

SYNODALITY AS A MECHANISM FOR THE PROMOTION OF PEACE, SOCIAL HARMONY AND CO-RESPONSIBILITY OF CHURCH AND STATE IN NIGERIA

Leonard Oshiokhamele ANETEKHAI, Dr. Theol.

Rector, St. John of the Cross Spiritual Year Seminary,

PMB 263, Ekpoma, Edo State.

leonibus4real@gmail.com

Abstract

The Church is increasingly focusing on promoting peace and social harmony within and outside the Church, as the world is experiencing escalating insecurity and economic challenges. This paper explores the potential of synodality as a tool for promoting peace and social harmony within the Nigerian Church. It emphasises the need to rethink the relationship between the Church and State to create a more cohesive environment. Religious differences are often exploited to incite violence, leading to discord within communities. A synod provides a forum for dialogue and decision-making on critical issues, allowing the Church to engage constructively with the State. By working together, they can promote peace and harmony throughout society. The Synod brings together representatives from various sectors of the Church and society to engage in thoughtful discussion and deliberation on issues that promote unity and understanding. By providing a platform for different perspectives to be shared and debated, the Synod facilitates the achievement of consensus on crucial issues. This essay highlights the Synod's essential role in promoting social harmony and peaceful coexistence within the Nigerian Church and strengthening the relationship between Church and State.

Keywords: Church in Nigeria, Church-state relations, Common good, Community of love, Social Justice.

1. Introduction

The interaction between Church and State has long been a subject of significant discourse, particularly in promoting peace and social harmony. Historically, the relationship between religious institutions and state structures has varied dramatically, ranging from complete separation to full integration. In modern times, the concept of reconciliation, deeply rooted in Christian theology, has been seen as a socio-political tool to address broken relationships and promote social cohesion. This approach is consistent with the broader definition of peace as not merely the absence of conflict but the presence of social harmony and the equitable functioning of society.

Pope John XXIII states that any well-regulated and productive association of human beings in society requires the acceptance of a fundamental principle: that each human being is truly a person. He has a nature; that is, he is endowed with intelligence and free will. His rights and duties flow together as a direct consequence of his nature. These rights and duties are universal, inviolable, and, therefore, absolutely inalienable (Cf. *Pacem in Terris*, n. 9). Similarly, in his message for the 55th World Day of Peace, Pope Francis asserts that in every age, peace is both a gift from on high and the fruit of a shared commitment. Indeed, we can speak of an “architecture” of peace, to which the various institutions of society contribute, and an “art” of peace, which directly involves each of us. Everyone can work together to build a more peaceful world, starting with the hearts of individuals and relationships in the family, then within society and the environment, and on to relations between people and nations (Pope Francis, 2022). The expression mentioned above conveys the idea that peace is both an individual and a collective responsibility that contributes to the common good and ultimately improves the quality of our world.

Promoting world peace and harmony can also be achieved by balancing the influence of the Church within any given state. While keeping these entities separate is one method, it is not the only way to achieve social peace. The Church plays an essential role in maintaining peace and harmony through actions such as prayer, support for victims of violence, and advocacy for human rights. Throughout history and with active participation in the affairs of God's people, Christian tradition, in particular, has made significant contributions to world peace through various levels of engagement, including public statements by church authority and programmes that enhance peace-building. These initiatives have, in turn, helped to a good degree to promote peaceful coexistence and dedicated social and human rights activities.

Pursuing peace and social harmony is a universal aspiration that transcends borders, cultures and ideologies. The United Nations International Day for Peace, celebrated every year on May 16, highlights the global commitment to promoting a sustainable world of peace and unity. It is believed that relative peace and social harmony within a given society are essential to reducing poverty, protecting the environment, promoting human rights and influencing democratic principles. In addition, education initiatives, that is, support for children's attendance at school and funding for their learning process, play a crucial role in inculcating values of tolerance, non-violence and conflict resolution among citizens. This approach offers alternative ways of resolving disputes without resorting to violence or underdeveloping communities through the destruction of property. The protection of human rights and the promotion of democratic principles are also essential to sustainable peace.

When a state embraces these values and practices, and the Church helps to checkmate these processes, it can bring societies closer to a harmonious world where the well-being of all is paramount. This harmonious world cannot be achieved in isolation without the Church helping the State and the State listening to the Church. This act of listening comes only through dialogue, which each Synod, as a gathering of the People of God with the Bishops as their representatives, and synodality, a renewed form of dialogue process within the Catholic Church, seeks to promote.

2. Understanding Synod and Synodality

Synod is derived from the Greek word '*synodos*', meaning 'assembly' or 'together'. It is a gathering of church leaders, such as Catholic Bishops, to deliberate on doctrine, administration, morals and discipline matters. It is an ancient and revered word in the tradition of the Church, whose meaning draws on the most profound themes of Revelation. It is a term composed of the Greek preposition *συν* (with) and the noun *ὁδός* (way). It indicates the way along which the People of God walk together. It also refers to the Lord Jesus, who presented Himself as “the way, the truth and the life”, as recorded in John 14:6, and to the fact that Christians, His followers, were originally called “followers of the way”, as recorded in Acts 9:2 and 19:9. (*Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n.3).

In the broadest sense, it means walking or journeying together as the governing authorities of the Church under the leadership of the Supreme Pontiff. Pope Paul VI, who initiated the Synod of Bishops in his Apostolic Letter *Apostolica Sollicitudo*, gives three general purposes for a Synod. First, to promote a closer union and greater collaboration between the Supreme Pontiff and the Bishops of the whole world; second, to ensure that accurate and direct information is given on matters and situations which affect the internal life of the Church and the way in which she is to act in today's world; and third, to facilitate agreement, at least on essential matters of doctrine and the way in which the life of the Church is to be conducted.

From its inception, synods have been instrumental in shaping the direction and policies of the Catholic Church. According to the article “What is Synodality? Experts Explain” in the *Catholic World Report* of October 25, 2018, a synod, “*in practice, is a consultative body. It is a body that gives the Pope an opportunity to discuss the issues of the day and to receive feedback and advice from the episcopate. Paul VI may have given it its present form, but the reality is that popes have always done this, consulting with their bishops on various matters, in one form or another.*” (Ed Condon, Vatican City, October 25, 2018)

While the purpose of a synod can vary according to the situation and reasons for such synods, it generally aims to promote unity, reflect on ecclesial

matters and guide the mission and governance of the Church. It is a way for the Church to discuss issues where different voices within the Church come together to discern the way forward in faith and practice. Hence, when the Bishops gather for a synod in the name of the people of God, the Church, they meet to assist the Pope in defending and developing faith and morals and preserving and strengthening ecclesiastical discipline. Through a synodal process, the Bishops consider questions concerning the Church's mission in our modern world. Although it is not their function to settle matters or issue decrees, it is for the Pope to ratify the decision of the Synod, unless the Pope has given them the power to deliberate in specific cases. A Synod involves a journey together and a process of fraternal collaboration and discernment, and after each Synod of Bishops, a magisterial document, an Apostolic Exhortation, is issued by the Pope on the issues discussed at the Synod. (Cf. Merlin Ambrose, 2021, p. 417)

Synodality, on the other hand, is a new wave of participation and transformation that characterises the life and mission of the Church and a new experience of making the Catholic Church relevant to the modern world. The Church believes that the transformation of human society depends on the transformation of each person. (Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 10) Synodality, when it refers to the Catholic Church as contemplated by the *International Theological Commission of the Holy See*, is 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 travel together, gather in assembly and participate actively in her evangelising mission. (*Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 6).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* expresses the idea of Synodality as allowing lay members of the Christian faithful to exercise governmental power according to the law. As such, the Church supports its participation in special councils, diocesan synods, pastoral councils, parish pastoral care, collaboration in finance committees, and ecclesiastical tribunals. (Cf. CCC n. 911).

The concept of synodality is deeply rooted in the tradition of the Church and emphasises the common journey of the People of God: The baptised, the priests, the bishops and the Pope. It is a way of listening to each individual within the Church to discern how God might be speaking to all. Synodality is not just about coming together; it is about recognising the diverse charisms within the Church and ensuring that each part of the Church fulfils its proper role.

As affirmed by Roy J. Deferrari,

Unless each individual member be endowed with all those things which they need to fulfil their roles, so in the case of the Constitution and composition of the Community, there can be no provision for the good of the

whole society, unless the individual members, namely, men endowed with the dignity of personality, are supplied with all they need to exercise their social duties, if, then, provision is made for social justice, the rich fruits of active zeal will grow from economic life, which will mature in an order of tranquillity and will give proof of the strength and solidarity of the State, just as the strength of the body is discerned from its undisturbed, complete, and fruitful functioning (Roy J. Deferrari, 1954, p. 610-611).

The synodal approach, which emphasises communion and solidarity among God's people, is seen as a way of promoting collegiality, reflecting the Church as the mystical body of Christ, in which each member has a unique and valuable impact to make. The International Theological Commission believes and emphasises that synods and councils have been almost interchangeable as formal church assemblies in the history of the Church. However, the modern understanding of a synod as distinct from a council and synodality itself requires careful theological clarification. (*Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 3-5). Nevertheless, the Synod on Synodality, initiated by Pope Francis, is a contemporary expression of this ancient practice, aiming to involve local Catholics, national episcopal conferences, religious communities and curial officials in an extended period of consultation and discernment.

For Pope Francis, synodality is in harmony with the teaching of *Lumen Gentium*, (n. 18-29), which provides an appropriate framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry of the Church, with the Pope representing the entire Church in the bond of peace, love and unity. This belief is based on the doctrine of *sensus fidei fidelium*, which holds that the faith of the individual believer *sensus fidei (fidelis)* cannot be separated from the faith of the Church herself *sensus fidei (fidelium)* or '*sensus Ecclesiae*', endowed and sustained by the Holy Spirit. It implies that all members of the Church, both lay and hierarchical, bear responsibility for the spread of the Word of God and are all agents of evangelisation (*Sensus Fidei*, n 66 – 67). Consequently, the realisation of a synodal Church is an indispensable condition for new missionary energy involving the whole people of God (*Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 9).

Furthermore, Synodality is at the heart of Christians' ecumenical commitment because it is an invitation to walk together towards full communion. Properly understood, it offers a way of understanding and experiencing the Church in which legitimate differences

find a place in the logic of a mutual exchange of gifts in the light of truth (*Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n.9).

Synodal processes are no new adventure in the sense of dialogue but a welcoming pathway towards development in addressing contemporary challenges and engaging the faithful in dialogue. The Synod on Synodality, as introduced by Pope Francis on September 18, 2021, at the hall of St. Paul VI in Rome (*L' Osservatore Romano*, n. 41, pp 6 -7), continues a long tradition of ecclesial gatherings going back to the Apostolic age and early ecumenical councils. As emphasised in the ongoing document of the Synod on Synodality, the questions raised echo the events of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, where Paul and Barnabas addressed the Jerusalem Council on the issue of circumcision among the Gentiles, and in Galatians 2:1-10, where Paul affirms that his missionary task and that of Peter were both to extend the kingdom of God. In these examples, we see a synodal event in which the apostolic Church, at a decisive moment in its development, lived out its vocation given its mission, enlightened by the presence of the Risen Lord. Throughout the centuries, this event has been interpreted as a paradigm for the synods celebrated by the Church (Cf. *Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church*, n. 20). These Councils laid the foundations for the Church's understanding of Synodality, emphasising the journey of faith undertaken by the ecclesial Community for the common good of the Church.

In light of this understanding of synodality, synodality expands to cover not just a methodological approach but also a realisation of the nature of the Church as it embodies communion, participation, and mission in its structure and processes. It calls for a spirit of openness in which the diverse voices within the Church can be heard and respected, fostering a sense of unity and common purpose. Through this process, the Church seeks to discern the signs of the times and respond to them in a way that is faithful to the Gospel and attentive to the world's needs and challenges. Synodality is not only a matter of governance but also a spiritual process that reflects the Church's commitment to living out its mission together and inclusively.

3. The Catholic Church in Nigeria and Synodal Dialogue

The presence of the Catholic Church in Nigeria has a rich and varied history, reflecting the country's complex cultural diversity, which is challenged daily by interreligious tensions. Within this complex cultural diversity, the Christian faith, as introduced to Nigeria by Portuguese missionaries in the 15th century, is home to a vibrant Catholic Christian community with a growing number of faithful and an expansion of indigenous churches. Through her mission and task, the Catholic Church plays a central role in Nigeria's social and cultural

life, contributing to education, public health and community development. The mission of the Church, as instructed by our Lord Jesus Christ in Matthew 28:19, underscores the responsibility of the Church to preach the message of peace, forgiveness, reconciliation, justice, unity, human development, love, freedom, and human dignity to all men and women, who are created in the image and likeness of God (Cf. Ogwuche et al., p. 33). This missionary task can only be accomplished through a synodal spirit of dialogue, which will serve as a corresponding commitment to foster communion within and beyond the Church. An act of communion which deeply reflects the communion of fraternal charity and zeal for the universal mission entrusted to the Apostles (*Christus Dominus*, n. 36), and thus must reflect in a concrete sense the life of the Church, which the mission of Christ emphasises in mutual self-respect, social and active participation and the inclusion of all.

In recent times, the Catholic Church in Nigeria has actively participated in the synodal process, reflecting its commitment to addressing societal issues and fostering a participatory approach among its members. In their plenary gathering, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) has been instrumental in guiding the Church through these synodal engagements and calling on state authorities to ensure that the voices of ordinary citizens are heard and considered in the decision-making process. This inclusive approach is evident in the leadership roles they hold within various lay apostolate groups, highlighting the Church's recognition of the vital contributions of all its members.

In the words of John Cardinal Onaiyekan, who, through the goodwill of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), has had the grace to participate in no less than seven Synods, beginning with the 1986 Synod on the Laity, the idea of a Synod gives each Episcopal Conference at least one voice in the Synod, either through its delegates or by papal appointment. It is a world forum where all are equal, and each contribution carries weight on its own merit for the good of the Church. (*Synodality in African Church Avant la Lette*, October 20, 2023)

The synodal path represents the Church's ongoing mission towards eschatological perfection, guided by the word of God and the collective wisdom of its members. It is a journey characterised by listening, dialogue, and discernment, where each voice contributes to the harmonious symphony of faith that guides the Church's pilgrimage through history. This act of listening must be accompanied by acts of love, as highlighted by Benedict XVI, and is a responsibility for both individual faithful and the entire ecclesial Community at every level, from the local Community to the universal Church (Cf. *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 20).

In this light of love and dialogue, as Benedict XVI exhorts, the Catholic Church, through its ecclesial representatives, must continue to promote peace and

social harmony in Nigeria through initiatives that foster dialogue and understanding among different faith communities. Such initiatives range from promoting peaceful coexistence within Christian communities, interreligious discussion, humanitarian assistance to victims of violence, and advocacy for human rights and justice through the Justice and Peace Commissions in various dioceses.

Through this spirit of dialogue, the thought of the Fathers of the Church, as given in *Lumen Gentium*, comes to light. That is, the Church has an unwavering commitment to social harmony, rooted in her teachings, with love, forgiveness and reconciliation as fundamental principles. By promoting these values, the Catholic Church in Nigeria can foster a more peaceful society and serve as a powerful example of unity in diversity. Her role extends beyond spiritual guidance to include practical action to address the root causes of conflict and pave the way for a more inclusive and just society. In this way, She brings the light of Christ to all and serves as a visible example of unity. (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 1). This means that the Church's influence must significantly shape attitudes and behaviours that promote peaceful coexistence, demonstrating that faith-based institutions can be a force for positive change in the world.

Just as the concept of Synodality is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition and has found a unique expression in today's Catholic world, the Church in Nigeria must concretely reflect in her *modus operandi* the dynamic interplay between faith, culture and societal challenges. If the Synod on Synodality has opened up a new way of reflecting on the participation of all the baptised in the affairs of the Church, the Church in Nigeria can use different contexts and situations, such as the regular meetings of lay apostolate groups to enhance the unique contribution of each baptised person to the one mission of proclaiming the Gospel in today's world. The effort envisaged here is not a request limited to a plan of technical or procedural improvements to make the Church's structures more efficient but rather an invitation to reflect on the concrete forms of the missionary commitment to which all the baptised are called and which, in turn, express the dynamism between unity and diversity proper to a synodal Church. (Cf. General Secretariat of The Synod XVI Ordinary General Assembly of The Synod Of Bishops, Vatican, December 11, 2000). This synodal approach opens a new outlook and revives an ancient practice fostering communion and common discernment on faith and pastoral care.

Promoting and nurturing a synodal Church in Nigeria that reflects communion and participation requires the revitalisation and re-evangelisation of the Basic Christian Communities (BCCs) in the Church. While it is unfortunate that in most dioceses in Nigeria, what was meant to be 'faith-based' has become 'money-based' Christian communities, there is hope for change. This growing

trend can be reversed, and the sharing of faith, mutual spiritual support and involvement in community activities that the BCC is meant to promote as a small unit of the larger church community can be restored.

The Basic Christian Community (BCC), which gained momentum after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), is a grassroots initiative that can help the Church to be synodal in its approach to mission. Emphasising the importance of community life and service within the Catholic Church and making the Church more accessible and closer to the people by focusing on local parish models, the Basic Christian Community within the Church in Nigeria and Africa can serve as a means of addressing the challenges and harnessing the potential of dialogue as a synodal Church.

More broadly, it will help to reflect and present to the Church in a concrete sense the events of the early Christians who came together to discuss common issues affecting each member of the early Christian communities. This reveals a rich blend of common faith experiences that predate colonial missionary efforts. By coming together in dialogue, the Church, as expressed in *Africae Munus*, gives and opens up a practical form of ecclesial communion that is deeply collaborative and participatory.

Hence, in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Pope Benedict XVI acknowledges that synodality is a cornerstone of the African ecclesial structure, which expresses that, as Christians, we are the salt and the life of the world (*Africae Munus*, n. 6). As Citizens a state and members of the Church and the African continent at large, we must live in solidarity and accept dialogue as a way of communicating with one another as domestic Churches, which will help various respective communities to recognise that all baptised Christians belong to the one body of Christ. This image is essential for the Catholic Church in Nigeria and the Universal Church (Cf. *Africae Munus*, n. 7).

The contemporary application of synodality in the Nigerian Church is a continuation and adaptation of its historical legacy, which has a universal undertone. All people are called to belong to the new People of God. This 'People' is meant to be spread throughout the entire world and to all ages so that God's will of uniting humanity as one can be fulfilled. The universality of the People of God is a gift from the Lord, and the Catholic Church tirelessly seeks the return of all humanity and its goods under Christ the Head in the unity of his Spirit (CCC, n. 831).

Synodality is an effort to articulate and live out the Church's understanding of itself as a pilgrim people, guided by the Word of God and committed to a synodal way of being, attentive to the signs of the times and the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Through synodal initiatives, the Church in Nigeria will foster a culture of encounter and dialogue in which every voice is valued, and

every member is called to contribute to the journey of faith. In essence, the Church journeys together, listening deeply and responding courageously and creatively to the needs of society and the challenges of the state.

4. Church-state Relations and their Common Responsibility in Nigeria

The relationship between Church and state in Nigeria is complex, deeply rooted in its history, and constantly evolving due to its socio-political dynamics. Since Nigeria's independence in 1960, the interaction between religious institutions and state structures has been the subject of considerable debate, often reflecting wider social challenges within the nation. However, the Catholic Church in Nigeria, which encompasses a wide range of grassroots Christian communities, significantly impacts the lives of many Nigerians, providing spiritual guidance and participating in social and educational endeavours.

The Catholic Church continues to remind the state of its promises to protect the life of every citizen by putting an end to the persecution of Christians. On the other hand, the state continues to fail in its responsibility to protect the lives of its citizens. It is unfortunate that there is still systematic persecution of Christians in Nigeria, especially in the north, and that the state authorities are not paying attention to the problems. Citizens live in constant fear and are unable to practice their faith in a country where religious freedom is enshrined in the Constitution. The increasing number of kidnappings, even from private homes, requires urgent attention through dialogue between church and state representatives. Worst of all is the problem of denial of rights to places of worship, even in most of the country's higher institutions. In some cases, where they are granted, they are located far from residential areas.

Religious violence, which has affected most communities, hinders and restricts the freedom of Christians to worship. The increase in planned radical attacks on churches is a threat to church-state relations in Nigeria. In this light, the Church, recognising its role within the state, must embrace its position not as a mere observer or analyst but as a leader in challenging the injustices of oppressive governments.

To a great degree, interreligious dialogue can be used to curb the effect of religious violence and facilitate peaceful coexistence among Nigerians. With dialogue among various religions, a new culture of unity and consultation will be created, serving the common good. Organisations like the Nigeria Inter-Religious Council (NIREC), established in 1999, which aims to empower different religions to communicate and find common ground in resolving conflicts, have played a crucial role in fostering mutual understanding and respect between Christian and Muslim leaders. This dialogue helps to dismantle the barriers of suspicion and mistrust that often lead to religious conflicts. However, it is essential to avoid

using religious fanaticism as a tool during political campaigns and the quest for power to prevent conflicts within communities. Instead, regardless of religion, political candidates must focus on defending their manifestos and showcasing their abilities and offerings. Religious leaders can collaborate across sectors to build fair and effective governance systems that prioritise human rights and promote pluralism within Nigeria's political and religious atmosphere (Cf Omonokhua, 2024).

Promoting peaceful coexistence in Nigeria is a shared responsibility between the Church and the State because it concerns the human person. Therefore, the Church must not see the State as a threat or vice versa. In the same way, the Church must be given the freedom to help the common man, as Pope John XXIII articulated the conviction that when the Church pours its energy into the life of a people, it does not see itself as an alien institution imposed from outside. Wherever the Church is present, people are reborn or resurrected in Christ. Those who experience this spiritual rebirth do not feel oppressed by external forces but rather recognise that they have attained perfect freedom, which enables them to seek God freely. Consequently, they support and put into practice what they consider to be good and morally right (*Mater et Magistra*, n. 180).

In line with promoting good and morally right actions within Church-state relations, the 'principle of subsidiarity' takes centre stage. This principle lies at the core of the Church's teachings on the relationship between the Church and the State. It advocates for matters to be handled by the smallest, lowest, or least centralised competent authority. (Cf. *Mater et Magistra*, n. 53). This principle has been suggested as a framework for the sustainable development of Church-State relations in Nigeria. This approach encourages balanced cooperation between the two entities, enabling them to contribute to national development without intruding into each other's domains.

Throughout history, the Church has also played a crucial role in teaching moral guidance and discipline and complementing the State's education and healthcare efforts by building schools and health institutions. However, this relationship has also been fraught with tension, especially when the State perceives the Church as interfering in political affairs or when religious leaders use their position to influence political decisions. In contemporary Nigeria, the interaction between Church and State is further complicated by the merging of faith and governance. The Church is expected to support good governance, democracy, and social peace, while the State is responsible for ensuring political, social, and economic stability. The balance of power and influence between Church and State is delicate and requires mutual respect for each other's roles in society. However, pursuing the common good should not be sacrificed on the 'altar of the division' between Church and State.

The common good, which is intimately linked to human nature, cannot be fully realised unless the human person is taken into account and the nature and realisation of the common good are kept in mind (*Pacem in Terra*, n. 55). This means that the common good requires that all the members of the State have the right to participate in it, albeit in different ways according to their individual responsibilities, merits and circumstances. Therefore, every governing authority should strive to promote the common good for all without favouring any particular citizen or group (*Pacem in Terra*, n. 56).

As exemplified by Garrett Fitzgerald, the factors that should motivate political responsibility are a desire to serve fellow human beings, to ensure that people receive what they deserve in justice, to treat people with the consideration they deserve as human beings, and to create a society that promotes optimal conditions for human development and social justice (cf. Fitzgerald, p. 10). When considering political responsibility, one must carefully examine one's conscience whenever one's inclination on a political issue aligns with one's own personal gain over the common good, as this is unjust to humanity (cf. Fitzgerald, p. 14).

Complementing Fitzgerald's thoughts, Sunday A. Aigbe, in his reflections on Church and State in Nigeria, identified two main approaches to church involvement in politics: identificationism, where the Church is closely associated with the State, and isolationism, where the Church keeps its distance from political affairs (Aigbe, 1990). Both approaches have strengths and weaknesses, and the choice often reflects the Church's broader strategy for engaging with societal issues. However, political and religious responsibilities are not careers in the sense of earning a living; they are VOCATIONS OF SERVICE. In this sense, politicians have something in common with ministers of religion, civil servants, teachers and those who care for the sick and needy, to name but a few (cf. Fitzgerald, p. 7).

Political responsibility in the state is not just a matter of securing a victory for one's own team but also spending four or eight years preparing for the next game by taking care of organisational matters. Politics and government are among the highest and noblest professions, enabling one to serve the interests of the people by seeking to advance the material interests of the Community, to improve the moral health, quality of life and cultural level of society, to ensure greater social justice, and to contribute to world peace and a redistribution of wealth between the rich and the poor (cf. Fitzgerald, p. 15).

The goal of politics as well as religion, as outlined in the 1999 Nigerian constitution, emphasises the importance of a healthy church-state relationship in promoting human rights, religious freedom and religious tolerance. It highlights the need for clear boundaries and mutual respect between the religious and political spheres to ensure that both can function effectively for the betterment of

society. As Nigeria continues toward sustainable development, the relationship between Church and State will undoubtedly remain crucial in shaping the nation's destiny.

Both the Church and the State have a common goal to play in the life of the citizen, who is both a member of the Church and that of the state. Their collaboration is essential in mediating conflicts and preventing religious tensions from escalating into violence. However, the relationship between Church and State can also be a source of tension and governance issues. When the two institutions need to establish boundaries or work together effectively, this can exacerbate social unrest. The Church's influence on the State should be focused on promoting good governance, democracy and a peaceful society. This requires careful management of boundaries and avoiding encroachment on each other's roles while working together towards the common good of all.

The Church existing within a given state must promote peace. Its role in advocating for peace and harmony goes beyond spiritual guidance to include practical actions such as providing assistance to victims of violence, challenging government policies that may violate human rights, and promoting democratic values and human rights education. Thus, effective conflict resolution through dialogue and peace talks enables the Church to play a crucial role in maintaining social harmony. The Church needs to maintain a balanced and respectful partnership with the State to promote good governance and a peaceful society. The future of peace and social harmony in Nigeria depends on the continued cooperation and combined efforts of religious and State actors working together for the common good.

5. Church-state Relations through a Synodal Lens

In Nigeria, the relationship between the Church and the state has been the subject of intense debate as to what role each should play in the life of the ordinary citizen. The history of this relationship is a rich story of interactions that have, at times, brought people together and moved society forward while at other times creating tension and conflict. Church authorities are important in maintaining peace and managing conflict because they are often seen as moral agents and community leaders, helping their communities to live in peace and harmony.

In the Nigerian state, with its many forms of conflict, the Church has a special opportunity to heal divisions and facilitate communication between different religious bodies. The call for a re-evaluation of church-state relations through a synodal lens for fruitful cooperation and collaboration is underscored by the potential of individuals both within the state and church institutions to make positive contributions to national development, democratic governance and the creation of an inclusive society where values such as fear of God, morality,

empathy, selflessness, accountability and transparency are not only preached but also practised.

Suffice it to say that the dialogue that is the fruit of a synodal encounter, if set in motion, can help to heal the pain of inequality, tribalism and the exploitation of religious sentiments for political purposes that result from the systematic persecution of Christians and religious violence. In this sense, a synod, a 'roundtable approach' between church and state representatives, can transform Nigeria's socio-political landscape by promoting justice in communities and government organisations, encouraging inter-faith dialogue and participating in community development efforts. Achieving this, however, requires a careful balance to ensure that the autonomy of both institutions is maintained and that they do not encroach on each other's roles while working together for the common good.

Reorienting church-state relations in Nigeria is desirable and necessary for attaining a peaceful and harmonious society. It is a journey that requires commitment, wisdom, and the collective efforts of religious and political leaders to navigate the complexities of their intertwined existence for the benefit of all Nigerians. In this light, synodality, which creates an atmosphere of listening to each other irrespective of religious affiliations and beliefs, is vital in promoting peace and social harmony in Nigeria by integrating their discussions into various aspects of Church and State life. As a representative assembly of the ecclesial Community, the Church's synodal dialogue with government representatives can and will serve as a platform for discussion and reflection on the social, moral and political challenges facing the country. This 'roundtable approach' must be established between the Church and the authorities of the State in order to reflect on issues concerning the common good of the citizens. This approach, in turn, will build and promote communion, mission and participation, emphasising the need for a common approach to the fulfilment of Christ's mission and advocating policies and practices that uphold moral and ethical values while respecting the autonomy of the State, thereby reassuring and respecting the independence of the State without forgetting the needs of every Nigerian.

Hence, the understanding of Synods, as gatherings that promote faith, morals and discipleship, can be used as a mechanism to provide moral and spiritual support to politicians and develop leaders who can positively impact governance and society's well-being. In addition, the concept of synodality, which encourages dialogue, can uphold democratic ideals of participation and co-responsibility that foster an enabling environment in which citizens can pursue their aspirations and contribute to national development. This approach encourages church and state representatives to engage in dialogue and discernment, which is crucial in addressing the complex issues of governance and faith in a diverse society such as Nigeria.

6. Conclusion

The concept of a synodal approach as a mechanism for the Catholic Church, especially in Nigeria, offers a compelling opportunity to promote peace and social harmony, look inward and criticise from within to enable the desired change outwards. Synodality, which takes the synodal approach a step further, emphasises that the Church and the State should be open to dialogue and active listeners through shared discernment based on principles of inclusivity and collective commitment. This approach could be crucial in ethnic and religious communities often struggling with underlying tensions. The Catholic Church can provide a solid framework for broader societal engagement and cooperation by adopting a synodal approach to engaging state representatives.

In addition, the Catholic Church's active advocacy for the rights of Christians and its commitment to promoting interreligious dialogue is essential in a country like Nigeria, where interreligious relations can be strained. Through its commitment to synodality, the Catholic Church can strengthen these efforts and foster an environment of mutual respect and understanding among different faith traditions. The Catholic Church's unwavering commitment to the rights of all Nigerians, as enshrined in the Nigerian Constitution, and its proactive engagement in interfaith dialogue to promote peace are admirable steps towards achieving social harmony.

In conclusion, a more synodal approach in the governing affairs of the Catholic Church in Nigeria has the potential to become a beacon of hope for peace and social harmony. Through its commitment to listening, dialogue and inclusivity, the Church can set an example of how diverse groups can work together for the common good. Her (the Church) advocacy of peaceful coexistence, interfaith dialogue, and efforts to address societal challenges position her as a key player in the quest for a more peaceful and harmonious Nigeria. Therefore, the ongoing synodal journey initiated by Pope Francis and synodal dialogue, which promotes inclusiveness, is not only a process within the Catholic Church but also a potential catalyst for broader societal transformation.

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