

THE SYNODAL CHURCH: WHAT SPACE FOR AFRICA?

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the exigent subject matter of the Synodal Church, with a particular focus on the African context. It draws its inspiration from the final document of the Second Session of the 16th Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which ended in October 2024. The paper argues that one of the core significance of the call for synodality involves the idea of the Church's journey back to its source, echoing the Christian understanding of life as a pilgrimage towards God. In this light, this paper discusses the centrality of pastoral conversion as elemental to being truly a synodal church. It also highlights the idea of synodality as a practice rooted in scripture, whose examples can guide the Church today to a return to a programmatic arrangement of walking together as a family. With Africa's rich cultural heritage and growing Christian presence, this paper investigates the space for African perspectives and experiences within the synodal Church and how they can contribute to the Church's universal mission. It responded to the interrogative, any space for Africa, by leveraging on the analogy of the sheaves in Ps 126:6 and metaphorizing the Church in Africa as the Church of the Sheaves. Leveraging on the progressive numerical strength of the Church in Africa and also of it (Egypt) being a biblical place of refuge for Jesus during the perilous days of King Herod, who wanted to kill him (Matt. 2:20), this paper concludes that Africa has a role to play in the future of the Body of Christ.

Keywords: Synodal Church, Pastoral Conversion, Church of the Sheaves, Missionaries, Walking together.

Back to the Source

“Every step in the life of the Church is a return to the source. It is a renewed experience of the disciples' encounter with the Risen One in the Upper Room on the Easter evening.”²

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²XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. *Secondo Session (2-27 October 2024). For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission. Final Document.* No.1.

These are the opening words of the final document of the Second Session of the 16th Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which was held in the Vatican from 2 to 27 October 2024. The affirmation finds its locus in the wider Christian perception of our earthly life as a journey back to God, the source of every life. We journey from this world of death and transient comforts on paths that inexorably lead us back to the Creator. The Church, the community of God's people, belongs to this journey, and Jesus Christ is its path. He himself declared: "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one can come to the Father but through me" (Joh 14:6).

Any authentic renewal of the life of the Church recalls its original and fundamental identity. This was Pope Francis's vision when, in 2021, he initiated the synodal journey that would culminate in the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the theme, "*For a Synodal Church: Communion, participation and mission.*" At the official inauguration of the Synodal process on 9 October 2021, the Pope called on the entire People of God to journey together in order to experience a Church that receives and lives the gift of unity and is open to the voice of the Spirit. He declared that all are called to unity, communion and fraternity born of the realization that all are embraced by the one love of God; all, without distinction, particularly the bishops who are called to lead. This particular vision of the Pope finds expression in the opening paragraph of the said Final Document. The document underlines how the participants in the Assembly perceived in their midst the presence of the Risen Christ who, with the gift of the Holy Spirit, continues to inspire in the People of God "a unity that establishes harmony amidst differences."³

Innovations and Curiosities

The 16th Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops was marked by the spirit of innovations. With the preparatory process, the Synod progressed in three phases spanning three years: the diocesan, the continental and the universal. From October 2021 until April 2022, the diocesan phase took place with moments of listening and consultations in the local Churches. Then followed the continental phase, from September 2022 to March 2023. The third and final phase was that of the universal Church, with the celebration of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly in two separate sessions, respectively, in October 2023 and 2024. With its two sessions, this Assembly became the first of its kind since Pope Paul VI instituted the Synod of Bishops on 15 September 1965, with the *Motu Proprio, Apostolica Sollicitudo*. Some of the participants in the meeting joked about calling it a

³Ibid.

council rather than a Synod of bishops. Others were heard, during the last session, commenting wryly on how laypersons, including the youth, shared spaces, words and votes with the participating bishops in what was supposed to be a Synod of Bishops. In fact, the 464 participants in the session included 365 members, 54 women, 20 delegates from the Eastern Churches and two Chinese bishops appointed by the Pope. It was no longer the Synod of Bishops as it was known before but a three-year synodal process for all the People of God of different ranks and statuses. No one was excluded; everyone was invited to walk together. Lay people were not only part of the synodal process and dialogue; they were also given the right to vote.

The explanation for such novelty has been sought in the Apostolic Constitution, *Praedicate Evangelium*, promulgated on 5 June 2022, in which the Pope changed the name of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops to the General Secretariat of the Synod. However, the Pope himself insisted on referring to the meeting as a Synod of Bishops, one where members of the clergy and representatives of the lay faithful helped the Bishops in their deliberations. It is the right and privilege of the Roman Pontiff to convoke a Synodal Assembly according to the modality he judges convenient. Consequently, availing himself of such a right, Pope Francis wished to bring, as much as possible, representatives of the entire faithful, bishops, priests, religious and lay faithful, into dialogue in a process of listening and sharing.

The challenge for Pope Francis was to involve the entire “people of God” in this process. Consultation with the faithful at the base was central. Mutual listening and community discernment characterized the work of the Synod in its different phases. At the two General Assemblies, participants sat around tables in different linguistic groups. The equal dignity of all the baptized was expressed without prejudice to the diversity of the states of life, charisms and functions. The Pope wished to underline the fact that the “Synodal Church” is a listening Church.

The outcome of the meeting was synthesized in the Final Document comprising 155 paragraphs, which were duly voted and approved by the Assembly. The text encompasses five chapters developed around the theme of conversion: the heart of synodality based on the call of the Holy Spirit, the conversion of relationships in the Church, the conversion of processes particularly of discernment, decision-making and governance, and the conversion of bonds especially between the various organs, expressions and groupings of the local Churches and the Church of Rome. The fifth chapter and the conclusion of the document bring together all these forms of conversion, crowning them with the goal of forming a Church of missionary discipleship, called to the banquet for all peoples.

The document was not to become the basis of an Apostolic Exhortation. The Pope desired that it be published immediately to inspire the life of the Church.

In this, Pope Francis returned to a practice already found in the first two Ordinary General Assemblies convoked by his predecessor, Pope Paul VI. It was with the third Ordinary General Assembly on "Evangelization in the Modern World" (27 September – 26 October 1974), characterized by the remarkable divergence of opinions and positions, that for the first time, the Pope used the results of the deliberations to write the remarkable Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii nuntiandi*, of 8 December 1975.

However, unlike the previous ones, the Synodal process of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly did not end with the conclusion of the second session. Beyond the publication of the Final Document, the Synodal process was to extend into an implementation phase of a "daily journey with a synodal methodology of consultation and discernment, identifying concrete ways and formation pathways to bring about a tangible synodal conversion in the various ecclesial contexts."⁴ Ten study groups emanating from the session were charged with examining some themes of particular interest and sensitivity. These were directed to complete their work by June 2025, after which the results of the studies would be shared with the Episcopal Conferences of the participants. It is the intention of the Pope that decisions should be reached through an extended period of reflection and discernment, avoiding unnecessary rush.

In fact, already after the first session, before the second, there was an implementation phase, during which the conclusions of that session, recorded in a Synthesis Report and approved by the Roman Pontiff, were published. The local Churches were invited to read the document and to see it as a sign of encouragement to continue the journey, to deepen the Church's synodal style and form, to involve in the synodal process those at the local ecclesial communities, and to offer concrete contributions on the understanding of synodality.

Pastoral Conversion

As already mentioned, the theme of conversion stands out as a guiding framework for the final document. Conversion generally entails a change. In Christian religious connotation, it implies a return to the original paths or ways that may have been abandoned. This could be expatiated with the solutions offered for malfunctioning electronic gadgets, like cellular telephones. When a device starts to act up or make its use difficult, the best way to resolve the problem is to return it to the factory setting, that is, to restore the gadget to its original condition before it leaves the factory. In a telephone, for example, this process

⁴Final document, n.9.

erases or reorders all the previous settings on it and reinstalls the operating system, making it more functional, resourceful, and efficient. This is what happens in an authentic conversion process. The performance improvement that occurs after the resetting is similar to what happened at the Second Vatican Council, when the Church renewed herself by returning to her sources. For us, the source is the word of God, not just the written word, the Bible, but especially the Word made flesh, Jesus Christ himself.

Conversion in the Hebrew Scriptures is expressed by the word “*shuv*,” which the prophets used to invite the people to turn away from sin and return to the path of alliance with the Lord. The rabbinic tradition later used the word “*teshuvah*” to recall the prophetic exhortation to repentance as an invitation to turn away from sin and return to right action, to the Torah and to God.⁵ By choosing the theme of synodality for the sixteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis was calling the Church to rediscover and return to its original identity as a synodal People. Already in his address on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, on 17 October 2015, the Pope declared that the Church is “nothing other than the ‘journeying together’ of God’s flock along the paths of history towards the encounter with Christ the Lord”.

Synodality of the People of God in the Bible

The term “synod,” from the Greek expressions “*syn*” (together) and “*hodos*” (way), is used to refer to this “journeying together” of all the People of God, from the bishop to the last of the faithful. Therefore, the Church is intrinsically synodal, and synodality is a constitutive element of the Church. Synodality entails a communal sharing of space and life, walking and running together, in reciprocal respect for the differing paces and energies, as in the Easter morning race of Peter and the beloved disciple of Jesus (Joh 20:1-10). It also entails mutual listening to one another whereby everyone – the faithful people of God, the bishops (the bishop of Rome included) – has something to learn.

The Church, like the People of God of the Hebrew Scriptures, is at once an “Exodus community” (Greek *ex-hodos*: *way out*) and a synodal one. It is an Exodus community, saved from the shackles of eternal damnation through the passion and death of Christ, just as Moses led the People of God away from slavery in the land of Egypt. Consequently, the experience of the People of God

⁵ Cf. F. Nwachukwu, “Verso la conversione pastorale della Chiesa,” in: Francisco Insa (a cura di), *Pastori secondo il cuore di Cristo. La dimensione pastorale della formazione sacerdotale*. Roma: Edizione Santa Croce, 2024, 20 (16-29).

stands as a point of reference for much of the current life of the Church. The ancient Israelites were together (*syn-*) on their way out of Egypt. In the wilderness, they *stayed* together, *walked* together, *shared* meals together, *and talked* among themselves. We may add that they *ran* together, following the hastiness of the Passover meal. However, during their journey, despite the joy of being together on the way and of being liberated, conflict still arose. They began to quarrel both among themselves, with their leaders, Moses and Aaron, and with God. This is recalled in the story of their experience at Massa and Meribah (cf. Ex. 17:7). *Massah* refers to their “putting God to the test” (the Hebrew word *massa* comes from the root *nâsâh*, to test) and *Meribah* speaks of their “challenging God or arguing with God” (the Hebrew word *meribah* is from the root *rîb* or *rûb*, to toss or to grapple with). The joy of liberation was not enough to insulate them from problems and difficulties. Even in the midst of joy, if God's presence is not felt, every problem can degenerate into an experience of Massa and Meribah.

The solutions adopted by the People of Israel to deal with this situation remain applicable to the Church of today. One was human, based on the principle of subsidiarity (cf. Exod. 18:12-27), and the other divine, based on the Divine Law (Exod. 20: 8-11; 24:12-28; Deut. 5: 6-21). Regarding the first, Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, observed how Moses was overwhelmed by the problems of the people. He advised Moses to appoint elders as advisers who would help him in settling minor issues and simple matters, while the major and critical ones were referred to him. However, this solution, which was based only on human wisdom, remained limited and insufficient. There was a need for a higher and more complete one. This came from God himself, who set before the People the principles and guidelines for the Synodal Way. These were the commandments that God handed to Moses on stone tablets at Horeb (Sinai).

Today, to be able to make the most of the Synodal Way, the Church needs to be asking the question: what is God saying to us as Church? For the People of Israel, God's commandments were the basis of their moral life and daily choices. This was so crucial to their social cohesion and their journey together that Joshua had to ensure they renewed their commitment to God and to keeping his commandments before they entered the promised land. He asked the people to choose whom to serve:

“Choose today whom you will serve, whether the gods you ancestors served beyond the river, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell...But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord” (Josh. 24:15).

Those commandments given by God at Horeb (Sinai) continued to be the principle of the People's renewal in the whole of the Old Testament. It formed the basis of the teachings and actions of the prophets, as is exemplified in the call of

Elijah on mount Carmel (1Kgs 18:18.21), as well as guidance for the kings, as is typified in the reform carried out by king Josiah (2 Kgs 23).

In the New Testament, the same synodal character or togetherness underlies the community of the followers of Jesus. Two moments of this synodality of Jesus' disciples may be identified before and after his resurrection. In the first moment, it was Jesus himself who enunciated the rules of the synodality of his disciples. He called them primarily to "be with him" before being sent out to preach (Mk 3:14). He held his followers together as a shepherd does his flock. With a parable, he explained that the shepherd does not let even one of his sheep to stray (Mt 18:12-13). Before his passion, death and resurrection, he prayed to his Father that his disciples might be one, and he reported: "While I was with them, I kept them in thy name...; I have guarded them, and none of them is lost but the son of perdition" (Jn 17:11-12). Besides indicating himself as the "way, the truth and life" to be embraced by all his followers wishing to reach the Father, Jesus also called on his disciples to rise and join him on *the way of the cross*: "Arise, let us be on our way" (Mat 26:46; Mk 14:42).

More concretely, Jesus laid down elements of the Synodal Way in the significant passage of the mission of the Seventy-Two (cf. Matt. 10:7-10; Lk 10:1-23). Four features of the mandate of that mission may be mentioned. First, Jesus sent the seventy-two out in pairs, two by two. This may read as an antidote to selfishness and an exhortation to fraternal sharing. We find here also an encouragement to a relationship of dialogue ("talking together"), mutual friendship ("sharing together"), and communal life ("staying together"). Second, he asked them to travel light, with "no purse, bag, or sandals," thereby calling them to simplicity and detachment. He wanted his disciples to live with little means, unencumbered by materialism and vain pursuits (cf. Matt. 8:19-20). Third, he instructed and encouraged them to be welcome-worthy and congenial. Fourth and perhaps most importantly, he told them not to bring back to the community of his disciples the dust of opposition and resistance to the faith: "Whoever does not welcome you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet when you leave that house or town" (Mat 10:14). Even today, the followers of Jesus continue to encounter ill-treatment in the course of their duties; people offend them, treat them badly, and sometimes refuse them welcome. Yet, they are not to bring these ill feelings back to the Church or their religious communities. They should shake them off and let the dust of opposition remain with their owners.

Walking and Running Together

The pre-resurrection teachings on the togetherness of the disciples are complemented by the narratives of particular post-resurrection incidents

indicating how the disciples imbibed and practiced those teachings of Jesus. Two outstanding examples may be found in the stories of the Emmaus Journey (Lk 24:13-35) and the Easter morning sprint (Joh 20:1-11).

The first is the story of the two disciples on their way to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35). Their journey is presented in a way that reflects the life of the Church. They passed through the four stages of talking *about* Jesus, *talking with* him, *eating with* him and finally *proclaiming* him as the Lord. It was while they talked about him that Jesus himself drew close and walked with them. A Church that *talks about* Jesus always enjoys his company! Such a Church is drawn by Jesus himself into *talking with* him in prayer. It is a praying Church which also experiences the warmth of the Holy Spirit. In fact, the disciples later declared: "Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?" (Lk 24:32). It was, however, at the *breaking of bread*, when they received from Jesus the bread he blessed, that their eyes were opened, and they recognized him.

The Eucharist is the centre of the life of the Church, where the faithful recognize Jesus. The opening of the eyes at the Eucharist corrects that of the sin of the garden of Eden (Gen 3:6-7). It is to be recalled that God created the human being in his image and likeness, like a mirror or camera, which is turned towards God and constantly captures and reflects his image. With the sin of Eden, the focus of the mirror or camera was turned inwards towards Adam and Eve. They began to do only "selfie" capturing. This was the beginning of the loss of the state of grace, culminating in the expulsion from Eden and the beginning of interpersonal violence, as is seen in the story of Cain and Abel in the chapter following the sin of Eden. It is at the breaking of the bread by Jesus, at the sharing of a meal with him, that the focus of the human mirror or camera was corrected and restored to its original state; it was returned to capturing Christ "the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15). Once they had this experience of renewal, the disciples went back to Jerusalem to *proclaim* the name of Lord. They testified that he is alive (Lk 24:35). Only one of the two disciples is mentioned by name, Cleopas (Lk 24:18). The identity – name, gender, age or origin – of the other is not revealed. That makes the story applicable to all followers of Christ who daily make their way together ("syn-hodos") to the Emmaus of the world.⁶

The second story is that of the mythical Easter Sunday race, narrated in John 20:1-11. On the day Jesus rose from the dead, the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene went to his tomb and found that the stone had been removed. She ran

⁶Cf. F. Nwachukwu, *The Birth of Systematic Theology in Contemporary Black Africa*. Rome, 1994, 57-61.

to "Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved" and told them that the body of Jesus had been removed from the tomb. Peter and the other disciples took off for the tomb. They ran together (Jn 20:2-4). The important word is "together" (in Greek, *homou/homos* akin to the expression *syn*). The other disciple ran faster and reached the tomb first. He did not enter but waited until Peter arrived and went in first. The other disciple then followed suit. Although the narrative does not explicitly say so, there is evidence that Mary Magdalene also ran silently with or behind the other two. That should not surprise us. She ran to bring them the message (Jn 20:2) and would certainly not have left them to run alone to the tomb. In fact, when Peter and the other disciples left the tomb, she remained there weeping (Jn 20:11).

This story is rich in meaning. Biblical exegetical tradition has generally identified the other disciple whom Jesus loved as the apostle John. Yet, the Bible is silent on the exact and nominal identity of the disciple. He is only identified as "the other" and "the one whom Jesus loved". It is possible to see in this silence and the peculiar way of presenting this disciple an intention to open the story to all followers of Christ. Any disciple of Jesus of any age or identity who feels himself or herself loved by Jesus Christ may put on the cloak of that "other disciple." Based on this, I have for years applied this story to the desirable synodal relationships between the followers of Christ: between the older Churches (represented by Simon Peter) and the younger ones (seen in the other disciple); or also between the hierarchy (seen in Peter) and the faithful or charismatic groups in the Church, represented by the other disciple.⁷

In either case, it is to be noted that the runners respected their differences. The other disciple ran faster than Peter, and Peter let him do so without complaining, shouting or trying to stop him. This disciple arrived first but respected the "authority" of Peter and waited for him to enter the tomb first. Mary Magdalene represents those who quietly run behind the curtains but whose role is often decisive, as was hers on that occasion. When all the members of the Church are respected and accepted for their differences, and all are engaged and made to collaborate, the Church grows by taking advantage of the various talents and strengths of each person or group.

Together as one Family

One way the early Church expressed the togetherness or synodality of its members was with the image of a household or family. Both Peter and Paul

⁷ Cf. F. Nwachukwu, *The Birth of Systematic Theology in Contemporary Black Africa*. 109-110; also: F. Nwachukwu, ed., *One Faith, Many Tongues*. Abuja, Nigeria, 2017, 117-119.

referred to the community of believers as the household of God (1Pt 4:17) or the household of faith (Gal 6:10). Paul was more explicit by speaking of "the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth" (1Tm 3:15). According to him, Jesus Christ created a new community of persons through his passion and death. In his flesh, he broke down the walls of hostile division between peoples and, by his blood, brought together those who were formerly separated (Eph 2:12-13). For the followers of Christ, the consequence is fundamental. Paul summarizes it in the following words:

“You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Eph 2:19-22).

In the aforementioned passages of the letters of Peter and Paul, neither the Greek word “*patria*” nor the Latin “*familia*” is used. Instead, the words *oikos* (Greek for “dwelling or house”) and *domus* (Latin for “house”) and *domesticus* (Latin for “household member”) are used. Yet, there is no doubt that the idea expressed in them is that of a family, the family of God or of faith. In fact, the Latin expression “*familia*,” applied to a group of servants of the same master, is generally also understood as a household of persons belonging together under the same paternity.

In presenting the synodal nature of the Church, the image of the family stands out against other paradigms used for the Church, as that which best reflects the ideas of communion and participation are two elements that are essential for synodality. The family is not simply one out of many images, figures or models for describing the Church. The family is *the* image of the Church. According to Pope Francis, the Church “is a family of families”, constantly enriched by the lives of all domestic churches.⁸

It was the wealth of the paradigm of family, together with the centrality of the family in the African culture and society, that the Fathers of the First African Synod wished to underline. The Synod Fathers recognized and promoted this imagery as an inculturation tool, “an expression of the Church's nature particularly appropriate for Africa”. They opted for the *Church as God's Family* as the “guiding idea for the evangelization of Africa”, especially because “this image

⁸Pope Francis, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Amoris Laetitia*. Vatican City, 2016, 87.

emphasizes care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationships, acceptance, dialogue and trust.”⁹ In response to this interest, Pope St John Paul II, who had convoked the Synod, challenged theologians in the African continent to elaborate the theology of this paradigm of the family, exposing its wealth and complementarity with other images of the Church.

The African Paradox

Unfortunately, while the Fathers of the First African Synod were proudly speaking of their continent as champions of the values of the family, a most horrible fratricidal war was in 1994, devastating Rwanda, which was one of its most Catholic nations at the time. How, then, could the African voice be credible? In the presence of such a debacle of inter and intra-ethnic cohabitation, which is still rampant in various parts of the continent, how would anyone take seriously Africans vaunting their peoples' attachment to family values, like fraternal peaceful collaboration and solidarity? This has remained the challenge to the Church in Africa. It is sincerely hoped that African Catholics will seize the opportunity of the synodal process and its immediate aftermath to seek out the enduring causes of and valid solutions for such inter and intra-ethnic conflicts not only in the broader spectrum of the African continent but also in particular ecclesiastical circumscriptions.

Africa and the Church of the Sheaves

The synodal process offers the Church in Africa a fresh opportunity to make an important contribution to the survival, revival and fresh flourishing of the Universal Church. The first step in this regard is for the Church in the continent to wean herself of a certain "baby syndrome" that presents her as a spoilt baby still relegated to the crib, where she is fed with milk – subsidies and subventions - from the elder mother-sister churches of the West. The generosity of her benefactors and the consequent receiving mentality make her feel she is condemned to the crib, incapable of helping herself out of it, while she finds interminable explanations for why she has to remain where and as she is. The result is that the voice of this Church is often treated like the cry of a baby from the crib, which comes only to disturb the meaningful dialogue of the adults. Sometimes, the adults listen to the cry and offer some smile or applause, with no effort to really take seriously what the baby is saying. On other occasions, they may simply hush up the baby and offer her some milk to appease her into silence. Yet, after more than a hundred years in most parts of the continent, the Church in Africa should

⁹Pope John Paul II, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Ecclesia in Africa*, 63.

begin to show concrete awareness of her gradual maturity and ability to take care of her needs. This does not mean that she should no longer ask for or accept help from others. Everyone, including grown-ups, may still ask and receive help from others. However, she should show greater enterprise in covering her basic needs and sustenance. That would give stronger resonance to her voice and evoke greater attention to it at the universal level. Only so can the Church in Africa begin to assume with greater conviction her renewed mission in the new life of the Church, the Church of the Sheaves.

Yes, the Church of the Sheaves! That is the new concept of the Church drawn from the words of Psalm 126:6 on the return of the exiles of Zion:

Going, they went and wept, casting their seeds.

But coming, they shall come with joyfulness, carrying their sheaves.

The West has held and sustained the Church for the greater part of its life, especially since the decline and near disappearance of the early Church in northern Africa. The current presence of the Church in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and most of the southern hemisphere is the fruit of the missionary endeavours of the Church in the West. No amount of gratitude would be sufficient to appreciate the sacrifice of the missionaries who came mostly from Western Europe. I will limit my comments here to the African experience, although there is no doubt that the same is applicable to most of the other parts of the southern hemisphere of the world.

I am usually enthralled by the stories of the Western missionaries who brought the Christian Gospel and the values based on it to sub-Saharan Africa. They believed so much in the Gospel and its values that they were ready to die for them. To bring them and teach them to Africans, they did the most heroic things. At a time when the modern means of transportation and the current medical advancement did not exist, they undertook intercontinental voyages in order to bring the Gospel and its values to the mission lands. They risked high sea dangers, threats of hitherto unknown diseases, possible death from these, and incomprehension from local populations. They sacrificed the most beautiful moments of their youth, including the company of their families and their peers, and many of them made the ultimate sacrifice of their lives.

In those days, their departure for the mission lands was like a dying. Most of the missionaries did not hope to return home again and their families did not hope to see them anymore. It is therefore not difficult to imagine the quantity of tears that must have flowed as they bade farewell to their loved ones. They really went out full of tears, carrying the seed of the Gospel for sowing.

The Gospel and the values that the missionaries wished to share with the mission lands were the same on which and with which the West had built and

developed its society and civilization. It would, therefore, be remiss of anyone not to admire the generosity of these missionaries in wishing and trying to share with their fellow humans the values that had fostered the growth and development of their own societies. As sub-Saharan Africans and peoples of the southern hemisphere, in the mission countries, we received and imbibed these values, although not always as perfectly as one would have expected. Yet, we honour these missionaries as heroes and idols of our Christian faith. Their lives and examples challenged and still challenge us to make sacrifices and aspire to the same values that they bore and spread. In Africa, we think of people like Archbishop Shanahan, Luigi Comboni, and many others. When one visits the cemeteries where these missionaries were buried, one is struck by how many of them survived only a few months after their arrival. Many died before attaining the age of forty. In spite of this, other young persons, aware of the dangers in the mission lands and the demise of those who went ahead of them, still embraced the missionary journey! They really were mad-in-love with their faith and their neighbour. We love them. We remember them. Their memory will always remain fresh in African minds. The good news is that, despite the inevitable mistakes, omissions and excesses on the side of some of them, the efforts and sacrifices of these great heroes have borne fruit. The harvest is truly abundant in sub-Saharan Africa and certainly in many parts of the southern hemisphere. This is the time of the sheaves. Yes, as the Psalmist says, "Coming they shall come with joyfulness, carrying their sheaves" (Ps 126:6b).

It is unfortunate that some people are still slow to take full cognizance of this new reality of the Church. They go on complaining about crises which are only apparent in the Church. The current statistics of the Church confirm this assertion. For example, between 2020 and 2021, the population of Catholics in the world increased by 16,240,000 to a total of 1,375,852,000. The increase affected all continents, except Europe which was less with 244,000 Catholics. The increase was mainly in Africa (+8,312,000) and America (+6,629,000), followed by Asia (+1,488,000) and Oceania (+55,000). This means that what the Church is experiencing is not a crisis but a redistribution of its members and vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life. In fact, what some people call a crisis in the Church in the West is God's own way of preparing this Church and nudging her attention towards the abundant harvest of the gardens planted by her missionaries. For centuries, the Church in the West has been so self-sufficient and altruistic in giving assistance to the younger churches that it would not ordinarily and readily have opened up to accepting help from those she was accustomed to birthing and babysitting. She, therefore, had to experience some "fragility" and situation of need that would oblige her to extend welcoming hands to the help of the sheaves of the gardens she planted in mission lands. Generally, to oblige a person to tap on the wall and discover a new passage into and out of a room, God sometimes closes

all the doors and windows the person was accustomed to using to enter and exit the place. Many local Churches in the West would not have spontaneously welcomed and integrated priests and other collaborators from Africa and other mission countries if they had sufficient priests and local assistants to cover their pastoral needs.

The Church of the Sheaves is one that implies a change of mentality in the way of being Church: the synodal Church characterized by communion, participation and mission. It is the Church in which the local Churches in the West recognize and embrace, without complex, shame or humiliation, the outcome of their missionary endeavours and integrate the same through synodal communion and participation in their pastoral life. This would involve a linguistic update. The older and more experienced local Churches in the West are called to see themselves as the "mother" of the synodal community, ready to share their experience and wisdom with the new and adolescent Churches of the southern hemisphere. On the other hand, the brethren from the younger Churches are to be aware that they are not coming to the West to evangelize it. The West has already been evangelized. The mission of those coming from the younger Churches is to integrate and strengthen the missionary and pastoral life already existent in the Churches in the West.

This is already gradually taking place. Some "strange" African names are already punctuating the lists of names of the clergy of many dioceses, the officials of certain ecclesiastical and academic institutions, as well as the governing bodies of a few religious communities and organizations in the West. The hesitation sometimes encountered with such novelties is understandably associated with the natural challenge people face in accepting and integrating differences. It is, therefore, necessary to move from these spontaneous cases to a more organized arrangement.

With this in mind, to ensure a fruitful communion and participation of the brethren from the younger churches, a training programme should be put in place for them, similar to the formation that was given to missionaries in the West before they were sent out. Some of the seminaries in the West, which no longer receive many seminarians, could be employed as missionary welcome centres where those coming from the younger Churches are taught the language, culture, habits, sensitivities and taboos of the places in the West where they are to serve. At the same time, clear conventions are to be stipulated between the local churches from which the candidates are coming and the churches that would welcome them. This approach will ensure that no part of the Church is left to suffer the lack of labourers in the vineyard while other parts are teeming with them. It would help the local Churches in the West to desist from closing down parishes or introducing sweet-sounding initiatives that amount to the same thing, thereby killing the stumps from which the shoots of regeneration of the Church would need to come.

What Space for Africa?

The Church in Africa certainly has a role to play in the regeneration and rejuvenation of the universal Church, including in the West. Africa has been a major beneficiary of the sacrifices of Western missionaries. While the colonial powers and their agents in Africa laboured to make booties and gains out of the territories they controlled, the missionaries made of themselves victims, booties and gains for the same territories. They gave everything of themselves. The first space for Africa in the Church of the Sheaves is one of deep gratitude.

The Church in Africa would show its thankfulness, among other things, through conscious fidelity to, as well as preservation and defence of, that Gospel message and its values for which the missionaries offered up their energies and life. The importance of this role is not to be underestimated at a time when the harsh and loud echoes of the mistakes and misbehaviour of some clerics and ministers of the Church have tended to rivet public attention to the sins and shadows in the Church. Although universal, this situation has been most pronounced in the West. The testimonies from the Church in Africa offer a contrasting narrative. They show that, beyond the errors in question, including the most despicable ones, the beautiful legacy bequeathed by the missionaries in the places where they served is still bearing good fruits. That legacy greatly surpasses, without disregarding, whatever mistakes clerics may have made in the course of years. This point is better made by the African Christians than those of the West, whose voice often remains hushed up by the sense of guilt, remorse, panic and fear of the reaction of the already hostile public opinion. Experience is always a principal weapon in any dispute. Sub-Saharan Africans have abundant experience of the good deeds of Western missionaries, and many Africans are not shy about sharing them.

Moreover, by incarnating the Gospel values for which the missionaries offered up their energies and lives, the African Christians are standing as beacons against certain incongruencies that are being generated in the West by rampant secularism. For example, there is today the strange paradox whereby, after centuries of spreading, defending and sacrificing for the dissemination of the Gospel and the values built on it, the West is now beginning to despise the same values and is fighting to replace them with new unproven ones which are, at least, at odds with those the Western missionaries spread, defended and died for. Worse still, some people in the West want the rest of the world to sheepishly follow them in this rash, brash and flimsy flopover. In this regard, young Christians in Africa are asking questions like: why should we abandon values and principles taught by those who so believed in them that they were ready to die for them? Why should we embrace new values and principles invented and taught by the descendants of the bearers of the former ones, values being orchestrated by those who stand no chance of being measured against the empathy of the missionaries? Finally, why

should we abandon values and principles that have served as bedrock for the building of prosperous societies in the West as we know it today in order to pursue ideologies of dubious validity and unproven efficacy? This paradox is evident in social life, multilateral diplomacy, and intra-ecclesial affairs in the West.

In this regard and in dealing with the challenges she faces, the Church in Africa is keeping in mind the traditions of love and empathy she received from the missionaries. Jesus did not teach us that the Church is a community of perfect human beings but of people seeking the Kingdom of God. We love our missionaries. They are our "mothers" in the faith. The mother may have wrinkles, and she may even be ugly, but mother, she is! We usually don't permit anyone to insult our mothers. The Church in Africa will remind the West to keep this in mind when addressing issues concerning the Church.

I would conclude by recalling what I wrote about the Church in Africa some three decades ago: "Any history of the African Church that limits itself to what is to be found in the 'secular' books of history is bound to be truncated. The earliest indications of the presence of Christianity in this continent are to be found in the Bible itself. In this regard, the correct point of departure should be the first welcoming of the 'Head' of Christianity (Col 1:18), Jesus of Nazareth, as a refugee by this continent. Nothing more is biblically known of that sojourn apart from the fact that Africa (Egypt) safeguarded him until 'those who sought the child's life are dead' (Mt 2:20). This incident may be taken together with another one told in Luke 23:26. Here a certain Simon of Cyrene is taken and made to help in carrying the cross of Jesus Christ. Now, in Acts 2:10..., the phrase, "...Libya belonging to Cyrene..." suggests strongly that Cyrene is also (North) Africa. If that is so, then Simon of Cyrene was an African. The consequence is clear. The African continent is brought in at two very crucial moments in the life of Jesus Christ, the 'Head' of the Christian Church: at his infancy, safeguarding him from those who wished to destroy him, and at his passion, helping him to carry the cross of our salvation." It is as if the Head of Christianity himself wished to foretell a role that this continent would play in the future, this time in relation to the Body, the Church (Col 2,20).¹⁰

¹⁰F. Nwachukwu, *The Birth of Systematic Theology in Contemporary Black Africa*. Rome, 1994, 12-13. Also: F. Nwachukwu, "A Nigerian Reflection of the Special Mission of African Theology". *Encounter* 2(1993) 53.