

## HUMAN DIGNITY: WHEN ETHICS AND SPIRITUALITY CONVERGE

**Deogratias M. Rwezaura, SJ<sup>♦</sup>**

*Hekima University College, Nairobi*

### **Abstract**

African Christian spirituality, understood as our experiential union with God, the world around us and our fellow human beings, cannot be separated from African Christian morality, understood as our active response to God's love for us. What we consistently do reflects who we are, and who we are influences what we consistently do. Human dignity must flourish when the marriage between ethics and spirituality has taken place. Divorce from these two essential aspects of being human (ethics and spirituality) leads to double life which in turn jeopardises human flourishing.

**Key Words:** Human Dignity, African Christian Spirituality, Ethics, Morality, *Imago Dei*

### **Introduction**

A platonic dualistic approach to life has influenced the western sense of reality for centuries. This duality became more pronounced because of the Enlightenment. Consequently, reality became increasingly perceived as sacred or profane, good or bad, black or white, spiritual or material, and divine or human. Dualism has also led to the separation of who we are from what we do. Hence, the marriage of spirituality and ethics has also fallen prey to this

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<sup>♦</sup> Deogratias M. Rwezaura, SJ is a Jesuit priest from Tanzania and a lecturer at Hekima University College in Nairobi - Kenya. He earned his doctorate in Sacred Theology from the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University, in California (USA). He has published several articles in renowned peer-reviewed journals, the latest of which appear in *Theological Studies* (September 2023) in commemoration of Martin Luther King Jr.'s I have a Dream Speech and in *Asian Horizons* (December 2023) on Protracted Internal Displacement as a Moral Challenge to African Renaissance. Email: deogratias.rwezaura@hekima.ac.ke

schizophrenic approach to life. While distinction may be legitimate, a healthy life calls for a holistic “both-and” approach. I share these reflections arising from my meditation and prayer, spiritual reading and academic research, as well as a critical appreciation of a journey that is long, arduous at times, and indirect but one that remains intent on reaching the goal of being united with God who in Jesus has made us his friends. I start by defining the terms, I then show how *dignitas infinita* dialogues with African Christian spiritual morality, privileging the place of community. Next, I discuss virtue ethics as informed by the *Imago Dei* in view of proposing an integral spirituality and morality whose goal is holiness (human dignity in its fullness). I use the morality and ethics as synonyms to bridge the dichotomy between theory and practice and thus mirror an African integral approach to life.<sup>1</sup>

### What is African Christian Spirituality?

African Christian spirituality is not primarily a way of speaking about God. It is an encounter with God. As an encounter with God, African Christian spirituality is best understood as a relationship between God and humanity. It is a relationship which embraces God who is always with us. As such, African Christian spirituality allows us to see God not as an object of our faith or a list of requirements to be fulfilled. But God, in this relationship, is perceived as a reality within us and around us constantly challenging and calling us to reach out to others in loving service.

This encounter between God and humanity presupposes what the Synod on Synodality has termed “a spiritual disposition” which “permeates the daily life of the Baptised as well as every aspect of the Church’s mission.”<sup>2</sup> Conversely, in this relationship we also recognize that we are with God open to contemplative listening to “what the Spirit is saying to the Churches (Rev.2:27),”<sup>3</sup> cultivating an attitude of silence and being open to “conversion of heart.”<sup>4</sup> Within the African context, this attentive listening is known as *palavar* which gathers people under the “tree” to discuss matters of shared importance until

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Samuel Weje Kunhiyop, *African Christian Ethics* (Nairobi: Hippo Books, 2008), 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> Francis, XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission* (Final Document), 26 October 2024, no. 43, [https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26\\_final-document/ENG---Documento-finale.pdf](https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG---Documento-finale.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Francis, *For a Synodal Church*, no. 45.

<sup>4</sup> Francis, *For a Synodal Church*, no. 43.

they agree. It is a practice that brings spiritual practices and moral decisions in talking terms.

In *What is not Sacred?: African Spirituality*, Laurenti Magesa articulates the merger between spirituality and ethics when he maintains that to think “that there is a ‘spiritual life’ distinct from any other kind of existence is foreign to the African mind and spirit. All reality is spiritual and has ethical implications...In the structure of existence, life is experienced in both dimensions. No conceptual or practical separation between them is morally permissible or ethically possible.”<sup>5</sup> In his *Christian Ethics in Africa*, Magesa makes reference to the Small Christian Communities (SCCs) in East Africa as a space where the Spirit works among the faithful when they gather to worship and act “as a social critic” of the governments’ *status quo*.<sup>6</sup> They do so by addressing the needs of the poor, the sick and the elderly among them. Other non-African authors think along the same line as Magesa’s on the role of spirituality in Christians’ lives.

Marcus Borg and John Shea, for instance, remind us of the God within and around us whose praises we sing and whom we worship through our spiritual practices.<sup>7</sup> Richard Gula also puts an emphasis on praise and gratitude for the God of life as our primary motive for spiritual practices.<sup>8</sup> Spiritual practices in their various forms: sacraments, meditation and contemplation on the word of God, and other forms of prayer enrich us with the awareness of the God who loves us and who is continually present in our lives. They mediate God’s presence and love to us enabling us to love God in return through love for one another.

Once we are aware of God’s abundant graces for us, we cannot but look for ways of sharing them with others. Good news impels us to share our life. The convergence between African Christian spirituality and ethics then becomes inevitable. God’s mediated presence enables us to do what God is doing in us. It is when moved by God’s love for

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<sup>5</sup> Laurenti Magesa, *What is not Sacred?: African Spirituality* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2013), 26.

<sup>6</sup> Laurent Magesa, *Christian Ethics in Africa* (Nairobi: Action Publishers, 2002), 139.

<sup>7</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a More Authentic Contemporary Faith*, (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1997), 32-54; John J. Shea, *Finding God Again* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005), 79-84.

<sup>8</sup> Richard M. Gula, *The Call to Holiness: Embracing a Fully Christian Life* (New York: Paulist Press, 2003), 147-184.

us that we reach out to others in joyful witness of what God has done to us through living our Christian virtues. The coming together of ethics and spirituality attunes us to the good life which we can then purposefully share with others. Again, to echo Magesa's words from an African perspective, "spirituality is more of an activity than a passive quality..."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, "it is a way of behaving or, rather, relating. It involves dynamic relationships between visible and invisible powers. Better yet, it entails the mutual exchanges of energies among all beings."<sup>10</sup> To put it in Jon Sobrino's words, "there is no *spiritual* life without actual, historical *life*. It is impossible to live *with spirit* unless that spirit *becomes flesh*."<sup>11</sup> It is in this sense that in linking Ignatian spirituality with social engagement, Sobrino asserts that seeking to live as Jesus did (discipleship) is the essence of God's will though it may be manifested differently by different people depending on their context.<sup>12</sup>

This understanding of God enables us to see ethics and spirituality with new eyes. In the light of our relationship with God, ethics becomes a response to God's invitation to us to become whole and holy. In this way morality becomes an expression of spirituality where the latter is understood, in Gustavo Gutierrez's words, as "a style of life that puts its seal on our way of accepting the gift of filiation (the basis of fellowship) to which [God] calls us."<sup>13</sup> The key to who we are and who we are to become is how we relate with God, with others and with the world around us. For relationships to become integral we cannot afford an individualistic approach to spirituality or ethics. We need an anthropology that is relational for we are naturally social. John S. Mbiti sums up African anthropology quite well: "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Magesa, *What is not Sacred?* 26.

<sup>10</sup> Magesa, *What is not Sacred?* 26.

<sup>11</sup> Jon Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation: Toward Political Holiness*, trans. Robert R. Barr (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1985), 4.

<sup>12</sup> Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads: A Latin American Approach*, trans. John Drury (London: SCM Press, 1978), 404.

<sup>13</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*, 20th Anniversary Edition, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 4.

<sup>14</sup> John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann Educational, 1990), 106.

### ***Dignitas Infinita* in African Christian Spiritual Morality**

What Mbiti's wise adage implies is that without others I cannot become fully human and fully alive. In St. Irenaeus's words to be fully human and alive is to embrace God's glory in its fullness. Here is where *Dignitas Infinita* becomes a conversation partner with the African spiritual and moral vision of human dignity. Like African spiritual morality that sees and values human life even before one is born until one joins the ancestral community, *Dignitas Infinita* reminds us that "every child possesses an intangible dignity that is clearly expressed – albeit in a unique and differentiated way – at every stage of his or her life: from the moment of conception, at birth, growing up as a boy or girl, and becoming an adult. Because of this unalienable dignity, the child has the right to have a fully human (and not artificially induced) origin and to receive the gift of a life that manifests both the dignity of the giver and that of the receiver."<sup>15</sup>

*Dignitas Infinita*, like African spiritual morality, defends human life from conception to life after death. However, the latter goes even further, like the psalmist, (Ps. 139: 13-18), to acknowledge life before conception, life in the mind of God. Being created in *imago Dei*, anchors life and gives human dignity respect that transcends biological givens. In its biological sense, human life begins when two people, male and female, come together in sexual union. Personality and maturing are influenced by the immediate family and the surrounding community. From infancy a child learns what it means to be inter-dependent and as a child grows up, he/she learns to cultivate inter-dependence through healthy and mature relationships. The "we" in the child's relationships affects him/her at a deeper level.

The greeting among the Shona in Zimbabwe captures what I mean here. When greeted, *Makasimba yere?* (Are you strong/well?) A Shona speaker responds, *Ndakasimba kana makasimbawo.* (I am strong/well, if you are strong/well). To be is to be related and to be well is to be in a harmonious relationship with God, other people and the rest of creation. For African Christians, it is to be in "union with Christ through love."<sup>16</sup> This love must be relational; it cannot be an abstraction. There must be a lover and a beloved, one who loves in

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<sup>15</sup> Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration "Dignitas Infinita" On Human Dignity*, no. 49, 2 April 2024, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_dcf\\_doc\\_20240402\\_dignitas-infinita\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_dcf_doc_20240402_dignitas-infinita_en.html).

<sup>16</sup> Donna Orsuto, *Holiness* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 87.

return. This kind of mutual love strengthens a community and the members that constitute and animate it.

### The Place of Community

While there is a communal aspect to who we are and who we become, community does not discount or replace individual responsibility. Community helps shape human character and as people grow virtuously, they begin to contribute to the character of the community. Virtues, both personal and social, help people orient themselves toward the *telos*. In Christian spirituality God is the *telos* and people's virtuous acts orient them toward God through ethical choices and responsibility. African Christian spirituality then requires and privileges community.

The Church, as people of God, is the community that shapes a Christian way of life while constantly being shaped by it in return. This dialectic between the individual and the community, the believer and the Christian community is ongoing and indispensable in living an adult African Christian spirituality and morality. There cannot be any moral agency without community just as there cannot be a moral community without moral agency. African Christian virtue ethics allows for the apt connection between individual and social ethics because virtue is always "other-regarding."<sup>17</sup>

Again, this is where African spiritual morality embraces the infinite dignity of persons. It remains undeniable that human dignity does not depend on circumstances, social status, gender or human community. It is God given. Yet, human dignity can be imperiled by acts that disregard others as created in God's image and likeness. *Dignitas Infinita* describes such acts as surrogacy, abortion, corruption, dehumanizing extreme poverty, armed violence, forced migration, human trafficking, sexual abuse, gender-based violence, euthanasia and assisted suicide, and neglect of those living with disabilities.<sup>18</sup> All these human rights violations point to a society whose ruptured relationships need healing.

African Christian morality fundamentally responds to the question, how am I in relation to other people, to the rest of creation, and to God? Put differently, how is the interaction between faith,

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<sup>17</sup> T. Ryan Byerly and Meggan Haggard, "Expansive Other-Regarding Virtues and Civic Education," *Journal of Moral Education* Vol. 52, No. 1, (2023): 95-107. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2022.2117143>.

<sup>18</sup> Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Infinita*, nos. 33-62.

environment and society at large? The intended response leads to a healthy relationship arising from who we fundamentally are, that is, social beings. Our faith in God and our image of God has a great bearing on how we act. As Christians we believe that the fullness of God's image is in Jesus Christ and so our relationships are inspired by Jesus' own relationship with us. Each one's experience of Jesus, then, is foundational to how we relate with others.<sup>19</sup> Once we focus on God's love for us in Jesus and the Spirit that dwells within and around us, our actions become directed by that love and hence we learn to relate with others justly, faithfully, and tenderly. Prudence, or practical wisdom, helps us discern and cultivate virtues that habitually make us focus on who we ought to actively become thereby praying for the grace to constantly dwell in God.<sup>20</sup>

Any maturing spiritual and moral relationship with God, with others and with the rest of creation is still a process that must be intentionally prayed for, pursued and cultivated. It is not automatic. It calls for true repentance and conversion of heart, attitude, and behavior. Here again, Magesa reminds that "repentance is never a perfect once-and-for-all affair, given any situation of failure. It is a continuous effort at all levels of the human condition to right a wrong, repair a broken relationship, amend tarnished moral attitude."<sup>21</sup> But Magesa is aware that this process is not solely dependent on human effort, it is a process graced by "God present among us."<sup>22</sup>

Character formation is critical to morality and spiritual practices bring out the best in us with regards to how we regard and relate to others. In this regard, "*ontological dignity*" is nourished by its social, moral and existential character. While the ontological dimension of human dignity anchors the undeniable and inalienability of human rights, its social, moral and existential dimensions serve to recognize, promote, and safeguard human dignity. While the former is a given the latter dimensions must be constantly and consciously worked on

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<sup>19</sup> On how our images of God create a healthy or a disconnect between cognitive and emotional relationships with God see John Jefferson Davis, "Renovating Our Images of God: Neuroscience and Biblical Meditation," *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*, (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1177/19397909241269489>.

<sup>20</sup> Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* (On the Call to Holiness in Today's World), 19 March 2018, no. 51, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20180319\\_gaudete-et-exsultate.pdf](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20180319_gaudete-et-exsultate.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> Magesa, "I am Saved," 241.

<sup>22</sup> Magesa, "I am Saved," 241.

within a community. In this sense, a human being inevitably matures in a relational way within society.

Similarly, central to African Christian spirituality is Jesus as the fullness of our union with God. In the mystery of the incarnation, God becoming human, we are invited and shown the way of becoming divine. The way to God involves concrete choices guided by Jesus' words and deeds as they inspire us and apply to our own world and experiences. Who Jesus is and what Jesus did inspire us to become who God wants us to be through what we habitually do. As a process that requires discernment and an "analogical imagination"<sup>23</sup> that makes a healthy connection between Jesus' world and our world, African Christian spirituality and morality are processes of ongoing incarnation. For Christianity to take roots in Africa, incarnation must take the form of salvific inculturation, with language as a fundamental expression of such a process of evangelisation. Failure to appreciate ways in which faith is expressed, including language, will mean failure to learn from the failed sustained evangelisation of Christian North Africa<sup>24</sup> as elsewhere on the continent.

Sustained evangelisation requires what Magesa envisions as driven by an attitude of "humility not pride."<sup>25</sup> Humility opens the door to listen, learn, work with and allow for mutual enrichment and transformation between two persons or two cultures. It opens the window to what Pope Francis refers to as a "culture of encounter."<sup>26</sup> Pride on the other hand approaches evangelization with arrogance that comes with preformulated answers to questions that the context has not yet posed to the evangelizer. This attitude leads to a failed evangelization before it has started.

Humility as a prerequisite virtue for evangelization reminds us of St. Paul's words to the community of Corinth when he says, "Now

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<sup>23</sup> See William C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 50-71.

<sup>24</sup> For a brief account of failed evangelisation efforts in North Africa see General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishop and Libreria Editrice Vaticana, "Africa Synod: Lineamenta and Questions," *Africa Ecclesial Review*, Vol. 33, Numbers 1& 2 (February/April 1991): 3-7.

<sup>25</sup> Laurenti Magesa, "Redemptoris Missio, Centesimus Annus and the African Synod," *Africa Ecclesial Review*, Vol. 33, Number 6, (December 1991): 321.

<sup>26</sup> Pope Francis, "For A Culture of Encounter: Morning Meditation in the Chapel of the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*," 13 September 2016, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2016/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie\\_20160913\\_for-a-culture-of-encounter.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2016/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20160913_for-a-culture-of-encounter.html).



you are the body of Christ, and individually members of that body.” (1 Cor. 12:27). Understood as “a corporate body,”<sup>27</sup> humanity in the African extended sense of the family, shares in Christian “kinship”<sup>28</sup> made possible by the incarnate Son of God. St. Paul invites us to recall the gifts each one of us is graced with and in gratitude as equal and dignified members of Christ’s body to put those gifts at the service of the Christian community. We are not merely members of the body of Christ, but active members for as St. Teresa of Avila reminds us: “Christ has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which he looks with compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”<sup>29</sup> St. Teresa’s is a reminder for each one of us to put on the mind and heart of Christ, as St. Paul urges us in his letter to the Philippians (2:5-11). This is incarnational spirituality and morality at its best.

### **Virtue Ethics in *Imago Dei***

Christian virtue ethics is deeply rooted in God’s image as fully made manifest in the person of Jesus. The extent to which we move closer and closer to the person of Christ in our personal encounter with him is the extent to which we may become virtuous persons. Prayer and the use of our “analogical imagination” are critical to our growth in Christian virtue ethics. The image we have of Jesus in our spiritual growth is equally important. If Jesus is for me simply the Christ, the divine majesty to be highly praised and glorified with nothing to do with human reality, I will remain at the level of piety and devotional prayer. But when I encounter Jesus as fully human and fully divine then I begin to see how his world affects what he is doing. That way I begin to relate his world to my world, his actions to my actions, and his dispositions to my dispositions. In William Spohn’s terms, Christ becomes my “prime moral analogate”<sup>30</sup> opening the window for me to become Christ-like. Any devotions devoid of

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<sup>27</sup> Laurenti Magesa, “‘I am Saved’ – the Ethical Dimension,” *African Ecclesial Review* Vol. 32, no. 4, (August 1990): 239.

<sup>28</sup> Magesa, “I am Saved,” 239.

<sup>29</sup> Theresa of Avila (1515-1582), Poetry Selection “Christ Has No Body,” in *Journey with Jesus, A Weekly Webzine for the Global Church, Since 2004*, [https://www.Journeywithjesus.net/poemsandprayers/3637-Teresa\\_Of\\_Avila\\_Christ\\_Has\\_No\\_Body](https://www.Journeywithjesus.net/poemsandprayers/3637-Teresa_Of_Avila_Christ_Has_No_Body).

<sup>30</sup> Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 55.

commensurate actions accounts for the social malaise in various African settings. It remains at the level of what Magesa has called “mere (intellectual and emotional) knowledge and acceptance of Jesus Christ, as ‘Lord.’”<sup>31</sup> Yet, true faith must be accompanied by acts of love otherwise it remains what St. James regards as a false religion (James 2:14-26).

In becoming a faithful disciple of Christ major and minor decisions must be made. Having Jesus as our “moral analogate” forms a firm foundation upon which we can discern with the help of others in the Church. The normativity of Jesus in our moral and spiritual life enables us to ask who we are in relation to who we are becoming or who we wish to become. Day to day living out of Christian virtues equips us with inclinations, attitudes, feelings, and dispositions for facing major choices. The paradigmatic Jesus shapes our emotive responses to those with whom we relate like Jesus did. The move from Jesus’ moral and spiritual world to our own requires a personal and a communal discernment leading to sacrificial acts of love.

At the heart of Christian spirituality and morality lies God’s ever inviting and enabling grace and our own dispositional, affective, volitional and cognitive response to that invitation. We must want to be transformed to form a character that is in tune with Christ’s. Various practical things help us form that character. First, we must be attentive to what God is doing to us in Christ so that as Christ’s disciples we can live a life worthy of our Christian calling. Second, to be able to become Christ-like must engage with scripture, allowing it to transform our attitudes much as we also bring our contemporary African experience to our reading of scripture to adequately respond to our context. This implies an ethical reading of scriptures because “not every biblical institution sets a precedent for moral discernment, because some [like Paul’s endorsement of slavery and patriarchy] contradict God’s intentions as revealed in Christ.”<sup>32</sup> Third, we must listen attentively to our deeper-most desires and movements of the heart to discern what God is inviting us to become and what we ought to do in that respect. Thus, our calling needs from us certain virtues, practices and discipline that continually resonate with who we are becoming. This way, instead of being action-centered, morality becomes person-centered so that actions flow from who we are.

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<sup>31</sup> Magesa, “I am Saved,” 242.

<sup>32</sup> Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 154.

For us to be of the same mind and heart as Christ, we need to be purposeful about our actions, prayer in all its forms, relationships, and other spiritual practices. As a Church we must move beyond “sacramentalisation” and embrace evangelisation understood in Magesa’s terms as “the free, mature acceptance of the call to search for Christ.”<sup>33</sup> Evangelisation in this sense implies “socialization”<sup>34</sup> in the way, the truth and the life that is Christ. I submit that the dichotomy found in lives lived by Christians and the faith they profess finds its roots in a lack of investing resources and time in the ongoing formation of the faithful beyond sacramental rituals. If time invested in preparing for Holy Orders was equally given significance in preparation for other sacraments the lay faithful would in my submission make significant contributions and appreciation of their Christian life. But beyond preparation for sacraments there is also a need for ongoing formation to allow for the kind of maturity, freedom and “acceptance of the call to search for Christ” that Magesa refers to as evangelisation in its fullest sense.

Socialisation beyond sacramentalisation in a parish context reminds me of the marriage encounter experiences both in preparation for marriage and among married couples. In preparation for marriage, bringing together those engaged to learn from the experience of those who have been married for five years, twenty-five years and fifty years proved formative. It became a beacon of hope for those preparing for marriage to realise that marriage for life is tenable. It equally gave an opportunity for those who have lived together in a sacrament of matrimony to share their lived experiences of marriage. Many attested that they were sharing their experiences as a couple with others for the first time and that it enriched and strengthened their marriage bond. In effect, the experience attested to the fact that “when it comes to the pastoral care of families, families themselves are active participants and not just passive recipients.”<sup>35</sup> Creating avenues for ongoing formation and socialisation, in sacramental ministry beyond sacramentalisation gives a deeper meaning to sacramental life and the Church’s mission.

This way the lay faithful “proclaim the Gospel with an exemplary witness of life rooted in Christ and lived in temporal realities: the family; professional commitment in the world of work, culture, science and

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<sup>33</sup> Magesa, “Redemptoris Missio, Centesimus Annus and the African Synod,” 323.

<sup>34</sup> Magesa, “Redemptoris Missio, Centesimus Annus and the African Synod,” 322.

<sup>35</sup> Francis, *For a Synodal Church*, no. 64.

research; the exercise of social, economic and political responsibilities.”<sup>36</sup> This mission arises from “their specific identity”<sup>37</sup> born of their baptismal commitment. Additionally, and more importantly, the vocation of the laity is not a portion given to them by the hierarchy, it is an indispensable “theological and ecclesiological reality”<sup>38</sup> of witnessing to their faith in Christ. Helping the lay faithful become aware and own their mission in the Church and world does not in any way take away the authority invested in the hierarchy to serve, on the contrary it makes that service a shared mission. Again, John Paul II clearly states that due to “the one dignity flowing from Baptism, each member of the lay faithful, together with ordained ministers and men and women religious, shares a responsibility for the Church’s mission.”<sup>39</sup> The Church’s mission remains a shared responsibility of all the baptised.

The final document of the Synod on Synodality has even made this shared mission clearer by stating that “Clericalism is based on the implicit assumption that those who have authority in the Church are not to be held to account for their actions and decisions as if they were isolated from or above the rest of the People of God.”<sup>40</sup> Explicit in this strong statement is that those with authority in the Church are part and parcel of the People of God and remain accountable to them. In chapter IV, the document puts an emphasis on the significance of formation by stating that “Formation in synodality and the Church’s synodal style will make people aware that the gifts received in Baptism should be put to use for the good of all: they cannot be hidden or remain unused.”<sup>41</sup> I think this is where Mageša’s insight remains relevant. Most people in Africa receive baptism as infants, unaware of what baptism and its gifts entail.<sup>42</sup> The only other time they hear about sacraments is when they prepare for Holy Communion and

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<sup>36</sup> Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium for the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 2 April 2004, no. 543, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/justpeace/documents/rc\\_pc\\_justpeace\\_doc\\_20060526\\_compendio-dott-soc\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html).

<sup>37</sup> Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium*, no. 541.

<sup>38</sup> John Paul II, Post-Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici* (On the Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World), 30 December 1988, no. 15, [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_30121988\\_christifideles-laici.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_30121988_christifideles-laici.html).

<sup>39</sup> John Paul II, *Christifideles Laici*, no. 15.

<sup>40</sup> Francis, *For a Synodal Church*, no. 98.

<sup>41</sup> Francis, *For a Synodal Church*, no. 141.

<sup>42</sup> Mageša, “*Redemptoris Missio*, *Centesimus Annus* and the African Synod,” 322.

confirmation. So, the gifts that the synod asks them “to put to use for the good of all” remain obscure and that is where socialisation cannot be over-emphasised.

With formation/socialisation, we allow spirituality and morality to come together; indeed, we let *ontological* dignity bestowed by the sacrament of baptism enrich its social, moral and existential realities. Socialised in this way, the Church as God’s family continues to celebrate a faith that it practices and proclaims a Gospel which is an integral part of its life.<sup>43</sup> This is an invitation to “work together to ensure that we continue to move together from strong words about charity and justice to effective action, from official statements to creative ministry at every level of the Church’s life.”<sup>44</sup> This concerted effort will render the marriage between politics and religion, faith and justice, the Church and state, and spirituality and ethics, celebratory. It will blur the line between what happens on Sunday and the rest of the week and make the dismissal at the end of every Eucharistic celebration meaningful, namely, to go in peace and in loving service to God and one’s neighbour.

African Christian spirituality empowers us with a way of seeing and acting that is inspired by the Spirit of God dwelling within and around us. Spohn’s insights into what it means to be “morally perceptive” are critical to sharpening our ability to relate with others in a spirit of companionship and love. Moral perception goes beyond mere seeing to include our whole selves in seeing what we see and the way we see it to respond in a way that is appropriate.<sup>45</sup> A sense of “analogical imagination” that helps us relate what we see or experience in our lives with what we have experienced, or what the sages have experienced before us helps us recognize “morally relevant features”<sup>46</sup> in any situation. It also enables us to discern how the situation at hand is inviting us to respond effectively, affectively and intellectually.

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<sup>43</sup> Magea, “*Redemptoris Missio, Centesimus Annus* and the African Synod,” 328. Magea quotes the United States Catholic Bishops who in marking the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Social teaching of the Church state that “We cannot celebrate a faith we do not practice. We cannot proclaim a Gospel we do not live.”

<sup>44</sup> NCCB/USCC, *Contemporary Catholics Social Teaching*, (Washington D.C.: 1991), 7 quoted by Magea, “*Redemptoris Missio, Centesimus Annus* and the African Synod,” 328.

<sup>45</sup> Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 75.

<sup>46</sup> Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 75.

This way of seeing, arising from who we fundamentally are, persons imbued with God's spirit of love and compassion, is central to the way we relate to others in ordinary as well as extraordinary circumstances. A spiritually and "morally perceptive"<sup>47</sup> person cannot afford to be immune to situations that call for fairness and just relationships. Being immune to fairness and justice renders infinite dignity fragile and disposable. We are called to witness to the contrary in all circumstances in which human beings, especially the most vulnerable find themselves for indeed if we can accord unconditional dignity to "the incarcerated" and "the worse of criminals" we can accord it to anyone else.<sup>48</sup>

### **Integral Spirituality and Morality**

Integral spirituality and morality presuppose intimate and adult concepts and images of God. How we image the holy affects how we pursue holiness in our lives which presupposes maturity of spirituality or what I call integral spirituality. Integral spirituality is akin to what Sobrino sums up as "fortitude, discernment and fidelity"<sup>49</sup> – and one that "embraces the whole of reality."<sup>50</sup> There is a variety of images of God as there are spiritualities and their ethical expressions. Images of God understood as various ways in which we allow ourselves to make sense of God in our lives are critical to who we are and who we want to become. Imagining the sacred in our lives affects how we live our ethical convictions and our spiritual practices. The Trinitarian understanding of God invites us to grow in a loving communal relationship. By responsibly and compassionately relating to one another and to the world around us we incarnate the triune God in our lives. We are relational by nature and who we are is shaped by how we relate. Conversely, the way we relate bespeaks of who we are, the kinds of community to which we belong, and the kind of God we believe in.

To have an unfettered image of God and an unfettered relationship with God and others requires Christian maturity. As mature Christians, we experience God in ways that allow us to live integral lives. In integrity, our faith, our spiritual practices and our moral life converge. We experience God as living among us inviting and enabling us to live in mutual trust, faithfulness, peace of mind and

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<sup>47</sup> Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise*, 88.

<sup>48</sup> Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Infinita*, no. 34.

<sup>49</sup> Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, 10.

<sup>50</sup> Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, 13.

heart, responsible freedom, care, love, honesty, commitment, and respect. But integrity also puts us in touch with our deepest selves, enabling us to come to terms with our weaknesses and sinfulness and march along the path of reconciliation and conversion.

Christian maturity is a fruit of reflected personal encounters with God in community. It is equally a fruit of self-awareness that humbly seeks support in ridding ourselves of whatever obstacles may impede us from becoming spiritually integrated adults. An adolescent can only relate to God and others in an adolescent way. Similarly, a spiritually mature person relates to God and others in a spiritually mature way. An obstacle to living integrated lives arises from conceptions of God as a distant or authoritarian being. For many of us even as we wish to outgrow unhealthy images of God our first image of a demanding God is still operative in our spiritual and moral lives. To be able to see God as personal, experiential, historical, and yet transcendent we need to let our experiences reshape our childhood and adolescent images of God. Experience is a key to a challenging yet fulfilling image of God. In the process of growing in our understanding of God, moments of doubt or faith crises may arise. Instead of being seen as obstacles to our Christian life, doubt and faith crises need to be seen in the light of our growing relationship with God. Doubt allows us to clarify certain beliefs of God that we may have inherited without having assessed them with our own experience – our encounter with the God of history who in Jesus grapples with the real world in an honest and caring way.<sup>51</sup>

Spiritual experts teach us that to be able to develop a morally perceptive character that brings what we do and who we are in harmony we need to be people of constant prayer. The Ignatian prayer of awareness of God's presence in all circumstances empowers us to see the face of God in the faces of the needy around us even, or especially, in the busy cities – the homeless, the poor, the minorities. It trains and sharpens our minds and hearts to recognize God's presence in them and act the way God would like us to. It empowers our moral perception and responsiveness toward others. Inner silence and solitude amid a busy world are critical to cultivating this integral way of life where morality and spirituality converge.

In our desire to become virtuous and holy we need to be mindful and intentional to bridge our spiritual practices with our way of life.

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<sup>51</sup> Sobrino, *Spirituality of Liberation*, 14-19.

Spiritual practices alone may not lead to a moral life. The link between how we pray and how we lead our lives must be an intentional practice. In living our integrated lives of faith and action, spirituality and morality, we ought to cultivate the art of discernment. Discernment enables us to get at the heart of our emotions, intentions, and desires to direct them where God wants us to be. Individual or communal discernment is indispensable in living our faith in an integral way.

The ultimate value of authentic Christian spirituality and morality is the way we relate to God and to others with our whole selves. This relationship happens in our ever-deepening faith that is expressed in what we do. In our contemporary world our relationship with God and with one another has in the recent past been summed up by Jesuits as the mission of reconciliation and justice. The Christian sense of justice is rooted in God's compassionate love for us and our compassionate response. Our just response that is informed by faith, seeks to put right what is wrong. It seeks to set up the right relationship with the marginalized and the wounded in our communities. It also seeks to establish the right relationship with the rest of creation in our increasingly interdependent world. To be able to set up harmony between us and the rest of creation we need to be in harmony with God. Prayer and other spiritual practices enable us to see the world from God's perspective. They allow us to use the eyes and ears of our hearts to relate with one another in mutual respect. The sense of wholeness opens our hearts to the search for holiness in all that we are and do.

Holiness encompasses our worldview through the grand divine vision. The vision of a world where all can feel at home and live in mutual respect requires the involvement of everybody. In this sense, I reiterate that holiness is not a privilege of the few within the Church's hierarchical structure. It is a universal call for everyone who is ready to cooperate with the indwelling and outreaching divine grace for the transformation of the world that begins from our inner transformation.<sup>52</sup> Without inner transformation, the tendency to see dignity, like holiness, as a preserve of the few, will lead to consider others as unworthy of holiness.<sup>53</sup> Yet, the contrary remains true in that the incarnate God has elevated humanity to share in his divinity. The incarnate One who reminds us, in the words of *dignitas infinita*, that

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<sup>52</sup> Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, nos. 1,2 and 14.

<sup>53</sup> Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, no. 3.



people “are even more ‘worthy’ of our respect and love when they are weak, scorned, or suffering, even to the point of losing the human ‘figure’—has changed the face of the world. It has given life to institutions that take care of those who find themselves in disadvantaged conditions, such as abandoned infants, orphans, the elderly who are left without assistance, the mentally ill, people with incurable diseases or severe deformities, and those living on the streets.”<sup>54</sup>

## Conclusion

In this article I have argued that African Christian spirituality and its ethical expressions are rooted in the incarnate God who in Christ Jesus desires to make us holy and whole. Inspired by Laurenti Magesa, and in dialogue with like-minded theologians from other contexts, I maintain that though an unmerited gift as clearly indicated by *dignitas infinita*, human dignity can only be promoted and protected within a community that cherishes mutual respect, cultural encounters, reconciliation of broken relationships, virtuous living, moral imagination, and attention to the marginalised in our society.

To constantly work towards the realization of a community where spirituality and ethics converge for human flourishing, we must humbly walk together in attentive solitude and practical wisdom towards inner transformation and an awareness of what God continues to do in our world and in our lives. It is by the empowering divine spirit that we come to see the world differently and thus begin to function as collaborators in God’s mission of reconciliation and service. Compassion, mercy and unconditional love, together with other fruits of the Holy Spirit, offer us a measure of how well we are striving towards holiness. When spirituality and morality embrace, they open a window for the infinite dignity of all regardless of race, religion, social role, ecclesial status, cultural origin, or stature.

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<sup>54</sup> Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dignitas Infinita*, no. 19.