

Synodality and the Active Roles of the Laity in the Church

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Abstract

Some of the characteristics of human beings are socialization and communication. This means that by our nature we have the capacity to socialize and communicate with one another. No one is an Island as the saying goes. We need one another as we journey through this life. For a peaceful co-existence in any community there is the need for socialization and communication among the inhabitants of that community, especially when there is a problem to be solved. Synodality is a situation where the hierarchy of the Church with some selected lay faithful come together to socialize, communicate and discuss matters concerning the progress of the Church. Synod has been part and parcel of the Church right from the beginning of the history of the Church. The Church comprises the clergy and the laity that are united under the leadership of our Lord Jesus Christ. Both the clergy and the laity have an active and special role to play in the Church and the world at large. This paper is concerned with the active roles the laity should play in the Church. This article has been able to discover that the Church cannot grow without the active roles of the laity because of the special place they occupy in the world. The lay faithful interact with the secular world on daily basis in the areas of health, education, politics, family life and etcetera. The Church is therefore asking the laity to participate actively in evangelizing the world through the above-mentioned areas. This is the crux of this article.

Introduction

The functionality of every family, institution or organization depends strictly on dialogue among the members of such family, institution or organization. There is this common proverb in Africa that says, "One broom cannot sweep a room". Another one says that "a tree cannot make a forest". This means that one person cannot function well alone. Human beings need one another in order to do things well as Christians. The Church is the gathering of the people of God under one head, Jesus Christ. Jesus is the head, and all Christians are his members. Human beings are not perfect beings that is why we do make mistakes in our dealings and interactions with one another. To correct these mistakes, we need to come together to rub minds with one another once in a while.

Going through the history of the Church, we see instances in the New Testament where the Apostles of Christ were able to settle crises in the early Church through councils. Synod is a period where the Church calls the leaders and some members of the Church to come together to discuss issues concerning the progress of the Church and to proffer solutions on how to correct some ills in the Church in order for the Church to function well. This article seeks to discuss the topic, “Synodality and the active roles of the laity in the Church”.

Definition of Concepts

- A. SYNOD. The word synod is derived from the Greek word “Synodus”, meaning the coming together of ecclesiastical councils distinguished by their extent or locality. In simple term, synod means an ecclesiastical council which could be local or general for the deliberations of ecclesial matters. That is the coming together of the Church’s hierarchy and few selected members of the laity to discuss matters concerning the progress of the Church.
- B. LAITY. “The term laity or lay is derived from the Greek terms *laos theou*, which means the people of God. The term is here understood to mean all the faithful except those in Holy Orders and those who belong to a religious state approved by the Church. That is, the faithful who by Baptism are incorporated into Christ, are placed in the people of God, and in their own way share the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ, and to the best of their ability carry on the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the whole world” (Lumen Gentium no. 31). These are the other members of Christ’s faithful apart from the clergy and the religious. The laity are the larger members of the body of Christ.

The People of God in General

The general understanding of the people includes both the clergy, religious and the lay faithful. The sacrament of Baptism unites all the people of God under one head, Jesus Christ. “Baptism makes us members of the body of Christ: “Therefore... we are members one of another. Baptism incorporates us into the Church. From the baptismal fonts is born the one people of God of the new Covenant, which transcends all the natural or human limits of nations, cultures, races and sexes: For by one spirit, we were all baptized into one body”. (CCC no. 1267). This implies therefore, that the virtue of our common Baptism, all the baptized are now priests, prophets and kings. However, from our common priesthood, few are called by God for a special apostolate, namely, the ministerial priesthood. These are to take care of the spiritual needs of the lay faithful whose apostolate consists in the secular affairs of the world. This explains to us why there should be a collaboration between the priests, religious and the laity. Each has a role to play in the evangelization of the

world. The work of mission is an imperative to all priests, religious and the lay faithful because we all belong to the same people of God.

What then is Synodality all About?

Synodality is derived from the word Synod (in Greek *sun*) which means ‘together’ (‘way’, ‘journey’). In the Catholic Church the term is usually used to describe the process of fraternal collaboration and discernment among the members the Church. Synodality in the Catholic Church denotes or designates the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the people of God, which reveals and gives substance to her being as a communion when all her members journey together, gather in an assembly and take an active part in the evangelizing mission. Synodality could also be understood from the perspective of an involvement and participation of the entire people of God in the life and mission of the Church. In such a gathering the people of God are called to participate actively in the life and mission of the ecclesia (Wikipedia).

Pope Francis has a great interest for the Synodality of the people of God. It is one of the keywords that characterizes his Papacy. This synod on synodality started in Rome in October 2022. This journey for the Pope is a journey of togetherness where the people of God listen to one another in order to hear what God is communicating to humanity. This is clearly portrayed in the prayer for the Synodal Journey, “We stand before you Holy Spirit as we gather together in your name with you alone to guide us...so that we may journey together to eternal life and not stray from the way of truth and what is right”.

Coming together to listen to God will definitely promote the catholicity of the Church with the aim of discerning the paths God wants to take as the people of God for our salvation. The coming together of the members of the same family for the purpose of sharing and rubbing minds for the success of the family is something worth doing. When the members of the Church come together to discuss issues concerning the problems of the Church will help the Church to correct the past mistakes of the Church and forge ahead with the affairs of the Church. The synod on synodality involves the coming together of all the baptized, both clergy and laity to journey together in order to discuss matters concerning the progress of the Church.

Synodality and the Active Roles of the Laity in the Church

Having made a conscious effort to say something about synod of synodality, let me turn my attention to the active roles of the laity in the Church. In the document *Christi Fidelis Laici*, St. John Paul II briefly defines the laity thus: “The lay members of Christ’s faithful people...are those who form that part of the people of God which might be likened to the labourers in the vineyard mentioned in Matthew’s Gospel: “For the Kingdom of heaven is like a householder who went out early in the morning to hire labourers for a denarius a day, he sent them into his vineyard” (Mt 20:1-2).

The Active Roles of the Laity in the Church

Addressing the members of the secular institutes on the 2nd of February 1972 (AAS 64), Pope Paul VI talked about the specific secular role of the laity in the Church. According to him the lay faithful “are called to work in the temporal order in a specific manner befitting their secular character...this means that they should be involved in the ordinary tasks of everyday life as an important part of their Christian vocation. So, they have to live out the ordinary tasks of everyday life with extraordinary love for God and love of others, thus, establishing a unity or coherence between the faith and the world, between Gospel and culture” (Laity Week Manual, p. 62). The Vatican II Council document succinctly puts it that the laity;

By reason of their special vocation it belongs to the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God’s will. The live in the world, that is, they are engaged in each and every work and business of the earth and in the ordinary circumstances of social and family life which, as it were, constitute their very existence. It pertains to them in a special way so to illumine and order all temporal things with which they are so closely associated that these may be affected and grow according to Christ and may be to the glory of the Creator and Redeemer (LG 31).

The laity are full members of the Church; therefore, they have a role to play in the salvific mission of the entire people of God. “What distinguishes the lay faithful from the clergy and also from the religious is the secular quality proper and special to them. But this does not mean that the role of the laity is only in the outward mission of the Church. They are and must be involved also in the inward community-building mission of the Church” (Echema, p. 163).

The Active Participation of the Laity in Politics

When Jesus Christ spoke of his disciples as the salt of the earth, he meant that they must manifest the kingdom in the society and must change people and society. It is wrong therefore to keep God and religion apart from public life and the realm of politics. Gone are the days when people use to see politics as a dirty game. Politics is not dirty. The players are those that are dirty. Man by nature is a political being, so it is natural that human beings should participate in politics. Politics is all about leadership, quality leadership and only those who fear God can produce quality leadership. That is why the Church in her Social Teaching encourages the lay faithful to participate actively in politics in order to produce a quality government, a God-fearing government that is interested in justice and good governance. It is the fundamental rights of the laity to engage in politics; that is to vote and to be voted for. When Christians run away from politics, then they should not complain when things are not moving in the society.

The Laity and the Married Life

The sacrament of marriage makes holy and raises the mission of the family. The Code of Canon Law, states; “The marriage covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of their whole life, and which of its own very nature is ordered to the well-being of the spouses and to the procreation and upbringing of children, has, between the baptized, been raised by Christ the Lord to the dignity of a sacrament” (can. 1055). The sacrament of matrimony unites the spouses in love and makes them witnesses to their children patterning the things of God. They have a duty to bring their children closer to God and the Church by teaching them about faith and morals. This they do by living an exemplary lifestyle and the proper upbringing and education of their children and those under their care. Parents are to be well informed in the Catholic doctrines and teachings concerning marriage and prayers. This will enable them to instruct their children concerning the things of God and the Church.

The family is regarded as the domestic Church. The domestic Church gives birth to the larger Church. Parents are the first pastors or teachers to their children. They are the first agents of conscience formation. This would mean that parents have a great responsibility in forming the conscience of their children into becoming good citizens of the society in which they live. Experience has shown that children who grow in good families turn out to be good and morally sound people. Once you have people coming from good families, you will have good members of the Church which will in turn translate into having good and God-fearing people in the world. Parents are therefore encouraged to play a very active role in educating their children to become role models in the world.

The Laity as Collaborators with the Clergy

The Church is the gathering of the people of God, which includes the lay faithful and the clergy. In the administration of the activities of the Church the lay faithful and the clergy have a very important role to play. The Church cannot function well without the clergy and the laity working together. They are to collaborate with one another for the wellbeing of the Church. The laity sustain the Church financially while the clergy are responsible for the administration of the Sacraments for the spiritual growth of the people. According to Austin Echema, “The laity are as it were the point of intersection between the Church and the world” (165). The laity have a very unique and irreplaceable role to play in the world (166).

The New Testament is full of examples of how the laity collaborated with the clergy in advancing the kingdom of God and the work of evangelization in the world. The Blessed Virgin Mary collaborated with God in bringing the incarnate word into the world (Lk 1:26-38). Joseph the husband of the Blessed Virgin Mary also collaborated with God when he was told by the angel of God to take Mary as his wife because her pregnancy was of the Holy Spirit (Mtt 1:18-23). Joseph also collaborated with God when he was

told in a dream to take the infant Jesus to Egypt when King Herod sought to kill Him (Mtt 2:19-23). Joseph collaborated with the angel of the Lord by taking the infant Jesus to Egypt to protect him from Herod's venom of destruction. The early Christians also collaborated with the apostles in the advancement of God's kingdom in the world. We are also told that the early Christians remained faithful to the teachings of the apostles, to the brotherhood, and to the breaking of bread and to their daily prayers. They lived with the apostles and other members of the Christian family, owned everything in common, some sold their lands and brought the money to the apostles and shared everything among themselves (Acts 2:42-47). There were some women who assisted St. Paul during his missionary journeys. Some of them include Lydia, Acts. 16:40; Priscia, Acts 18:2; Phoebe, Romans 16:1, and Apphia, Philemon 1:1-3, etcetera. With these few examples we can see that the role of the laity in the collaborative ministry of the Church is evident and cannot be denied.

“The lay people played wonderful role also after the Apostolic Age in the spread of the gospel. The Roman Canon of the Mass (or Eucharistic Prayer 1) commemorates such valiant martyrs as Cosmas and Damian, Felicitas, Perpetua, Agatha, Lucy, Agnes, Cecilia and Ansatasia” (Echema 168).

It is very interesting to know that the laity as active and living members of the Church have also the vocation of applying to the building of the Church and to its continual sanctification all the powers which they have received from God the Creator of the universe (Echema 171). The laity as members of Christ's body have the mandate of sharing in the salvific mission of the Church.

The Laity Have the Responsibility of Witnessing to Christ in their Different Professions

The laity are called upon by the Church to bear witness to Christ in their different vocations or professions. As light and salt of the world they are to carry the message of Christ to all the length and breadth of the world in their day-to-day activities as they interact with people. In the gospel of Matthew 28:19-20, Jesus instructs his disciples to go into the world and baptize all who believe in him in the name of the Father and the Son and in the Holy Spirit and instruct them to obey all his commands. This great mandate of Christ also applies to the laity. They too have the mandate to teach people about the gospel of Christ. The world today is infected with so many evils, such as, murder, abortion, suicide, kidnapping, human trafficking, sexual abuses, crimes, substance abuses, cultism, racism, tribalism, nepotism, political irregularities, war, terrorism, banditry, etcetera. Amid these evils, the laity must join hands with the clergy to fight these menaces. So, the laity have a tremendous role to play in making this world a hospitable place for all humanity.

The Lay Faithful Participating in Parish Apostolate

As a matter of fact, the laity should and must participate in parish apostolate like teaching of catechism, helping in teaching marriage courses, organizing health programmes, entrepreneurship programmes, educational programmes, participating in societal meetings, political awareness in the parish, executing projects, organizing seminars and conferences on important issues at the parish and diocesan levels, etc.

The Role of the Laity in the Health Sector

The lay faithful have a very vital and significant role to play in the health sector. Medical profession is a very important field in the world. A healthy environment produces a very healthy people. Therefore, to have a very healthy world the laity must be involved in medical profession. In the Catholic Church it would appear as if the clergy are not too involved in the medical field as the lay faithful. This could be as a result of the priestly profession. The priests mostly serve as hospital chaplains rather than doctors or nurses. There could be few priests that are medical doctors in the world but the majority of medical doctors and nurses are the laity. This is why I say that the laity have a very important role to play in the medical profession.

Today, medicine has advanced much more than ever before. It is not a gainsaying that there are so many things that are happening in the medical field. The truth is that with the great and lovely things that are happening in the medical field there are also many abuses taking place in this area. There are abuses in the area of Human Experimentation, Ordinary and Extraordinary Treatments and Human Sexuality such as In vitro fertilization (IVF), Abortion, Transgenderism, Contraception, etcetera. It is a truism, that medicine has improved the quality of human life on earth but there are few abuses as observed above. The Church therefore calls the lay faithful who are in the medical field to represent the Church very well by fighting such abuses that are taking place in this noble profession. The Catholic Church is very passionate in protecting the dignity of the human person, who is created in the image and likeness of God (cf. Gen 1:26-27). That is why in Catholic Moral Theology there is a whole topic on Bioethics (Ethics of Human Life) that is being taught in the Major Seminaries. This is meant to teach her future priests and the entire Catholic faithful on how human beings are to be treated by the medical personnel in the hospital. So, in this synodal journey the Church calls on the lay faithful to play a very active role in the area of medicine by fighting these abuses that are creeping into the medical profession.

The Active Participation of the Laity in the Area of Education

Education is very important in the development of every society or nation. A society or nation that does not take education very seriously is heading to *doom*. The early missionaries used education as a very important tool in evangelizing our forefathers. In fact, it is being said that education started with the Catholic Church in the Cathedrals. At the very beginning, the

lay faithful participated actively in the field of education. Today the laity are also very active in the area of education all over the world. The Church is calling on all her members to join hand with the clergy to educate the young people to become good citizens of their countries and to make the world a more comfortable place for everyone to live in. In most African countries, the Mission Schools are considered the best schools to that of the government. Education develops the children intellectually, physically, spiritually and emotionally/psychologically. “In a great many countries of the world, (children) they represent half of entire populations, and often constitute in number half of the people of God itself living in those countries” (*Christifidele Laici* 77). Furthermore, “Children are a continual reminder that the missionary fruitfulness of the Church has its life-giving basis not in human means and merits, but in the absolute gratuitous gift of God” (78). It is therefore an imperative for the laity to participate actively in the education of the children at the parish and the diocesan levels.

Conclusion

The Church cannot perform her work of evangelization well without the cooperation of the laity. This is because the Church is the combination of the laity and the clergy; these two bodies must work together for the realization of God’s kingdom on earth. The laity have a moral mandate to partake in the lay apostolate organizations both at the parish and diocesan levels under the umbrella body known as the Catholic Laity Council of Nigeria (CLCN) (Gabriel Afolabi Ojo 362). On this synodal journey the relationship between the laity and the clergy should be like the Trinitarian relationship of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The clergy and the laity are all called to the life of holiness. “Therefore, all in the Church, whether they belong to the hierarchy or are cared for by it, are called to holiness” (Lumen Gentium no. 39).

Human beings are by nature moral agents made in the image and likeness of their Creator. As human beings we have the capacity to be holy as our heavenly Father is holy (Lv. 19:20). However, this world is infested with a lot of evils and to live above the water, humanity is in constant need of the grace of God to survive morally in the world. The freedom God gives human beings permit them to choose between good and bad. Many people today abuse this freedom God has given them by involving in so many evil activities that is why many people do not believe in God anymore. This has made many people to indulge in a lot of diabolical activities. To get rid of all these the laity must exercise their priestly and prophetic mandate given to them on the day of their baptism, to fight and condemn the evil in the world through the many roles that are mentioned above. The Church, therefore, calls on the laity to engage in the economic, political, religious and social affairs of the world by taking part in mission of the Church. Finally, the Church is not the buildings we have littered all the nooks and crannies of our communities, but the Church is the people of God and as such we have a role to play to expand the gospel of Christ to all humanity.

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