

Palaver as a Synodal Praxis of Belonging in the Catholic Church

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Abstract: African praxis of *palaver* is its own cultural enactment of a synodal consciousness. It is rooted in the African psyche as a source of ritualizing social belonging while also upholding the unique creativity and imagination of the constituent members of the social group. This approach to responding to the signs of the times in the African social world can serve as a source of articulating a synodal culture in the Catholic Church. Such an embrace of synodality ought to proceed with a sense of inclusivity and belonging of all baptized persons. This work sheds light on what is at stake when this process is done well and what horizon of new possibilities can arise for the church, especially as it attempts to respond to the signs of the times. While acknowledging that the church is catholic in the sense that it embodies multitudes of cultural ways of being in the world, this work is intended to articulate an African consciousness of how to be church in Africa.

IN THIS ARTICLE, I ARGUE THAT AN AFRICAN PRAXIS OF *PALAV*
is one model the church can use in its praxis of fellowship among its members as it attempts to recenter its culture and sense of synodality as a way of being church for our times. True ecclesial synodality entails an embrace of the praxis of resolving differences with the intent to arrive at a conclusion to which all parties can lay claim. However, synodality is never about the simplification of narratives just for the sake of harmony; it holds in place the needed tension in interpretations at stake with a goal of arriving at a higher truth—the covenant of fellowship is the bond of life from which all parties derive their purpose and meaning.

This understanding of ecclesial synodality was in full display at the Council of Jerusalem (henceforth referred to as Jerusalem).¹ As noted

¹ An earlier draft of this article also included an extensive discussion of Nicaea. Due to space limitations, I am focusing on the Council of Jerusalem. Nicaea is important for the following reason: it intended to address divisions in the early church which threatened the unity of the empire. To understand fully how imperial Rome under Constantine saw the need to unify the empire both under secular authority and

by Shailer Mathews, “The faith that was Jewish in form, and universal in content, had to be adjusted to non-Jewish people.”² In hindsight, we may consider the decision of Jerusalem to be light. But this is not the case. “The messianic hope involved a salvation which at the start was apparently limited to Jews. Nothing could be more natural than the position of the Jerusalem Christians at this point. Jesus was a Jew; they were Jews; the gospel was Jewish.”³ Yet, Jerusalem chose to center what was really at the heart of Christianity—the markers that defined belonging. In doing this, Jerusalem chose to embrace “a vital Christianity [that] moves away from legalism as certainly as virtue moves away from animalism.”⁴

Fast forward to the twenty-first century, Christianity is still faced with the reality of belonging. The Catholic Church is wrestling with different pastoral and doctrinal issues that bring to the forefront the question of who and what makes one a part of the church in light of cultural differences; life realities that prevent one from meeting the conditions for actively practicing one’s faith cannot go unaddressed. In fact, the embrace of synodality as a defining marker of the pontificate of Pope Francis, whose legacy will live on as a summons to continue the vision of the Second Vatican Council, is an attempt to respond to the crises of belonging that the contemporary church is faced with and to continue the praxis of reception of the teachings of the Council itself.⁵

The African praxis of *palaver* is its own cultural enactment of a synodal consciousness,⁶ rooted in the African psyche as a source of ritualizing social belonging while also upholding the unique creativity

religious institutions and the relevant religious beliefs, one has to study Nicaea’s proceedings closely. I juxtapose both the Council of Jerusalem and Nicaea for understanding the contributions of African synodal consciousness and praxis understood as consensus-building in my forthcoming “Palaver as a Synodal Praxis of Belonging in the Catholic Church: Towards a Decolonial Memory of the Africanness of the Church,” *Abuja Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 15 (forthcoming).

² Shailer Mathews, “The Council at Jerusalem,” *The Biblical World* 33, no. 5 (1909): 337.

³ Mathews, “The Council at Jerusalem,” 337–338.

⁴ Mathews, “The Council at Jerusalem,” 338. For a rich analysis of the Council at Jerusalem, see Patrick Ogbonyomi Alemayo, “The Jerusalem ‘Apostolic Decree’ in Acts 15:1–35,” (STL Thesis, Boston College (April 30, 2019), hdl.handle.net/2345/bc-ir:108451.

⁵ Francis, *For A Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission. Final Document*. Vatican City, November 24, 2024, no. 5, synod.ie/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Final-Documents-English.pdf.

⁶ For a historical grounding of the term “palaver” beginning with the West African coastal communities and beyond, see Mira Shah, “A Word: ‘Palaver’ and Its Transferral Residues,” *Word and Text* 4, no. 2 (2014): 67–83.

and imagination of the constituent members of the social group. Its focus makes accessible the river of life which links all social groups and other beings to the source of life itself, who is the supreme God and its cohort of divinities and minor deities. I am not arguing that African societies are currently always living in the oneness of *ubuntu*, but that Africa's heritage of *ubuntu* realized through the praxis of *palaver* can be retrieved as basis for healthy ecclesial life on the continent. The praxis of *palaver* is one among many African cultural ways of attaining consensus, building peace, and ensuring that social interactions do not consciously erase some members of society. For example, among the Ihievbe people of Nigeria, this process is referred to as *oje s'Ihievbe*, which literally means 'the throne of peacebuilding for the Ihievbe people.'

In precolonial times, the African praxis of *palaver* involved a process of inclusivity itself rooted in a worldview that prioritizes cosmic belonging. Hence, the process of dialogue to address differences included humans and non-humans. Under the *palaver* tree (baobab tree)—symbolic of cosmic connections because the tree symbolizes hospitality and connections—the community, along with the disputing parties who seek redress, gather under the tree to “speak, listen, and settle their differences.”⁷ The praxis of dialogue playing out through *palaver* sacralizes difference through encounters and legitimizes the fact that each of us is different and yet united. Both our differences and unity serve one ultimate purpose, the preservation of the inherent harmony of the one cosmic life of which we all partake, as well as making concrete the attainment of harmony, referred to as *ubuntu*—living in an altruistic manner allowing for the reciprocal experience of abundant life by all (humans and non-humans).⁸ Through the *palaver* encounter, the inherent differences threatening the delicate harmony of cosmic life are pruned and addressed through the socio-political dynamics of negotiation in dialogue. Each party involved in these social dynamics of encounter must put the flourishing of everyone else before their own self-centered interests. The fundamental question must also be asked: how do my interests ensure the preservation and continuity of the harmony inherent in the one cosmic life I partake of? This fundamental question, and the response provided to it, enabled pre-colonial African societies to see

⁷ “The *Palaver* Tree: Witness to Human Lives,” *Palace Travel*, www.palacetravel.com/the-palaver-tree-witness-to-human-lives/.

⁸ SimonMary Asese A. Ahiokhai, “The Enduring Power of Palaver as a Tool for Fostering Socio-Cosmological Harmony: An African Response to the Culture of War in Our World,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 20, no. 2 (2023): 234.

the importance of always living beyond-the-self to allow for reciprocities and recognition of the other as one who makes whole the subject as a being-in-relation. In the words of Laurenti Magesa, “The African *palaver* aims at creating, strengthening, or restoring relationships for the sake of ‘the fullness’ of life of the community through fellowship among all three dimensions of the community [the living, the dead, and those not yet born].”⁹

Similarly, synodality evokes a sense of belonging where one has a voice in shaping the outcomes of social decision-making processes. Hence, as Rafael Luciani notes: “Synodality is an *ecclesial way of proceeding*, meaning that it is a *constituent*, processual reality rather than simply a particular practice of a functional and organizational nature. Synodality involves the constant review of *lifestyles* (spirit) and *discernment practices* (method) at all *levels* and *structures of government*.”¹⁰ The inclusiveness and participatory culture synodality evokes in the *koinonia* of the church and its members can be said to be synonymous to the inherent goal of the praxis of *palaver* in the African cultural worldview. Stated differently, “Synodality is a *constitutive* and *constituent* dimension of ecclesiality, it cannot be identified with a specific event, nor can it be reduced to a method. . . . Rather, it is what makes a new model possible by setting in motion a process of constant ecclesiogenesis that generates an ecclesial way of proceeding.”¹¹ Similarly, *palaver* is not just the praxis of sitting under a tree and talking. Rather, it is grounded in a type of hermeneutic consciousness that plays out through the praxis of deep listening, for the purpose of attaining inclusivity and belonging through active deployment of one’s agency—*ubuntu*.¹²

Christianity has at its core an African stamp insofar as its theological foundations benefited greatly from the creative minds of African theologians and ecclesial leaders. Today, however, its current expressions in the African continent, especially the Roman Catholic Church, has all the markers of a Western inculturated religion. African expressions of the Roman Catholic Church reflect a continuum of colonial vestiges and the erasure of African creative genius to articulate an authentically African Christianity for the African experience. In the words of Jean-Marc Éla, “The church must go

⁹ Laurenti Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa* (Orbis Books, 2004), 161.

¹⁰ Rafael Luciani, *Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church* (Paulist, 2022), 27.

¹¹ Luciani, *Synodality*, 27.

¹² Bénédet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality*, trans. Brian McNeil (Crossroad, 2001), 49.

further than just questioning faith. It must probe the actual practices of the church, if it is going to redefine itself in relation to the struggles and efforts of black people for a better status in contemporary history.”¹³

In this article, I argue that *palaver*, embraced as constitutive marker of the praxis of Catholicism in Africa, offers a pathway for birthing forth a sense of belonging reflective of the African experience in the world. As Jerusalem did for the early Christians it will bring about a “face to face [engagement] with the very fundamental of real Christianity [which] is one of the turning-points in Christian history.”¹⁴ Paul’s close proximity to such persons as Titus who, though he may not have been circumcised because he was Greek, was a devout Christian, necessitated a turn to inclusivity grounded in real pragmatic experience of the Gentile world and its ability to embrace the *kerygma* being preached by the followers of Christ.¹⁵ So also can the praxis of *palaver* be a source of instantiating a culture of belonging within the church.¹⁶

My argument proceeds in three movements. First, I offer a brief overview of the praxis of *palaver*. Second, I then highlight the contours of synodality relevant for our times. Third, I demonstrate how a deliberate turn to *palaver* as synodal praxis helps retrieve the ways authentic synodality can define the life of the church in Africa. Finally, by applying *palaver* to the leadership structure of the church, I show how within Africa a new style of leadership can be embraced to allow for a culture of inclusivity and participation to become the norm for our times.

THE PRAXIS OF PALAVER

Before applying the rich possibilities of *palaver* encounter to synodal consciousness in the Catholic Church, it is proper to offer a brief description of how *palaver* operates in some sub-Saharan communities. *Palaver* encounter involves the disputing parties, along with the elders of the community gathering under the *palaver* tree (Baobab tree) to address the conflict with the intention of restoring

¹³ Jean-Marc Éla, *My Faith as An African*, trans. John Pairman Brown and Susan Perry (Wipf and Stock, 2009), 138.

¹⁴ Mathews, “The Council at Jerusalem,” 342.

¹⁵ Mathews, “The Council at Jerusalem,” 342. See also Dom Bernard Orchard, “The Problem of Acts and Galatians,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 7, no. 4 (1945): 383–384.

¹⁶ Éla, *My Faith as An African*, 138.

social harmony. *Palaver* is not limited to addressing disputes, but can also involve a process of communal decision making where the community has to discern what is the right step to take. Under this tree, all parties, along with the community elders, participate in a common ritual that demonstrates their cultural bond and will to always support the flourishing of each other and the community. Here, community is understood to have a cosmological consciousness; it is not simply a human-focused world.

Depending on the region, the supporting rituals tend to differ, but the focus remains the same: that disputes must never diminish life. The ritual may entail partaking in a shared meal evoking a sense of oneness of heart and ritualized harmony that is the fruit of *palaver* (*ubuntu*). For example, both in the Igbo (Nigeria) cultural praxis and religious rituals of peacebuilding, the supporting rituals of *palaver* involve the offering of libation to the goddess of the land, *Ala* (*Ani*, depending on the dialect of the Igbo language) and the communal and familial ancestors, as well as the breaking of cola nut, considered a gift of the deities along with the community ancestors.¹⁷ The eldest male from the eldest clan present in the gathered community offers prayers of gratitude to the deity of the land, *Ala*. Among the Ihievbe people and in Ihievbe religion, should the high priest of the deity *Ekeva*—a female deity whose priests can either be male or female—be present, they have the right to offer such prayers. Gender is not a restriction in this process. The use of salt is paramount to the *palaver* ritual among Ihievbe people. The disputing parties put salt in their mouths and then revoke the hatred they have towards each other by saying what they had intended for each other and what they now wish for each other. After this, they spit out the salt symbolic of revoking the evil intentions that not only hold the other captive but the one who intends them as well. Just as salt purifies, so are the heart and mouth purified of all evil intentions to allow for new beginnings. Through this process, social liberation is attained. During this prayer of gratitude and supplication, the gathered community taps into their ancestral knowledge and sense of self which affirms the fact that social harmony is protected by a covenantal bond with the deity of the land. The land deity, *Ala* for the Igbos or *Ekeva* for the Ihievbes, the goddess of life and fecundity and custodian of communal peace, is centered in the ritual. There is a clear understanding that if disputes are not addressed

¹⁷ For insight into the ritual of cola nut breaking among Igbos, see Michael Eli Dokosi, “The Significant Role of Kola Nuts among the Igbo People,” *Face2Face Africa*, July 6, 2020, face2faceafrica.com/article/the-significant-role-of-kola-nuts-in-the-culture-of-igbo-people.

at their core, they may threaten life itself. By summoning the land deity along with their communal and familial ancestors, the gathered community also acknowledges the fact that who they are as a people and individuals is defined by their existential and historical rootedness in their past. Without this rootedness, they cannot serve as media for an enduring future for the yet to be born members of the community.

During the offering of libation, done by pouring alcohol on the soil and invoking the names of the ancestors and land deity, the libator taps into the collective wisdom of the community. They (in Ihievbe context) speak in proverbs and through this process, remind the gathered community of the importance of social harmony and their role as custodians for all who call the land and community their home. Looking at the Ga People of West Africa, Molefi Kete Asante speaks of the central motif and role of the libator as similar to that of a social poet in the Western world.

The libator is much more a member of a collective consciousness. . . . The libator is a poet, a creative genius capable of assuming trancelike dispositions. Only the libator in African culture, rich in the history of traditions of his people, assumes a completely poetic nature. In the performance of libation, the libator exploits oratorical and poetical techniques to reinforce the message or to enhance natural gifts. . . . By it, the people are united with their ancestors; by it, the community is shown its relationship to posterity.¹⁸

After praying over the cola nut, the latter is divided into parts and shared among all those present. This sharing and ensuing actual consumption is of major significance. To consume the cola nut is to enact a covenantal bond of trust and life. Each person who has partaken of the cola nut meal has agreed to be honest with their testimonies and uphold the other party as worthy of their care and protection. No harm to anyone who partakes of that meal can be tolerated. The cola nut ritualizes the importance of trust, vulnerability, and safety. The consumption of the cola nut makes all parties participants in a single life given to them through their communal bond with the land deity considered to be the source of social and cosmic harmony.

Only after the consumption of the cola nut can the disputing parties vocalize their grievances. Authentic sharing is the rule. The virtues of radical listening and refusal to leap to judgment are to be upheld by

¹⁸ Molefi Kete Asante, *The Afrocentric Idea*, revised and expanded edition (Temple University Press, 1998), 79.

all. Each person in that space has the right to voice their opinion without being silenced. There is no rushing of the process which can take hours, days, weeks, or even months and years. Deep listening is encouraged throughout the process. The eldest person (for the Igbos, a male from the eldest clan; for the Ihievbe people, usually the high priest of *Ekeva* or the priest of any of the deities worshipped in the villages that constitute Ihievbe should the high priest of *Ekeva* not be present) helps the gathered assembly to remain focused on the guiding principles that define the process. As everyone shares their ideas, they remain committed to one question: What is arising from this sharing that we can all agree on? This question is important because it defines the social bond of life the disputing parties participate in due to the fact that they are recipients of the gift of life the land deity mediates for all. Another question also arises as the sharing continues: What do we not agree on and why is that the case? Notice that the focus is not on who is correct or wrong. The focus is more on understanding why there is a fracture in their relationship and how it can be addressed.

In African context, *ubuntu*, as a mode of being in the world that orients one and the community towards embrace of social harmony, is only made possible by an means of *palaver*.¹⁹ This is because the quest for social harmony is what makes possible the realization of *ubuntu*, especially in a social world where relationships have been fragmented. Harmony is never realized when there is erasure of otherness or when a point of view is dismissed because of imbalance in the use of social power. Harmony is attained through the intentional embrace of differences and paradoxes insofar as these help to reach a primal goal, access to abundant life by all parties. Thus, the praxis of *palaver* entitling everyone gathered under the tree to the right to speak and be heard is what realizes *ubuntu*. Hence, Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator notes that *ubuntu* “prioritizes inclusivity over exclusivity, community over competition, hospitality over hostility, dialogue over confrontation and respect over domination.”²⁰ Listening is paramount to *palaver* dialogical encounter. To hold all the diverse perspectives in place is to take seriously the voices expressing them and their embodiment in their own rich historicities. The same can be said of synodal consciousness. As Francis comments on synodality: “I want to say that in this Synod—also to make room for the Holy Spirit—the priority should be to listen. This is the priority. . . . the Church is

¹⁹ Adeoye O. Akinola and Ufo Okeke Uzodike, “Ubuntu and the Quest for Conflict Resolution in Africa,” *Journal of Black Studies* 49, no. 2 (2018): 115.

²⁰ Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, *Religion and Faith in Africa: Confessions of An Animist* (Orbis Books, 2018), 72.

‘taking a break.’ It is a break for the whole Church, as we engage in listening. This is the most important message.”²¹

At this point, I must retrieve an element of the praxis of *palaver* in the African world. This retrieval sheds light on the root causes of the crisis of erasure perpetuated by the current structures of the church. As Bénézet Bujo notes, “The expression ‘everyone’ in the *palaver* regulation refers not only to the invisible community of the ancestors, but genuinely to *everyone*, such as the handicapped, who perhaps cannot express themselves in speech but nevertheless are capable of communicating by means of symbolic actions.”²² Bujo calls attention to the fact that *palaver* is intended to broaden the space of inclusiveness along with participation. Thus, when one speaks during a *palaver* discourse, one ought to speak as though one was speaking as a messenger for the other who may not be present. *Palaver* is a ritual embrace of what I call “the empty chair,” symbolic of a perspective that has not been explored, of blind spots that those present may have and are not aware of as they deliberate.

This understanding of *palaver* as instantiating an empty chair consciousness allows for a critique of African societies where exclusion is a social norm. For example, among some Igbo ethnic groups in Nigeria, there is the religious or cultural caste system, known as *Osu*.²³ An embrace of the empty chair consciousness can help address the exclusionary nature of caste systems that sometimes began as socio-political realities and not as inherent cultural markers of the people. Furthermore, some African societies have appropriated patriarchal norms, leading to the silencing of women’s voices. However, not all African societies have such exclusionary caste systems or patriarchal norms. For example, among the Ihievbe people of Nigeria, my own ethnic group, women and men participate in the *palaver* dialogical encounter. This is because Ihievbe people have enduring traces of a matrilineal system.²⁴

²¹ Francis, *Address for the Opening of the Works of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops ‘For A Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission,’* October 4, 2023, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/october/documents/20231004-apertura-sinodo.html.

²² Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic*, 55.

²³ For an understanding of the *Osu* System among some Igbo ethnic groups in Nigeria, see S. Leith-Ross, “Notes on the *Osu* system Among the Ibo of Owerri Province, Nigeria,” *Africa* 10, no. 2 (1937): 206–220, doi.org/10.2307/1155783.

²⁴ For more engagement with the Ihievbe people and some of their cultural norms, see SimonMary Asese A. Ahiokhai, *Fostering Interreligious Encounters in Pluralist Societies: Hospitality and Friendship* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). See also Onaiwu W. Ogbomo, *When Men and Women Mattered: A History of Gender Relations Among the Owan of Nigeria* (University of Rochester Press, 1997).

Furthermore, with an embrace of the empty chair, deliberations are never embraced as absolute declarations. Rather, they are open-ended to allow for awareness of and openness to new perspectives. The decisions arrived at help the community address issues to which they are confronted. As Jean-Godefroy Bidima calls it, “It is a search for a consensus based on a discussion between the parties involved. The consensus can be of a temporary kind. The main thing is that the different parties agree at least for the time being.”²⁵ This openness is what makes *palaver* a praxis that authentically responds to the signs of the times.

In sum, the turn to the social world concretized by *palaver* dialogical encounters makes grounding oneself within the living tradition of African communities possible. The praxis of *palaver* intended to lead to *ubuntu* consciousness can only be achieved by locating oneself within the living tradition of one’s people. The latter involves connections and inclusivity that take seriously the past as dynamic and linked to the present as well as oriented to a future of infinite possibilities. Thus, respect for tradition and social norms cannot be discarded,²⁶ themselves dynamic. Hence the praxis of *palaver* serves as a pruning process making tradition a living and dynamic that speaks to a people in the concreteness of their existence and also shapes how current social norms are to be conceived. Simply stated, “By enacting the *palaver* tree encounter, the laws of the land are given legitimacy through the connection that the community has with its ancestors ([living] dead) and those that have a responsibility to preserve a world that works well so that their lives can also attain their ultimate goal: abundant life (those yet to be born).”²⁷

SYNODALITY AS AN AFRICAN GIFT TO THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

For many, it may sound strange to claim that synodality, understood as consensus building, is as African as it can be and in fact a gift to the early church from African Christian communities. Thomas C. Oden buttresses this point. He notes that “the early African councils provided a practical model for ecumenical debate and resolution. The conciliar movement, which began in Jerusalem (c. 45 CE) as reported by Luke, took on formal characteristics in African debates in Carthage,

²⁵ Jean-Godefroy Bidima, *La palabra, une jurisdiction de la parole*. Paris, as cited in Akinola and Uzodike, “Ubuntu and the Quest for Conflict Resolution in Africa,” 115.

²⁶ Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Orbis Books, 1997), 269.

²⁷ Ahiokhai, “The Enduring Power of Palaver,” 235–236.

Alexandria, Hippo, and Milevis that would gradually come to define the methods for achieving ecumenical consensus elsewhere.”²⁸ Furthermore, Oden notes that “it is not sheer accident that the methods of the conciliar movement were well-established in Africa before widely employed elsewhere. And it is not difficult to see that it was from African bishops like Agrippinus and Cyprian, and the African-born Pope Victor that the impulse for conciliarity first developed.”²⁹ As Oden notes,

A century prior to the First Council of Nicaea (325 CE), these African churches were firmly established, courageously led, actively growing and vital worshipping communities, able to stand boldly against a vaunted order of civic religious idolatry that had behind it enormous power—the power of life and death. African churches, especially in the Medjerda Valley under Cyprian, developed highly sophisticated protocols and procedures for drawing together Christian leaders in councils to reach agreement on conflicted questions. They debated disruptive issues through rigorous scriptural inquiry. These were not debates primarily about philosophical language, but about the texts of Scripture. They came to discrete judgments based on mutual consent. The votes were reported and the debates summarized, and they became the beginnings of canon law. These actions became known as the conciliar process, and in time the ecumenical movement. The councils gave clear leadership to the divided faithful and drew them, despite their cultural differences, toward consensual decision making. These councils were widely utilized in African synods before proceeding to the first ecumenical council at Nicaea.³⁰

Furthermore, Éla speaks of the sense of fellowship (*koinonia*) that defined the founding of Christianity. In his words: “The universalism professed by the New Testament is not a mere dream of fellowship in terms of an adherence to a creed but is ultimately based on blood ties and tribal or national loyalties. To liberate the universal potential of the gospel, the church down through the centuries had to struggle against every imaginable expression of sectarianism.”³¹ A more inclusive understanding and openness to negotiate, while allowing differences to operate, defined the decisions of Jerusalem. Mathews notes this well when he writes:

²⁸ Thomas C. Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind: Rediscovering the African Seedbed of Western Christianity* (Intervarsity, 2007), 48.

²⁹ Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*, 49.

³⁰ Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*, 49.

³¹ Jean-Marc Éla, *African Cry*, trans. Robert J. Barr (Wipf and Stock, 1986), 9.

Just what was this *modus vivendi* should be we can see must have been a matter of no small difficulty. On the one side was the Jewish Christian with his insistence on ceremonial purity, and on the other was the Gentile Christian totally indifferent to such requirements. The ideals of neither could be practiced by the other. The one line of procedure open was that which was followed, namely, to recognize that different groups of Christians were at liberty to maintain different forms of worship provided that they were loyal to the primary element of the gospel, the saving experience of God through faith in Jesus as Christ.³²

Nicholas J. Schaser shows how the author of Acts links the decision of Jerusalem to the initial mission of Jesus prophesied by Simeon the Prophet at the Temple in the Lukan Gospel in ways that allow for a pragmatic decision to welcome Gentiles into the church.³³

On these grounds, one can argue that the inherent traditions and praxes defining the Catholic Church are themselves not alien to the African psyche. In fact, the *koinonia* (fellowship) serving as one of the defining markers of Christianity is as African as it can be through Africa's embrace of *ubuntu* consciousness. This understanding of fellowship is not simply a mindset; it is conditioned by modes of being in the world. As Don Thorsen notes, *koinonia* is not limited to fellowship. Rather, it can also mean "sharing, participation, or even contribution."³⁴ This type of sharing goes beyond the boundaries of one's familiar world. In fact, it is supposed to form the ethical ground for relating with that which is unfamiliar and/or different. Similarly, *ubuntu* consciousness is not limited to a mindset, but rather conditioned by a turn to active engagement with the world. It is a conscious turn

³² Mathews, "The Council at Jerusalem," 340–341.

³³ Nicholas J. Schaser, "'Unlawful for a Jew?' Acts 10:28 and the Lukan View of Jewish-Gentile Relations," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 48, no. 4 (2018): 198. See also Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (Doubleday, 1977), 458; Frank Dicken, *Herod as a Composite Character in Luke-Acts* (Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 37–38; Stephen Fowl, "Simeon in Acts 15:14: Simon Peter and Echoes of Simeon's Past," in *Characters and Characterization in Luke-Acts*, ed. Frank Dicken and Julia Snyder (Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2016), 185–198; Bart J. Koet, "Isaiah in Luke-Acts," in *Isaiah in the New Testament*, ed. Steve Moyise and Maarten J. J. Menken (T & T Clark, 2005), 94; Rainer Riesner, "James's Speech (Acts 15:13–21), Simeon's Hymn (Luke 2:29–32), and Luke's Sources," in *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ: Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Christology*, ed. Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Paternoster, 1994), 263–279; Pamela Shellberg, *Cleansed Lepers, Cleansed Hearts: Purity and Healing in Luke-Acts* (Fortress, 2015), 144; George V. Shillington, *An Introduction to the Study of Luke-Acts* (T & T Clark, 2007), 62, 70; Samson Uytanlet, *Luke-Acts and Jewish Historiography: A Study on the Theology, Literature, and Ideology of Luke-Acts* (Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 65–66.

³⁴ Don Thorsen, *An Introduction to Christian Faith and Practice. Volume 1* (Claremont, 2020), 141.

to sociality and a deliberate engagement with otherness through sharing and cooperating in a manner that allows for everyone to enter the horizon of abundant life.

Understood as sharing, participation, fellowship, or even contribution, *koinonia* is intricately linked to synodality. As noted by Julien M. Ogereau, in the pre-Christian era, verbs cognate to *koinonia* “denoted the action of cooperating or associating in an enterprise of some kind, be it political, commercial, or otherwise.”³⁵ Furthermore, “persons designated as κοινοί [*koinoi*] are usually understood to be tied by certain socio-economic and legal obligations, which could sometimes be brought to bear in official litigations.”³⁶ Reading ancient texts, one notices that *koinonia* does not refer to some abstract or passive mode of connection, but rather a deliberate and active connection with the other. This is found in the Pauline usage of the term.³⁷ The use of the term in the early church, especially in the cenobitic traditions, also upholds this deliberate and active connection to the other. Even Pachomius the Great is said to have named his cenobitic community *koinonia* to reflect the active care for and sharing of one’s gifts with others.³⁸

On a creedal level, Trinitarian relationality itself is grounded in *koinonia*. As noted by Najeeb G. Awad, commenting on Basil of Caesarea’s view on the Trinity, “Basil speaks about the divine Godhead as a *koinonia* of three persons in reciprocal interpenetration.”³⁹ This active reciprocal giving of oneself to the other instantiates both “inseparability and indivisibility of the three divine persons in terms of their actions.”⁴⁰ Similarly, “the incarnation reveals God as Trinity.”⁴¹ Hence, the two natures, divine and human in Jesus Christ are in a *koinonic* relationship because of their rootedness in the Second Person of the Trinity—Hypostatic Union (the giving of each nature to the

³⁵ Julien M. Ogereau, “A Survey of Κοινωνία and its Cognates in Documentary Sources,” *Novum Testamentum* 57 (2015): 278.

³⁶ Ogereau, “A Survey of Κοινωνία and its Cognates,” 285.

³⁷ Julien M. Ogereau, “Koinonia: New Testament,” in *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, vol. 15, *Kalam – Lectio Divina* ed. Christine Helmer, Steven L. McKenzie, Thomas Römer, et al. (De Gruyter, 2017), 433–434.

³⁸ Peter Gemeinhardt, “Koinonia: Christianity,” in *Kalam – Lectio Divina*, 435.

³⁹ Najeeb G. Awad, “Between Subordination and Koinonia: Toward A New Reading of the Cappadocian Theology,” *Modern Theology* 23, no. 2 (2007): 183.

⁴⁰ Awad, “Between Subordination and Koinonia,” 184. See also Basil of Caesarea, *De Spiritu Sancto*, chapter 16, no. 37, in *New Advent*, www.newadvent.org/fathers/3203.htm.

⁴¹ Aristotle Papanikolaou, “Divine Energies or Divine Personhood: Vladimir Lossky and John Zizioulas on Conceiving the Transcendent and Immanent God,” *Modern Theology* 19, no. 3 (2003): 358. See also Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1976), 64.

other on the grounds of the relationality that exudes from the divine personhood). Personhood forms the grounds for the enactment of a relational turn to the other. Hence, we speak of the triune God as a relational God in and through their personhood. Furthermore, since the incarnation is itself the realization of a divinized humanity through the grounding of the human nature of Jesus in proximity with the divine nature while maintaining their inseparability, unchangeability, indivisibility, and unmixity, one can argue that the entire content of the Christian life is one of fellowship (*koinonia*)—a turn to active communion with the other.

One sees this clearly articulated in canons 11 and 13 of the Council of Nicaea.⁴² Canon 11 focuses on the rituals of repentance and forgiveness grounded in an understanding of fellowship (*koinonia*). In and through active fellowship with the church, the sinner attains forgiveness for their sins through Christ who is the source of Christian fellowship. Canon 13 focuses on the intercessory role of the church in providing Viaticum for the dying while praying for their salvation. Hence, the creed is reflective of the *koinonia* in God as Trinity down through the Christian praxis of one baptism, belief in the catholicity of the church, the forgiveness of sins mediated by Christ, and the intercession of the saints for the sinful members of the church.⁴³ This centrality of *koinonia* in the Christian understanding of God as a social being in fellowship grounds the claim that participation, as the ritualization of *koinonia*, is central to one's deification (*theosis*) as embodiment of the new humanity in Christ. Conscious engagement with God through Christ in the church is undeniable. Aristotle Papanikolaou notes this well: "The incarnation is the event of real communion, such that the created human nature in Christ is deified through participation in God's life."⁴⁴

Without synodality, the Christian church cannot instantiate *koinonia* among its members. Hence, Pope Francis made the following comments to the members of the synod at the opening of the sixteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: "The Church: a single harmony made up of many voices and the work of the Holy Spirit. That is how we should think of the Church. Each Christian

⁴² Gemeinhardt, "Koinonia: Christianity," 436. See also, "'The Canons of the Council of Nicaea (325)—The Original Greek Text with English Translation—and Latin Versions," *Early Church Texts*, www.earlychurchtexts.com/public/nicaea_canons.htm.

⁴³ Grigorios Larentzakis, "The Unity of the Church as Koinonia: Some Reflections from an Orthodox Standpoint," *The Ecumenical Review* 45, no. 1 (1993): 69–70. See also, Francis, *For A Synodal Church*, no. 11.

⁴⁴ Papanikolaou, "Divine Energies or Divine Personhood," 359.

community, each individual is distinctive, but this distinctiveness must be included in the symphony of the Church, and that symphony is made ‘just right’ by the Spirit.”⁴⁵ Understanding the role of the bishop both within his local church and in proximity to other local churches, the link between *koinonia* and synodality is preserved. The bishop does not only embody the fellowship and invitation to reconcile differences through sharing by all, he also stands as the symbol of fellowship oriented towards the embrace of ecclesial peace among churches. Hence, Ignatius of Antioch would write the following to the church in Smyrna: “But avoid divisions, as being the beginning of evils. Do ye all follow the bishop, as Jesus Christ doth the Father; and follow the presbyters as the apostles; and have respect unto the deacons as unto the commandment of God. Let no one, apart from the bishop, do any of the things that appertain unto the church. Let that eucharist alone be considered valid which is celebrated in the presence of the bishop, or of him to whom he shall have entrusted it.”⁴⁶

One sees this play out in episcopal ordination rituals. A fellowship of churches through their bishops is enacted as the co-consecrating bishops stand as witnesses to the ordination of a new bishop for a local church.⁴⁷ In a similar manner, when gathered with other bishops in a synod or even a council, the bishop embodies the spirituality of *koinonia*. By “spirituality,” I mean a mode of being in the world and in the church oriented towards an embrace of the salvific peace of Christ itself a post-resurrection gift from Christ to his followers. Hence, Philip Kariatlis notes:

Historically, synodality in the Church concretely emerged as an extension of the *koinonia* within the local worshipping gathering so that there could be a means for eucharistic hospitality between faithful of different local Churches. In this way, communion across these different ecclesial gatherings could be safeguarded since faithful members of one local Church travelling to another in a different city could indeed partake of Holy Communion whilst on their journeys away from home. Together with this, a further task for the synodical gathering of bishops, which emerged very quickly in the early Church, was their coming together to reach and express a “common mind” in

⁴⁵ Francis, *Address for the Opening of the Works of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops ‘For A Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission.’*”

⁴⁶ Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Smyrnaeans*, trans. Charles H. Hoole (1885), 8:1, in *Early Christian Writings*, earlychristianwritings.com/text/ignatius-smyrnaeans-hoole.html.

⁴⁷ John P. Beal, James A. Coriden, and Thomas J. Green, eds., *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law* (Paulist, 2000), 1196.

matters of faith. Indeed, the decisions of such conciliar gatherings were considered to have been taken under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Both these functions not only manifested the communal dimension of all bishops' authority but also the profound *koinonia* between the local Churches. Expressed simply, it was the synodical structure, which gave each local Church—genuinely apostolic and “catholic” [namely integral] in itself, yet not self-sufficient—a visible means, by which it could be truly united with all other local Churches throughout the world. Accordingly, in the exercise of what St. Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258 CE) called the “harmonious multiplicity [*concors numerositas*]” of the college of bishops united together, the *koinonia* of all the faithful within the different local Churches was also expressed, since the bishops did not act in isolation but met in synod precisely to bear witness to and voice the faith of their respective communities.⁴⁸

Grigorios Larentzakis articulates this well from the perspective of Orthodox theology when he argues that it is “the Trinity that provides the theological basis of . . . *koinonia* ecclesiology.”⁴⁹ In the context of the Catholic Church, the “Final Document” from the recently concluded Synod on Synodality states:

In the holy People of God, which is the Church, the communion of the faithful (*communio fidelium*) is at the same time the communion of the Churches (*communio Ecclesiarum*), which is manifested in the communion of Bishops (*communio Episcoporum*) by reason of the very ancient principle that “the Church is in the Bishop and the Bishop is in the Church” (St. Cyprian, *Epistle* 66, no. 8). The Lord placed the Apostle Peter (cf. Matt 16:18) and his successors at the service of this manifold communion. By virtue of the Petrine ministry, the Bishop of Rome is “the perpetual and visible principle and foundation” (LG, no. 23) of the Church’s unity.⁵⁰

In Jerusalem, synodality embodied building bridges and expanding the borders of belonging to allow for difference to be embraced as part of the constituent markers of fellowship in Christ. However, when one looks at the history of the church and its approach to handling theological crises, one notices a shift from this approach employed by the Council of Jerusalem. Štefan Brinda states this well: “From the

⁴⁸ Philip Kariatlis, “The Apostolic Council of Jerusalem: The Decisive Paradigm for the Church’s Synodical Mode of Existence: A Timely Reminder for Today,” *Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church: Ecumenical Patriarchate*, orthodoxcouncil.org/-/the-apostolic-council-of-jerusalem-the-decisive-paradigm-for-the-church-s-synodical-mode-of-existence-a-timely-reminder-for-today.html.

⁴⁹ Larentzakis, “The Unity of the Church as *Koinonia*,” 69.

⁵⁰ Francis, *For A Synodal Church*, no. 10.

time of the Edict of Milan (313 CE), when Christians gained religious freedom and Christianity became the state religion, ecclesiastical and secular power influenced each other.”⁵¹ As David P. Long notes: “As the Church moved from the Patristic era to the Scholastic period, the understanding of excommunication included a greater emphasis on ‘the *poena vindicativa* and *medicinalis* of later ecclesiastical law.’ Excommunication became more defined, more easily imposed, harsher, and more difficult to reverse. Just as theologians became systematicians, addressing complex questions through proofs and arguments, so too did excommunication become a system of requirements met and official pronouncements made.”⁵²

The church’s legacy of a synodal culture is shaped by a struggle to strike a balance. On one hand, it attempts to legitimize synodal culture by insisting on the common baptism of its members as locus for ecclesial infallibility. On the other hand, it quickly reifies the hierarchical model as the source of magisterial infallibility that ought to guide the church. Sometimes, in the history of the church, these two have not always worked harmoniously.⁵³

SYNODALITY AS *PALAV*ER DIALOGUE

Francis argues that

Synodality is the walking together of Christians with Christ and towards God’s Kingdom, in union with all humanity. Oriented towards mission, synodality involves gathering at all levels of the Church for mutual listening, dialogue, and community discernment. It also involves reaching consensus as an expression of Christ rendering Himself present, He who is alive in the Spirit. Furthermore, it consists in reaching decisions according to differentiated co-responsibilities. . . . In simple and concise terms, synodality is a path of spiritual renewal and structural reform that enables the Church to be more participatory and missionary so that it can walk with every man and woman, radiating the light of Christ.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Štefan Brinda, “The Requirements of a Candidate for Bishop in the Early Church,” *Teka Komisji Prawniczej PAN Oddział w Lublinie* 17 (2024): 360.

⁵² David P. Long, “Eucharistic Ecclesiology and Excommunication: A Critical Investigation of the Meaning and Praxis of Exclusion from the Sacrament of the Eucharist,” *Ecclesiology* 10 (2014): 212–213.

⁵³ See Phyllis Zagano, *Just Church: Catholic Social Teaching, Synodality, and Women* (Paulist, 2023), 53–77.

⁵⁴ Francis, *For A Synodal Church*, no. 13.

Synodality speaks to the fact that the church as a community constituted by believers in Christ is an institution with an eschatological focus which must engage and serve as a “catalyst for the redemption and transformation of social relationships.”⁵⁵ A church in the world is affected by and responding to the realities shaping the world in which it finds itself.⁵⁶ However, the realization of its eschatological focus is not complete because the church is also sinful. In its sinfulness, the church strives to be faithful to Christ and the examples of its saintly members. Through the synodal process, it works actively at reimagining the focus of the socio-political dynamics to move away from the usurpation of power by a few to a more collaborative and synodal consciousness grounded in an altruistic focus.⁵⁷

Baptism is a common denominator of belonging within Christianity. This sense of belonging ought to open up the space of leadership and participation to all in the church’s life. One does not ascend the hierarchical ladder of Holy Orders unless one is baptized. However, baptism does not open up this space for women within the Catholic Church. This exclusion of women from aspects of ecclesial life frustrates the attainment of the universal consciousness and belonging Christianity and its ecclesial communities ought to embrace. A transnational sense of belonging ought also to foster a non-trans-exclusionary culture when it comes to the inner workings of the church as an institution that instantiates *koinonia* among its members. Hence, the Final Document from the sixteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod reminds the entire church that “by virtue of Baptism, women and men have equal dignity as members of the People of God. However, women continue to encounter obstacles in obtaining a fuller recognition of their charisms, vocation, and place in all the various areas of the Church’s life. This is to the detriment of serving the Church’s shared mission.”⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Libreria Vaticana, 2004), 23.

⁵⁶ See Sean Healy and Brigid Reynolds, “The Church as Economic, Political, Cultural, and Social Actor. The Case of Social Partnership in Ireland,” paper presented to *Boston University/CORI Justice Commission Conference on Church and Theology in the Contemporary World* (February 11, 2002), 1–31, www.socialjustice.ie/sites/default/files/legacy/file/the_church.pdf.

⁵⁷ Second Vatican Council, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et Spes*. December 7, 1965, no. 1, www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

⁵⁸ Francis, *For A Synodal Church*, no. 22.

Ubuntu instantiates belonging of all in the African worldview. This point can serve as a corrective to the church's self-understanding and role in the world. However, African social wisdom rests on the fact that social systems are constituted by difference. Epistemic, ideological, existential, cultural, religious, and even political differences are constituent markers of a social world. As a turn to harmony in the social world, *ubuntu* does not mean a negation of differences; it rather holds in place and acknowledges these differences while making a deliberate effort to find the threads of unity all parties can uphold. To achieve this, it employs the social praxis of encounter and dialogue. Thus, *palaver* is itself a tool not just for encounter but also recognition of otherness in a social world. It also instantiates spaces of visibility where all parties involved in dialogue embrace openness towards each other. Though each party may hold different ideologies, the fact that they all come together with the intent to broaden their perspectives and, if possible, embrace a pragmatic perspective that strikes a balance, is itself an effort made to follow a thread of unity.

As praxis of encounter and recognition of otherness, *palaver* functions by acknowledging the historicity of a people. The participants in a *palaver* encounter operate by insisting on standing on the collective wisdom of their people; in this case, the wisdom of ancestors. The same can be said in Christianity as it pertains to saints. Saints are exemplary figures who stand as examples of how to live the Christian life in a manner that allows one to attain both personal and cosmic harmonies in the pursuit of a relational intimacy with the divine.⁵⁹ Ancestors are custodians and reflectors of the moral ideals and wisdom of a people in the African cultural world. They serve as guides for embodying abundant life not just for oneself but for others as well. The participants in a *palaver* encounter may hold different ideas. Ancestral knowledge is not primarily about knowledge, but rather more about the relevance of that depository of wisdom in mediating abundant life for all in the community. Similarly, by holding on to different ideas, the participants in a *palaver* encounter are tasked with the responsibility to always focus on how their ideas can help mediate life for all. This is how a turn to *palaver* encounter is itself a rejection of insular ways of being in the world.

⁵⁹ For a comparative analysis on the similarities between ancestorhood in Yoruba Religion and sainthood in Christianity, see, SimonMary A. Ahiokhai, "Ancestorhood in Yoruba Religion and Sainthood in Christianity: Envisioning an Ecological Awareness and Responsibility," *International Journal of African Catholicism* 1, no. 1 (2010): 1–22.

Furthermore, a turn to *palaver* encounter is itself a turn to ethics. It grounds encounter in a world of existential praxis of ethical consciousness oriented towards an altruistic way of being in the world. Thus, how one acts or argues in a *palaver* encounter must always be defined by a willingness to act rightly, speak truthfully, and embrace openness so that the encounter can be transformative for all. Bujo states this well when he speaks of how *palaver* works among the Ashanti people of Ghana. “The first rule of the palaver among the Ashanti states that the gods and the ancestors watch over the world and together guide all the powers of the universe. The formulation aims to point out that the human person cannot construct the meaning of his life on his own; this meaning goes beyond him and can come only from a transcendental world. This is the basis of the entire endeavor to establish correct moral precepts.”⁶⁰

Palaver affirms a pragmatic way of being in the world. Pragmatism is inherent in the African cultural worldview. This turn to pragmatism shapes African relationships, including between the religious person/community and the divine. The truths of the divine are not static truths demanding simple adherence or intellectual submission. Rather, they are always to be understood within the social world of Africans. This social world and its realities ought to shape how such divine truths are received. Hence, for Africans, reading the signs of the times also means that divine truths must speak to the cultural and social world in which Africans find themselves.⁶¹ Consequently, *palaver* encounters mediate a deliberate process of reading the signs of the times in a way that sheds light on how the divine is inviting the community through those involved in the encounter to update their ways of being in the world and allow God’s word to be ever living and relevant, mediating progress for all.

Even when intended to address conflicts, *palaver* encounters are themselves focused on connections. Disputes arise when erasures occur. Such erasures can be of the other who is existentially embodied or they can be epistemic. In fact, social disputes are validated by a turn to a monologue which represses alternative perspectives. The praxis of *palaver* is the affirmation of polyphonic discourse that creates a sense and place of visibility for ideas, knowledge, identities, and

⁶⁰ Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic*, 55.

⁶¹ For a detailed engagement with this idea see, SimonMary Ahiokhai, “Embracing the Pragmatic in African Indigenous Religions: New Perspective for Interfaith Dialogue,” in *Christianity and Culture Collision: Particularities and Trends from a Global South*, ed. Cyril Orji and Joseph Ogbonnaya (Cambridge Scholars, 2016), 151–163. See also Francis, *For A Synodal Church*, no. 6.

bodies previously erased or silenced. Only through deep listening can the church hear the insights and see the vision of a path to follow that can help make present the fullness of God's life for the here and now. As Josephine Lombardi notes: "By asking key questions, including but not limited to, 'How is journeying together happening today in your local Church? What steps does the Spirit invite us to take in order to grow in our journeying together?' the bishops of the Church are anchoring the synodal process within the community of the faithful. Moreover, as a teaching and learning Church, the people of God is led by the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit."⁶²

As for synodality, in *palaver* encounters discourses are intended to be a ritual of thinking together and embracing a collective consciousness of what is being revealed to all present. Synodality is not just about the retrieval of the past, but rather about standing in the collective wisdom of the church's tradition while intentionally asking the question: How can present realities help us so interpret the past that it becomes a living tradition flowing like a river into the present while making way for the unfolding future? This continuum of consciousness—not restricted by a sense of rigidity as though the church's tradition is an archival reality without connection to the living church of Christ—forces an embrace of synodality to reflect on the psyche of the church radical openness to the realities of the present. The church comes to understand its ministries as always self-reflective, looking at how the present can help reshape such ministries to allow for a broader embrace of those both within and outside of church.⁶³ This understanding of synodality as a continuum of consciousness is similar to how *ubuntu* is understood. The praxis of *palaver* within the African social world enables *ubuntu* consciousness as a continuum of moral awareness that serves as a reminder to Africans to ask themselves: Who is excluded and why are they excluded? This question grounds the probing dialogue instantiated by *palaver*, through which the community realizes that they must go further to make space for those who may have been erased or silenced. Without this ongoing process, the community becomes morally dead and unable to mediate abundant life for all. Insofar as *palaver* is enacted in the social interactions of the community members, *ubuntu* must be an awareness that evokes continuity.

⁶² Josephine Lombardi, *Marian Approaches to Synodality* (Paulist, 2024), 13.

⁶³ Francis, "Speech at the Commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops," October 17, 2015, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html.

Emphasizing the relevance of reconceiving the church through a synodal lens, Gaudenzio Zamnon argues that “synodality is the form in which the recognition of multiple subjectivities can take place, all of them necessary, albeit in different ways, for the fulfillment of the Church’s mission.”⁶⁴ Hence, the Final Document notes the following: First, “synodality ought to be expressed in the Church’s ordinary way of living and working. This *modus vivendi et operandi* works through the community listening to the Word and celebrating the Eucharist, the brotherhood of communion and the co-responsibility and participation of the whole People of God in its life and mission, on all levels and distinguishing between various ministries and roles.”⁶⁵ Second, “synodality denotes those structures and ecclesial processes in which the synodal nature of the Church is expressed at an institutional level, but analogously on various levels: local, regional, and universal. These structures and processes are officially at the service of the Church, which must discover the way to move forward by listening to the Holy Spirit.”⁶⁶ Third, the theological and canonical processes of the church are meant to help shed light on these structures and ecclesial styles in a manner that they reflect the content of deep listening and openness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit even if these conflict with settled ways of doing and seeing things. Synodality evokes a rebirth, a new vision, an embrace of the enduring and continuous awakening to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

What is sometimes forgotten in discourses on synodality is the fact that synodality centers the role of a people’s socio-cultural contexts in deliberating on how to interpret the signs of the times. It is not just about “journeying together” or engaging in a collaborative approach to dialogue and encounter, but also about acknowledging the social world defining the experiences and meaning-making approaches of the constituent members of the synodal process. It is about taking seriously the social world of a people and acknowledging the fact that such a world can and does mediate divine-creation encounters. When the church gathers in synod, the Holy Spirit is present to it through the different local experiences its members embody. The fact that the gathered church through the synodal process embraces a *koinonia* of love among its members points to the fact that their one baptism unites

⁶⁴ Gaudenzio Zamnon, “Riconoscimento reciproco di soggettività tra laici e ministri ordinati in ordine ad una forma sinodale di chiesa,” in *Chiesa e sinodalità. Coscienza, Forme, Processi*, ed. Ricardo Battocchio and Serena Noceti (Glosa, 2007), 194 as cited in Luciani, *Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church*, 28.

⁶⁵ Francis, *For A Synodal Church*, no. 14.

⁶⁶ Francis, *For A Synodal Church*, no. 14.

them to Christ and this unity demands that they all take seriously the different social worlds where the life of Christ has been made present to the believers coming from such worlds. Hence, we speak of reception. The church teaches. The church also receives what she teaches through its members united with the college of bishops with the Bishop of Rome as its head. One notices how the reception of the canons of Nicaea played out even among the churches of the East at different synods.⁶⁷

REIMAGINING LEADERSHIP IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH: A TURN TO *PALAV*

If the spirit of synodality is to be fully embraced by the Catholic Church, the church must also be willing to reimagine its current structures of leadership, defined by the social world from which it emerged. For example, the realities defining the role of a bishop and even the office of the papacy as we have come to know it came from the church's embrace of the Roman imperialistic social structures of governance. These structures validated a top-down approach to leadership and governance, especially when society was shaped by a pyramidal structure of importance with the monarch at the top.⁶⁸ To circumvent this reality, a synodal turn must necessarily embody a new social world. Even if this social world may not currently exist, a turn to synodality is itself a turn to possibilities for imagining a new way of being in the world. Synodality, as a mindset, a spirituality, a desire to bring to bear a new way of being radically inclusive, can be the means for creating a social world that is inclusive.

As *palaver* encounter is about making room for all persons to participate by sharing their insights in the resolution of a conflict or the process of making decisions, so can synodality be for the church when grounded in baptism. The role of the bishop in that context is more like that of the libator described earlier. As libator, the bishop serves as a source of ecclesial wisdom and a voice that helps to call all into fellowship in love without being the one to pronounce judgment that does not reflect the will of the people. As libator, the bishop's role is to help hold space for the praxis of synodality in the deliberations

⁶⁷ For a rich engagement with how the Church of the East received the teachings of Nicaea, see Ephrem Aboud Ishac, "The First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea 325 in Syriac Synodal Politics," *Annales Historiae Conciliorum: Journal for the History of Councils* 53, no. 1 (2023): 77–85.

⁶⁸ Claudia Rapp, "The Elite Status of Bishops in Late Antiquity in Ecclesiastical, Spiritual, and Social Contexts," *Arethusa* 33, no. 3 (2000): 387–388.

of the local church, paralleling the role of the Bishop of Rome for the universal church. As one who holds space and calls all to embrace synodality in their deliberations, whether in the local or universal context, the bishop serves as embodiment of the fellowship of love that exists in the churches. But this role does not mean that only in the bishop can one find this embodiment. In fact, baptism makes all Christians an embodiment of the *koinonia* of love that exists in the churches. Also, baptism is a sacrament of connection. In their office of libator, the bishop is joined with other Christians within and outside their local churches through the one baptism of Christ in which all Christians participate.

Palaver is a communal praxis of belonging. No one is excluded. If baptism is itself the grounding of a synodal mindset and culture in the church, then holy orders, and all sacraments ought to be open to all who are baptized. Is the church's current magisterium open to this reality? I do not think so. The constant appeal to tradition and refusal to understand that that tradition is defined by the cultural, political, and historical epochs through which the church was formed makes it almost impossible to rethink the theology of holy orders to allow all the baptized to partake of it. The role of women in the African cultural and religious world is something the African churches ought not to ignore. Prior to Christianity and Western colonial governments, African women were very much present as active agents of leadership both in the secular and religious contexts. To then have a church that bars women from ministerial priesthood through which it shapes leadership structures is paradoxical to the African psyche.

Palaver is a process that is essentially public. It is not private. All parties are meant to share and discern publicly to arrive at a decision with which they are all comfortable. If this process is embraced by the church, the current culture of secrecy that surrounds the appointment of bishops, whether for the local church or the See of Rome, ought to be abandoned. Baptism is what makes all members of the church. The responsibility of being an active member of the church flows from it in such manner that one can participate in ecclesial governance. If this is accepted, then the baptized need to play an active role in the decision-making process for appointing bishops. The current practice of consulting just a few persons—sometimes, these are priests sworn to secrecy—needs to be abandoned. The bishop is going to be the pastor of a local church, and all members of that church should weigh into the process.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Francis, *For A Synodal Church*, no. 32.

While upholding the relevance of a synodal consciousness in church leadership and decision-making process, I argue that the issues at stake are also about taking seriously the local church as locus of ecclesial deliberations to allow for a robust deployment of the discerning praxis of reception. Too often the universal church tends to make the mistake of making binding decisions that do not have any contextual relevance for specific local churches. The place where discernment of doctrinal teachings and ecclesial praxes must begin is the local church. This was exactly the practice of the early church. As Oden notes,

The fact that the seven general ecumenical councils accepted by the East and West occurred in Asia Minor does not mean that the decisions they proclaimed as consensual were originated in Asia Minor. They merely confirmed exegetical studies that were hammered out previously and indeed largely in Africa at the earliest layers. . . . The ecumenical councils were making decisions based on regional councils that anteceded them. The earliest of these occurred more in Numidia, the Roman province of Africa and Egypt, than anywhere else.⁷⁰

CONCLUSION

Mathews's judgment on ecclesial history is worth noting:

Most of the difficulties in Christian history have arisen from the desire of one set of Christians to force another into complete identity of creed and practice. The decision of the church at Jerusalem is a model of another sort. The decision proposed by James was in effect that the Gentile Christians should be allowed to maintain their non-ritualistic form of Christianity, while by implication the Jews were left equally free to maintain the observance of the Mosaic law.⁷¹

The call for inclusivity in the twenty-first century church is coming from many fronts. Women seek a role in the ministerial life of the church. Same-sex persons long to participate in the sacramental life of the church. Divorced and re-married couples seek full participation in the life of the church. Rather than appeal to dogmatic texts or canonical decrees written within a culture of a hierarchical model of church governance that preferences an imperialistic model of leadership, a turn to a synodal process that instantiates a *palaver* approach may be the way forward. This approach calls for a church

⁷⁰ Oden, *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*, 51.

⁷¹ Mathews, "The Council at Jerusalem," 341.

that is slow to condemning and shaming people and quick at embracing all whom the Holy Spirit has led to the threshold of the Christian faith. Courage is needed. However, this courage comes from an embrace of vulnerability and surrendering to the promptings of the Holy Spirit who has promised through the words of Christ to lead and guide the church. The Spirit is not a spirit of exclusion. The Spirit is the spirit of unity that holds difference in place. The Spirit of the Trinity is an eternal bond of love with otherness in the fullness of the manifestation of otherness as Father and Son—the Father and the Son are not the Spirit. Let me end this work with the wise words of Pope Francis that call for the church to embrace the gift of imagination and creativity in addressing issues of inclusivity. In his words: “Since ‘time is greater than space,’ I would make it clear that not all discussions of doctrinal, moral, or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium. Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it.”⁷² Taking Francis’s advice seriously, the different local churches can instantiate their own cultural practices that foster inclusivity. That said, African churches ought to begin the process of using a *palaver* approach in shaping their leadership structures, while also promoting policies that foster inclusivity.

Finally, synodality can open up a new era for the church. It can be the gift of a new Pentecost experience, if the church takes seriously the possibilities that may open up while being guided by the Holy Spirit in its encounter with Christ. For this to become reality, courage to try and embrace a new culture grounded in hospitality, openness, and understanding that allow for radical inclusivity ought to be the *vade mecum* of the church for our times. **M**

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⁷² Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, no. 3, www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html.

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