithful in the Eucharist and other sacraments of the Church?



# Sharing Responsibility for Our Common Mission

**Nora K. Nonterah and David Kaulemu**

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*Synodality is at the service of the Church's mission,  
in which all her members are called to participate.*

## **Introduction**

Pope Francis has invited the Church on a journey leading to the sixteenth Synod of Bishops on synodality. This is historic. The process will renew our encounter with Christ. It will allow us to experience the love of Christ when we meet in dialogue, prayer, discerning, and listening to each other. It means journeying together in ways that will enrich our experience of a common life of faith, participation, and mission. It is aimed at creating space, time, and energy to renew our ability to speak frankly to each other. We will find new ways of organising ourselves as the Church that can more effectively share the love of Christ with the world. All members of the Church are encouraged to rediscover and recommit to the responsibilities of our common mission of transforming the world for salvation.

## **Our Common Mission**

The mission of the Church comes from Christ as a responsibility to spread the Gospel to all nations and peoples. By virtue of their baptism, all the faithful are called to spread the Gospel and share the love of Christ, which brings the fullness of life to the Church, to humanity, and to the rest of creation.



## **Shared Responsibility**

The Church is being invited to imitate God's love of communion, mutual listening, and reconciled diversity. Pope Francis is calling on all the People of God to listen in a new way to the Holy Spirit, who inspires our mission.

All the baptised have a shared responsibility to create space, time, and conditions for everyone to genuinely participate. All are encouraged to express themselves especially those who for various reasons feel marginalised, discriminated against, devalued, ignored, neglected, or abused. We are to recognise the richness and the many gifts and powers the Spirit has given us for the benefit of the human family and especially the youth as Anne Béatrice Faye points out in her essay.

The Church is still facing many challenges in the way its members collaborate to fulfil its mission. Many members, especially the lay faithful who participate in the structures of the Church, feel frustrated and not listened to as they often remain on the fringes. These people include pastoral workers at parish and diocesan levels and many women and young people. They all need and desire new and creative forms of pastoral care and support.

## **Prospects for Our Shared Responsibilities**

The purpose of the synodal process is to prepare ourselves, our communities, and our church structures for the communion and mission that God is calling us to. We are to renew our commitment to the mission of the Church. This renewal is greatly needed especially at this time of many global challenges



including the COVID-19 pandemic, growing global economic inequalities, environmental degradation, and climate change. We are all being invited to listen to the Holy Spirit, who helps us read the signs of the times and fulfil the Church's mission of helping the human family build a close union with God.

The call to journey together as the People of God and to be witnesses of God's love in the world bestows on all the people who have been baptised the following co-responsibilities.



***To Acknowledge the Invitation to All the Baptised to be Witnesses of God's Love on Earth***

To always be aware and remind each other of our origins, history, and traditions as children of God and how the Holy Spirit has and continues to guide us to be witnesses of God's love on earth in words and deeds and how we relate.

***To Examine and Restructure the Church in God's Love***

To work toward reconciling the form, structure, and style of the Church with the Spirit of God's love. This will allow the Church's ways of doing things, times, schedules, language, and structures to be suitable for the effective evangelisation of the world.

The Church should not focus merely on self-preservation. We will need to examine how responsibility and power are exercised in the Church. We will have to adjust our structures and relationships so that we abandon the prejudices and distorted practices not rooted in the Gospel.

*\*We need to examine how responsibility and power are exercised in the Church... adjust our structures and relationships so that we abandon prejudices and distorted practices\**

***To Equip the Laity with Knowledge and Skills for Full Participation and Collaboration in the Mission of the Church***

To become more cognizant of and pragmatic about equipping the laity with the right knowledge, skills, and resources. This will allow the body of Christ to share a common vision and to walk and work together.



***To Collaborate in Love and Respect***

To sincerely encourage, cultivate, recognise, and appreciate the many rich contributions from all members at all levels of the Church and to celebrate all the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

***To Be Open and Welcoming to All Children of God***

To actively encourage, prepare, and support our brothers and sisters committed to the common good, love, and service in the Church and society. To actively promote activities, movements, and programmes on social justice, human rights, scientific research, education, health, politics, and care for the environment.

To listen with open hearts and minds to regenerate relationships among members of different Christian communities, local and global religious traditions, popular movements, civil society, and other social groups. To seek to listen and to collaborate on how God is moving all these groups to build a better world.

***To Listen to the Holy Spirit and to Each Other***

To break out of our routine to stop and listen to the Holy Spirit in adoration and prayer. To listen to our brothers and sisters and their hopes and worries to understand the crises of faith around the world, which point to the need for renewed pastoral life.

We need to create spaces to listen to those who have been hurt in the Church in various ways and to those who have left the Church. We need to strengthen the Church's ability to better



accompany individuals and communities with better understanding of their hurt and suffering. This will require unmasking many of our false certainties so that we can cultivate hope and faith in the goodness and love of God.

### **How to Journey Together Now and Beyond**

As we journey together in this synodal process and beyond, we are invited to form leading teams that reflect the richness of the gifts of the Spirit. We are encouraged to overcome the scourge of clericalism and the virus of self-sufficiency and leave behind prejudices and stereotypes about one another.

Synodality is our time to recognise, learn, and practice interdependence as the people of God. This journey calls on pastors to listen attentively and with love to the faithful entrusted by Christ to their care. It calls upon the laity to freely express their views with honesty and respect.

### **Conclusion**

Synodality is a period of renewal and revival of our shared responsibility in the mission of the Church as the people of God. We, the clergy and laity, young and old, women and men, are all children of one God. Our shared responsibility for our common mission demands from all of us collaboration, listening culture, humility, conversation, interrelatedness, mercy, charity, and above all, listening to the Holy Spirit.





## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What hinders the baptised and especially the lay faithful from being fully active and taking much greater responsibility in the mission?
2. What more could the Church do to accompany its members who serve society in various ways, for example, in social and political involvement, scientific research, education, promoting social justice, protecting human rights, caring for the environment, etc.?
3. What areas of mission are we neglecting, and how could the Church address this neglect?



# Reverential Dialogue: Building Ecclesial Synodality from Marriage and Family Life

**Nicholaus Segeja M'hela**


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*Dialogue is a path of perseverance that also includes silences and sufferings, but which is capable of gathering the experience of persons and peoples.*

Unlike previous synods, the Sixteenth Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of the Bishops with the theme “For a synodal Church: communion, participation, and mission” is unique. It allows longer periods of consultation in every diocese and on the continental level and emphasises listening to all. In an African context, such practice is embraced in the process of reverential dialogue (*shikome*) like palaver, especially in marriage relationships, or *jamaa*, which goes beyond the nuclear family.

Vatican II elevated reverential dialogue to be a way of walking together toward integral development. Pope John Paul II taught us that the fostering of authentic and mature communion between persons in the family was marked by dialogue and love among other cardinal values.

Consultation and listening embraced in reverential dialogue enable us to address global challenges where humanity appears increasingly shaken by discord and fragmentation. Through reverential dialogue, the Church and humanity can work together to build our common home (*Laudato si' 13*). The Church needs to address, for example, the reality of clericalism and various types of abuse in relation to power and authority, economics, conscience, and sexual relations in some places.




One can also consider aspects of relativism, indifferentism, negative ethnicity, racial, caste, and other forms of social stratification that impact the meaning of synodality.

\*Consultation and listening embraced in reverential dialogue enable us to address global challenges where humanity appears increasingly shaken by discord and fragmentation\*

Vatican II initiated processes of reverential dialogue in different ways based on insights relating to our understanding of who God is and how God has entered a relationship with humanity and the Church through history. God created human beings in God's own image and likeness through the Word (Gen 1:26–27). Indeed, the world and all things too were created through God's words (Gen 1; Jn 1:1–3) suggesting the reality of reverential dialogue. It is also by way of the Word that God communicated to the people of Israel in history all through to the time of Jesus Christ (Heb 1:1–2; *Dei verbum* 2). The Church comes into being as a result of the incarnation and the Paschal mysteries through which all are drawn into a unity in the relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (*Unitatis redintegratio* 2; *Ecclesiam suam* 73; cf. 71–72). To use Pope Francis's words, one can say that we are called to be a Church in reverential dialogue because the triune God has entered the same with us (*Evangelii gaudium* 238–58).

Since Vatican II, successive popes have actively called the People of God to be a Church in reverential dialogue with other Christian communities, world religions, and the socioeconomic and cultural world in which we live. Pope Francis has identified



three key areas of dialogue (*Evangelii gaudium* 238). He points to dialogue with states and political institutions at the service of peace and the common good. He also links it with other believers who are not part of the Catholic Church, and science and culture.

In society today, families are places of nurturing but also places of pain, violence, and abuse especially for women and children. Nevertheless, marriage and family life still exhibit and remain a source of hope and encouragement. The accompaniment of families therefore is needed.

The Church family in Africa has celebrated two assemblies of synods that among other things have made reference to marriage and family life as a basis for reverential dialogue in the Church and society. This is so when we speak about the Christian family as a domestic church constituting a specific revelation and realisation of ecclesial communion (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2204). In this context, reverential dialogue in the Church and society saves the Church family in Africa from unnecessary and at times exaggerated emphasis on its institutional and hierarchical aspects.

Christian marriage and family life highlight the understanding of the Church family as a body of individuals, as members brought together by being born anew through the sacrament of baptism. As such, members of the Christian family are consecrated to be a spiritual house and become witnesses in the world by drawing all people to the journey or ecclesial synodality toward perfection (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 784–86). Subsequently, Christian marriage and family life become icons



and efficacious signs of the invisible grace instituted by Christ in which divine life continues to be dispensed to all. Reverential dialogue is exercised for integral development and provides a means for addressing issues of violence and abuse, especially in relation to children and women, divorce, separation, remarriage, and wounded families.

In the context of the theology of the local church, one can look




at the parish as a community of families working through Small Christian Communities. Thus, one can think of the importance of a catechesis based on reverential dialogue as a means of fostering and promoting marriage and family life. This highlights the synodal nature of the Church family as a communion that is not limited to structures or buildings. It is the baptismal commitment and vocation to engage in reverential dialogue that makes Christians belong to the Church family and society (*Amoris laetitia 11*). Such catechesis, therefore, should also embrace other basic pastoral activities especially the spirituality of the faithful, liturgy, and sacramental life.

In addition to special catechesis to family members based on reverential dialogue, one can also rethink the role of the Church family today. Since amid the experience of today's crises, marriage and family life still model the one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church, it should also go beyond its physical confines. In fact, Christian families, just as the universal Church, are supposed to be at the service of humankind.

The experience of crises today, among other things, has substantially influenced integral, holistic development. This is why the concern and engagement of the Christian family should be an entry point and a reference for the Church family and especially in Africa to be involved in reverential dialogue to foster and promote ecclesial synodality.

Similarly, the Church needs to pay attention to good governance and the challenges and crises confronting families. By so doing, the Church will also reflect on and rearticulate its synodal role in evangelising the new worlds, namely, health care, information



technology, and education (*Africae munus* 106, 132–46). All these need to be realised in marriage and family life within the setup of the parish as a family of families operating through Small Christian Communities.

### Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What are the existing structures of reverential dialogue in the parish that can promote the accompaniment of families in the African context?
2. How best can reverential dialogue be fostered and promoted in favour of ecclesial synodality?
3. How can a parish, understood as a family of families through Small Christian Communities, foster reverential dialogue in the Church and society?



## Ecumenism and Synodality

Anthony Egan

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*The dialogue between Christians of different confessions, united by one Baptism, has a special place in the synodal journey.*

As we prepare for the Synod on Synodality, it is worth reflecting on its ecumenical dimension. The theme of ecumenism is peppered throughout the preparatory texts and most notably in the 2018 International Theological Commission's *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church* (hereafter ITC) but also referred to in the Preparatory Document (PD) and the Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality (VM). I shall attempt to analyse them through a series of theological proposals accompanied by a few questions for further reflection and discussion.

### **Proposition One: Ecumenism is an essential part of Catholic renewal.**

Ecumenism is the search for Christian unity through ongoing dialogue between churches (over teaching and practice) to heal the divisions between Christians. Vatican II (*Unitatis redintegratio*, 1964) called such divisions scandalous and needing healing. Although the process has been difficult, considerable steps have been made toward reunion. In *Ut unum sint* (1995), John Paul II insisted that the process should continue.

In recent years, a new approach to the process called receptive





ecumenism has encouraged the idea of receiving and celebrating the various spiritual gifts different Christian traditions can offer one another. Catholics have come to see the value of preaching and the Word through interactions with Protestants who know and love scripture as well as the beauty of joyous worship from Pentecostalism. Protestants can and have increasingly come to see the importance of the Eucharist or Mass in building Christian community. The preliminary texts for the synod welcome the ecumenical “journey involving the whole people of God,” a journey of conversion of heart “in order




to demolish the walls ... which has separated Christians” (ITC, n. 115). They state that the goal of ecumenism is “to discover, share and rejoice in the many riches that unite us as” (ibid.). These are gifts that are to be shared, a central theme of receptive ecumenism.

A similar thing happens in dialogue between Christians and non-Christian religions. The interfaith dialogue seeks not to convert each other but to understand and respect each other’s faith and discover points where persons of faith (and anyone of good will) can work together for the good of everyone.

**Proposition Two: Synodality is integral to Christian history, and one can learn much about it from other Christian churches.**

Synodality has happened from Jesus’s first disciples to the present as Magesa mentions in his essay. Such a process of prayerful decision making together happened in the early Church on local, regional, and international levels. It remains central to leadership in the Orthodox churches, which continue following “the tradition of the [Early Church] Fathers, particularly on the level of patriarchal [i.e., diocesan] and metropolitan [i.e., regional] Synods” (ITC, n. 31). In various forms (noted in ITC, n. 36), it is practiced in Anglican and Protestant churches.

The Anglican Church describes itself as run by synods and led by bishops. In some Anglican churches such as the Church of England, key decisions have to gain the majority support of all three houses (bishops, clergy, and laity) to be implemented.



Members of these houses have to be elected by their constituents.

Internationally, the Faith and Order (doctrine and worship) Commission of the World Council of Churches affirms that guided by the Spirit, the whole church is “synodal/conciliar, at all levels of [church] life” (ITC, n. 117). This does not mean that all churches approach synodality in the same way, nor should we assume that our forthcoming synod will have voting, democratic “houses” like the Anglicans or any other model. What it means is that we can and should talk with and draw on the experience not only of our common past but also on the experiences – good and bad – of fellow Christians for whom the process is more common. And we will be speaking of our experiences of faith with each other so we will see how what we are taught by the Church ties into how we live our faith.

**Proposition Three: Though the synodal process may seem strange to many of us, perhaps even sounding quite “Protestant,” given the way the Church is inviting everyone to participate (cf. VM, 2.1), even this is subject to certain limitations. This too has ecumenical implications.**

Significantly in the ITC text, there is an implication that our model of synodality has certain limitations (ITC, n. 117). The traditional Catholic understanding distinguishes between the general power (or charisma) of the *sensus fidei* (sense of the faithful) guided by the Holy Spirit and the specific knowledge, gifts, and skills of priests, bishops, and those who teach theology. Not everyone in the Church has the same knowledge of the faith though all should try to improve their knowledge of it.



We must also remember that some basic, common things such as the Creed cannot simply be changed though there might be space for new ways of looking at them. People sharing what they believe and how they live what they believe will help everyone learn more and deepen their faith.


When churches engage in ecumenical dialogue, church leaders and theologians often come to see that the same thing they all believe can be said differently and still be true or done in a new way, a way that makes our faith stronger.

But from the preparation documents (especially the PD and VM), we see that the synodality process will go beyond this kind of dialogue of experts, embracing too the *sensus fidei* of all Catholics. Hopefully, we will also listen to the *sensus fidei* of other ordinary Christians too.

It is worth noting here that ecumenism is possibly the strongest among ordinary people; Catholics and non-Catholics share workplaces and friendships and are very often parts of the same family. This experience will hopefully be shared at the synod whether by lay Catholics or even non-Catholic guests. At least, one hopes we will hear what it's like for some families splitting up to go to different churches on Sunday mornings.

**Final Proposition: Though not widely discussed in the preliminary documents, ecumenism is in some ways a picture of what the synod seeks for the Church.**

Just as ecumenism is walking and working and talking together to find what Christians have in common, in the walking and



working and talking (particularly over problems we share such as poverty and injustice), we come together more than we think. In the past, synodality is familiar practice in non-Catholic churches like the Anglican Church. We have learnt and are still learning from this.

*\*...ecumenism is walking and working and talking together to find what Christians have in common... particularly over problems we share such as poverty and injustice\**

If the synod's goal of giving everyone a voice and reaching out even to ex-Catholics is to be achieved fully, it is even a kind of ecumenism with ourselves. We should embrace the practice and wisdom of receptive ecumenism to speak to each other as Catholics about matters facing us as Catholics and to seek reconciliation in a Church that is, whether we like it or not, often very divided within itself. We should not expect quick and easy solutions; ecumenical dialogue has taught us that agreement is often slow and difficult. But the spirit of openness, of receiving and enjoying the gifts and insights of each other, may help us as Catholics to better walk, work and talk together.

### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. Where and how have you grown in faith from an encounter with Christians outside the Catholic Church?
2. How might our non-Catholic brothers' and sisters' experience of synodality in their own churches help us engage in it ourselves?
3. How might dialogue between sectors of the Church – clergy and laity, experts and nonexperts – be helped using the principle of receptive ecumenism?



## Leadership, Inclusion, and Participation

**Veronica J. Rop**

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*A synodal Church is a participatory and co-responsible Church.*

When opening the Synod on Synodality, Pope Francis noted that “by walking together, and together reflecting on the journey made, the Church will be able to learn from what it will experience which processes can help it to live communion, to achieve participation and to open itself to mission.” For the Church in Africa, where most people are used to walking together either to the marketplace, pasture, or farm or simply on a journey, the term *synodality* evokes vivid experiences. It is in walking together that relationships are built and strengthened. Strangers are discovered to be a long-distant relatives and family members. Those who get tired along the way are encouraged, supported, and guided to continue the journey.

With the above background, co-responsibility as a way of leadership in synodality means leading with others to go far and achieve much. It is listening carefully and respectfully to the experiences and ideas of each person or group, regardless of their age, gender, education, socioeconomic status, tribe, or position in the Church.

Synodal leadership ensures that participation in discernment and decision-making processes is not left to a few since the Spirit is the one leading us all. Therefore, the spirit of inclusion,



which ensures the active participation of the marginalised, women, youth, and people with various challenges and their families is integral to synodality.

Numerous examples from the scriptures have shown that leadership, participation, and inclusion go hand in hand and keep changing even as people listen, discern, and follow the direction of the Spirit. One such example is Moses leading the people of Israel from Egypt, the land of slavery, to Canaan, the Promised Land. Moses led God's people alongside his brother Aaron and his sister Miriam (cf. Num 12:15–16; Josh 8:30–35). Others who led with Moses were the judges (cf. Ex 18:25–26), the priests or Levites (cf. Num 1:50–51) and the elders (cf. Num 11:16–17, 24–30). From the start, Moses ensured that women (Miriam), children, and even foreigners (cf. Josh 8:33–35) were part of his leadership team. What made Moses a successful leader was his ability to lead with others by carefully listening to and incorporating their experiences and ideas in his leadership.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, will always remain the ideal model of synodality. She embraced co-responsibility by accepting to be the mother of our Saviour and part of her son's ministry, i.e., at his birth, ministry, death, and even after his resurrection (cf. Lk 1:38, 45, 8:21, 11:28; Acts 1:13–14). This means that inviting women to take active part in synodality is not something foreign. Women have always played a crucial role in God's salvific plan. They still bring their unique gifts, talents, and perspectives that the Church needs.

*\*...inviting women to take active part in synodality is not something foreign. Women have always played a crucial role in God's salvific plan\**

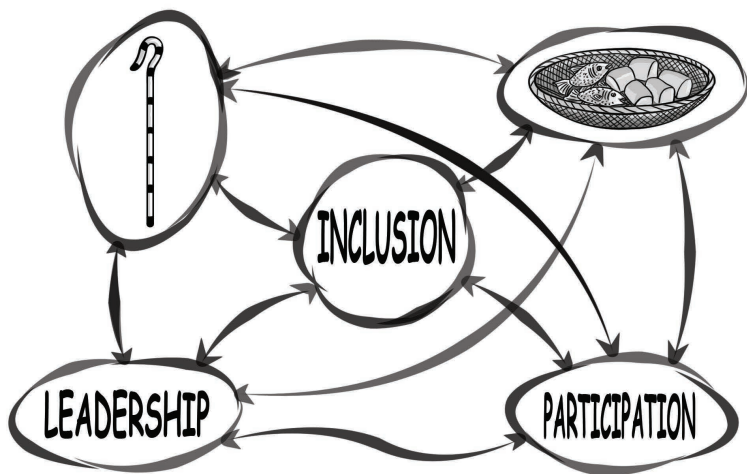


In his incarnation, life, works, teachings, passion, death, and resurrection, Jesus revealed to us what leadership, participation, and inclusion entail. He showed God’s love for the oppressed and those marginalised by communities, society, and religion by touching lepers, eating with sinners, allowing prostitutes to touch him, and engaging with women (cf. Jn 4:27). A demonstration of this leadership is in the encounter between Jesus and the Samaritan woman. Jesus as a leader par excellence did away with societal and religious customs to honour the dignity of the Samaritan woman and included her in his ministry (Jn 4:1–42).

Synodality then is an opportunity for those active in the Church to seek the excluded and marginalised and listen to them, without judging, to hear what the Spirit is saying and use their experiences and ideas to strengthen the body of Christ. Synodality is an occasion to restore people to the Church by listening to their stories and being open to how, what, and where the Spirit is leading the Church to.


Jesus incorporated his disciples in his ministry of proclaiming the good news of the reign of God. He invited his disciples to participate in the feeding of the 5,000 people. Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, is presented as participating by identifying a boy in the crowd: “There’s a little boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish.” As was his custom, Jesus gave the disciples the opportunity to do the work themselves while he encouraged them. Moreover, the presence of the little boy brings to attention the challenge of inclusion and how what might be considered of little importance might be the game changer or key in a synodal process. Every person, idea, and perspective matters.





Employing various ethical means is crucial to hearing what the Spirit is saying to the Church. Using all forms of media, especially social media, to share synodal proceedings as well as to enable engagement from a wider and diverse audience will be enriching. This requires going beyond prejudices, stereotypes, and positions of power to listening and giving every person a chance to join the walk again and feel included. We all have a moral obligation as the family of God to listen to the many Christians who may be polygamous, divorced, single parents, former priests and religious, and those who have a different sexual orientation, to fully participate in the Church.

Thus, discernment and prayer – listening to one another and adhering to the teaching and the spirit of Jesus active in the Church – is important. Inclusion plays a crucial role here, and



Jesus's example is key. The relationship between co-responsible leadership and participation is clearly brought out in Jesus's ministry of inclusion, where he incorporated sinners into his ministry such as the woman who anointed him with perfumed oil (Lk 7:37–47) and the woman caught in adultery (Jn 8:3–11). Mary Magdalene is identified as being among the women who accompanied and ministered to Jesus (Lk 8:2–3). Again, Jesus called Matthew or Levi, a tax collector who was considered a sinner by virtue of his profession. On account of his calling, many other tax collectors and sinners found a Saviour in the person of Jesus (Mt 9:9–13; Mk 2:13–17; Lk 5:27–32).

In fact many of the periphery of society such as the lepers (Lk 5:13-16), the deaf (Mk 7:31-37), the blind man (Lk 18:35-42; Mt 20:29-34), the sick man lowered through the roof by friends (Lk 5:17-39), and even the non-jewish woman whose daughter was healed by Jesus (Mt 15:21-28) all found places in Jesus's ministry.

Synodality is a *kairos* moment to remind ourselves that as the baptised, we are all called in our shared leadership, prophetic, and priestly roles to actively get involved in making the reign of God a reality. Synodality is a time to allow the Spirit to breathe new life into our lived experiences just as the Spirit did during the life of Jesus and in the early Christian community to promote teamwork and co-responsibility of all the faithful.



## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How do we shed our cultural and religious biases that might hinder co-responsible leadership, participation, and inclusion at various levels of the Church?
2. What concrete steps can we take to ensure that synodality is fully African and fully Christian?
3. How do we ensure that the voices of women, youth, and other marginalised persons are heard and their suggestions are integrated into the Synod on Synodality?

## Discerning and Deciding

**Noluthando Honono**

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*In a synodal style, decisions are made through discernment based on a consensus that flows from the common obedience to the Spirit.*



Human existence entails the continued capacity to make decisions in view of growth and progress. Decision making is an




exercise that we undertake daily but often with limited consideration of the value it plays in our lives and how it shapes our habits.

We often make life-altering choices on the spur of the moment because at face value they seem rather insignificant relative to the grand scheme of things. The rush of daily life, the materialistic nature of a mostly capitalistic world, and the pressures of existing in it have made the art of decision making superficial and driven by thoughts of acquisition and consumption. Against this backdrop, discernment becomes pivotal to effective decision making.

Discernment is the process of giving conscious attention to our thoughts and feelings in relation to particular choices we are making. To make good decisions, we must consider all information made available to us and process it in a way that is factual and considerate of our feelings. This delicate balance between facts and feelings requires the use of spiritual exercises to guide the process of discernment. This is even more important during this synod, which takes a form somewhat different from what the Catholic Church has made the norm over centuries.

This synod is unique because all the faithful are called to engage in the synodal process in three complementary ways – communion, participation, and mission. Synodality encourages a real involvement on the part of each and all. This reflection seeks to explore the importance of discernment to decision making in a synodal church. I will consider the following concepts:

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1. The correlation between the nature of the Church and the synodal process
  2. Discernment as a means of renewing the Church
  3. The role of the laity in discerning and deciding in the synodal process

## **The Correlation between the Nature of the Church and the Synodal Process**

The form, style, and mission of a synodal church rely on the reality of all having something to learn from one another. It is rooted in the ability to listen with intent and to engage with no malice. The process of discernment is not a mechanical exercise of gathering data for debates or meetings. As Leonida Katunge and several other contributors demonstrate in their essays, it entails listening to one another, our faith traditions, signs of the times, and the Holy Spirit in an active quest for the will of God.

The Church by definition is a fellowship of the People of God and the sacrament of salvation established as the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit. This definition emphasises the communal nature of the Church, whose essence is rooted in the people who make up the body that is the Church.

The emphasis on people means there is no exclusion of anybody from the mission of service in the Church. All its members are endowed with a dignity and a significance that match that of the next, be they clergy or laity. In this context, an inclusive exercise of discerning and deciding is integral to the form, style, and mission of the Church. Discernment and decision making in common are essential dimensions of a synodal Church.



There are several implications to this process of discerning and deciding in common. It calls for a shared desire to listen to the Holy Spirit, the abandonment of hierarchies, and a recognition of the worth and contribution of each member of the Church. Authentic discernment and inclusive decision making allow the Spirit to breathe new life into the traditions, beliefs, and practices of the Church.

*\*Authentic discernment and inclusive decision making allow the Spirit to breathe new life into the traditions, beliefs, and practices of the Church\**

### **Discernment as a Means of Renewing the Church**

The renewal of the Church is a matter of importance not only to its members but also to people who do not share or who disagree with the beliefs of the Church. Oftentimes, those in this latter group are easily condemned by the former.

Synodality calls for a different approach that discerns beyond the rigid rules and laws that have an exclusionary effect on people who, for one or another reason, cannot abide by them. It calls for an approach that imitates the way of life of Jesus, who dined with tax collectors, sinners, and outcasts. It is an openness of heart to embrace differences and celebrate diversity in a way that ultimately calls forth the People of God as one family.

It is thus imperative that in building the vision of a renewed church, the necessary steps are taken to be inclusive of believers, civil society, and other denominations and faith



traditions as Anthony Egan demonstrates in his essay. The act of openly engaging beyond what have been the acceptable ecclesial boundaries will enable the Church to broaden its perspective and discover new ways of being the sacrament of salvation in a religiously and culturally diverse world.

Pope Francis has reminded us of the need to create a different Church rather than a new Church. The pope further urged all to invoke the Holy Spirit and listen with even greater intent. This listening requires putting the Holy Spirit at the fore and journeying together in seeking to hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church of Christ.

Pope Francis stresses that without the Holy Spirit, there is no synod. The success of the synod and the renewal of the Church rely on listening to the Holy Spirit. This fits the description of true discernment, as set out by Pope Francis, as a condition for the success of the synod, as well as the much-anticipated renewal of the Church.

### **The Role of the Laity in Discerning and Deciding in the Synodal Process**

Synodality leads the faithful toward God as disciples as Philippe Tine indicates in his essay. It requires the direct engagement of all stakeholders at local, regional, continental, and universal levels. It means facilitating those engagements without being intrusive and welcoming all contributions with no prejudice. It further requires forming lay people in the spiritual exercise of discernment so that they can attain a level of spiritual maturity that will empower them to become actively and meaningfully engaged in fulfilling the mission of the Church.





Spirituality should be at the fore at the local level so that we can effectively guide the process of synodality by rooting it in the ability of people to discern and participate in decision making from a perspective that is neither superficial nor rigid. The synodal process encourages a deeper level of participation in the mission of the Church as the communion of the faithful.

Pope Francis reminds us that for this to happen, we need the life-giving breath of the Spirit, who sets us free from every form of self-absorption, revives what is moribund, loosens shackles, and spreads joy. This is a call to embrace communion and seek to understand mission in a way that enables all the baptised to participate in the life of the Church.

Discernment as an essential dimension of decision making facilitates the emergence and growth of a synodal Church, under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, who leads the People of God to consensus, co-responsibility, and harmony.

### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. What is the value of individual discernment in the synodal process?
2. How can lay people best contribute to the process of synodality?
3. What is the value of synodality to the renewal of the Church?



## Forming Ourselves in Synodality

**Philippe Abraham Birane Tine**

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*In order to “journey together,” we need to let ourselves be educated by the Spirit to a truly synodal mentality entering with courage and freedom of heart into a conversion process that is indispensable for the “continual reformation of which [the Church] always has need, in so far as she is a human institution.”*


The Synod of Bishops (2021–2023) that Pope Francis has convened represents a unique opportunity for the Catholic Church to reflect on the notion of synodality. Three words reflect the dynamism of this synod – *communion, participation, and mission*. They make it clear what is at stake and what the challenges are for the Church to become more dynamic, more lively, and more missionary.

The synod wants us not just to live or be together but rather to walk together. This dynamism, which adopts the pedagogy of motion, is a challenge that requires active formation of all and of each person. I am going to propose three main requirements for a programme to form oneself in synodality.

### **1. What Are the Attitudes Needed to Form Oneself in Synodality?**

#### *To Long for Synodality*

Whoever has a strong desire for something will ordinarily do what it takes to get it. It is therefore important to become aware




that we desire something we are missing. Formation for synodality therefore requires an individual as well as a communitarian desire. This desire should be felt as a call from Christ, who came to gather the People of God scattered all over the world. The desire to be formed in synodality should be experienced as another beatitude: “Happy are those who desire to walk together.” The challenge is to constantly find ways to keep this desire burning in us.

### ***To Live as Disciples***

A disciple (*discipulus*, student) has some distinctive qualities: he or she must be humble, listen actively, be docile, and persevere. We have to learn again how to walk as did the twelve disciples with Christ, who with patience and ingenuity prepared them for their mission. During these three years, the disciples never walked alone; usually, they were together or in small groups. The Master never sent them out on their own but in pairs (Lk 10) so that they could learn how to walk together in the same direction, with the same rhythm, and supporting each other when they were tired. This is a phase of communion, participation, and mission.

*\*We have to learn again how to walk as did the twelve disciples with Christ, who with patience and ingenuity prepared them for their mission\**

How can we draw inspiration from this example to give Christians a better formation particularly when they are in charge of things? Such an approach will make it possible to prepare a new communitarian exodus that will consolidate our



walking together toward our promised land. Walking together is a critical synodal experience as Josée Ngalula and Wilhelmina Tunu mention in their essay.

Humble disciples are not afraid of saying, “Lord, teach me to pray” (Lk 11:1), teach me to love, to welcome and to listen to the other, to walk with my brothers and sisters. This request should be personal before being communitarian. The answer of the Master calls us to be receptive because, “the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and make you remember all that I have taught you” (Jn 14:26). To form oneself in synodality therefore becomes a spiritual journey requiring total and sincere readiness on the part of the disciple.

## **2. What Are the Tools to Be Used to Form Oneself in Synodality?**

When forming ourselves in synodality, we ought to remember what is needed to take proper care of the needs of Christians.

### ***The Essential Role of God’s Word***

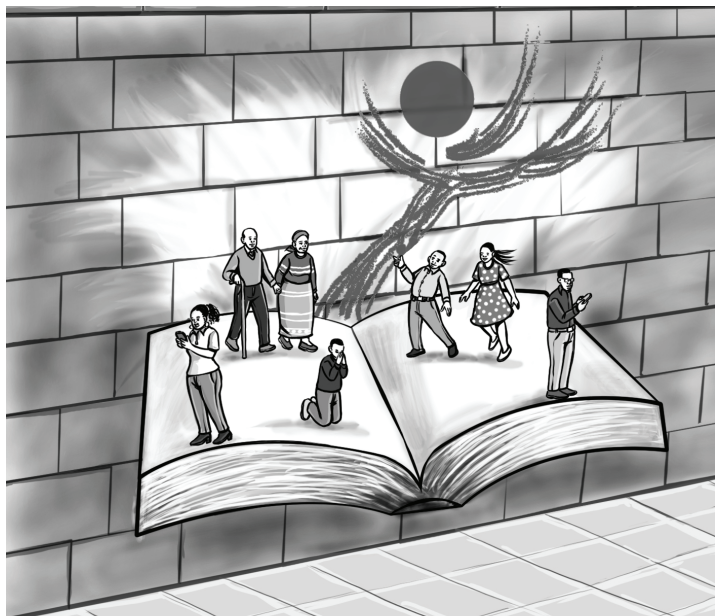
God wants to dialogue with human beings. When we read the scriptures, we show our readiness to welcome God’s teaching. The post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Verbum domini* by Pope Benedict XVI helps us grasp the centrality, the universality and the irreplaceable value of the Word of God in the life of the Church and of the world.

It is therefore necessary to learn, if not relearn, how to read and celebrate the word of God individually and in community to

allow it to give shape to our lives. The Dogmatic Constitution *Dei verbum* 25 says it clearly, that the Christian faithful:

... should gladly put themselves in touch with the sacred text itself, whether it be through the liturgy, rich in the divine word, or through devotional reading, or through instructions suitable for the purpose and other aids which, in our time, with approval and active support of the shepherds of the Church, are commendably spread everywhere.

The purpose of God's Word is to enlighten and build communion. Forming ourselves in synodality is inspired by God's Word.





## ***The Practice of the Sacraments***

In the synodal process, it is necessary to promote the practice of the sacraments while proposing a new continuous catechetical approach. This shall help people to rediscover the meaning of the sacraments and how they conform us to Christ and unite us with him. The sacraments make us brothers and sisters in Christ, and in so doing, they dispose us to walk together. All the sacraments, each in its own way, helps strengthen our steps and improve our walking together.

### **3. Where Is This Formation to Take Place? The Settings for Synodal Formation**

It is important to recall the settings needed for formation in synodality. Here, I mention those that have a direct impact on the process of transformation.

#### ***The Family***

As several contributors point out, the family, as the domestic Church, is the privileged setting where parents give their children the basics of faith. Parents who take care of awakening faith in their children's minds soon admire their children's wondrous spiritual perception.

By praying together, the family opens itself to others and strengthens the union and communion in Christ. Parents should make sure that their children first receive the sacraments and later continue to benefit from them. In this, the holy family of Nazareth can be considered an example.



## ***Small Christian Communities and Parishes***

They continue the formation given in the family by offering a setting in which fellowship, communion, and solidarity are put into practice (Acts 4:32ff.). To learn how to walk together on this path, all members should take care to:

- Regularly celebrate the Word of God. (To achieve this, it would be good to encourage the creation of groups in which meditative scriptural reading is practised).
- Rediscover how central the Eucharist is in the life of the Church.
- Fruitfully participate in community life.

## ***New Areas in Which to Grow in Togetherness***

In the present context, where family life is in crisis and young people no longer go to church, action should be taken in:

- Schools and other educational institutions,
- The streets and areas where people meet,
- Other areas where people share and are not afraid of being judged by others, and
- The use of social media like how Bishop Robert Barron in the United States uses it effectively.

## **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. What are the best ways to make formation accessible to and beneficial for all?
2. What strategies can we use to improve the way the faithful are listened to and heard?
3. Would it be possible to consider the creation of mission schools?



## Inculturation as the Path to a Synodal Church

**Rodrigue Naortangar**

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*The proclamation of the Gospel is not addressed only to an enlightened or chosen few. Jesus's interlocutor is the "people" of ordinary life, the "everyone" of the human condition, whom he puts directly in contact with God's gift and the call to salvation.*

By convening a Synod on Synodality, Pope Francis is making it an important theme in the life of the Church. He wants a Church that goes out rather than a Church that cares only for its own security. The purpose of a Synod on Synodality is in line with this vision; the pope says that this is what God wants for the Church of the third millennium.

The synodal way, that is the walking together, is the common journey that is the objective of the synodal process. Such a process is not new; it is being rediscovered. Africa was part of the synodal process of the Church in the first three centuries of our era; centuries that bear witness to the theological and ecclesial dynamism around Alexandria, the cultural and religious centre of the Greek language, and around Carthage, which was Latin speaking. The Muslim invasion of northern Africa, the various schisms following ecumenical councils, and the slave trade and colonisation interrupted Africa's relationship with the other centres of Christianity and made the continent's voice less audible.

It took time, namely, until the Second Vatican Council, before the people of Africa finally regained their place in the common



march in the Catholic Church, with people of other continents, having accepted the wounds of the past. Didn't Karl Rahner say that the discourse of the magisterium began to open up to cultural diversity after Vatican II? Didn't Pope John Paul II, on behalf of the Church in the context of the Jubilee Year 2000, ask Africa and Africans for forgiveness because of the harmful role Christians and Christian institutions played during the slave trade? These two events alone have been important motives for a reconciliation of Africa with its painful past and thus with the whole Church. They prepared Africa to walk together with the Church and to become the land of the Gospel and the new homeland of Christ.





Consider the current ecclesial experiences of Ivory Coast, my land of mission, which has celebrated 125 years of evangelisation and therefore is among the first lands to be reached by the last evangelisation wave in Africa. Consider also the state of evangelisation in Chad, my land of origin, which will celebrate its 100 years of evangelisation in 2029 and therefore can be considered as a Church resulting from the Second Vatican Council. It seems to me that three types of experiences, without being exhaustive, constitute avenues of synodality that have to be explored: the positive role of the laity, inculturation of faith, and the involvement of the Church in socio-political life.

The positive role of the laity in African churches should be more valued. The laity is much more than a mere auxiliary of the clergy. Tertullian pleaded for equal dignity and equivalent duties between the clergy and the laity. This idea has been valued anew by Vatican II. Revalorising the role of the laity in the mission and life of the Church is an important element of the synodal turn taken by Vatican II. The reception of this idea and the council itself are not yet complete.

In Chad, the role of catechists and the laity in the evangelisation and animation of communities without priests and even in leadership at the village or neighbourhood level is well known. They have a good pastoral experience and a deep knowledge of God's people. Generally, this is lacking in priests because of their multiple trips to celebrate the sacraments in vast parish territories.

In Ivory Coast, the role of fraternities and *nouvelles communautés* (new communities mostly of charismatic




spirituality) in the dynamism of Ivorian Christianity since the 1990s is obvious. Their members live among the people and know by experience, the joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties of their contemporaries, much more than does the clergy who can only sympathise with them because of their priestly formation that sets them apart.

The success of these fraternities and communities in the local and universal Church are vibrant testimonies in favour of the importance of their role. Therefore, what could be better than a greater appreciation of the role of the laity in the struggle against clericalism that synodality is meant to fight? What could be better than the promotion of a greater complementarity between the secular and the ordained ministry?

The inculturation of faith is the fruit of the first African synod, the culmination of forty years of African theological practice. Already in the past, the lack of inculturation has caused the decline of the once flourishing Church in North Africa. This is why walking together must be done in full awareness of our cultural differences, that is, without the assimilation or integration of certain cultures into others but by valuing what is beautiful and true in each culture, for the good of the Church's mission of evangelisation.

*\*...walking together must be done in full awareness of our cultural differences... valuing what is beautiful and true in each culture, for the good of the Church's mission of evangelisation\**



African cultures are in this sense an asset since in most of them, cultural differences are not rejected but celebrated, not fought but considered an enrichment in favour of the whole society, and generally considered a real trove of diversity beyond any syncretism or eclecticism.

It also responds to a fundamental requirement of the process of globalisation, which the Church is familiar with. The core concern is not to export a social or ecclesial model from one context to another, but to allow what the Word of God arouses in each context to emerge while maintaining an unavoidable interconnection between churches, which is essential to the unity of the Church. The missionaries in Chad understood this well since in the wake of Vatican II, they let the musical genius of cultural traditions be expressed in the liturgy.

Theologians from West and East Africa have also understood this well since starting from the anthropological reality of the family, so dear to many African cultures, they committed themselves with enthusiasm to consider the Church in Africa as a Church family of God, that is, as an assembly of members strongly bound by bonds of faith, baptism, and fraternity. Their bonds go beyond biological kinship and ethnic affinity; they are brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of the same Father.


The Church's involvement in socio-political life is a result of its walk together with other members of society. The Second Synod for Africa identified the themes of reconciliation, justice, and peace as key concerns for the Church in African societies. The suffering in African societies caused by slavery, colonialism, and neo-colonialist exploitation makes Africa the victim that the



good Samaritan helps. Walking with these African societies means to be committed to listen to the cry of the African person and to understand the cruelty of their suffering in order to help them. Such a listening is not restricted to Christians; it is open to all components of the multicultural, multireligious, and multiethnic African societies. Thus, synodality means a sincere commitment to a more just society in line with the vision of the kingdom of peace and justice, together with others in an intercultural, interreligious, and interethnic dialogue.

### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. What lessons can we learn from the history of Christianity in Africa about the progress of the Church in Africa?
2. What steps can we take to further promote the role and mission of the laity in the Church in Africa to ensure the growth of synodality in the local churches?
3. In what ways can we deepen the themes of inculturation, reconciliation, justice, and peace to ensure the substantial contribution of the churches in Africa to the process of synodality?



## **Journeying Together in Service and Harmony: The African Jamaa as a Model for a Synodal Church**

**Laurenti Magesa**

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*The spirituality of journeying together is called to become an educational principle for the formation of the human person and of the Christian, of the families, and of the communities.*

According to Pope Francis, the purpose of the forthcoming Sixteenth General Assembly of Bishops in 2023 is to strengthen the salvific mission of the Church in the contemporary world through an integrated participation of all the faithful. Described as the Synod on Synodality – the habit of walking, travelling, or journeying together side by side as friends – it is the spirit of community living.

In African social structures, this disposition is assumed in any population constituting a family or *jamaa* in Kiswahili and must be constantly purified of any negative connotations along the way of life. It presumes social harmony, cooperation, and mutual assistance.

For the contemporary Church, these are also the requirements for synodality and are explained at some length in the synod's Preparatory Document and its official handbook or *Vademecum*. These documents are designed to explain the meaning, requirements, methods, and goal of this Synod on Synodality.

The three phases planned for the synod have the oneness and

practical togetherness of the Church as the objective. The first phase, between October 2021 and August 2022, aims to discern the level of Christian intimacy in the Church and foster it at the grassroots levels of the particular churches – the nation, the diocese, and the family. Attention about the same on the regional and continental levels will form the second phase of the discernment process, from September 2022 to March 2023. Finally, informed by the inspiration of God’s Spirit through these two phases, bishops, the clergy, and the lay faithful from all over the world will in October 2023 chart a definitive path for the universal Church to follow on the endeavour. The goal is to nurture the life force and practices of the Church as genuine family, jamaa.






Several theological and pastoral themes emerge from this ultimately spiritual programme. Above all, what is intended by the synod as a whole is unity in thought, word, and deed of all the faithful who as a body and beyond the purpose of jamaa – which is primarily social self-preservation – are on the road toward the objective of their salvation and the redemption of humankind. The deliverance of humankind from everlasting alienation from God’s face founds the mission of Jesus Christ, which is as well the purpose and goal of the Church on earth. It calls on Christians united in spirit to advance toward realising the reign of God.

Just as is the case in families, there have always been challenges in the way of unity, harmony, and service in the Church arising from human frailty, sinfulness, and lack of trust in God and neighbour. The tests and trials differ depending on the particularities of time and place. Nevertheless, the purpose of the journey itself – human salvation – remains constant and acts as a beacon for everyone on the journey, the people who believe in Jesus Christ as God’s messenger to humanity.

Synodality has taken different modalities in the history of the Church. An early, formal expression of it was the Council or Synod of Jerusalem, held around 50 CE. It marks the starting moment of institutional synodality. Convened by the earliest disciples, it addressed the divisive question of whether to be accepted into membership of the Church, non-Jewish peoples had also to undergo the Jewish custom of circumcision. As is well known, the answer was an unambiguous no. Genuine faith in the risen Jesus as Lord was the only necessary requirement for Christian discipleship.





To address numerous other questions against the unity of the Church that have surfaced since then, the Jerusalem assembly has implicitly provided a model of walking together in faith to address them. The ensuing general and particular councils and synods have essentially held a similar spirit and outlook. Theologically and pastorally, in terms of faith and morals, synodality remains part and parcel of the inner constitution as well as outward expression of the life of the Church, establishing an indispensable dimension of its spiritual and social anatomy.

Speaking of anatomy, two scriptural passages illustrate the theological basis of the synodality in the Church and indicate how it should be realised concretely. The Pauline analogy of the structure and life of the Church and the functioning of the human body (1 Cor 12) stands as one of the best expressions of the truth: “Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with [the Church of] Christ. For we were all baptised ... so as to form one body.” As Nontando Hadebe points out in her essay, all members of the Church ought to live and work together in unity as one jamaa. The absence of any part negatively affects the whole body.

*\*...all members of the Church ought to live and work together in unity as one jamaa. The absence of any part negatively affects the whole body\**

For the Church to survive as a viable organism, harmony of purpose is indispensable despite or even because of necessary diversity. Distinctions of status and functions should not be allowed to be divisive; they are valuable and should be made to



contribute to the health of the whole body. Synodality is never a question of uniformity of status or similarity of ability of members. It concerns their inner mutuality shown through attendance to the needs of each member as well as cooperation with and respect for one another. The process is ongoing and has its ups and downs, but the point is never to lose sight of the goal of the process that is Jesus himself.

The other scriptural citation (Phil 2:6–7) is pastoral. It offers the life of Jesus as the exemplar for all believers on the journey to emulate: “[Jesus], though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant.” Synodality adopts this model of sincere, courageous, and affective service very much aware of its possible unpleasant consequences. Christian humility is often accompanied by suffering. Any resultant pain is transformative and creates redemptive human relationships. Service is the centre of the Christian calling.

Unity and service as foundations of the African jamaa are similar to the pillars of synodality in the Church, namely, communion, participation, and mission. The Synod on Synodality aims to nurture inclusiveness in the Church by facilitating respectful encounters among all the faithful and avoiding over-deference to any one group. If we are all created in the image and likeness of God, no one is unimportant in and on the journey to salvation; no one should be sidelined or in any way left behind.



## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Jesus “walked with humanity” and became human “in everything except sin” (Heb 4:15). What lessons can we draw from Jesus’s way of walking with us to enrich our journeying together as a synodal Church?
2. “If you want to go fast, walk alone; if you want to go far, walk together.” How does this African saying deepen our understanding and practice of synodality?
3. What might be the biggest obstacles or threats to synodality in our local Christian communities (parishes and dioceses), and how can we overcome them?



# African Youth in the Synodal Process: In Between Giftedness, Paradox, and the Future

**Anne Béatrice Faye**

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*To whom does our particular Church need to listen to?  
How are the laity, especially young people and women,  
listened to?*

## **Introduction**

When you think of young people and of synodality in the Church, what words or images come to mind? What values will overcome the disorders that are so frequently exposed today? This essay brings together and reformulates the numerous and valuable answers given to these two questions.

Indeed, youth evokes numerous debates in society and in the Church particularly since it has led to various outbursts in the world such as the Arab Spring, the protests in Europe, marches against the excesses of some political and religious leaders, and the synod of the youth. In the context of Africa, the demographic weight of the youth reveals the importance of its needs in education, employment, integration into the process of development of the continent, spiritual accompaniment, and discernment.

We are simply going to listen to the voices of the youth as Pope Francis asks us to do: “To “go out” into the world of young people requires a willingness to spend time with them, to listen to the story of their lives and to be attentive to their joys, hopes,

sadness and anxieties; all in an effort to share them.”<sup>9</sup> Synodality invites us to this inverted pyramid to better appreciate the giftedness of the youth.




### **The Words and Images of the Youth in the Context of Africa**

Today in Africa, the youth constitute the majority of the population. They are a gift and a treasure from God for which all

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<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, Synod on Young People 2018 Preparatory Document, “Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment” no. III, 1. Walking with Young People (*Seeing*).




of Africa is grateful. They should be loved, appreciated, and respected. “A society that cuts itself off from its youth severs its lifeline; it is condemned to bleed to death” (Kofi Annan). Youth are the strength and hope of a society. In many countries, they face numerous problems and challenges that make them vulnerable due to inadequate personal formation and education, unemployment, political exploitation, and so on. These situations make the youth feel frustration and rejection.

The issues of the youth and their future are raised over and over, even though the frontiers of research on the youth have become very diversified. Concretely, youth constitute a complex and diverse reality because various factors determine it, including rapid social changes, urban or rural contexts, language, ethnicity, socio-economic status, level of instruction, and so on.

### **Synodality – A New Era for the Church, the Family of God in Africa**

Synodality is an opportunity and an important moment for the youth to debate with courage, without constraints or fear, to bring out the plain truth, and above all, to reflect on the way they relate to faith, to the Church and how the latter can accompany them. Synodality provides the youth with an opportunity to have their voices heard, to share what they feel in their innermost selves, and to express their ideas about life, the Church, their doubts, their fears, and their proposals.

*\*Synodality provides the youth with an opportunity to have their voices heard... to express their ideas about life, the Church, their doubts, their fears, and their proposals\**




A new era is beginning in the Church for all youth. The synod is a worldwide event; African youth must participate, and I am sure they will. To this end, the dioceses must make it easy for them to take part in the various encounters and walk with them, together with other youth on the continent, to become aware of what they think and experience.

We all repeatedly say that the youth are the future of Africa. Yes! But the youth do not only represent their future; they also want to be part of the present. Is this an impossible mission? In this walking together, the Church can restore confidence between young people and adults, reform the education system and empower them.

### **On the Synodal Path, Restore Confidence between Youth and Adults**

People often mention the generation gap. It certainly is real and important, but it is more the result than the cause of the lack of transmission of convictions and values. It could make the youth into nothing more than an object; their identity reduced to their deficiencies, fragility, lack of civil virtues, vulnerability, instability, insecurity, and many other problems. The youth are not only moved by slogans but they yearn for more justice, dialogue, solidarity, reconciliation, and peace.

A young activist once stated, “We refuse to be treated as a vulnerable group because such a qualification denies our strength and creativity and promotes irrelevant policies.” Many young people today need guidance, people who will accompany them, welcome them, listen to them without judgement, enlighten and orient them.



We have to rely on their faith, that is, their unshakeable confidence in themselves, in their religious and political convictions, their strong patriotism, the steadfastness of their choices and goals, and their proven perseverance and courage. We should promote creativity and appreciate whatever competence they have acquired, allowing them to start something and create wealth.

Young people need to be acknowledged, respected and valued. They should be encouraged and given their space. We should revise our programming and invent things that have not been tried before. Their education and empowerment are important. They need a compass to give better direction to their lives. In concrete terms, what is the youth expecting from the Church today? What can the Church offer them?

### **Christ and His Gospel of Life: A Compass for the Youth in the Church**

Young people are a gift from God. “Whatever their possible ambiguities, [they] have a profound longing for those genuine values which find their fullness in Christ. Is not Christ the secret of true freedom and profound joy of heart? Is not Christ the supreme friend and the teacher of all genuine friendship? If Christ is presented to young people as he really is, they experience him as an answer that is convincing and they can accept his message, even when it is demanding and bears the mark of the Cross.”<sup>10</sup>

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10. Pope Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Africae munus*, “You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world” (Mt 5:13-14), no. 60.





The youth need a Church that guides and supports them, particularly during hard times, when they feel tested or bereft. The Church should restore peace and security and give guidance to help them grow in their faith. They especially need a Church that accompanies them individually, gives them support, helps them rediscover themselves, and gives them direction.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, I will mention two compass points for the youth.

The first is Jesus. To be able to discern what should be done and to find the strength and the freedom needed to resist all kinds of pressure, I encourage young people to put Jesus Christ at the centre of their lives through prayer and also through the study of the scriptures, receiving the sacraments, spiritual discernment, learning the social doctrines of the Church, and by active and enthusiastic participation in Church events and initiatives.

The second compass point is Pope Francis. The pope tells us that young people should be understood in their dynamic context. Youth represent something prophetic. The prophet Joel reminds us, “Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams, your young men will see visions” (Jl 2:28). Youth reveals itself as a promise of life, of hope, of a future, and also of a vision.



## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. In the context of your local Church, how does the giftedness of young people manifest itself?
2. In the midst of so many difficulties and temptations, what is your local Church offering young people?
3. How can the Church proclaim Jesus Christ to young people in a credible way?




## Contributors

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