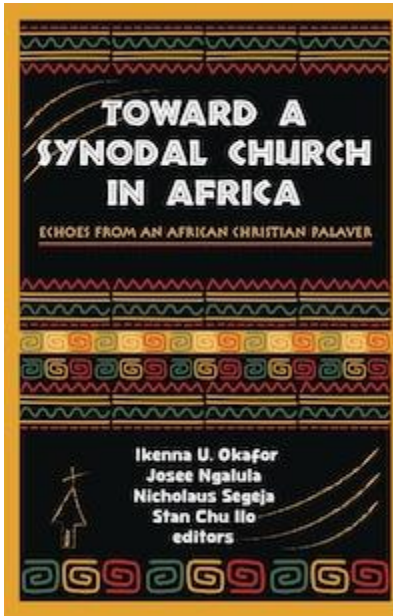


Praxis and Palaver by Joseph G. Healey

18 May, 2024



Book Review of:

Toward a Synodal Church in Africa: Echoes from an African Christian Palaver
 Edited by Ikenna Okafor, José Ngalula, Nicholas Segeja, and Stan Chu Ilo
[Orbis Books](#), 2024 \$50 248 pp.
 Ebook: \$40.50 ([Amazon](#)) | \$30.49 ([Barnes and Noble](#))

The timing of this important book is perfect. This is a *kairos* moment for the Catholic Church in Africa as the African voting delegates prepare for the second session of the Synod in Rome in October 2024.

Pope Francis convoked this [Synod on Synodality](#). He says: “Synodality is a style, it is a walk together, and it is what the Lord expects from the Catholic Church of the third millennium.” This challenging invitation has initiated countless dialogues in local churches throughout the world.

In this fine volume (which has also been published under the title *Journeying Together for a Synodal Church in Africa: Echoes from an African Christian Palaver* by [Paulines Publications Africa](#) for \$10), African theologians and pastoral agents contribute their contextualizations, reflections, and proposals on a synodal church in Africa. This book is highly ambitious, innovative in method, and daring in its scope and vision. It presents a groundbreaking combination of

theological, pastoral, and socio-cultural resources in search of a Pan-African agenda for nurturing Christian growth grounded in *Ubuntu* (“humanness” in Southern African languages), the African ethos of synodality and dialogical inclusivity.

Toward a Synodal Church in Africa was overseen by an esteemed group of editors. Ikenna Okafor is a Nigerian diocesan priest and senior research fellow in Austria. José Ngalula is a religious sister from the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the only African woman on the International Theological Commission. Nicholas Segeja is a Tanzanian diocesan priest and director of the Gaba Pastoral Institute in Kenya. Stan Chu Ilo is a Nigerian diocesan priest who teaches at DePaul University in Chicago.

The book includes the talks given at the Second Pan-African Congress on Theology, Society and Pastoral Life that took place at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA) in Nairobi, Kenya, from July 18–23, 2022. The congress was coordinated by the Pan-African Catholic Theology and Pastoral Network ([PACTPAN](#)).

The book also includes messages from Pope Francis, Cardinal Mario Grech, and the secretary general of the Association of Member Episcopal Conferences of Eastern Africa ([AMECEA](#)). The ten chapters are written by one bishop, seven priests, one religious sister, and one laywoman. Important chapters include “Exploring the Possible Contributions of the African *Palaver* [a term that means “talk” or “lengthy debate” in Portuguese] Towards a Participatory Synodal Church”; “*Ubuntu* and Synodality”; “The Social Dimension of Ecclesial Synodality in Africa: A Call to Walk in Communion with the Laity in Doing Theology”; and “Five Key Lessons of Synodality for the Church Family of God in Africa.”

Today there is an emphasis on a new African theological process or method that is called by a variety of names: “African *Palaver* Theology,” “African Theology as Conversation,” “African Conversation Theology,” African Christian *Palaver* Theology,” “African Christian Conversation Theology,” or simply “*Palaver* Theology” or “Conversational Theology.” It is both the name of a process or method of theology and the type of *content* of that theology (like “liberation theology”). Method heavily influences and determines content and vice versa; it is a two-way process that illuminates and enriches African and Christian values. This African *Palaver* Theology is similar to Mango Tree Theology, Theology Under a Tree, Shade Tree Theology, Story-telling Theology, African Reverential Dialogue, and *Matatu* Theology.

In his contribution to the volume, “Exploring the Possible Contributions of the African *Palaver* Towards a Participatory Synodal Church,” Ilo states: “This essay argues for a participatory Synodal Church and the possible contributions of African *palaver* as a model for participatory dialogue in the Roman Catholic Church. The African *palaver* is the art of conversation, dialogue, and consensus-building in traditional African society.” The concept of *palaver*—talking together in dialogue—has become an important theme for theologians and people of faith in Africa. Alongside the Synod on Synodality, *palaver* points to the importance of gathering together and listening to all voices, including those of women and young people.

In her essay “*Ubuntu* and Synodality,” Ngalula writes: “The option of Basic Christian Communities (BCCs)/[Small Christian Communities](#) (SCCs) is a deconstructive paradigm at the

service of the revitalization of *Ubuntu*, that joins the will of God . . . [SCCs are] an experience of building the church from the grassroots, by listening to God who is speaking to all humanity through Holy Scripture. That is exactly where the People of God, the faithful of Christ, learn and experience from the grassroots the true spirit of the extended family of God, a sense of family that excludes racism, tribalism, [and] ethnocentrism.”

Many observers feel that the spirit and practice of synodality (“walking together”) is a way of life in Africa that has many values connected to community, unity, sharing, joint participation, and dialogue. As Okafor states in his introduction: “This volume is expected to animate the praxis of synodality in Africa with vision and orientation on many levels.” ♦

Originally published on the [Today’s American Catholic](#) Website.

NOTE: The Pan-African Catholic Theology and Pastoral Network (PACTPAN)’s Synodality Unit hosted a Book Launch of *Toward a Synodal Church in Africa: Echoes from an African Christian Palaver* on Friday, 17 May, 2024. Further information is [here](#), and the link to join the launch is [here](#). Orbis Books is currently offering the book at a 30% discount [here](#); readers may also be interested in the *Handbook of African Catholicism*, available at a 30% discount [here](#). A recording of the two and one quarter hour Book Launch will be on YouTube and will be stored in the [PACTPAN](#) Archives.

Father Joseph G. Healey, MM is an American Maryknoll missionary priest who has 50 years of experience working with Small Christian Communities in Africa and elsewhere. He has taught at Tangaza University College and Hekima University College in Nairobi. He is co-author of *Small Christian Communities Today: Capturing the New Moment* (Orbis Books and Paulines Publications Africa) and author of the free online Ebook [Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa](#), among other titles.