

A Vision of Synodality Rooted in an African Ecclesial Context
International Colloquium on Synodality
Nairobi, Kenya
March 2022

Introduction

They were all together in one place. (Acts 2:1)

A working group of theologians, professionals, and academics (laity, religious women, and clergy) from various institutions in Africa gathered in Nairobi, from 9 to 11 March 2022, for a three-day synodal encounter. The group was convened by the African Synodality Initiative (ASI) in partnership with the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences of Eastern Africa (AMECEA) and the Symposium of the Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) and supported by the Jesuit Conference of Africa and Madagascar (JCAM) and the Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops. The purpose of the gathering was to provide a platform for Catholics on the African continent to discuss, discern, and propose a vision of synodality from an African perspective.

1. Synodality: A Call to Listen

Each one heard their own language being spoken. (Acts 2:6)

Pope Francis has invited the people of God to embark on a journey of listening and discerning our way of being Church: “Our journey of listening to one another can be an authentic experience of discerning the voice of the Holy Spirit. Authentic discernment is made possible where there is time for deep reflection and a spirit of mutual trust, common faith, and a shared purpose” (*Vademecum*, no. 1.1).

Listening and discerning are instrumental to our being co-responsible for our shared mission. Listening is the *method* in order to hear the cry of God’s people, discernment is the *goal* as to engage “both the heart and head” to find the will of God, and participation is the *path* through which involvement of all the baptised is made concrete (Preparatory Document). Our journeying together also invites us to an openness to diverse perspectives and to pay attention to those we may think are unimportant (Preparatory Document).

2. Synodal Experiences in Africa Today

When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment. (Acts 2:6)

From the beginning of this synodal process, different efforts and initiatives have occurred in various churches of Africa. These include working groups from the parish to the diocesan level, discussions, colloquia, webinars, and numerous questionnaires being circulated. Bishops, clergy, religious sisters and brothers, laity, and theologians have been part of the process. Many voices—male and female, young and old—have been and continue to be heard; many views have been expressed.

In listening, however, we have come to recognise some challenges. Some, including clergy, hesitate to embrace change for fear of the unknown and how that will affect the position of the Church and its leaders. Some laity has expressed fear and reluctance, questioning whether their opinions will be taken seriously. In some places, the insufficient creation of awareness of synodality and what it stands for affects participation as does a distorted conception of synodal engagement and its overarching depths.

3. A Proposed Vision of the African Church as Synodal Church

*All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues
as the Spirit enabled them. (Acts 2:4)*

In a spirit of dialogue and discernment, convinced that the Holy Spirit has guided our individual reflections and communal discussions, the participants of this meeting offer this vision for the Church moving forward. We see the entire synodality process as a journey of reform rooted in reading the signs of the times, the Word of God, the Word in Church and in the world, a word that springs forth in the African church from creation, from our lives and culture, from the idea of Church as family of God.

This word is best understood by open and honest conversation, by genuinely valuing in word and deed the different charisms of all the people of God. This especially applies to the laity marginalised and patronised by excessive clericalism. The latter is a symptom of a deeper malaise—a class system in the Church and a lack of trust that needs to be overcome at every level.

Pope Francis has courageously articulated on many occasions what we (including those of us who are clergy) have known in our hearts: clericalism and the indifference, even refusal, to listen to the *sensus fidei* of the people of God is a sin.

Synodality, which springs from life and recognises and celebrates the charisms of all Christians, is not simply a corrective to clericalism; it is the way in which we can truly be Church. It breaks down rigidity and creates a culture of listening to the voice of the Spirit that forms us all for the mission of the Church: integral evangelisation of peoples and cultures, here particularly our diverse African cultures, as well as new worlds to be evangelised—education, health, technology, politics, economy, and the Church itself. This is the work of clergy and laity, theologians and bishops working and walking together as members of the family of God. We are all learners and teachers; laity and clergy evangelise one another as we evangelise the world.

Integral to this evangelisation is living in solidarity with all creation, which includes our common home (Mother Earth), engaging in interreligious and ecumenical encounters, and the promotion, as previous synods and Church tradition have proclaimed, of family, justice, reconciliation, and peace.

In particular, our contribution to the Synod on Synodality must include our African cultural values (expressed in terms like Ubuntu, Ujamaa, Baraza, Palaver, etc.), reverential dialogue that is inspired by the family spirit and related to nature, our ancestors, and the desired future for Africa.

We have noted already that the synodal process on which we are embarked has already generated fear and even perhaps resistance in some circles. The fear is often rooted in the view that change may destroy the Church. But this is counterproductive: institutional self-preservation, while a natural concern, can be detrimental where so much of what we have is dysfunctional or simply does not contribute as well as it could to the Church's mission.

It is our hope that synodality will not end with the synod. We believe that synodality is an ongoing, long-term pedagogy and way of life of the Church. By building openness and systems of trust, by changing a mentality of rigidity and building a culture of listening that is open to suggestions and critiques, we believe that we can truly become a Spirit-filled Church, a living witness to Christ at the service of the marginalised and excluded in Africa and the world, and a place that welcomes all God's people.

Conclusion

*They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship,
to the breaking of bread and to prayer. (Acts 2:42)*

The story of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–47) deliberately frames this vision of synodality. It is a story of disciples still gathered, closed fearfully in on themselves, who were driven by the Holy Spirit out of themselves, out of their fears, into the market place, into history. We the Church are the result of this Spirit-filled act of boldness. Today, we are called to a renewal of this Pentecost event. Synodality is not we believe a new catchphrase but an invitation to thoroughly reform and renew the Church to better serve God's people and respond to the multiple threats to life that characterise their daily experiences and our common home.

We implore the Holy Spirit to accompany this synodal journey, and we deeply believe that the Church of the third millennium should embrace the path of synodality. We commit ourselves to serve as facilitators in educating and promoting awareness of and building a culture of synodality. We also resolve to avail ourselves for the next phases of the Synod on Synodality and beyond.

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