

ASIAN
HORIZONS
Vol. 14, No. 1, March 2020
Pages: 167-180

SYNODALITY AS THE KERNEL OF POPE FRANCIS' ECCLESIOLOGY

Implications for Missionary Dynamism for the Church in Africa

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Abstract

Synodality has gained renewed currency during the Pontificate of Pope Francis. In keeping with the programme of *aggiornamento* of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Francis has continued an insightful exploration of the Trinitarian and *communio* ecclesiology that are at the heart of a synodal Church. Synodality is the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the People of God, which reveals and gives substance to her being as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelizing mission. In this essay, I will attempt to show that Synodality is at the heart of Pope Francis' Ecclesiology. This essay will also be an effort in contextual theology, especially in proposing for the Church in Africa some ecclesiological models that can help her re-launch her missionary dynamism in the third millennium.

Keywords: Collegiality; Communion Ecclesiology; Ecclesiology; Missionary Dynamism; Participatory Church; Synodality; Trinitarian Ecclesiology

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Introduction

The topic of synodality has been an important feature during the Pontificate of Pope Francis. Little wonder, he has announced that the 2022 Synod of Bishops in Rome will be devoted to the theme: “For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission.”¹ In October 2015, on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Synod of Bishops by St Paul VI, Pope Francis said,

From the beginning of my ministry as Bishop of Rome, I sought to enhance the Synod, which is one of the most precious legacies of the Second Vatican Council... synodality is very close to my heart: it is a style, a walking together; an ecclesial journey that has a soul that is the Holy Spirit... it is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church in the third millennium.²

Some ecclesiologists have remarked that Pope Francis has initiated a new phase in the reception of Vatican II’s vision of the Church in his agenda of a synodal church. In keeping with the programme of *aggiornamento* of Vatican II, Pope Francis has continued an insightful exploration of the Trinitarian and *communio* ecclesiology contained in the dogmatic Constitution, *Lumen Gentium* which sets out a vision of the nature and mission of the Church as communion, with the theological presuppositions of a suitable re-launch of synodality.³

Fifty years after Vatican II, Pope Francis invites the entire Church to journey together on the path of synodality. Shaped by his South American experience, which is rooted in a theology of the people of God, he is advancing in fresh ways the Church’s mission of mercy and work for justice in response to the cry of the poor and the cry of the earth.⁴ The image of a participatory and co-responsible church is taking the centre stage in his Petrine ministry as seen in the numerous synods of Bishops he has convoked since the beginning of his Pontificate. The attempt in this essay is to reflect on Pope Francis’ Synodal ecclesiology with the view of proposing ecclesiological models for dynamic missionary evangelization for the Church in Africa.

¹ <https://cruxnow.com/vatican/2020/03/pope-chooses-synodality-as-theme-for-2022-synod/> Accessed 10 March 2020.

² Francis, Address at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015. Hence cited: Francis, “Address – 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops.”

³ International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 2 March 2018, 40, http://www.vatican.va/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en/ Accessed 10 March 2020.

⁴ Bradford E. Hinze, “The Ecclesiology of Pope Francis and the Future of the Church in Africa,” *Journal of Global Catholicism* 2, 1 (December 2017) 8.

1. Understanding Synodality in the Light of Communion and Collegiality

“Synod” is an ancient and venerable word in the Tradition of the Church, whose meaning draws on the deepest themes of Revelation. Composed of a preposition *συν* (with) and the noun *ὁδός* (path), it indicates the path along which the People of God walk together. Equally, it refers to the Lord Jesus, who presents Himself as “the way, the truth and the life” (Jn 14:6), and to the fact that Christians, His followers, were originally called “followers of the Way” (cf. Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14:22).⁵ In ecclesiastical Greek, it expresses how the disciples of Jesus were called together as an assembly and in some cases it is a synonym for the ecclesial community.⁶ Saint John Chrysostom, for example, writes that the Church is a “name standing for ‘walking together’ (*σὺνοδος*).”⁷

From the first centuries, the word “synod” has been applied, with a specific meaning, to the ecclesial assemblies convoked on various levels (diocesan, provincial, regional, patriarchal or universal) to discern, by the light of the Word of God and listening to the Holy Spirit, the doctrinal, liturgical, canonical and pastoral questions that arise as time goes by.⁸ The Greek *σὺνοδος* is translated into Latin as *synodus* or *concilium*. Although the roots of “synod” and “council” are different, their meanings converge. In fact, “council” enriches the semantic content of “synod” by its reference to the Hebrew *קָהָל* (*qahal*), the assembly convoked by the Lord, and its translation into Greek as *ἐκκλησία*, which, in the New Testament, refers to the eschatological convocation of the People of God in Christ Jesus.⁹

In the theological, canonical and pastoral literature of recent decades, a neologism has appeared, the noun “synodality,” a correlate of the adjective “synodal,” with both of these deriving from the word “synod.” Thus people speak of synodality as a “constitutive dimension” of the Church or *tout court* of the “synodal Church.”¹⁰ This linguistic novelty is a sign of something new that has been

⁵International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 3.

⁶Cf. G. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968, 1334-1335.

⁷*Exp. In Psalm.*, 149, 1: PG 55,493; cf. Francis, “Address – 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops.”

⁸International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 4.

⁹International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 4.

¹⁰International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 5.

maturing in the ecclesial consciousness starting from the Magisterium of Vatican II, and from the lived experience of local Churches and the universal Church since the last Council until today.¹¹

Although synodality is not explicitly found as a term or as a concept in the teaching of Vatican II, it is fair to say that synodality is at the heart of the work of renewal the Council encouraged.

The ecclesiology of the People of God stresses the common dignity and mission of all the baptized in exercising the variety and ordered richness of their charisms, their vocations and their ministries. In this context the concept of communion expresses the profound substance of the mystery and mission of the Church, whose source and summit is the Eucharistic *synaxis*.¹² This is the *res* of the *Sacramentum Ecclesiae*: union with God the Trinity and unity between human persons, made real through the Holy Spirit in Christ Jesus.¹³

In this ecclesiological context, synodality is the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the People of God, which reveals and gives substance to her being as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelizing mission.

While the concept of synodality refers to the involvement and participation of the whole People of God in the life and mission of the Church, the concept of collegiality defines the theological significance and the form of: a) the exercise of the ministry of Bishops in the service of the local Church entrusted to the care of each of them, and b) of the communion between local Churches at the heart of the one universal Church of Christ, brought about by means of the hierarchical communion of the College of Bishops with the Bishop of Rome. Collegiality is thus the specific form in which ecclesial synodality is manifested and made real through the ministry of Bishops on the level of communion of the local Churches in a region, and on the level of communion of all the Churches in the universal

¹¹International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 5.

¹²Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion* (28 May 1992), 1, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_28051992_communionis-notio_en.html/ Accessed 10 March 2020.

¹³Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 21 November 1964, 1, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html/ Accessed 10 March 2020.

Church. An authentic manifestation of synodality naturally entails the exercise of the collegial ministry of the Bishops.¹⁴

2. *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Hermeneutic Key for Understanding Pope Francis' Ecclesiology

In his Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis makes a detailed presentation of his pastoral and missionary agenda for a synodal church. Rereading the document, published just eight months after Francis' election, it becomes clear just how much this exhortation provides a valuable key to understanding this pontificate. It is simply Pope Francis' guide for the Church's missionary life.

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis emphasizes that "the people of God is holy thanks to the anointing, which makes it infallible *in credendo*."¹⁵ This characteristic is shown in "the supernatural sense of the faith (*sensus fidei*) of the whole people of God, when 'from the bishops to the last of the faithful' it manifests a universal consensus in matters of faith and morals."¹⁶ He added that "all the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envisage a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients."¹⁷ The *sensus fidei* prevents a rigid separation between an *Ecclesia docens* and an *Ecclesia discens*, since the laity likewise has an instinctive ability to discern the new ways that the Lord is revealing to the Church.¹⁸

In a synodal Church, Pope Francis noted that, "it is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. In this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote a sound 'decentralization.'"¹⁹ He further stated:

¹⁴International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 7

¹⁵Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), 119, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html/Accessed 10 March 2020.

¹⁶Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 12.

¹⁷Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 120.

¹⁸Francis, "Address to the Leadership of the Episcopal Conferences of Latin America during the General Coordination Meeting," Rio de Janeiro, 28 July 2013, 5, 4, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/july/documents/papa-francesco_20130728_gmg-celam-rio.html/Accessed 10 March 2020.

¹⁹Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 16, 32.

I am persuaded that in a synodal Church, greater light can be shed on the exercise of the Petrine primacy. The Pope is not, by himself, above the Church; but within it as one of the baptized, and within the College of Bishops as a Bishop among Bishops, called at the same time – as Successor of Peter – to lead the Church of Rome which presides in charity over all the Churches.²⁰

Thus, Pope Francis makes clear that collegiality and synodality in the Church also entails a certain measure of withdrawal of the papacy from the role of primary and unique ‘maker’ of the Catholic tradition. There are other levels where some issues can and must be addressed.

While reaffirming the urgent need to think about “a conversion of the papacy,”²¹ Pope Francis wants spirit-filled evangelizers to take the gospel to the peripheries; he said:

An evangelizing community gets involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives; it bridges distances, it is willing to abase itself if necessary, and it embraces human life, touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others. Evangelizers thus take on the “smell of the sheep” and the sheep are willing to hear their voice. An evangelizing community is also supportive, standing by people at every step of the way, no matter how difficult or lengthy this may prove to be.²²

An inspiring and illuminating ecclesiology that has the qualities of synodality is further seen in this Apostolic Exhortation as the Holy Father remarked:

I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a church concerned with being at the center and which then ends being caught up in a web of obsession and procedures...²³

3. Pope Francis and Missionary Synodality of the Church

Missionary synodality is the involvement and participation of the whole People of God in the life and mission of the Church as a community of missionary disciples. In the wake of Vatican II, following in his predecessors’ footsteps, Pope Francis insists that synodality describes the shape of the Church that emerges from the Gospel of Jesus, which is called to become incarnate today in history, in creative fidelity to Tradition. In conformity with the teaching of *Lumen Gentium*, Pope Francis remarks in particular that synodality

²⁰Cf. Saint Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistula ad Romanos*, Proemium: PG 5, 686.

²¹Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 32.

²²Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24.

²³Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24.

“offers us the most appropriate framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself”²⁴ and that, based on the doctrine of the *sensus fidei fidelium*,²⁵ all members of the Church are agents of evangelization.²⁶ Consequently, making a synodal Church a reality is an indispensable precondition for a new missionary energy that will involve the entire People of God. Besides, synodality is at the heart of the ecumenical commitment of Christians: because it represents an invitation to walk together on the path towards full communion and because—when it is understood correctly—it offers a way of understanding and experiencing the Church where legitimate differences find room in the logic of a reciprocal exchange of gifts in the light of truth.

The International Theological Commission, in *Synodality in the life and mission of the Church*, illustrates the nature of synodality in these terms:

It is possible to go deeper into the theology of synodality on the basis of the doctrine of the *sensus fidei* of the People of God and the sacramental collegiality of the episcopate in hierarchical communion with the Bishop of Rome. This ecclesiological vision invites us to articulate synodal communion in terms of ‘all’, ‘some’ and ‘one’. On different levels and in different forms, as local Churches, regional groupings of local Churches and the universal Church, synodality involves the exercise of the *sensus fidei* of the *universitas fidelium* (all), the ministry of leadership of the College of Bishops, each one with his *presbyterium* (some), and the ministry of unity of the Bishop of Rome (one). The dynamic of synodality thus joins the communitarian aspect which includes the whole People of God, the collegial dimension that is part of the exercise of episcopal ministry, and the primatial ministry of the Bishop of Rome. This correlation promotes that *singularis conspiratio* between the faithful and their Pastors, which is an icon of the eternal *conspiratio* that is lived within the Trinity.²⁷

Pope Francis' commitment to this vision of synodality reflects his Jesuit training in the spirituality and “way of proceeding” of Ignatius of Loyola and his long-time experience of collaborating with the Latin American Bishops' Conference. When he commemorated the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops on October 17,

²⁴Francis, “Address – 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops.”

²⁵International Theological Commission, *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* (2014), 91, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html/ Accessed 10 March 2020.

²⁶Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 120.

²⁷International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 9, 64

2015, he chose to speak of synods in terms of “journeying together.”²⁸ All of the people of God should participate in evangelization and should not be viewed as passive recipients. Everyone participates in the listening and the teaching church, and “the flock... has an instinctive ability to discern new ways that the Lord is revealing to the Church.”²⁹

Pope Francis gives special attention to the role of listening and honest speaking in synods. On listening, he writes:

A synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realizes that listening ‘is more than simply hearing.’ It is 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’ (John 14:17), in order to know what he ‘says to the Churches’ (Rev 2:7).³⁰

In the words of Pope Francis: “In a synodal Church, the Synod of Bishops is only the most evident manifestation of a dynamism of communion which inspires all ecclesial decisions.”³¹ He differentiates three levels of synodality in the Church. At the first level, he identifies synodal structures in particular or local churches—diocesan synods, presbyteral councils, college of consultors, chapters of canons, and pastoral councils. Through these structures, leaders stay connected to the base, the people, and their daily problems, “even when they [these processes] prove wearisome. The second level is that of Ecclesiastical Provinces and Ecclesiastical Regions, Particular Councils and, in a special way, Conferences of Bishops... [which can foster] a sound ‘decentralization.’”³² And the third level is that of the universal church and the practice of the Synod of Bishops. Thus, at this level, “episcopal collegiality” and an “entirely synodal Church” manifest “the *collegialitas affectiva*, which can also become in certain circumstances ‘effective,’ joining the Bishops among themselves and with the Pope in solicitude for the People of God.”³³

²⁸Francis, “Address – 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops.”

²⁹Francis, “Address to the Leadership of the Episcopal Conferences of Latin America during the General Coordination Meeting.”

³⁰Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 171.

³¹Francis, “Address – 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops.”

³²Francis, “Address – 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops.”

³³This last mention of affective and effective collegiality, which implies a further clarification of the Pope’s position, references Pope John Paul II’s *Pastores Gregis*, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paulii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_20031016_pastores-gregis.html/ Accessed 10 March 2020.

4. Emerging Dynamic Ecclesiological Models from Francis' Synodality for the Church in Africa

The novelty of the synodal ecclesiology of Pope Francis has enormous implications for the Church in Africa. For dynamic missionary outreach in the continent of Africa, some ecclesiological models³⁴ can be proposed in the light of the foregoing discussions.

4.1. A Kenotic Church

A Church which must satisfy the practical and pastoral implication of synodality must adopt the image of a self-emptying and sacrificing mother, the pelican bird. A kenotic Church should be one troubled in conscience that so many people are living without the strength and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without pastoral care of ministers who should do so. The Pastors of the Church in Africa must (like Christ) come down from their royal thrones, put off their outer garments and wash the feet of their brothers and sisters no matter how filthy they are. Increasingly, there is the great danger for African Christianity to find the spirituality of the Good Samaritan discomfiting with preference to pharisaic Christianity. Like the priest and Levi on the Jerusalem-Jericho walk, we may be interested in the rituals of the synagogue, in ostentatious preoccupation for the liturgy, in sounding theologically correct but overlooking the dying man molested by robbers. Like Pope Francis our interest should not be much on a self-serving Church but a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.³⁵

4.2. A Listening Church

A synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realizes that listening "is more than simply hearing."³⁶ It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The Synod of Bishops is the point of convergence of this listening process conducted at every level of the Church's life. The Synodal process begins by listening to

³⁴ I have elsewhere made these ecclesiological proposals as *vademacum* for embarking on missionary evangelization in the Third Millennium especially in Africa. See Anyanwu U. S, "Ite Missa Est (Go Forth, The Mass Is Ended)," Valedictory Speech presented @ the 46th Convocation Ceremony of Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu, 20 March, 2017, <http://www.bigardenugu.org/ite-missa-est-go-forth-the-mass-is-ended.html>

³⁵ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 46.

³⁶ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 171.

the people of God, which “shares also in Christ’s prophetic office.”³⁷ The Synodal process then continues by listening to the pastors. Through the Synod Fathers, the bishops act as authentic guardians, interpreters and witnesses of the faith of the whole Church, which they need to discern carefully from the changing currents of public opinion. On the eve of Synod on Family, Pope Francis stated: “For the Synod Fathers we ask the Holy Spirit first of all for the gift of listening: to listen to God, so that with him we may hear the cry of his people; to listen to his people until we are in harmony with the will to which God calls us.”³⁸ The Synod process culminates in listening to the Bishop of Rome, who is called to speak as “pastor and teacher of all Christians,”³⁹ not on the basis of his personal convictions but as the supreme witness to the *fides totius Ecclesiae*, “the guarantor of the obedience and the conformity of the Church to the will of God, to the Gospel of Christ, and to the Tradition of the Church.”⁴⁰

The Church in Africa is called to adopt a relational manner that places emphasis on “listening, welcoming, dialogue and common discernment in a process that transforms the lives of those taking part.”⁴¹ Using the image of a rabbit with large ears, Elochukwu Uzukwu in his book, *A Listening Church*⁴² proposes a pastoral ministry with large ears and leadership of communities in the service of listening for the Church in Africa. To be true evangelical witnesses, we must attentively like the listening chief, listen to the flock entrusted to us, feed them and never lord it over them. A leadership which cultivates the ministry ‘with large ears’ makes it easier for all to listen, to hear, and to do what the Spirit is saying to the Churches and also obey the logic of service and solidarity. The Church in Africa should empathically listen to the disturbing cries of her sons and daughters burdened by injustices and oppression. More than ever the

³⁷Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 12.

³⁸Francis, “Address at the Prayer Vigil for the Synod on the Family,” 4 October 2014, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/october/documents/papa-francesco_20141004_incontro-per-la-famiglia.html, Accessed 10 March 2020.

³⁹First Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Pastor Aeternus* (18 July 1870), ch. IV: Denz. 3074. Cf. *Codex Iuris Canonici*, can. 749, § 1.

⁴⁰Francis, “Address to the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops,” 18 October 2014.

⁴¹Synod of Bishops, XV Ordinary General Assembly, “Young People, The Faith and Vocational Discernment”: *The Final Report of The Synod of Bishops to the Holy Father, Pope Francis*, Vatican City: 27 October 2018, n. 122. Hence cited as *Relatio Finalis*, 123.

⁴²Elochukwu E. Uzukwu, *A Listening Church, Autonomy and Communion in African Churches*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996, 127-130.

listening qualities of accessibility, love, and sensibility to the plight and concerns of the people are urgently needed by members of the family of God in Africa.

4.3. A Servant Church

In the heat of the tussle for leadership positions both in the church and society especially in Africa, the servant image of the church dominant in synodality is instructive. Pope Francis aptly noted that synodality is the appropriate key for understanding the exercise of hierarchical ministry in the Church. If we understand the Church as nothing other than the “journeying together” of God’s flock along the paths of history towards the encounter with Christ the Lord, then we understand too that, within the Church, no one can be “raised up” higher than others. On the contrary, in the Church, it is necessary that each person “lower” himself or herself, so as to serve our brothers and sisters along the way.⁴³

Jesus founded the Church by setting at her head the Apostolic College, in which the Apostle Peter is the “rock” (cf. Mt 16:18), the one who must confirm his brethren in the faith (cf. Lk 22:32). But in this Church, as in an inverted pyramid, the top is located beneath the base.⁴⁴ Consequently, those who exercise authority are called “ministers,” because, in the original meaning of the word, they are the least of all. It is in serving the people of God that each bishop becomes, for that portion of the flock entrusted to him, *vicarius Christi*,⁴⁵ the vicar of that Jesus who at the Last Supper bent down to wash the feet of the Apostles (cf. Jn 13:1-15). And in a similar perspective, the Successor of Peter is nothing else if not the *servus servorum Dei*.⁴⁶

⁴³Francis, “Address – 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops.”

⁴⁴Pope Francis used the expression “inverted pyramid” in his homily on Oct. 17, 2015 commemorating the 50th anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops. In that compact but weighty speech, the pope puts forward a vision of the church which he calls an “inverted pyramid,” with the People of God, the base, above what is normally perceived to be the “apex.” The clergy, bishops, cardinals, and even His Holiness the “servant of servants of God,” himself are all located beneath the People, playing the role of undergirding systems of support for the wider believing faithful, not franchise branch managers, or guardians and dispensers of oligarchical stockpiles of grace. The ministers (from “minus” meaning “less”) do not “lord their power” over the rest of the People, but rather serve them effectively and tirelessly. This is the mark of a truly synodal church, which can both teach and listen.

⁴⁵Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 27.

⁴⁶Francis, “Address to the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops,” 18 October 2014.

The Church in Africa must always recall that for the disciples of Jesus, yesterday, today and always, the only authority is the authority of service, the only power is the power of the cross. As the Master tells us: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave" (Mt 20:25-27). The experience of "walking together" as the People of God helps us to understand more and more deeply the sense of authority as service.

4.4. A Participatory and Co-responsible Church

A synodal Church is a Church of participation and co-responsibility.⁴⁷ In exercising synodality, the Church in Africa is called to give expression to the participation of all, according to each one's calling, with the authority conferred by Christ on the College of Bishops headed by the Pope. Participation is based on the fact that all the faithful are qualified and called to serve each other through the gifts they have all received from the Holy Spirit. The authority of Pastors is a specific gift of the Spirit of Christ the Head for the upbuilding of the entire Body, not a delegated and representative function of the people.⁴⁸

A characteristic feature of the synodal Church is the valuing of the charisms that the Spirit gives according to the vocation and role of each of her members, through a dynamic of co-responsibility. In order to initiate it, conversion of the heart becomes necessary, as well as a readiness for mutual listening, which builds an effective common mind. Motivated by this spirit, the Church in Africa can proceed towards a participatory and co-responsible Church, capable of valuing the wealth of the variety of which it is composed, gratefully receiving the contributions of the lay faithful too, including young people and women, female and male consecrated persons as well as groups, associations and movements. No one should be put aside or put themselves aside. This is the way to avoid both clericalism, which excludes many from decision-making processes, and the clericalization of the laity, which imprisons them instead of launching them towards missionary commitment in the world.⁴⁹ In the spirit of involvement, the active participation of the faithful, especially

⁴⁷International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 67.

⁴⁸International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 67.

⁴⁹*Relatio Finalis*, 123.

women and the young, should become effective and ordinary in places of co-responsibility in the particular Churches and in the organs of the National and Regional Episcopal Conferences in Africa.

4.5. A Transparent and Accountable Church

Synodality encourages transparency and accountability in the Church. Stan Chu Illo in his *Illuminative Ecclesiology* proposes for the Church in Africa this inspiring description of a transparent and accountable church: (1) a church that is an eyewitness to what is going on in the lives of the people in particular communities and in the lives of all of God's people in every part of the world; (2) a church that takes an interest in what is going on in the lives of people and in finding how people can be healed, saved, liberated, taught, and affirmed to appreciate that they are loved unconditionally by God and gifted by God to play a full part in the work of God in the world; (3) a church that by being present and participating in the life of people in a particular and personal way is able to be a mirror for shining the merciful and loving face of God to the people and for reflecting the faces of everyone to God; (4) a church that lives in such a way that the stories that come out of its communities are able to move all men and women who love God to learn and receive the message of the Gospel as good news because the church and its members have first lived and witnessed to it for themselves.⁵⁰

A transparent and accountable church in Africa is one that has an eye in bringing her members to sanctity of lives. The young especially are crying out for an authentic, radiant, transparent, joyful Church. Many of the young have left the Church because they have not found in it holiness, but rather mediocrity, presumption, division and corruption. Unfortunately, the world is outraged by the abuses of some people in the Church rather than being invigorated by the holiness of her members: hence the Church in her entirety must embrace a decisive, immediate and radical change of perspective. Many of the faithful are strongly conscious that the church cannot continue as before. They call the church to change her way of functioning, to be a more synodal church.

Conclusion

Pope Francis is currently teaching the Church that "to walk together is the *constitutive* way of the Church; the *figure* that enables us to interpret reality with the eyes and heart of God; the *condition* for

⁵⁰Stan Chu Ilo, *A Poor and Merciful Church, The Illuminative Ecclesiology of Pope Francis*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2018, 137-138.

following the Lord Jesus and being servants of life in this wounded time.”⁵¹ By his emphasis on a synodal church, Pope Francis has fundamentally and radically shifted the priorities and practices of the Catholic Church on such core issues as power and authority in the church with regard to service and discipleship, pastoral leadership, financial management of the resources of the church, and recognition of the diversity of gifts and talents in the whole of the people of God. Pope Francis has opened the doors to the voices of the marginalized in the church—women, the poor, homosexual persons, the so-called dissenters and rebels who were excluded in the past. Indeed, under Pope Francis, the biblical image of the church as the net of the Lord Jesus containing all kinds of fish has become true (*see* John 21:11). Francis is bringing about a new experience of Catholicism as a poor and merciful church.

⁵¹International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 120.