

Synodality in the Catholic Church with Special Reference to the Nine AMECEA Countries in Eastern Africa

1. State of the Question

- a. Many Catholics are very hopeful in the changes being introduced by Pope Francis. He is frequently referring to the importance of the implementation of the Second Vatican Council and the expression “People of God” in his talks. He is emphasizing more and more “synodality” (including various “synod models”), collegiality, collaboration, consultation and subsidiarity. We are optimistic this synodal process will bring significant changes in developing new pastoral structures, priorities and solutions corresponding to our reading of the contemporary signs of the times, contemporary Communion Ecclesiology and the ecclesial reality on the local level in Africa.
- b. What is consensus in a National Bishops Conference? Unanimous. Three quarters. Two thirds.
- c. It has been suggested that an African theologian write an article describing the specific African Models of Church. These models can contribute substantially to the ongoing discussion in the World Church on ecclesial collegiality, synodality (with focus on the relationship between the College of Bishops and the pope), collaboration, dialog and subsidiarity.
- d. Here is a partial summary and commentary by Massimo Faggioli on the March, 2017 Italian document (not available in English) by the International Theological Commission -- ITC (Commissione Teologica Internazionale called *La Sinodalità Nella Vita E Nella Missione Della Chiesa*:

A problem that is hampering Pope Francis’ efforts to facilitate greater synodality is the difficulty of Catholic theologians to give practical expression to the idea of *episcopal collegiality*, which was developed at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and in the post-conciliar theological debates, and to the *ecclesial synodality* that a truly global Catholic Church needs. The introduction to the document roots the ecclesiology of synodality “in the footsteps of Vatican II,” acknowledging the need to proceed further in the trajectory of the council (par. 8). The text paints an overly optimistic picture of the development of synodality in the post-Vatican II Church, but is silent about the frustration experienced these last 50 years regarding the demands and need for synodality and collegiality at the universal, national, and local levels of the Church (par. 41). It is also almost totally silent about the need to integrate synodality with new forms of Catholic life and ministry in the Church; that is, the new lay ecclesial movements and new communities [here we can include the Small Christian Communities Model of Church]. It relies heavily on the episcopal ecclesiology of Vatican II and is therefore

based on the parish and diocesan model, which is not the model of the new movements and new communities — the new “creative minorities.”

Evolving and developing true synodality is seen in the context of reading the contemporary signs of the times. 2018 is very different from 1965 (end of Vatican II). The Catholic culture of 60-75 years ago is gone. This includes the increasing influence of popular culture and secularism from outside the church on pastoral solutions, decisions and changes inside the church.

There is a strong recognition of the need to consult all members of the Church. The document makes the distinction between a deliberative and consultative vote (par. 68-69, 73), but refuses to equate the meaning of a consultative vote in the Church with that in civil law. In the Catholic Church, it says, pastors need to consult and listen to the *vota* of the faithful before making decisions (par. 68).

- e. The Catholic Church is moving toward structures that extend synodality beyond pope and bishops. It is easy to talk about the “grassroots” and the “*sensus fidelium*,” but for Francis there must be structures that make these concepts real. He understands that this extension of what a “synodal church” means must still be “received” (ownership). The test of reception is not theology but ecclesial structures.
- f. Today in Africa after several generations of John Paul II and Benedict-appointed bishops, Francis-appointed bishops are emerging who have a more pastoral style and are closer to the people. Following the process of synodality, subsidiarity (decentralization) and collegiality, a big question is how a consensus on new pastoral solutions can evolve in national bishops conferences on the local level in Africa on challenges such as liturgy, sacraments, marriage, family and young people?

2. Case Studies

- a. **Kenya:** A number of African bishops have pointed out how hard it is to achieve a consensus on marriage rites given the wide variety of African cultural traditions, customs and rites. In an interview retired Archbishop Raphael Ndingi Mwana’a Nzeki of Nairobi, Kenya mentioned that the 1994 First African Synod appointed him to a Commission on Marriage in an African Context. He said that our Catholic marriage laws are based on Western law (for example, German law). The hope was to develop common inculturated guidelines on marriage that could be used throughout Africa. But the commission failed and was disbanded. Ndingi said that he could not even get the bishops in Kenya to agree on a common marriage rite for the whole country. He said, “Every bishop wants to be king in his own diocese.” Presently in Kenya there are 27 Catholic Dioceses and 44 to 71 ethnic groups (depending on how you count), each with its African traditional marriage customs and rites.¹

¹ Raphael Ndingi in a conversation with the author in Nairobi, Kenya in March, 2007.

- b. **South Africa:** An example of this diversity is the Catholic Bishops' Conference in South Africa. South African Redemptorist Bishop Kevin Dowling, CSSR of Rustenburg Diocese points out that with the wide diversity of pastoral and cultural views among the bishops, it is very hard for the conference to agree on joint pastoral solutions.
- c. **Germany:** Can a spouse who is not Catholic in a mixed marriage receive communion? The background is the high proportion of mixed marriages and families in Germany. The bishops recognize that this is a challenging and urgent pastoral task and want to determine if and under what circumstances couples of different denominations who regularly go to church together can receive the Eucharist together. After failing to reach a consensus in the German National Bishops Conference, each bishop will now provide guidelines in his own diocese.

3. Concrete pastoral challenges calling for concrete pastoral solutions and pastoral guidelines/directives (alphabetically):

NOTE: The concrete pastoral solutions and pastoral guidelines/directives will vary from country to country in Eastern Africa. Some will be national guidelines/directives and some will be metropolitan guidelines/directives (for example, marriage in the Luganda-speaking, Ugandan dioceses and in Gikuyu-speaking, Kenyan dioceses).² Here is a total of 33 examples.

Age of confirmation.

Biblical translations.

Catechists distributing communion.

Circumcision.

Cohabitation.

Color of liturgical vestments (for example, at funerals).

Communion for Pregnant Single Women.

Dowry.

Eucharistic Adoration in sub-parish and outstation chapels.

Fast and abstinence during Lent.

Financial audits.

Growing importance of Metropolitans (Ecclesiastical Provinces). **NOTE:** A metropolitan (ecclesiastical province of one archdiocese and suffragan dioceses) is a communion of dioceses. Pope Francis wants to give more importance to decision-making, implementation and activities on the metropolitan level. For example, we have facilitated three SCCs Workshops on the metropolitan level: Mwanza Metropolitan, Tanzania (May, 2014); Tororo Metropolitan, Uganda (May, 2014); and Gulu Metropolitan, Uganda (August, 2018).

Holy Days of Obligation.

Lack of trained youth chaplains (covering parishes and schools).

Lay ecclesial ministries.

LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) issues.

Many Catholics cannot receive communion because of irregular marriages.

Marriage guidelines. **NOTE:** Experts have pointed out that more generic basic criteria can be established on marriage in Africa so that the various African culturally specific forms can fit within this broader umbrella.

Married priests (*virī probati*). **NOTE:** A specific pastoral challenge in Africa today is what we call the “Eucharistic Famine”³ (also called the “Eucharistic Hunger” or the “Eucharistic Drought”). Due to the lack of priests, on any given Sunday most Catholics in Africa (up to 80%⁴ in some surveys) participate in a “Sunday Service Without a Priest” especially in rural areas where there is usually no Holy Communion rather than participate in a regular mass. This is popularly called “the Eucharistic Famine.” In some of these services communion is distributed by the catechist or by a trained and installed lay leader. In general, the AMECEA Bishops do not have the Eucharist reserved in outstation chapels mainly because of security issues and do not allow the catechists to give out communion because of the abuses that have taken place.

Mixed marriages (Catholics and Protestants).

³ While not a common expression in the West, it is well known in Africa. Archbishop Ndingi used the term in his intervention at the First African Synod in 1994.

⁴ This figure is quoted in Joseph Healey, “Beyond Vatican II: Imagining the Catholic Church of Nairobi I,” in Agbonkhanmeghe E. Orobator (ed.), *The Church We Want: African Catholics Look to Vatican III*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016 and Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2016, p. 199. More alarming statistics come from individual sources. Church historian Ugandan diocesan priest John Ngulu says that in his home diocese of Jinja, Uganda the farthest outstations may get mass only once a year.

National and diocesan synods.

Parish Pastoral Councils.

Parish Finance Councils.

Polygamy.

Priests conferring the Sacrament of Confirmation.

Requirements for lay Catholics to serve in leadership positions.

Requirements for priesthood.

Sexual abuse.

Shared Homilies in the Home Masses/House Church Masses (SCC masses).

Tabernacles with the eucharist in sub-parish and outstations chapels.

Uneven implementation of the AMECEA key pastoral priority of building SCCs.

Washing of the feet on Holy Thursday.

Witchcraft and superstition.

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