

ECCLESIOGENESIS AND INCULTURATION: FACTORS OF SYNODALITY FOR THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The ecclesiological perspective of the Second Vatican Council continues to be a lighthouse for theological reflections and evaluations and the Church's involvement in this current synodal renewal points to the deep wealth that this Council's legacy has left us. But in order for us to not fall into the temptation of using synodality as a magic word, it is necessary to ask after factors that can promote not just its durability but also its credibility in the life and mission of the Church. The Church's origin and sustenance flows from the life of the Blessed Trinity, which is her model but the participation and identity of the ecclesial subjects within the Church is also important because without these, the significance of catholicity and communion cannot be said to have been achieved.

Keywords: Synodality, People of God, Ecclesiology, Inculturation

Introduction

The discourse of synodality has permeated the fibers of the Church's organization and after the first plenary of the Synod on Synodality which took place in October 2023 in Rome, it is believed that this opportunity at the revitalization and renewal of the Church's identity should not be left impotent without initiating any concrete evaluation and/or change for the Church. But as this applies to the universal Church, the significance of synodality only begins to be manifest when we take the concrete realization of the Church in their local settings and ask how we can make synodality, the act of journeying together with one another, become part of the Church's manner of expressing herself.

It is for this reason that this article is proposing two realities – ecclesiology and inculturation – for the Catholic Church in Nigeria. The first refers to the reconfiguration of the Church according to the demands of the People of God ecclesiology, where every ecclesial subject in the local Church takes part of the mission for which the Church has been commissioned. This will require that the communities around the parishes (in Nigeria, they are called zones) be given more protagonist roles. The second factor, inculturation, hinges on the multicultural outlook that characterizes a great deal of the local Churches¹ in Nigeria, a factor that has been given little practical significance. It argues that the ecclesial subjects cannot be alienated from the culture they come from or that plays host to local churches. These are important if the Catholic Church in Nigeria wants to be truly synodal.

This article is stratified in such a manner that the divine aspect of the Church is shown as the bedrock of what the Church should represent. This is accompanied by a reflection on the People of God ecclesiology and its connection with synodality. Finally, the concepts of

¹This term is used interchangeably with “dioceses”.

ecclesiogenesis and inculturation are discussed with the benefits they have for a synodal Church in Nigeria.

The Church And Her Mystical Identity

The discourse of the synodal identity of the Church can only be meaningful within the Church, because it is in the internal dynamics of her life that its identity is discovered and recognizing this, makes it possible for her members to better comprehend the Church's divine origin and purpose.

Until the revolutionary perspective of the Second Vatican Council, the Church's identity from the Tridentine period was debated along the lines of the legitimate structure of her hierarchy and the authority that lied therein.² The ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council sprung from the seeds that were planted in the First Vatican council by some notable theologians like Johann Adam Möhler, Clement Schroeder, Johann Baptist Franzelin and currents of theological renewals that took place within the Church.³ The theological heritage present in the Second Vatican Council on the Church is contained in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* but not in an exclusive sense as other documents of the Council highlight the ecclesiological perspectival presentation of what the Church should be in the world, in her mission, in her act of worship, her mode of comprehending her faith, her relationship with other churches and other religions.

The ecclesiological vision of the Second Vatican Council takes off from the position and idea that the Church is a mystery,⁴ that is, to be closely knitted to the Blessed Trinity. Summarily, the first chapter of the dogmatic constitution on the Church makes us understand that the origin of the Church is rooted in the salvific desire hidden in God, which was revealed gradually in history through creation and the covenant with the people Israel and then fully in Jesus Christ (cf. LG 2, Col. 1:24-27, Heb. 1:1-2).⁵

²Cf. K. Rahner – M. Von Galli – O. Baumhauer, *La reforma que llega de Roma*, Barcelona 1970, 19. The First Vatican Council was billed to debate the identity and nature of the Church but was abruptly interrupted by the outbreak of WWI and only two sections saw the light of the day: The dogmatic constitution on the catholic faith *Dei filius* and The dogmatic constitution on the authority of the Pope *Pastor aeternus*. The latter constitution highlights the hierarchical conception of the Church, where all the faithful and pastors are hierarchically subordinate to the episcopal authority of the Roman pontiff in the question of the faith, morality and all that pertains to the discipline and governance of the Church. This was the dominant and official ecclesiological position of the Church until the Second Vatican Council.

³ Cf. K. Walter, *Iglesia Católica. Esencia, realidad, misión*, Salamanca 1996, 20ff; J. Powell, *The Mystery of the Church*, Milwaukee 1967, 3ff.

⁴ Cf. K. H. Neufeld, "Misterio/Misterios" in: R. Latourelle – R. Fisichella – S. Pié-Ninot (dirs.), *Diccionario de Teología Fundamental*, Madrid 1992, 985-987; K. Rahner – H. Vorgrimler, "Misterio" in: *Diccionario Teológico*, Barcelona 1966, 435-437. The understanding of mystery should be captured as something that transcends the human cognitive ability and not so much as a deficient reality since it belongs to and forms part of the general organization of reality in its totality. It is an aspect that is not completely comprehended by the human mind. As far as the Christian understanding is concerned, God is the origin, center and finality of mystery but this mystery is not a reality that gains relevance by its hiddenness rather it is a mystery that constantly wants to be revealed to man in history and whose revelation is assented to by the testimony of faith and not by mere human reason. The Christian concept of mystery combines two parallel aspects because it accommodates, on one hand, the idea of mystery as a transcendental and salvific reality where the identity of God as distinct from the realm and reach of man is buttressed together with the idea that God, the transcendent being, also reaches out to man (salvation). On the other hand, lies the aspect of mystery as a hidden and manifested reality which points to the fact that man's natural use of reason is incapable of comprehending this transcendental reality but this reality does not comfort itself by being esoteric or merely hidden. It seeks to be revealed and manifested to man (L. Gera, "El misterio de la Iglesia" in: *Teología: Revista de la Facultad de Teología de la Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina* 7, 154-213). The Church as a mystery underlines the fact that her origin is not in her but in God and secondly, that she represents the God's plan in human history.

⁵Cf. J.-M. R. Tillard, *Iglesia de Iglesias. Ecclesiología de comunión*, Salamanca 1991, 23ff. It must be stated that the origin of the Church in God was not a super-creative idea of the 20th century among theologians rather, it is in conformity with the faith of the first Christians, according to the exegetical findings and studies of the new testament texts, after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The principal idea here is that the Church, as manifested on the day of Pentecost, is the fulfillment of God's salvific design held from ages before.

In Jesus Christ, the Word of God, the will of the Father is fulfilled. He who preached the kingdom of God by his words and pointed it out by his works and healings, attracted to himself his followers, among whom were the twelve who lived and formed a fraternal community around him. His death and resurrection, the climax of the work of our redemption, is the manifestation of God's love and his plan that men should share in his life (cf. LG 3).

The Holy Spirit has been present from the beginning in creation, in the life and mission of the Son and was fully revealed at the event of Pentecost which gave rise to the manifestation of the nature of the Church. The Second Vatican Council teaches us that the Holy Spirit is the sanctifier of the Church, her guide to all truth, her unifying force with the Trinity (cf. LG 3-4). In this reality the Church finds her foundation in the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The Church's origin in the Blessed Trinity, as presented in the first chapter of the dogmatic constitution *De ecclesia*, presents the opportunity of discussing the Church's gradual formation in various historical phases – the prefiguration phase contained in the beginning of creation, the phase of preparation in the history of Israel, the phase of its institution by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and finally its consummation phase at the end of time.⁶ The inner life of the Triune God is the source of the Church's existence. It is what determines its nature and defines its mission in the world and as St. Cyprian puts it, the Church finds its root and foundation in the unity of Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.⁷ These words of St. Cyprian «*de unitate Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti plebs adunata*» highlights the thought of the Church Father on how the Church should be conceived and according to G. Philips, the Church could be thought as either an imitation of or a participation in the Trinity but it is clear that in Cyprian's thought the Church cannot be fully expressed nor understood outside of the Trinity.⁸

This trinitarian vision of the Church reflects the internal unity of the divine persons because she is the fruit of the revelation and divine missions and an icon of the Trinity given that the Church is a community of distinct persons united to form a people in the likeness of the Trinity.⁹ From this perspective, it is understood that the Church, primarily and principally, from this mystical identity is a *sacrament* that manifests and reveals the triune identity of God. A perfect comprehension of the Church cannot be said to have taken place if she is not spoken of as the image of the trinitarian communion¹⁰ which underlines her identity as “mystery” because her members participate in the divinity of three divine Persons.¹¹

⁶Cf. G. Philips, *La Iglesia y su misterio en el Concilio Vaticano II. Historia, texto y comentario de la constitución «Lumen Gentium»*, Barcelona 1968, Vol. I, 103-109. The central idea postulated by this author, following the arguments of the church fathers, is that the Church's origin was premediated in the mind of God right from the beginning of creation. The deepening of the Church's origin in the Blessed Trinity is used to underline once again the internal relation between the old testament and the new testament, between the people of Israel in the old testament and the people of God of the new testament and finally the coming of Christ and the effusion of the Holy Spirit as the fulfillment of the promise made by God in his covenant with his people. The Church's place in history will be consummated at the end of time, where she will fully assume her identity in perfection.

⁷Cf. St. Cyprian, *De oratione dominica*, 23.

⁸Cf. G. Philips, *op. cit.*, 116.

⁹Cf. N. Silanes, “*La Iglesia de la Trinidad*”: *La Santísima Trinidad en el Vaticano II. Estudio genético-teológico*, Salamanca 1981, 189-190.

¹⁰Cf. W. Kasper, *op. cit.*, 123.

¹¹Cf. L. Gera, “El misterio de la Iglesia”, 159.

Summarily, the consideration of the Church in her mystical identity, takes off from her origin in the manifestation of the salvific design of God the Father, which was revealed fully in the person of Christ and by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The actions of these three divine Persons united in love and will are the foundation of the Church. The Church, through her members, participates in the divine life of the Trinity and by the unity and communion borne in the heart of each member, she is the icon and image of the Trinity, the sacrament of salvation that God offers to man and creation. Therefore, as fruit of the union and love of the divine Persons, the nature of the Church as *koinonia*, communion seems logical and natural. The implication of this is that the Church experiences this communion not just as a representation of the perfect unity of the Trinity but also by the internal expression of solidarity among her members where each one is receptive to the other irrespective of the particularities that differentiates them and this is fully seen in the participation in the same faith, Baptism and Eucharist (cf. Eph. 4:4ff).¹²

The synodal image of the Church

From this perspective it can be seen that the identity of the Church as mystery comes from the Trinity (cf. LG 5) and that it is impossible for one concept to describe it satisfactorily. For this reason, one can see the logic of the different images used to define the Church in her concrete form in history. The reception and formulation of these ecclesiological concepts have given rise to a rich understanding of the identity of the Church not only in its origin but also in its historical form in today's world.

One of the fruits of the Council was the recovery of the Church within the ecclesiological category of "People of God", an identity that is linked to the history of salvation. The understanding of the Church as the People of God obviously does not underestimate her identity as the "Body of Christ" or the "Temple of the Holy Spirit" because if the Church is the People of God, it is so thanks to the participation of her members in the Body of Christ and the recognition of the life of the Holy Spirit within her.¹³

The theological richness and depth of the ecclesiological category of the People of God was again evident in the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which focused on reflecting and understanding the Church under the lens of synodality, highlighting the aspects of communion, participation and mission.

Synodality is a concept that refers to the involvement and participation of the whole people of God in the life and mission of the Church.¹⁴ According to Pope Francis, "it is precisely this path of synodality that God expects of the Church in the third millennium".¹⁵ This reality derives directly from the conception of the Church as the People of God presented by the Council, which finds its roots in the Old Testament people of Israel and which in the New Testament was raised to a new qualitative state instituted by Jesus Christ (cf. LG 9). It makes sense, then, that the Church should focus on finding the relevance of her identity by embracing the synodal spirit, which means a community that walks together.

¹²Cf. J.-M.R. Tillard, *Iglesia de Iglesias*, 40-42.

¹³O. González de Cardedal, "Introducción al documento *Lumen Gentium* sobre la Iglesia", in: *Concilio Ecueménico Vaticano II. Constituciones, Decretos. Declaraciones*. Madrid 1993, 65.

¹⁴International Theological Commission, *Synodality in the life and mission of the Church*, March 2018, n.7.

¹⁵Francisco, *Discurso en la ceremonia conmemorativa del 50 aniversario de la institución del Sínodo de los Obispos*, 2015.

Already St. John Chrysostom defined the Church as a system and a synod, the reality of walking together, the communal participation of each member of the Church toward the kingdom of God in conformity with the demands of the Gospel of Christ.¹⁶ This is clearly a manifestation of the meaning of *ekklesia*, the etymological root of the Church, which implies that it is, on the one hand, the fruit of the grace of God's invitation to man to be part of the community of those who in faith and love obey this divine invitation and, on the other hand, the verification of the salvific proclamation that the community itself represents in the world.¹⁷ For if the Synod aims to reflect the communion, participation and mission of the Church, it is because the ecclesiological category of the People of God, a historical manifestation of the Church as *communio*, has not become obsolete, but is a category that requires a coherent renewal of its understanding and actuality.

The implication of being a people of God is manifested in the capacity to “walk together” which presupposes the acceptance of a common identity. Thus, starting from the legacy left to us by the Second Vatican Council, it is affirmed that synodality is best understood in terms of the Church as the People of God, “but with a healthy harmony with the ecclesiology of communion”.¹⁸ It is this view of communion in and of the Church, a gift of God, that provides that fertile soil for the practice of walking together. Just as communion is logical and natural to the Church, synodality is seen as the *modus vivendi* and *operandi* of the people of God.¹⁹ synodality describes the Church's life and manner of being in the world. It expresses and manifests the ecclesiology of communion in that each faithful, bound to others as “companions on the journey”, is called to participate actively in the priesthood of Jesus Christ²⁰ and this is concretely expressed in her liturgy and her mission. In the following segments there shall be a brief presentation of the theological base of synodality.

The mystery of God as the foundation of synodality

Just as the origin of the Church cannot be without connection to the Blessed Trinity, it is theologically impossible to talk about the synodality of the Church without the Blessed Trinity. This highlights the relevance of the Trinitarian doctrine which was criticized by Immanuel Kant as lacking practical significance for man, therefore irrelevant. To talk of the synodality of the Church from the mystery of God gives us the opportunity to reflect on the unity of the three Persons, their equality in nature and power and their distinction by virtue of their relations to the other.²¹

¹⁶Cf. S. Madrigal, *El giro eclesiológico en la recepción del Vaticano II*, Santander 2017, 311.

¹⁷ Cf. W. Beinert, “El sentido de la Iglesia”, in: J. Feiner – M. Löhrer (dirs), *Mysterium salutis. Manual de teología como historia de la salvación*, Madrid 1973, vol. IV/I, 301.

¹⁸J.P. García Maestro, “Noción y fundamento teológico-pastoral de una Iglesia sinodal”, in *Sinite: Revista de pedagogía religiosa* 190 (2022), 292.

¹⁹Cf. International Theological Commission, *op. cit.*, n. 43. The *modus vivendi* of the Church is described in the terms of *koinonia*, in the sense that it expresses the intimate nature of the Church and this implies the relationship of unity and love with the Triune God, the participation in the life of God through the celebration of the word and sacraments, the communion and unity of local Churches by the grace of the Eucharist and finally, the expression of communion of the faithful by the shared responsibility in the life and mission of the Church. The *modus operandi* express how the Church carries out her mission in the world and it is enshrined in the mandate of service, *diakonia*, which she learnt from Jesus Christ. The definition of ministry in the Church starts from the biblical understanding of service and the perfect terminology is *διακονία* and this refers to the attitude of service that a Christian should have by being a disciple of Christ in the world. Here it is a lifestyle that is not just added to being a Christian or as a mere ethical or functional attitude, rather it is a life of deep service to God (Cf. C. Martínez Oliveras, “Sinodalidad: fundamentos teológicos del *modus Ecclesiae*” in: *Salamanticensis* 68 (2021) 213-249).

²⁰Cf. International Theological Commission, *ibid.*, n.55.

²¹Cf. W. Kasper, *Iglesia católica*, 121-125.

The International Theological Commission in its document on synodality points out that the synodal image of the Church is as a result of the participation of the Church in the life of the Blessed Trinity, a life that is opened and destined to humanity.²² The trinitarian foundation of synodality is expressed in the notes of the Church and therefore called into communion by the salvific design and desire of God, she is *one* because the unity of the Trinity which is her origin, model and destination. This unity is a gift and not a fruit of man's will, which makes the Church a People of God united in the Body of Christ through the Holy Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 12,4). She is *holy* because she is the fruit of the Blessed Trinity, sanctified by the grace of Christ as his bride and vivified by the Father's love through the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5,23; Rom. 5,5). She is *catholic* because the fullness and integrity of the faith is present in her and she is divinely commissioned for all men and women of the human race be made one holy people (Mt. 16,16; 28,19). She is *apostolic* because she was erected on the faith of the apostles (Eph. 2,20) and faithfully transmits this faith from one age to another through their successors (Acts. 20,19).

The synodal image of the Church is divinely founded on the truth that it draws from the Trinity and the plurality of her members is a manifestation of the dynamic relationship whose force is the love of God, communicated by Christ and his Spirit. It is the fusion of divine communion with the history of man. As a people and assembly called by the Lord, synodality is the expression of the identity of the Church as a People of God.²³

The “People of God” ecclesiology and synodality

The use of images to describe the Church has been stated as the effect of its mystic identity, a reality that is a gift due to its origin, participation in the life of Trinity and its divine destination. This is why the use of images is important whenever the nature of the Church is to be described. These images, however, are needed to complement and complete each other, since no single image can encapsulate all that the Church is.²⁴ The People of God ecclesiological image has been chosen because it seems to be the most favored, but not exclusively, by the Second Vatican Council and the idea behind synodality is heavily vested in the common identity that the members of the Church share – in being God's people which has been promoted by the papacy and magisterium of Pope Francis.²⁵

The historical salvific significance of the idea of the People of God in the sacred scripture shows that it is not a mere sociological concept but points to the reality of God's desire to elect and set aside a people for himself through which his salvation will reach all the people (Gen. 18,18; 22,18; 26,4; 28,14), in the covenant he made with Israel after their exodus from Egypt, he vowed that they are his people just as he is their God (cf. Ex. 6,7; Lev.

²²Cf. International Theological Commission, *ibid.*, n. 43–45.

²³C. M. Galli, “Iglesia sinodal y sinodalidad de la Iglesia: Fundamentos teológicos y teológicos”, in: S. Madrigal (ed), *La sinodalidad en la vida y en la misión de la Iglesia. Texto y comentario de la Comisión Teológica Internacional*, Madrid 2022, 115ff.

²⁴Cf. W. Kasper, *op. cit.*, 183.

²⁵Cf. Francis, Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, November 2013, n. 17; A. Spadaro, “Interview with Pope Francis”, 2013. Interview with Pope Francis by Fr Antonio Spadaro, Editor-in-Chief of the Italian Jesuit magazine “La Civiltà Cattolica” (“L'Osservatore Romano” of 21 September 2013) | Francis (vatican.va) “The image of the church I like is that of the holy, faithful people of God. This is the definition I often use, and then there is that image from the Second Vatican Council's ‘Dogmatic Constitution on the Church’ (No. 12). Belonging to a people has a strong theological value. In the history of salvation, God has saved a people. There is no full identity without belonging to a people. No one is saved alone, as an isolated individual, but God attracts us looking at the complex web of relationships that take place in the human community. God enters into this dynamic, this participation in the web of human relationships”.

26,12; Jer. 32,38; Ez. 11,20). In the new testament, the concept of the People of God acquired a new terminology (from Greek's *ekklesia*) “Church” or “Church of God” (Acts. 20,28; 1 Cor. 1,2; 10,32; 11,22; 15,9; Gal. 1,13; 1 Tim. 3, 5) even though it used the “People of God” in some places (Acts. 15,14; 18,10; Rom. 9,25; 2 Cor. 6, 16). The most famous usage is seen in 1 Pet. 2, 9ff. The principal idea of the people of God in the New Testament is the continuation of the promise and salvation of God to his people but no longer as in the spirit of the Old Testament as the idea of God's people can only be interpreted in the light of the person and significance of Jesus Christ. This explains the baptismal doctrine that is strongly Christological especially in the letters of St. Paul. In the Second Vatican Council, we see that the dogmatic constitution on the Church, dedicated its second chapter on the Church as a People of God which showed a different perception from the juridical and institutional conception of the Church and presented the Church in its totality by its decision to include and define the hierarchy, not as a reality above the people, but rather a part of the People of God together with the laity.

Being Church means being God's people²⁶ and the category that qualifies each individual to participate in this identity is principally the sacrament of baptism. This determines that the Church is in the totality of her members where each person, irrespective of their particular state, is related to the other by virtue of dignity and co-responsibility against the temptation of hierarchicalism, institutionalism and clericalism. The understanding of the gift of baptismal grace is often solely interpreted in its relationship with original sin, but other effects of this sacrament are almost never reiterated. The Second Vatican Council clearly underlines that through baptism the faithful are incorporated into the Church and regenerated as children of God (LG11). This implies that the sacrament of baptism introduces and incorporates us into the common fraternity of the children of God, the Church. The sacrament of Baptism - with Confirmation and the Eucharist - makes those who receive it participants in the common and unique priesthood of Christ (LG 10) and qualifies them for the three messianic functions of Christ.²⁷

The fact of participating in the common priesthood, thanks to the regeneration that the baptismal water gives us, is inscribed in the biblical texts (Ex. 19:6; Is. 61:6; 1 Pet. 2:5,9; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6). In the sacrament of baptism, every faithful enjoys the same priestly dignity as St. Thomas Aquinas declares that it is a participation in the sacerdotal identity of Christ.²⁸ This means, every faithful must participate actively, each according to their status in the sacrifice of the mass and share in the identity and the unique mission of the kingdom of God entrusted by Jesus Christ to the Church.²⁹

In baptism, the faithful not only receive a free gift of the paternal offer of God in Jesus Christ (the salvific work) but also assume the responsibility of being a sign of this gift in the world and this responsibility is both individual and communitarian. The mission of the Church is about the kingdom of God which implies that the members manifest their belonging to Christ. As members of the Church they must understand their equal identity from the very effect of the sacrament they receive (membership) and the same mission

²⁶Francis, Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 114.

²⁷Cf. F. J. Andrades Ledo, *Misión y Ministerios eclesiales. Diversidad en la comunión*, Salamanca 2010, 47.

²⁸Cf. *Summa Theologiae* 3 q. 63 a. 3.

²⁹Cf. Pius XII, Encyclical letter *Mediator Dei*, 108.

(apostolicity) which is their responsibility.³⁰

From this affirmation we can understand what the Pauline text says to the Ephesian community: “One Body and one Spirit... One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph. 4:4-6). In the sacrament of baptism, the Christian is incorporated into the same dignity enjoyed by all other Christians, which is to have God as Father, to be adopted in the Son and animated by his Spirit. The Christian, together with the others, feels as one more in this family that is the Church, where the salvation of God is received and manifested for the world.³¹

The manifestation of the consciousness of the Church's identity as a People of God is therefore an expression of its synodal image and when the significance of the common dignity is viewed from the spiritual lens, we find that the concept of the *sensus fidelium* takes on a more practical outlook in that what the Church – in this case, all the people of God, with no exception nor distinction – believes, she does so without error by the unction of the Holy Spirit and it is applied universally (cf. LG 12). Therefore, with the ecclesiological perspective of the People of God and the underlying synodal identity of the Church, one can notice the principle of totality at play here in that what identifies the Clergy, the Religious and the Lay is the status of being People of God and the manner of being and expressing this identity is by acting *synodally*.³²

Ecclesiogenesis and inculturation: Two necessary factors for a more synodal Church in Nigeria

In the foregone, what we have done is to fuse the discussion of the Church's synodal image into the mystery of God and the ecclesiology of the People of God. It must be said that the use of the People of God ecclesiology is done with the healthy conception that the Church cannot effectively be such if it was not the Body of Christ nor the Temple of the Holy Spirit. However, this discourse is not aimed at a systematic presentation of ecclesiological images, rather a quasi-practical postulation on how the Church, especially in Nigeria, can be more synodal and see herself as a People of God with the same attitude.

By ecclesiogenesis,³³ we mean the rebirth of the Church, a mindset and attitude that offers the reconfiguration of the Church's identity as a people of God. This reconfiguration does

³⁰Cf. F. J. Andrade Ledo, *ibid.*, 48.

³¹Cf. R. Schulte, “La conversión{metanoia}, inicio y forma de la vida cristiana”, en: J. Feiner – M. Löhrer (Dirs.), *Mysterium salutis. Manual de teología como historia de la salvación*, Madrid 1992, vol. V, 158ff.

³²Cf. R. Luciani, *Synodality. A new way of proceeding in the Church*, New York 2022, 50ff. The hermeneutical consequence of this points to the idea of the inversion of the pyramid given that what determines the conception of the Church will no longer be the hierarchical elements rather it will be the common identity. Luciani presents this succinctly when he says that the only active subject of the Church's action and the mission will be people of God and not just the bishops (some) and the pope (one), since this implies the presence and participation of all and it will strengthen the complementary relationship of reciprocity among all subjects irrespective of their status in the Church.

³³I happen to have come in contact with Leonardo Boff's *Ecclesiogénesis. Las comunidades de base inventan la Iglesia*, Santander 1986, which introduced me to the word *ecclesio genesis*. Although my idea has a tangential contact with the general overview of his position, I differ in my manner of presenting of the realities of the grass root ecclesial communities in the Nigerian Catholic Church given that Boff wrote from a Latin-American perspective which among other things takes into consideration the problem of the insufficiency of ordained ministers and the resultant situation of the inability of the faithful to participate in the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. Here, from an African-Nigerian, point of view, I am more interested in the identity and relevance of these grass root communities in relation to the parishes they are attached.

not only affect the structural dynamics of the hierarchy nor the external disposition of Church leaders, irrespective of the office and responsibility held, toward other members of the ecclesial community. It also requires the assent to the common base of faith that binds the faithful to each other and to the Church.

Hence the need for this segment which submits that for synodality in Nigeria to be rightly experienced, a considerable ambience must be given to ecclesiogenesis and inculturation to take place.

Ecclesiogenesis and synodality: the identity and significance of zonal pastoral communities

The continuous and insistent call for the Church to assume and absorb synodality, an image that is consistent with its nature, has demanded the participation of all as “a living expression of the Catholicity of the Church as communion”.³⁴ These two terms - Catholicity and Communion - are vital in any discourse on the synodal image of the Church and they find meaning in the concrete expressions realized in various local Churches. This is where I opine the necessity of factoring in an ecclesiogenetical dynamic as a way of living out synodality in a credible and relatable manner. Luciani posits this succinctly by averring that a proper synodal reconfiguration of the Church must necessarily create a dynamics that is relational and communicational, one that views ecclesial subjects as *Christifideles* so that they can listen, discern, elaborate and make decisions together.³⁵

Against this idea of ecclesiogenesis that is, the reconfiguration the offers the faithful the significance and consequence of their identity as a People of God, are two extremes: clericalism, the excessive concentration and vision of the Church from the prism of the hierarchy and laicism, the view of the Church's identity from an overtly laical perspective. A proper ecclesiogenetical vision should be able to unite the hierarchy and the ecclesial subjects that exercise the Christian mission both in the Church and in the world. This, in my opinion, takes a humble form within the grassroots communities that are structured around a parochial setting.

Throughout the diocesan phase of the synodal exercise in many dioceses in Nigeria, it became glaring that the place of the grass root communities (or zones), the smallest organizational and structural unit of dioceses, have been neglected and deemed inconsequential and this has further deepened the distance between the Church and those who no longer feel part of this family of God.³⁶ The seeming idea of the Church as the primary responsibility of the ordained ministers (*Uka Fada* as in southeastern Nigeria) also feeds on this distance and the inconsequential status of grass root communities.

³⁴Cf. International Theological Commission, *ibid.*, 58.

³⁵Cf. R. Luciani, *Synodality*, 70.

³⁶One of the questions formulated in the *Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality is that which asks after the companions of this synodal journey. The goal of this synodal reality cannot be achieved in a context of indifference and ignorance of those with whom we are supposed to be companions. Breaking down the walls of indifference and overcoming the barrier that separates each from others would imply accepting the realities and situations of those who are excised from the Church due to their socio-economic, socio-cultural or pastoral situations. The ecclesial spirit of synodality has to be credible in the way it concretely manifests itself, especially, as an invitation to all faithful to participate in communion with others in the mission of the Church commended to it by God. It therefore means that no one should be left out nor left to the peripheries.

For a more affective synodal identity in the various local Churches in Nigeria, relevance and importance must be given to the zones that make up the parishes. There should be continuous communication and communion between the parish and the zones that are under its jurisdiction. This is to avoid an overtly centralized form of being that starts and ends with the parish and this will be a step toward a Church in which synodality is not just restricted to formalities but will be truly a manner of expressing the Church's identity as a people of God. This will help strengthen the idea of participation which is quite necessary if the Church is ever going to be truly synodal, for it is by the full recognition of these zones that each subject can reflect on roles and responsibilities they can be in charge of and this will strengthen the reconfiguration of the Church's identity where the equality of each subject, from the basis of the sacraments, is truly guaranteed and expressed.³⁷

Inculturation and synodality: The value of culture in the building the Church's image

In 2021 during the thanksgiving of a celebration of a religious in Nigeria, a cultural dance troupe came out during the thanksgiving procession among which a masquerade was part. This generated a lot of discussions both online and offline and the opinions were divided on what the masquerade signified: whether it was a harmless representation of the culture of the religious or a sacrilegious show off that should not be allowed in the Church. The local ordinary of the Diocese had to issue a decree over the issue. The point of recalling this event, an example among many, is to highlight that the Catholic Church in Nigeria still has a lot to do as it matters to the encounter between the Christian faith and the individual culture where it is finding a home. And this contributes to the deepened image of synodality of and in the Church.

The place of culture in the Church's task of evangelization is an important aspect that the Second Vatican Council recognizes and if the objective is the glorification of God, then the philosophy, tradition and culture of particular indigenous people cannot be overlooked (Cf. *Ad gentes*, 22).³⁸ Of the things to note about the Catholic Church in Nigeria, the multicultural identity of the location that plays host to the local Churches and their subjects, who may not be of the same stock, continues to be an avenue that strengthens or weakens the ecclesial bond in a particular local Church. The practice of inculturation in the Church gives opportunity for a deeper encounter between the faithful of different cultural backgrounds (against tribalism) on one hand, and the encounter between these cultures and the faith on the other.

But as beautiful as the idea of inculturation is, I think very little progress has been done in making it an important theme that is integrated into not just the actions of the Church but also the lives of Catholic Christians in Nigeria. While referring to the situation of inculturation on a continental level in Africa, A. Shorter thinks that the fear of losing control and/or making mistakes is actually the principal reason for the slow progress of inculturating the faith³⁹ and I think this captures the reality among several local Churches in Nigeria. This fear of losing control is not to be downplayed but questions need to be asked on how much it is inhibiting a sincere encounter between faith and culture.

³⁷Cf. J.-M. R. Tillard, *La Iglesia local. Ecclesiología de comunión y catolicidad*, Salamanca 1999, 354ff.

³⁸"It recognized contextual reality as normative for reconfiguring the Church's identity and theological-cultural self-understanding, as well as for guiding its mission in the world" (Luciani, *Synodality*, 114).

³⁹Cf. A. Shorter, *Toward a Theology of Inculturation*, Eugene, OR 1999, 252.

Another challenge that is affecting the deeper incultural experience in the Church comes from the suspicious manner of judging cultural and traditional elements. Inculturation elicits some unwarranted defensive posture from certain quarters both among the ministers and the laity. The event of the masquerade cited at the beginning of this segment had opinions that stemmed from a negative stereotype that considered traditional cultural elements as unacceptable and for those who believed that the said masquerade meant no abomination in itself were feeling that the mode of worship is westernized and had no relevance for the indigent people. With suspicions and accusations that are effects of proper understanding, interpretation and reflection, the reality of inculturation in Nigeria Catholic Churches will keep going round in circles without making a tangible progress in the deepening the understanding and significance of both faith and culture.

The gradual realization and manifestation of a synodal Church also depends on the progressive success that the encounter between faith and culture enjoys. An encounter that will positively affect both the culture in which the evangelization of the Christian faith is carried out and the Christian faith that seeks to deepen its roots in the lives of the faithful. The import of inculturation as far as synodality is concerned makes it an opportunity for the Church herself to become the object of its missional activity and methodology, in that the Church must encourage her ecclesial subject to journey together not as people alienated from their cultures but rather as ambassadors of all that is good about their traditional cultures. In the light of this, it is important to state that recognition of inculturation as an important factor for synodality in the Nigerian Catholic Church implies that these realities - Culture, Religion and the Church – need to be adequately defined and understood. This way, the expectation and desires of the Catholic Church on this synodal journey will become attainable.

Conclusion

The reflections put forward in the segments above are done in the spirit and desire that synodality does not become a mere attractive mantra that is used without seeking its fundamental and practical significance for the Catholic Church, especially in Nigeria. It is for this reason that the theme of discussion took off from within the life of the Blessed Trinity. The invitation to “journey together” is for the Church to be what it is meant to be; a communion whose mission is the realization of God's kingdom on earth.

Synodality therefore requires that each ecclesial subject is in synergy with others, that is between the lay and the ordained ministers, all of whom are bound by baptismal equality. The Church is no longer seen as *societas inaequalis* as held by the First Vatican Council where the lay people had no active role in the mission of the Church and to the hierarchy belonged the authority and the right to direct other members. But it is not enough, to repeat that the sacrament of baptism offers us all the equality in dignity as a people of God, this truth should be accompanied with a manifested display of synergy that is visible and credible.

It is for this reason that this piece advocates for the factoring in of ecclesiogenesis and inculturation so that the practice of synodality will be fruitful in the sense that it will include all ecclesial subjects and strengthen the testimony of communion that is to be exemplified by the Church. In a multicultural society and a place where social living levels are not so conducive, like Nigeria, the living practice of synodality should be able to

enkindle hope and happiness in the lives of people. It should be a family, a place that identifies with everyone irrespective of their social or cultural backgrounds.

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