

Africa on the Map of Pope Francis' Teaching: A Scan of the Synods

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Abstract

Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation on youth, Christus Vivit (Christ is alive), is a product of the Synod of Bishops on "Young People, The Faith and Vocational Discernment." Our brief exploration of this synod will serve as a glimpse of a broader understanding of the other synods so far held during the pontificate of Francis and their implications for the Catholic faith and doctrine in Africa. Setting forth salient points from this synod, which the Pope builds on in his ensuing exhortation, this article argues that in Africa however, young people, as women, most critically face exclusion and inequality in social life occasioned by patriarchy which is legitimated even by the Church, as well as failed political systems. Relatedly, the threat of Islam and its fundamentalist groups continues to claim the lives of mostly young people and women in their prime. The nuance offered in this article therefore, is that, finding a voice in society and Church as well as discerning an appropriate response to Islam may be more burning issues to the African youth rather than a preoccupation with sexual inclinations.

Introduction

Since his election as Pope of the Roman Catholic Church, my thoughts on the leadership style of Pope Francis have drifted to time and tide. His moment of leadership in the Catholic Church and in the World of Western culture – which is fast becoming second nature even of African nations – is a precarious one. The moral authority of the Church to shape the culture of our times seems to have vanished in Europe and America especially. Fewer people bring faith to bear on the major issues of their lives. Seemingly, besides the forces of modernity and secularization, this may not be unconnected to the ever-increasing unravelling of clergy sexual abuse scandals and the resulting disconnect many ordinary people feel between their lives and their Church, among other things.

Francis, who appears to have the support of the progressive and secular media, has taken several steps indicative of his approach to these lingering crises. Apart from the Synod on the Family in 2015, which sadly appeared to many as a move towards the tacit approval of Holy Communion for divorced and civilly remarried Catholics and others living in otherwise non-marital unions, the XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of

Bishops, which held from October 3- 28, 2018, under the theme: Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment, to address the specific challenges that confront young people in their lives of faith as Catholics also had a similar appearance regarding sexual inclinations. Of course, the synod on the Amazon region held between October 6 and October 27, 2019, where bishops and representatives from Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, French Guiana, Guyana, Peru, Venezuela, and Suriname gathered with Pope Francis in Rome is still fresh in our memories. In spite of the fact that this synod generally sought to identify new paths of evangelization, especially for indigenous people and highlight the vital role the region plays in the health of the planet, it suffered same fate in perception, since besides a few other controversial issues, so much energy and calculations seemed to have hinged on studying the possibility of priestly ordination for indigenous elderly married people (elderly and respected married men) (*virī probati*), who are respected and accepted by their communities, so the remote areas of the region have access to the sacraments.

In this article, I would like to explore some of the implications of the Youth Synod as it concerns young people on the African continent to serve as a seeming model of Francis' style and approach to theology and doctrinal teaching. First, I will briefly recall salient points of the Youth Synod, arguing that the Synod was indeed timely, with different implications for particular Churches that make the one universal Church. Next, I will suggest possible implications for young people in Africa in the light of their peculiar circumstances in which young people should be listened to and accompanied as proposed by the Synod and the Pope's exhortation. I specifically note that young people in Africa belong to the class of the excluded, just as women are and should be accompanied in same fashion.

The Synod at a Glance

Young people today live in a complex world with multiple challenges. The recent Synod was a conscious invitation to the Catholic Church and all its members to pay closer attention to young people; taking their questions seriously, patiently walking with them and offering guidance as they discern the best way to live their faith (Synod18 Documento finale). From the Three Major parts of the working document, the ensuing final document of the Synod, the final report is also divided into three parts, each titled after parts of the New Testament account of Jesus meeting His disciples on the road to Emmaus: He walked with them; Their eyes were opened; They set out at once. Each of the parts contains chapters and smaller sections within the chapters.

Numbering 167 paragraphs, the Synod document focuses on improving ways to support young Catholics' baptismal call to holiness, to welcome the contributions they make to the Church and help their growth in

faith as well as in discerning the state of life that would best correspond to what God wants from them. Invariably, the call to listen to young people also ignited the call on the Church to listen to all people, particularly women, renewing communities and structures for a “synodal church” where all members listen to, support and challenge one another and share responsibility for the Church's one mission of spreading the Gospel (Wooden).

Importantly, with much resonance to Africa, the final document noted the common experience where young volunteers are met by priests and other adults who doubt their commitment or competence and thus unwilling to share responsibility with them. This attitude indeed, has been responsible for the exit of many young people from the Catholic Church in search of where they feel included and appreciated, such as the Pentecostal Charismatic church phenomenon shows in Africa.

At the same time as the Synod devoted a great deal of time to several themes as outlined in the *Instrumentum Laboris*, like synodality, the issue of abuse, migration, the digital age, art, music and sport, violence and persecution, suffering, education and seminary formation, Western media was awash with the impression that the themes of friendship, affection, sexuality and “sexual inclinations,” were at the heart and in fact, the focus of the Synod. In spite of that, only two paragraphs specifically dwelt on the issue of human sexuality, which as it says, requires focusing on “empathetic listening, accompaniment and discernment, along the line indicated by the recent Magisterium.” Entitled, “Sexuality: a clear, free, authentic word,” “the questions of young people,” these paragraphs of the Synod document reiterate the Catholic Church’s rich tradition and understanding “on which to build and from which to propose its own teaching” about sexual morality. This tradition draws from the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Pope St. John Paul II’s catechesis on the theology of the body, Benedict XVI’s encyclical *Deus caritas est* and Pope Francis’ apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia*.

Indeed, sexual morality is often a source of “misunderstanding and estrangement from the Church, as it is perceived as a space of judgement and condemnation.” It is very important however, not to gloss over the fact that young people value authenticity, even as they are often disoriented by the many social changes taking place: “They express more particularly an explicit desire for discussion on issues related to the difference between male and female identity” (Wooden). Regarding the difference between men and women, the document referenced the equality of men and women before God and said that “domination and discrimination based on sex offends human dignity”; forms of which even the Church needs to free itself from.

This seeming laudable approach by the Catholic Church under the watch of Pope Francis to respond to the typical challenges that young people encounter in their journey of faith, however, appears to be tilted in a direction

some analysts and theologians describe not only as reductionist but also calculated. In what has the likeness of a repeat of the 2015 Synod on the Family, Catholic principles on sexuality and the Church's governance and apostolic nature seem to have received another ambiguous reinterpretation by the Youth Synod. It will be recalled that the 2015 Synod on the Family, in the judgement of many, had the appearance in some respects of a battle conducted with a predetermined outcome — the tacit approval of Holy Communion for divorced and civilly remarried Catholics and others living in otherwise non-marital unions. *Amoris Laetitia*, the Pope's exhortation resulting from the Synod on the Family, has drawn disparate interpretations by episcopal conferences worldwide, bringing about some deal of confusion regarding the reception of holy communion, especially in Europe and America.

Similarly, the Youth Synod's final document as well as *Christus Vivit* appear to be clouded in a language that some describe as indistinct or ambiguous. Many are afraid such ambiguity could give room to varying interpretations, particularly regarding homosexuality in the Church. The final document for example contains wording suggesting it should be read in the light of the *Instrumentum laboris*, or working document, which contained the term "LGBT," (this is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. Recently the letter q, designating "queer community" is finding its way into the acronym. This is a very powerful ideological movement in Europe and America) the first time for a Vatican document to have the loaded political term. *Christus Vivit*, on the one hand, encourages the youth to be open to the wisdom and experience of the elders both in families and in the Church. On the other hand, it emphatically repeats that the Church is at risk of becoming a "museum" if it does not listen to the young, while at the same time acknowledging that young people are very much in need of structure and guidance. I believe Europe and America offer a compelling lesson of the destruction of family and structures in the name of absolute freedom.

Synodality, — typically a concept understood to mean a decentralization and democratization of the Church and the magisterium away from the papacy and the Vatican to local churches — appeared in the final document, when experts and participants at the Synod say it had not been widely discussed during the Synod. Of course, Pope Francis in his pontificate has made Synodality his talking point but was a surprise in the final document, leaving analysts in wonder as to how synod officials appointed by the Pope managed the Synod.

In addition, the final document calls for the "presence of women in ecclesial bodies at all levels" — and that their participation be included in "ecclesial decision-making processes." At the same time as the recognition of women and their increased involvement in the life of the Church has received reasonable attention in recent decades, the final document renders it in a

language that remotely suggests tampering with the apostolic nature of the Church, rejecting Christ's intent for episcopal leadership and weakening the spiritual fatherhood of priests reminiscent of feminist ideological agitation.

Curiously, one notices that the Catholic Church's teaching that all people are called to chastity and to refraining from sexual relations outside the bond of marriage between a man and a woman, which still appeals to many cultures outside of the West, especially in Africa and Asia seemed to be downplayed in the final document of the youth synod as well as the Pope's exhortation. Echoing this fear, many African Synod Fathers lamented the reductive anthropology which attempts to define the identity of persons solely based on their sexual orientation (Wooden).

At a Vatican press conference on Saturday, October 13, 2018, Cardinal Wilfrid Napier of Durban, South Africa, said the working document for the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith, and Vocational Discernment, lacks a global perspective, noting some of the concerns raised so far had been too Eurocentric (White). According to him, while the working document highlighted the fact that young people in the West are leaving the Church, he said that in Africa, the situation is quite different, where "young people are looking for Jesus...and they're looking to the Church" for such answers (White).

Grogan notes that, Bishop Andrew Nkea Fuanya of Mamfe in Cameroon at a Vatican press conference October 24, 2018 maintained that coming from Africa, the family is a very strong institution. We come from a culture in which tradition normally is handed from one generation to the other (Grogan). "Our traditional values still equate to the values of the Church, and so we hand over the tradition to our young people undiluted and uncontaminated" (Grogan). As a result, when asked about the potential inclusion of so-called "LGBT" language in the synod's final document, Fuanya explained that "99.9 percent" of the young people in his diocese would "stand at my door and say, 'What's this?'"

As most African Bishops therefore, Faunya believes that with matters of doctrine that the church teaches, "it is not like in this synod we are trying to invent new teaching ... Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life ... we cannot be taking positions that contradict the Gospels," (Grogan) the Bishop noted. Indeed, the demands on faith and vocation of young people in Africa is a particularly burning issue on the continent. It was therefore apt when the Synod Fathers noted how the basic, common Christian vocation is the call to holiness, which can and should be lived out in every state of life: young or old, single or married or in the priesthood or religious life. Young people, as women, belong to the excluded and powerless. As women in Africa, "the world of young people is also deeply marked by the experience of vulnerability, disability, illness and pain" (Grogan). This is the reality of

Africa. All the above observations regarding the seeming model of Francis' style and approach to theology and doctrinal teaching and the implications for the youth and Church in Africa, could, to a large extent, apply *mutatis mutandis*, to most of Francis' teachings as contained in *Amoris Laetitia* and *Querida Amazonia*, with few variations.

To my mind, areas that need *aggiornamento* (bringing up to date) in the life of the Church in Africa, among other things, rather urgently are: the search for an integral and non-violent basis for social existence for young people and women on the continent especially given the patriarchal setting of the African society in which the Church exists; as well as proposing for them an alternative response to the threat of Islam that continues to claim their lives in droves.

African Youth and Women in the Church

In Africa, religion and tradition have continued to be instruments of oppression of women and children (Arabome 119; Uti 131; Iorapuu 2). These constitute, among others, the ideology of the society, which is a superstructure on the socio-economic foundation of any class society. Many religious beliefs and traditions are designed to justify and sustain private property exclusively for men and continue to dictate the relationship between men and women for centuries, entrenching male domination as the structure of social organization and institution at all levels of leadership (Iorapuu 2; Uti 132). Despite the obvious overwhelming numerical strength of women in church attendance in most of Africa, the face of the Church in public is nevertheless thoroughly male, just as are all of the mosques. Women constitute close to 60 percent of Christian congregations, with nearly 70 percent of monetary contributions made by women and they virtually keep the churches alive through their active participation in ministries.

The critical challenges for ministry and evangelization in Africa today thus becomes the search for an integral basis for social existence that affects mostly women and the youth. Failed political systems, coupled with patriarchy, deny women and youth opportunities in social life. Women, who are controlled by their husbands at home and the clergy in the Church, continue to be controlled by their male children when their husbands are deceased. Young people defer to elders in the family setting and are excluded in social life. This applies to most of Africa in general.

In attending to this challenge, the Church will in the first instance, take a lead by transforming the understanding of authority and power as service to the people, opening avenues of involvement to women and youth. This, however, must not be done in a manner that suggests tampering with the apostolic nature of the Church, nor agitated in the fashion of the promoters of feminist ideology and secularism. The presence of women and young people in church bodies at all levels, including in leadership roles and their

participation in church decision-making processes while respecting the role of the ordained ministry should be of interest to the Universal Church in promoting evangelization in Africa. Secondly, it is important for the Church to be in the forefront in the struggle for stable democratic institutions and the involvement of women and the youth in political leadership, where the agenda of the state is set, to ensure a future for the teeming young people and women whose future is plundered daily by corrupt politicians.

Religious institutions will be more successful in promoting the course of women's participation in social life, first by giving women more space in the religious assembly, since the suppression of women has been constantly supported by religious practices. Supporting women to organize themselves in self-help associations to ensure their financial independence from the men, as well as taking the lead to support women liberate themselves from the oppressive cultural practices of society are key to the success of religion as an agent of change.

The above will be indicative of the Church's sincerity as an instrument of salvation for the African youth and women since the Christian religion is neither abstract nor esoteric. Indeed, at the heart of the Christian gospel is the profession: "the word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:1-18) (Smith 17). In the incarnation of Jesus is the most radical expression of God coming to meet humanity where humanity is, and in a form with which humanity can relate. The very conditions of daily life, the social context of the people constitute, in fact, the locus of God's self-communication, the place of the deepest form of divine encounter. Simply put, the incarnation implies that the Son of God became human so that children of men and women can live more fulfilled lives (John 10:10). This is the interpretation of the Christian gospel that lies at the heart of my call for the Church's attention to the social condition of women and children in Africa as a more urgent evangelical task.

African Youth and Women and the Threat of Islam

Opinions have remained varied in the perception of Islam as a religion such that while most Westerners hold that Islam as a religion is hard-wired for violence and incompatible with democracy and human rights, requiring a long civilizational war against this threat, others believe that Islam, like every religion, is historically malleable and diverse, home to a few extremists but otherwise hospitable to human rights and democracy (Philpott 36). Indeed, those who ascribe to the latter view think that the West's history of colonialism and military aggression is responsible for most of Islam's problems and dialogue should be pursued. The seeming consistent disposition of the Catholic Church, particularly in Nigeria, like other Christian bodies, has been to emphasize the urgency of evangelization through dialogue, proper Catechesis and education to have a balanced faith (Wankar, *Christian Witness* 133).

I have rather agreed with Daniel Philpott that while tolerance is often proposed as a measure of the criterion for a peaceful religion, implying restraint from violence toward or co-existent with minority groups, it is temporary, strategic and reversible, much like a truce (Philpott 1). As a result, as Philpott, I have proposed religious freedom as a better criterion to determine the peacefulness of any religion and a condition for coexistence. Historically, Islam has continued to defy this criterion and remains intolerant to other faiths as the experience in Nigeria and elsewhere continues to reveal (Wankar 135).

The global view of the coexistence of Muslims and peoples of other faiths based on dialogue, especially with Christians around the world therefore reveals a disconnect between the peace that is preached (theory) and the actual act of living in peace (practice). Alluding to this fact, Bishop Matthew Hassan Kukah of Sokoto noted recently that the persecution of Christians in northern Nigeria is as old as the modern Nigerian state:

This President has displayed the greatest degree of insensitivity in managing our country's rich diversity. He has subordinated the larger interests of the country to the hegemonic interests of his co-religionists and clansmen and women. The impression created now is that to hold a key and strategic position in Nigeria today, it is more important to be a northern Muslim than a Nigerian. Today, in Nigeria, the noble religion of Islam has convulsed. It has become associated with some of the worst fears among our people (Kukah).

Indeed, Kukah, a leading voice advocate of religious dialogue, often sounding the call of tolerance dramatically called the continued killing of Christians, culminating in the killing of Seminarian Michael "a defining moment for Christians and Christianity in Nigeria," noting "We Christians must be honest enough to accept that we have taken so much for granted and made so much sacrifice in the name of nation building" (Kukah). Kukah thus called on Christians to rise up and defend their faith with all the moral weapons they have. "We must become more robust in presenting the values of Christianity especially our message of love and non-violence to a violent society. Among the wolves of the world, we must become more politically alert, wise as the serpent and humble as the dove (Mt. 10:16)" (Kukah). This is a burning challenge as it affects young people and women in Africa today.

Listening to and Accompanying the Women and Young People of Africa.

In reflecting on the important challenges of young people, the Youth Synod indeed affirmed the importance and significance of diverse particular churches, as could be seen from the wide invitation to Catholics from all parts of the world. Aware that this variety of local churches with common aspiration is, indeed, evidence of the catholicity of the one universal Catholic Church, I have noted in this essay, the possibility of different concerns peculiar to different local Churches and so, identified the experience of exclusion and the

threat of Islam as more pressing concerns for the young people and women in Africa.

Regarding the experience of exclusion in social life as well as in the Church, there is no argument as to the legitimacy of the authority of the Church and its priests, for example; it exists and is willed by God in service of others, never as overlords. It is absurd, therefore, that the Church in her social teachings, constantly criticizes and denounces every abuse of power by civil governments, calling for equality of all of God's children, while at the same time appearing to legitimize the practices of patriarchy which exclude women and young people from certain privileges of social life even as it happens in the Church.

In recent years, Pentecostal/Charismatic Christianity has been significantly appealing in most of Africa today due to attention given to women and youth (Wankar, *Towards* 68). I call on the Catholic Church in Africa to take a cue from these bodies as a step to *aggiornamento* regarding young people and women in the Church and society at large. Through the various women and youth empowerment programmes of the Pentecostal movement, there is a growing identification of talents, abilities and achievements where women could even rise to leadership and authority and this is much cherished by the women and youth who have not got a voice in a patriarchal society. This is very different from leaving young people to do as they please in the name of listening to them as the language of the Youth Synod seemingly suggests. Mentorship and guidance are still very vital virtues here.

I have persistently noted how Pentecostal/Charismatic ministries have several social functions uniquely integrated with the religious function, due to the adversity in the social environment, especially for the women and youth (Wankar 68). Programmes geared to skills acquisition and entrepreneur training sessions, as well as leadership development are very dear to Pentecostal/Charismatic groups. Attention to these otherwise marginalized groups enables such Christian bodies to be addressing the structures of oppression that consign Africa to backwardness, mediocrity and non-achievement by encouraging women and young people to work their way into public office and influence the agenda of the state (Wankar 68). Empowering women and youth to overcome the influence of patriarchy and to have a voice in the social space Africa will be a significant exercise in *aggiornamento* in the evangelizing mission of the Church on the African continent. These are two major concerns in the lives of African youth and women today, rather than a preoccupation with sexual inclinations and seeming promotion of aggressive feminist ideology and a watering down of traditional family values.

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