

THE CHURCH AS A COMMUNION: INCULTURATING CHURCH AUTHORITY IN THE AFRICAN CONTEXT

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Abstract

In this work, we articulated an understanding and expression of Church authority rooted in African culture in light of the Catholic ecclesiology of communion. This inculturation effort is inspired by the need to help the Church in Africa discover a renewed model of ecclesial authority that moves beyond clericalism and the abuse of power. To reach this solution, we used theological analysis and anthropological inquiry. The theological approach examined both the Church's model of communion and its understanding of authority. We also applied cultural anthropology methods to examine understandings of authority and social organisation in African traditional societies. Among other things, we found that the 'palaver' model of leadership, which involves patient listening, broad consultation with the people, and deliberation at multiple levels to reach consensus, is typically African. Building on this leadership model, we inculturated Church authority in the African context, in light of the ecclesiology of the Church as the family of God, the African version of communion ecclesiology. Rooted in African palaver, this vision of the Church was ultimately interpreted through the lens of synodality, an ecclesiology that saw a resurgence with Pope Francis's papacy.

Introduction

How Church authority is understood and expressed in the African context or culture matters greatly today because clericalism and the abuse of authority sometimes pervade many African local Churches. In this work, we shall endeavour to show how authority can be conceived and lived as service in the Church, in a way that conforms to the model of the Church as *communio* (communion) and to the evangelical model of authority without domination. We wish to espouse and expound the view that the Church is fundamentally a communion, a fellowship among human beings and God. Consequently, authority in the Church must represent and express communion in the exercise of ministerial function and office.

The second part of our work would be carried out through the important and concrete process of inculturating Church authority in the African context. It seeks ways to live, celebrate, and share the Good News more deeply in the African Church. The important question here is: How is authority to be exercised as service in the African Church, in such a way that one takes into account the best values of the traditional cultural experience of the African peoples? This effort to answer this question will be done in light of the Catholic ecclesiology of communion, re-contextualised in the African background through an understanding of the Church as the family of God.

The Church as a Communion

Origin and Development of the Concept

Communio is a Latin term that translates the Greek *koinonia*, which means approximately “communion.” Etymologically, *koinonia* carries more symbolism than its Latin translation, *communio*. Monteiro (2006) shows that *koinonia* has roots in Greek philosophy, especially in Plato, who understood it as a life-giving participation in eternal realities.

The New Testament also understands the term this way, especially in the letters of Paul. Paul applies *koinonia* variedly, ranging from the idea of shared holiness (cf. 2 Cor 6:14) to sharing in the sufferings of Christ, to the unity based on equity and justice required by participation in the Lord’s Supper (cf. 1 Cor 10:1). Paul also applies the term to the social duty to “share in the needs of the saints” (cf. Rom 12:13) which culminates in the practical injunction to the Corinthians to contribute monetarily in assisting the impoverished Jerusalem community (cf. 2 Cor 9:13) (Mannion, 2007). Thus, in the New Testament, the term derives from Paul and refers to early eucharistic celebrations (Mannion, 2007). Generally, he uses it to describe our relationship with God through Christ and the Spirit, rooted in the Eucharist. By participating in the Eucharist, the faithful are built up into communion with the body of Christ, the Church (cf. 1 Cor 10:16). The Church as the body of Christ is central to Paul’s thought. In Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12, he focuses on the mutual union, concern, and dependence of local community members on one another. Although the above epistles do not mention Christ’s headship in the Church or the Holy Spirit as the soul, Ephesians and Colossians emphasise Christ’s position as head and the subordination of the whole Church to him.

Furthermore, it has often been emphasised that the early Church was a communion in which the bishops, the faithful, and a variety of Churches conceived themselves as united in a spiritual community. Nichols (1997) opines that the ancient notion of *Communio* was a religious concept and thus differs from modern notions of community. Unity came from participation in the Holy Spirit, sharing in the body of Christ received at the Eucharist, and the shared recognition of the bishop as a visible centre of unity. *Communio* marked both the relationship between the bishop and the lay faithful in the local Church and the communion between local Churches throughout the world (Nichols, 1997).

The episcopacy of Ignatius of Antioch (d. 108) has often been falsely designated as “monarchical episcopate.” This description is a misnomer, since in the early Church bishops did not rule their local Churches like kings. Usually, the faithful elected them, and sometimes the presbyters did. They could be deposed by the people, and customarily, they consulted both the presbyters and the laity in making their decisions (Nichols, 1997). Thus, the early Church’s life and activities can be described as *communio* in action.

In this sense of *communio*, Cyprian of Carthage understood the local Church. Both the bishop and the people were joined in a unity rooted in the unity of God and Christ. Thus, in a letter written to the priests and deacons of Carthage while hiding from the persecution of Decius (250 C.E.),

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Cyprian confesses: “But as for that which our fellow priests... wrote to me, I have been able to reply nothing in writing alone because, from the beginning of my episcopate, I decided to do nothing of my own opinion privately without your (the priests and deacons) advice and the consent of the people” (Cyprian, 250/1964, p. 43). Cyprian was thus a man who valued consultation and collaboration in the exercise of his episcopal ministry, which reflected his understanding of the Church as *communio*.

Other early Church fathers, such as Clement of Rome and Irenaeus, envisioned ecclesial communion as organic unity, while Augustine understood it in relation to the body of Christ. In his theology of the Eucharist, Augustine saw communion in the body and blood of Christ as binding together the mystical body of Christ, which is the Church.

In his own case, Aquinas saw the Church as consisting essentially in a divinising communion with God—imperfectly in this world and perfectly in the life of glory. For him, the Church consists of all those who, through the grace of Christ, are brought into union with God. His view of the Church is thus “theological” rather than institutional (Dulles, 1987). In this light, the body of Christ, the Church, is neither essentially visible nor societal, still less hierarchical. Like Augustine, Aquinas stresses the mystical and invisible communion which unites all those who are animated by the supernatural grace that flows from Christ as head. All visible or external means of grace, such as sacraments, scripture, and laws, take a secondary, subordinate place. They serve to dispose human beings to an interior union with God effected by grace.

The theology of the Church as the mystical body of Christ experienced a revival after a period of strong institutionalism in Catholic ecclesiology. The eminent German theologian Johann Adam Möhler and his colleagues in the renowned Tübingen school laid the groundwork for this revival in the nineteenth century (Dulles, 1987). Against the backdrop of the era's prevalent, arid institutional models, Möhler and his associates popularised the notion of the Church as a supernatural organism animated by the Holy Spirit. In his important work, *Unity in the Church*, Möhler (1825/1996) conceived the Church as basically a fellowship or communion with God through Jesus and the Spirit that is shared among Christians. The Church is not simply “a construction or an association, founded for the preservation of the Christian faith. Rather, she is much more an offspring of this faith, an action of love living in believers through the Holy Spirit” (Möhler, 1825/1996, p. 209). The Church develops from an inner need to express divine love (Möhler, 1825/1996).

Möhler's influence on later thinkers, especially on the *ressourcement* theologians, was massive (Doyle, 2000). One of them was Yves Congar, who acknowledged the strong influence which Möhler exerted on his theology: “In him I found a source, the source, which I directly used. What Möhler had done in the 19th century became for me an ideal toward which I would aim my own reflections in the 20th century” (as cited in Doyle, 2000, pp. 38–39). Congar championed the conception of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ, a communion that goes beyond mere visible structures to constitute a relationship between the Trinity and those devoted to Christ (Doyle, 2000).

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The concept of the Church as communion, as we have explored above, harmonises with many images in biblical ecclesiology, especially two that figured prominently in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of the Second Vatican Council: the Body of Christ and the People of God.

Vatican II and the Church as Communion

Although Vatican II's proper ecclesiology is that of the People of God, it is also an ecclesiology of communion, the central and fundamental concept in the Council's documents (Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, 1985; Rigal, 1997). Communion is fundamental because it more readily expresses the Church's inner reality and its origin in the mystery of the Trinity, which aligns with the Council's priorities. Trinitarian communion is therefore seen as the foundation of ecclesial communion. Thus, Rigal (1997) writes:

To say that the Church is a mystery of communion is to say that the members of the Church participate in the communion which exists between the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. The term 'communion', before applying to the workings of the ecclesial institution, designates the nature or better, the mystery of the Church in what is more intimate, more profound, more unexpected, and more missionary. (p. 63)

Three elements are constitutive of ecclesial communion: (1) the divine offer to human beings of participation in His life, knowledge and love (i.e. of participation in Trinitarian communion); (2) the effective participation of the human person not only in what is offered but also through it in God himself; and (3) the community which results from these relations (de La Soujeole, 1998). The ecclesial communion is thus both vertical and horizontal. It is expressed through the activities by which Christians receive and give: communion in the same faith, communion in the same charity, and communion in the same sacraments (de La Soujeole, 1998).

What we have said so far on communion also has important consequences for the Church's self-understanding and her actual organisation as a community of the faithful. First, this ecclesiology underscores the priority of the vocation of the whole people of God. According to Rigal (1997):

The ecclesiology of communion valued by Vatican II gives a singular relief to the common vocation of all the baptised. It underlines the priority of the 'we ecclesia,' constituted by the totality of the people of God, over all the diversities of functions and the charisms. The Church-communion cannot identify itself with a hierarchical Church where some monopolize power and responsibilities. It recovers, on the contrary, the community of the faithful, which is all the baptised inasmuch as they constitute the living Body of Christ. (p. 68)

On the other hand, the ecclesiology of communion is marked by the vision of the whole Church. Thus, it demands by this reality, the effective co-responsibility of the community in all aspects of the life and mission of the Church. This very situation demands that we move from concentrating responsibilities in the hands of a few to providing a multiplicity of services. Rigal (1997) contends that such evolution is possible only when the people of God become, in reality, what they are in the truest sense: the all-englobing reality within which, and in the service of which, the different

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ministries operate. Vatican II's determination to promote a partnership engaged in a unique mission in the Church, in the spirit of communion, is beyond doubt (Rigal, 1997).

The Church as a Web of Interwoven Relationships

The ecclesiology of communion offers an important way to understand the Church. This matters because, as Kasper (1990) shows, the Church's essence is communion, pointing to the transcendental reality from which she comes and by which she lives. This is the mystery of the Trinity. The Church is called to be communion because that is what God is: persons-in-communion.

In this light, she is to be understood as an “icon of Trinitarian life,” as McLoughlin (2000) has pointed out: “Like the Trinity, the Church's reality lies in an essential orientation towards relationship. Our God is a being-in-communion. If we share *koinonia* with God in Christ then we will find ourselves in *koinonia* with each other” (p. 129).

Thus, communion has two dimensions: the vertical (communion with God) and the horizontal (communion among men). According to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1992):

The new relationship between man and God that has been established in Christ and is communicated through the sacraments also extends to a new relationship among human beings. As a result, the concept of communion should be such as to express both the sacramental nature of the Church...and also the particular unity which makes the faithful into members of one and the same Body, the Mystical Body of Christ, an organically structured community, “a people brought into one by the unity of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” and endowed with suitable means for its visible and social union. (par. 3)

Communion ecclesiology, therefore, focuses on relationships. These relationships can be those among the persons of the Trinity, or those among human beings and God, or among the faithful people of God in a particular Church or among members of a parish community, or among local Churches represented by their bishops dispersed throughout the world, or between the Universal Church and the local Churches (Doyle, 2000). The Church is thus a web of interwoven relationships. To understand her, one must look beyond merely juridical and institutional aspects, as the Church is also the Mystical Body of Christ, in which all members form one body with Christ as their head (Doyle, 2000). “Communion ecclesiology emphasizes the element of spiritual fellowship or communion between human beings and God in contrast to juridical approaches that over-emphasise the institutional and legal aspects of the Church” (Doyle, 2000, p. 13).

The Participatory Character of Communion

We have seen that communion focuses on relationships—whether in the Trinity among the divine Persons, or among human beings and God, or among human beings united by faith and the Spirit. As such, communion has a participatory character—a fact which has important ramifications for the visible organisation of the Church as a social and historical reality. First, the participatory character of ecclesial communion demands that the Church reconstruct its structure as a participatory community. A participatory Church would retrieve the biblical and patristic tradition

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of ecclesial communion. It would respect the dignity of every member and ensure equal discipleship, in which all live their proper vocation while fulfilling their respective roles. This means that “relationships become less vertically mandated, and there is more inter-dependency, consultation, collaboration and mutual trust among the People of God” (Monteiro, 2006, p. 95).

Furthermore, a participatory Church would recognise, develop, and effectively utilise the charisms and expertise with which its members are endowed. She would uphold and nurture a participatory model of leadership and authority that promotes solidarity, dialogue, mutual exchange of ideas, and co-responsibility among members of the Church. She would “re-discover the potentiality of the forgotten or side-lined people of God and empower them to be co-workers and co-leaders of a Church community where all work together in a spirit of charity for the good of all” (Monteiro, 2006, p. 95).

The two major biblical images used to describe the Church in Vatican II, the Mystical Body of Christ and the People of God, express the participatory character of ecclesial communion. As Dulles (1987) shows: “They emphasize the immediate relationship of all believers to the Holy Spirit, who directs the whole Church. Both focus attention likewise on the mutual service of the members toward one another and on the subordination of the particular good of any one group to that of the whole Body or People” (p. 53).

Of the above two major biblical images, the most prominent in Vatican II ecclesiology is the Church as the “People of God”, which was given an entire chapter in *Lumen gentium* (Second Vatican Council, 1964, chap. 2). In this usage, People of God does not mean just the laity, but the whole Church, clerical, lay, and those in religious orders. In contrast to the Ultramontane view, which saw the Church as proceeding from the pope, the People of God model sees the Church as proceeding from the community of the faithful, united in the Spirit and with Christ as Head (Nichols, 1997).

This view of the Church as People of God also contrasts with Vatican I's tendency to derive the Church from the pope or equate it with the hierarchy. The participatory character of ecclesial communion, on the other hand, does not mean that the Church is a democracy or that “the people are the Church.” This is because, as Nichols (1997) says:

...the Church is the holy people of God, those people who have been or are being sanctified by the Spirit. Furthermore, the ‘People of God’ includes the hierarchy, which is also willed by the Spirit – a point *Lumen gentium* emphasizes (chap. 3). What the image “People of God” does is recover the patristic notion of the Church as a communion of the faithful, a *communio*. (p. 242)

Authority in the Service of Communion

From the foregoing analysis of the communal form of the Church, or the Church as *communio*, we discovered that communion is the Church's essence. We saw that the word *communio* points to the transcendental reality from which the Church comes and by which she lives. This shows that the Church's reality lies in an essential orientation toward relationship, since our God is a being-in-

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communion. Authority in the Church must therefore serve ecclesial communion and relationships. It must promote the communion of human beings with God, and the communion of the faithful People of God as members of a Spirit-filled community, a fellowship of life, charity and truth. This kind of authority must respect the participatory character of *communio* and thus, the nature of the Church as a web of interwoven relationships.

The Word “Authority”

Socially, the word ‘authority’ means legitimate power (Curtis et al., 1994). It is socially recognised power and carries a profound moral dimension. Authority is not just the right to determine what happens in other people's lives; above all, it is the rightful freedom to do what is genuinely right and to communicate this to others. A social group or superior authority confers it on a person or group, and it carries a corresponding responsibility for the common good. As a legitimate power, authority is fully bound to the goals, norms, and traditions of the social group and strives to pursue the common good. It differs from mere power over others because authority places man before his responsibility, freedom, and dignity. By power, we mean the possibility which a person has to make his ideas or his will, prevail over those of other persons.

Authority (*auctoritas*) is best expressed by its Latin root *auctor* (cause, promoter, guardian, surety) and *augere* (to increase, enrich, augment). What is ‘increased, enriched, and augmented’ is the common good of the people. Authority protects human rights and responsibility. It is essentially something ordered to the service of the human person as a member of a community, sharing in its common good. In the Church, authority is exercised for the sake of the kingdom of God and thus for the salvation of the People of God.

Uniqueness of Ecclesial Authority

Authority is an important feature of every human community, social group, or organisation. No human society can survive disintegration and paralysis without some kind of authority. This is because authority gives a society or community finality and purpose in concrete, specific circumstances. One essential role of authority is unity. It helps a society achieve its purpose by preserving its identity as a unified whole. From this perspective, authority is service. How this service is realised in a given society depends on that society's nature and end. For instance, within the family, parental authority aims to educate and train children. Parental authority is dominant. This authority is based on the presumed greater competence of the parents. But it is transient, since it aims to make children eventually independent, self-sufficient adults (Wright, 1980). In political society, or the state, authority aims at the common good of the citizens. To achieve this end, state authority is juridical in nature and may sometimes use coercive means.

Church authority differs from other understandings of authority in human society. Thus, John McKenzie (1996) states:

Church authority differs from other species of authority in human society. The type of authority found in any society is dependent on the end of that society. The idea of authority in the Church is not the same as the idea of secular authority. The Church is not a political society with jurisdiction, or a family with dominative power or a free contractual association. If the Church differs from all these societies in its end and its

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means, authority in the Church will be determined to its reality by the end of the Church. (p. 12)

The end of the Church is the salvation of the People of God or the kingdom of God. Church authority exists to communicate this end to its members. This work of communicating salvation to the People of God is first and foremost God's work through His Spirit, and only secondarily the work of God's visible representatives in the Church. Authority in the Church is consequently unique. It is fundamentally spiritual in nature. It is a servant authority modelled on Jesus Christ, the author of our salvation.

The Concept of Authority in the New Testament

The New Testament scarcely applies 'authority' to the apostles or to Church ambassadors. As we have seen, when the word is used, it usually refers to God's or Jesus Christ's authority. This is not surprising. Authority in the Church is primarily the prerogative of the risen Christ who reigns over the Christian community through his Spirit. Although the New Testament rarely applies the word *exousia* (authority) to Church leaders, the apostolic Church still has posts of authority. One need only consider Peter's place among the Twelve, James's place in the Jerusalem community (cf. Acts 15:13–21), Paul's role in the communities he founded, and the testimony of the Pastorals that Paul handed some churches over to his collaborators, Titus and Timothy. Thus, without denying the importance of formal authority, the New Testament emphasised its moral significance.

It is no wonder, then, that the words the New Testament prefers when speaking of Church leaders are *diakonoï* / *douloi* (cf. Mark 10:41–45; Matthew 20:24–28; Luke 22:24–27) and *charisma* (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:28). These terms, by their nature, imply absolute dependence on God's authority and carry a profoundly moral connotation.

Jesus Christ: The Model of Christian Authority

Jesus manifested authority in its supreme and ultimate form: service on the cross. In his passion, he definitively demonstrated his authority by assuming human weakness and remaining faithful to the end of his ministry. His was a 'crucified authority', the model of all Christian authority (Groupe des Dombes, 1980). Nowhere is his authority or power something which he wields over others. True authority can never be imposed; it works only when it is offered, chosen, and freely accepted (Kinnamon, 1982). This is the case of Jesus.

The authority of Jesus is one which uplifts those whom he meets and sets them free: "I order you: get up, and pick up your stretcher and go home" (Luke 5:25). It is not an 'authoritarian' authority which imposes constraint but an authority which 'authorises' (*auctor*) or responsabilizes those over whom it is exercised. Jesus does not hold man captive in a prison of prohibitions and rites, but opens up a horizon of initiatives and liberty for him. We find many examples of this in the Gospels, but the case of the Samaritan woman is particularly instructive (cf. John 4). Jesus' attitude toward observing the Sabbath (cf. Mark 2:23–3:6) is also instructive.

From the foregoing, Jesus' teaching, life, and death show that the authority he exercised cannot be conceived primarily in terms of an office. His authority was of moral order. Thus, he never relied on formal authority because his sole instrument of evangelisation was demonstrating the truth of

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his message through his way of life. Matthew highlighted this point of Jesus' moral authority by contrasting it with the authority of the scribes at the end of his account of the Sermon on the Mount: "When Jesus finished these words, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (Matthew 7:28–29). While the scribes exercised the authority of office, Jesus exercised a different kind of authority. It was an authority grounded in moral character.

However, Jesus does not reject the need for office authority. He demands that such authority be joined with moral authority. He demonstrates his position in the passage from Matthew's Gospel in which he acknowledges the legitimacy of the scribes' and Pharisees' authority while criticising their double standard (cf. Matthew 23:1–7). No doubt, the authority of office is often necessary. But its legitimacy depends on subordinating and reconfiguring it to the demands of the Gospel (Gaillardetz, 1997).

Recovering the Necessary Balance Between Official Authority and Moral Authority

The efficacy of authority in the Church depends heavily on Church leaders' ability to restore the necessary balance between official authority and moral authority, as demonstrated in Jesus Christ's teaching above. The 2003 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores Gregis*, by Pope John Paul II, emphasised this point. In this regard, the pope made many points, namely: (1) The bishop's pastoral ministry must be the sacrament of Christ's presence and action by his life of holiness; (2) In this way, it is a source of moral authority; (3) This moral authority is necessary for the effective exercise of his juridical authority and consequently for the fruitfulness of his ministry; (4) The bishop's governance or power must therefore be rooted in moral authority by radiating the light of the Good Shepherd and being modelled after him.

First, the bishop's pastoral ministry must be the sacrament of Christ's presence and action. "He will therefore strive to adopt a lifestyle which imitates the *kenosis* of Christ, the poor and humble servant, so that the exercise of his pastoral ministry will be a consistent reflection of Jesus, the Servant of God" (John Paul II, 2003, par. 11). By imitating the Good Shepherd's life through pastoral charity, humility, and simplicity, the bishop becomes a sign of Christ and gains the moral authority needed to exercise his juridical authority effectively (John Paul II, 2003).

The Bishop's governance, nonetheless, will be pastorally effective only if it rests on a moral authority bestowed by his life of holiness. This will dispose hearts to accept the Gospel the bishop proclaims in his Church, as well as the rules he lays down for the good of the People of God. (John Paul II, 2003, par. 43)

The implication is that if the episcopal office is not based on the witness of holiness, manifested in pastoral charity, humility, and simplicity of life, it eventually degenerates into a mere functional responsibility and consequently loses credibility before the clergy and the faithful: "Without the authoritativeness of his lived holiness – his personal witness of faith, hope and love – only with difficulty could a Bishop's governance be accepted by the People of God as a manifestation of the active presence of Christ in his Church" (John Paul II, 2003, par. 43).

Pastoral Style of Governance and Diocesan Communion

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The bishop's pastoral style of governance in his diocese must respect the principle of ecclesial communion, which enables the collaboration of the People of God. This is one of the key points the Synod of Bishops examined in "the bishop, servant of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the hope of the world". A major concern of the Synod Fathers is harmonising and balancing the primatial and communal principles in the life of the particular Church.

According to Pope John Paul II (2003), "There is a type of reciprocal interplay between what a Bishop is called to decide with personal responsibility for the good of the Church entrusted to his care and the contribution that the faithful can offer him through consultative bodies such as the Diocesan Synod, the Presbyteral Council, the Episcopal Council and the Pastoral Council" (par. 44). Furthermore, the pope explains the basis of this reciprocal interplay. This is based on the fact that the life of the particular Church involves not only the threefold episcopal ministry (*munus episcopale*) but also the threefold prophetic, kingly, and priestly functions of the entire People of God.

Through baptism, all the faithful share in a proper way in the threefold *munus* of Christ: "Their real equality in dignity and in acting is such that all are called to cooperate in the building up of the Body of Christ, and thus to carry out the mission which God has entrusted to the Church in the world, each according to his or her respective state and duties" (John Paul II, 2003, par. 44). If all the baptised have been called to Christ's one mission, what then is the basis for differentiation among the faithful? The Church is a community with diverse charisms, functions, and ministries whose *raison d'être* is serving the other members of the People of God. Therefore, the "ontological and functional differentiation that sets the Bishop before the other faithful based on his reception of the fullness of the Sacrament of Orders, is a manner of being *for* the other members of faithful which in no way removes him from being *with* them" (John Paul II, 2003, par. 44). In this way, the relations of superiority and subordination are radically transformed in the Church, as they must be lived in the Lord and ordered to the communion of the faithful, which is itself founded on Trinitarian communion (cf. 1 John 1:3; Groupe des Dombes, 1980).

The implication of this is that in the Church authority cannot be understood as the right of certain Christians over others (2 Corinthians 1:24), but as a service exercised in order that the members of the same body of Christ may share in the same faith and by the quality of their mutual relations witness together to the one who made himself the Servant (Groupe des Dombes, 1980). Furthermore, the bishop is responsible for promoting unity in diversity by coordinating the different charisms, ministries, and services within his organically structured Church to attain a common end: salvation. But this is not the bishop's only function, as his ministry cannot be reduced to that of a simple coordinator. According to John Paul II (2003):

By its very nature, the *munus episcopale* entails a clear and unequivocal right and duty of governance, which also includes the element of jurisdiction(...). In carrying out this task he will do everything possible to win the consent of his faithful, but in the end he will have to take personal responsibility for decisions which he as their pastor considers in conscience to be necessary, concerned as he is above all for the judgement of God. (par. 44)

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In demanding that the bishop does his best to win the consent of his faithful while carrying out his acts of governance, one sees a development beyond Vatican II. In Vatican II, the faithful are simply obliged to submit to their bishop's decision, made in the name of Christ, in matters of faith and morals (Second Vatican Council, 1964, par. 25). But by demanding that the bishops endeavour to win the consent of the People of God, Pope John Paul II means that they should consult the faithful as well as take into account their *sensus fidelium* in the exercise of their authority, a method which is in harmony with contemporary cultural exigencies, with its emphasis on debate and consultation of the people (Groupe des Dombes, 1980). The pope's true preoccupation is harmonising the bishop's specific responsibility with the faithful's participation. Thus, he writes:

Ecclesial communion in its organic structure calls for personal responsibility on the part of the Bishop, but it also presupposes the participation of every category of the faithful, inasmuch as they share responsibility for the good of the particular Church which they themselves form. What guarantees the authenticity of this organic communion is the working of the Spirit, who is at work both in the Bishop's personal responsibility and in the sharing of the faithful in that responsibility. (John Paul II, 2003, par. 44)

Inculturating Church Authority in the African Context in Light of Communion Ecclesiology

Church as Family of God: Basis for Inculturating Church Authority in Africa

The 1994 African Synod of bishops, held at the Vatican, adopted the Church-as-family model as the image of the Church appropriate for African peoples. The Church as a family, or "household of God," is one of the biblical images or concepts used by Vatican II to express the idea of communion (cf. Eph 2:19; Second Vatican Council, 1964, art. 6, par. 4). In doing so, the Council went beyond the strict use of the word *communio*. We have already shown in detail why and how the Church is truly a communion. We have also shown why and how Church authority must be understood and exercised in the service of communion.

Our major task now is to inculturate Church authority in the African context. Theologically, this task requires identifying points of contact or compatibility between the African traditional understanding of authority and the Catholic Church's understanding of authority, in light of communion ecclesiology. On these shared values, Church authority shall be incarnated, making it truly African and truly Christian. This effort at inculturation would make the African experience of Church authority more relevant, fruitful, and intelligible to Africans. As Okafor (2016) wrote elsewhere:

Incarnating the Christian message in those aspects of African worldview and culture which are compatible with the gospel message, and are thus signs of God's presence and activity among Africans, would make the message more meaningful, relevant and more effective in the lives of the African peoples. (p. 21)

Implication of African Family for Church Authority

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Left to African theologians for development, the ecclesiology of the Church as family, as understood by the African Synod, should be based on positive values in African culture. It will be an ecclesiology rooted in essential African human and family values, such as fraternity, community, hospitality, solidarity, and respect for elders (Okafor, 2016). By African family, we mean the African extended family system, which comprises more than nuclear-family members; traditional African socio-political organisation and life are built on family relationships. In his 1995 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, Pope John Paul II made reference to these values: “The Synod Fathers acknowledged it (Church as family) as an expression of the Church’s nature particularly appropriate for Africa. The image emphasizes care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationships, acceptance, dialogue and trust” (par. 63). The Pope further continues:

African cultures have an acute sense of solidarity and community life. In Africa, it is unthinkable to celebrate a feast without the participation of the whole village. Indeed, community life in African societies expresses the extended family. It is my ardent hope and prayer that Africa will always preserve this priceless cultural heritage and never succumb to the temptation to individualism, which is so alien to its best traditions. (John Paul II, 1995, par. 43.2)

This analysis implies that, in African culture, many human and evangelical values already exist on which the Church can incarnate itself and remain relevant in the African context. The essential human values of fraternity, community, and solidarity that mark the African family show that an authoritarian style of authority cannot be consistent with African culture. Traditional African culture does not subscribe to authority exercised by a single person over the community. It must always be authority in and for the community. The cultural values of fraternity and community, as the Synod underlines, imply that traditional African authority is shared. Even among the Yorubas of Nigeria, who regard their leader, Alafin, as “divine king”, Uzukwu (1996) has this to say:

...twice a day, there is deliberation over his manner of ruling, or rather leading the community by seven powerful chiefs who are members of his cabinet. And there are other levels of control (...). This shows that the community has faith in God; but God is best encountered in the conversations going on in the community for the benefit of the entire community. (pp. 137–138)

On the other hand, the Igbo people of Nigeria are republican and democratic in their ways (Ekwenife, 1995; Oguejiofor, 1996). No traditional authority is accepted which is not integrated into the structure of the community. In Igbo villages, each extended family directly exercises authority. Authority is essentially shared and participatory. Decisions are taken only after wide and thorough consultation and deliberation by consensus.

Authority in African Traditional Communities and the Church as Family of God

Here we examine how authority was exercised in African traditional communities, to apply its major traits to authority in the African Church. We will see how the African traditional experience of authority can help us better understand Church authority in the African context in light of the

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theology of communion. At this point, note that traditional African societies generally maintain two parallel political systems: one masculine and one feminine (Amadiume, 1987, 1997; Diop, 1959; Hafkin & Bay, 1976). Although the masculine structure of authority is more important and dominant, as African culture is generally male-dominated, the feminine political system, or women's council, an important pro-female organisation that created female solidarity, also has considerable significance and influence in African society. However, for the purpose of this work, we shall pay special attention to the masculine structure of authority.

Anthropologists have identified two patterns of social organisation in traditional African societies: societies with dispersed authority, or authority in many hands, and societies with centralised authority (Uzukwu, 1996).

Authority in Many Hands: The Igbo Case

Uzukwu (1996) opines that authority in many hands is the most common pattern of social organisation in sub-Saharan Africa. In this form of social organisation, authority is exercised by many leaders in relatively small communities. This practice of authority is found among bands of hunters and gatherers such as the pygmies of Central Africa and the San of the Kalahari Desert. These are small, autonomous groups, often no more than a hundred people. Here authority is exercised collegially: “An elder or kindred head, assisted by or along with family heads, assumes ritual and political leadership” (Uzukwu, 1996, p. 14).

The exercise of authority by many hands is also realised among fairly populous ethnic groups such as the Igbos of Nigeria. We shall pay particular attention to traditional authority as realised among the Igbos of Nigeria because it has special potential as an indigenous democracy for renewing not only Church authority but also the exercise of authority in African countries. Igbo traditional communities have several institutions that help organise their activities. Government was not vested in a single person. We shall here consider a number of these important institutions.

a. Authority of Elders and Community

The Igbo people of Nigeria, one of Africa's largest ethnic groups, do not accept strong, centralised authority. Their dominant form of social organisation is the village group. The village group (or town) is constituted by clans (or villages); the clan is constituted by kindreds; the kindred is composed of extended families. In the village group assemblies, the head of the principal clan presides, assisted by other clan heads.

The Igbos do not tolerate autocracy. This is evident in the fact that decisions affecting the lives of all the clans in the village group are made only after consultations at the family, kindred, and clan levels. The Igbos do not respect decisions which are taken at the top without prior consultation and negotiation in the larger community (Uzukwu, 1996). This involvement of the community in deliberation and discussion on matters affecting its life was captured by V. C. Uchendu (1965), who describes the Igbo system of government at the village level as direct democracy:

Government at the village level is an exercise in direct democracy. It involves all the lineages and requires the political participation of all the male adults(...). Legislative activities are performed by all adult males meeting in ad hoc general assembly called

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the *Amala* or *Oha*(...). Every villager who can contribute to the discussion is given a hearing. When the matter has been thoroughly talked out, the leaders from each lineage in the village retire for *izuzu* (consultation). (p. 41)

The Igbos do not have a centralised government. Igboland consists of independent village groups or towns that function as autonomous communities. Although the Igbos are generally not receptive to strong, centralised government, some village groups, such as Onitsha and West Niger Igbo, form small kingdoms with kings or chiefs, as the Yorubas and the Benin people do. These Igbo mini-kingdoms, however, maintain the basic patterns of Igbo experience of authority.

In many communities, aristocratic associations (*ozo*) may develop as a mark of success, with increasing political privilege and responsibility; also, trade associations (medicine men, blacksmiths, etc.) and age grades are developed. It is a situation where laws or decisions affecting the society at various levels and in various shades and forms are discussed in meetings of the youth (age grades), married women, daughters (married to other village groups), titled men and women, elders, *ofo*-holders (family, clan, or kindred heads), and so forth (Uzukwu, 1996).

The way Igbo communities govern reveals their conception of authority. Authority is seen as collaborative, consultative, and participative; it is not vested in one man (Uzukwu, 1996). Before colonial contact, each village was normally headed by the eldest male representative of the first family to settle on the site, known as *onye ishi ani* (i.e., the head) (Basden, 1966). Within the village, the eldest man in each kindred or *umunna* also headed this lineage group. When matters arise that affect the entire town, the *ndi ishi ani* (village heads) would meet and discuss the issues collegially. They may be regarded as the town's governing council. The village heads form a college presided over by the representative of the oldest village. Before any decision was reached, the village heads must have reached a consensus. They carry decisions home for discussion with their respective village communities. All adult male members are entitled to attend the village-level meetings.

The meetings (of the village or clan) were normally held in the village square(...) The *onye ishi ani* of that village presents the issue already discussed by the *ndi ishi ani* of the whole town, and then would call for some comments. Each person was free to talk during the deliberations (...) the reaction of those present helped (...) to know the acceptable line of action. But it was still necessary that the *onye ishi ani* should give the verdict, but within what the people in general had agreed. (Isichei, 1978)

The next level of authority in Igboland, after the town and village levels, is the lineage or kindred known as *umunna*, headed by the lineage's oldest man, the *okenye umunna*. The *umunna* meetings are open to all adult men. In some parts of Igboland, women are also permitted to attend. The *okenye umunna*, who presides over the meeting, introduces the issues already discussed at the village level. Here, people discuss the issues tabled most freely, as they are among their closest relations. Isichei (1978) argues that decisions are usually made quickly here because most attendees have already heard about the issue at the village level. Moreover, because it is a gathering of intimate relations, decisions are quick here, as all normally respect the *okenye umunna*'s opinion.

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Why are people expected to accept the okenye *umunna*'s opinion? This is because, as the oldest living kin, he is said to be closer to God and the ancestors. As such, he is expected to mediate spiritual blessings to the *umunna* because of his role as the elder. Moreover, as the oldest person, others expect to profit from his experience and wisdom (Isichei, 1978).

The last level of authority is that of the nuclear family, called *ezi na ulo*. Paradoxically, it is only in the nuclear family unit that democracy is not practised. This is because strong patriarchal authority rarely allows wives and children to contribute to decision-making (Isichei, 1978). The head of the family, or the man, can influence his family members to carry out a village decision or refuse it (Isichei, 1978). Due to the patriarchal stronghold in the Igbo nuclear family, just as in most other African nuclear families, it cannot be the basis for the articulation of the theology of the Church as family. Rather, the extended family system can serve this function, since the relationship here is fraternal rather than patriarchal. However, it must be noted that when one talks about family in the African context, one means the extended family system.

b. The Rise of the Authority of Rich, Titled Men

The original structure and gradation of authority from the town level to the family, under the aegis of the elders, evolved over time, making way for the authority of wealthy titled men. How did this new authority enter Igbo social organisation, and what place does it occupy? The rich class used their wealth to buy the highest titles, which gave them prestige and influence. Of these titles, the most popular and widespread was the *Ozo* title. Over time, these titled men (in some places known as *ndi amadi* because of their wealth, as against *ndi ogbenye*, the poor) formed the town or village governing council and began to replace the elders as custodians of authority by taking over their functions. Thus, gradually, they took the initiative in calling meetings, and their opinions carried more weight than those of a poor elder (Isichei, 1978).

c. The Role of Age-Grade Societies

The age-grade organisation is the association of young men. Each village has different age grades or groups, each of which is an association of the youths of the same age. Each group has a name and is headed by its eldest member. Functionally, the age-grade organisation served as the executive arm of the government of Igbo villages and towns and, in most cases, enforced the decisions of any judicial council (Isichei, 1978). The age grades also performed civic and military duties in the town. In times of danger, such as when they were threatened by rogues, they kept watch over the town at night. They engaged in public works such as clearing forests and building local paths and roads. They served as custodians of morality by censoring their members (Isichei, 1978).

d. The Role of Women — Umuada or Umuokpu

The *umuada* or *umuokpu* is the women's group made up of women born in the town and married within or outside the town. They have a political responsibility to play in the town's affairs. They can canvass for reform or play a corrective role by applying pressure on society when something is wrong in the town or village. The *umuada* also exercise judicial power when male authorities fail to settle a case. In such circumstances, the *umuada* would adjudicate the matter, and their decision is considered final (Oguejiofor, 1996). According to C. K. Meek (1937), "Anyone

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repudiating their authority would be regarded as guilty of sacrilege, and would be punished by the priests and titled officials to whom the Umuada would report the offence” (p. 160).

e. Masquerade Body

The masquerade body is an esoteric cult whose presence and activity make ‘present’ the dead among the living. In Igbo society, the dead are believed to be alive in some way and an integral part of the community. The masquerade cult known as *mmanwu* prolongs this communion between the ancestors and the living. But this cult also serves a political function. As one of their principal tasks, their members enforce the town's sanctions on a culprit. Thus, when someone is a culprit, his home could be invaded by these masquerades, and all his property seized until the owner paid the stipulated fine for his crime. He also reclaimed his belongings by paying an additional fine. This police action against masquerades is generally called *iri iwu* (Isichei, 1978).

f. The Power and Authority of Priests

Traditional priests and priestesses, custodians of ancestral shrines, also played an important role in village administration. Their value lay in representing the spiritual world to the living and, as such, being believed to be the gods' mouthpieces. Aro's long juju is a good example. Even the council of elders consulted the priests on matters beyond their power, namely those requiring spiritual intervention.

g. Some Observations

The Igbo experience of traditional authority reflects a decentralised system of power and influence. This is evident from the various structures of authority considered above. The Igbo traditional authority is an example of direct democracy. The authoritative leaders of Igbo traditional communities are the elders. But they exercise their leadership not simply on juridical grounds. They also exercise moral authority through personal example and integrity. Their authority is not autocratic, as Igbo society is egalitarian, and elders must therefore listen to the voice of the people. Igbo social organisation and political system allow widespread participation by diverse, coexisting, and mutually interdependent bodies and social groups that contribute to the common good. Ekei (2016) corroborates this view when he wrote:

The individuals, the social organizations, the age-grades, the titled men, the women groups, the talented people are allowed to make their respective contributions to the progress of the community. No section of the community tries to appropriate the role of another group. Rather, each group or organization performs its specific role, all to the welfare of the community. Therefore, the life of participation marks Igbo social and political system. (p. 91)

The Igbo have a highly developed pattern of consultation, as shown, and their focus on consensus in decision-making reflects their democratic and egalitarian spirit. Here also lies their weakness: “they lack the force to defend themselves against a centralized and militant group. For example, in the thirteenth century, the Bini kingdom (founded by the Edo ethnic group) had little difficulty in overpowering Igbo village-groups” (Uzokwu, 1996, p. 16). In conclusion, it would be necessary to state that the pre-colonial political system of the Igbo people can be safely said to be similar to the modern republican system of government, in which the people are governed by their consent.

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The exercise of authority in many hands is also experienced by some other ethnic groups in Africa, such as the Tiv of Nigeria and the Gikuyu of Kenya (Uzukwu, 1996). The main characteristic of communities with dispersed authority is widespread consultation and deliberation at many levels as they reach decisions by consensus.

Centralised Authority

Another pattern of social organisation in Africa, apart from authority in many hands, is centralised authority. This is the case of African kingdoms. These kingdoms are ruled by kings who gain office either by heredity or by election. African monarchies are either autocratic or oligarchic. Under autocratic monarchies, the ruler dictates the direction of his kingdom as he wishes. He can directly appoint his representatives and remove them as he wills. However, as Uzukwu (1996) has noted, autocratic monarchies are not typically African. This is because the areas where they have evolved were influenced by Arab Islamic culture. This was the case of the Mali and Songhai kingdoms.

The more typical African kingdoms are oligarchic. Although these kingdoms had monarchs, authority was strikingly collegial. Examples of such oligarchic monarchies include: Bini, Oyo, Egba, Ashanti, Abomey, Zulu, Kongo, Swazi, Ganda and Akan. A typical example of an oligarchic monarchy is Nigeria's Oyo kingdom. At the head of this empire is the Alafin, who is a "divine" king. To administer this vast Oyo empire, according to Uzukwu (1996):

...there are heads of districts, tribunals, the army, and so on. But working very closely with him on a daily basis is his council of chiefs – the Oyo mesi (seven very powerful chiefs who meet twice a day to deliberate on the affairs of state). Indeed, it is the Oyo-mesi which elects the Alafin. Each member advises the king on a key issue of state. The Bashorun (who is first among the seven) cross-checks the king's actions and can call for his removal. (p. 17)

In this Oyo oligarchic monarchy, consultation and deliberation involve all strata of society, from village groups to the kingdom level. The king exercises collegial authority.

African 'Palaver' Model of Leadership and Inculturation of Church Authority: Pathway to Synodal Exercise of Authority

The palaver model of leadership is, to a large extent, characteristic of traditional African society in its two patterns of social organisation: dispersal of authority and centralised authority. This model involves wide-scale consultation and deliberation at many levels, aiming to reach consensus. The decisions reached in this process usually reflect the opinions of the people governed, such that it can be rightly affirmed that power lies with the people. Masango (2003) was, therefore, right when he said: "In Africa, leadership was traditionally a function to be shared by all villagers or community members, rather than invested in one person" (p. 315).

Furthermore, Uzukwu (1996) illustrates the system of mass consultation of the people implied in the African palaver model of leadership with the symbol or totem of the Manja chief in the Central African Republic: "The chief's symbol is the rabbit, because it has large ears. He has the last word. But his ears are open to the opinion of all – humans as well as spirits. That is the source of his

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power; and that also is the limit of his power” (p. 18). Patient listening is thus a characteristic of African palaver. Continues Uzuoku (1996): “For the chief to be fair, he must be a patient listener. And this listening takes plenty of time. This is what is generally called African ‘palaver’: the liberation of speech at all levels of the community to come close to that Word which is too large for an individual mouth, the Word which saves and heals” (p. 128).

While stressing the palaver model of leadership, which involves open dialogue, patient listening and the exercise of authority in concert with the community, Bujo (1996) applies this model to the Church, thus:

According to the Black African palaver model, the word cannot be interpreted by some central authority but only by a community, that is, in the process of listening to one another. For in speaking and listening with and to each other, it is possible to repulse a fatal word and to confirm a life-promoting one, and to receive it into the service of the ecclesial community. Concretely, this would mean that it is not a solitary authority but this authority (is exercised) in concert with the community of all believers (...) This African palaver model even completes and corrects to some extent the individualistic view of Roman and Western ecclesiology that tends to ascribe the competence for decision-making and interpretation in many areas solely to the teaching magisterium of the Church. (p. 148)

The palaver model of leadership is therefore the leadership and authority pattern best suited to the Church's understanding of itself as the family of God in Africa. It suits the Church in Africa because it is truly African and aligns with the Church's participatory *communio* model. We have earlier demonstrated that it reflects the pattern of authority characteristic of traditional Africa, with its dispersal and centralisation of authority. Inculturation for the sake of the Gospel demands that we transpose this model into a new African ecclesiology, abandoning the stifling clericalism that dominates present African ecclesiology. The Church as family implies unity, fraternity, solidarity, and communion, as among all family members. The palaver model of leadership, with its emphasis on broad consultation and deliberation at many levels, patient listening, and community-centeredness, can help the Church in Africa attain the status of a true family of God if integrated into the structure and organisation of African local Churches. This can be done by prioritising the synodal system of government.

The Second Vatican Council opened the way for a synodal system of government in the local Churches by establishing key synodal structures, notably the Pastoral Council and the Presbyteral Council. Other synodal structures that followed Vatican II include the Diocesan Synod and the Episcopal Council. However, under Pope Francis, the Church witnessed a more radical contemporary revival of synodality—bringing to fruition and maturation what Vatican II began. One defining point of Pope Francis's ecclesiology was his call for, and emphasis on, synodality as “the path which God expects of the Church of the third millennium” (Pope Francis, 2015). This call highlights the importance of participation, communion, and mission within the People of God. His call for renewal challenges hierarchical rigidity and calls for ecclesial structures that support listening, consultation, and discernment. In his 2015 address to mark the 50th anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, Pope Francis described a synodal Church as one that “listens, in which everyone

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has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit” (Pope Francis, 2015). A synodal Church, therefore, not only consults but also integrates its members' lived experiences and wisdom. In this light, the Synod of Bishops' final document states that “Decision-making processes need ecclesial discernment, which requires listening in a climate of trust that is supported by transparency and accountability” (Synod of Bishops, 2024, par. 85).

However, African local Churches often face weak synodal and participatory structures that undermine this ecclesiological vision. This is because their ecclesial structures are often clerically dominated and insufficiently participatory, even though African Christianity is normally vibrant and deeply communal. To foster the growth of local Churches that incarnate African communal spirit, it is necessary to leverage the synodal structures of government created by Vatican II at the level of the particular Church, as already enumerated. However, these synodal institutions cannot function effectively on the basis of the principle of ‘African palaver’ unless efforts are taken to ensure that they do so. This implies that priority should be given to forming consensus and that decisions in the African Churches become the fruit of critical discussion, exchange of ideas, and patient listening, with an equal distribution of speech acts among all those involved in the ‘palaver event.’ As the successor of the apostles, the bishop has a personal calling and responsibility to watch over the palaver of the successors of the apostolic Church, the people of God, by facilitating it and ensuring it is not politicised or ridiculed by manoeuvres. In this light, he always has the last word, which should normally reflect the authentic consensus of the African ecclesial palaver. He is thus responsible for convening the palaver of the people of God in his diocese, presiding over it, and confirming its decisions.

But he must exercise this office in a responsible and credible way by having ‘large ears’ in order to be able to hear what the Spirit is saying through other members of the Church, and by avoiding all authoritarianism, as it is Jesus Christ and not himself who is the Head and Lord of the Church. Thus, he must conform himself to the apostolic way of life and model his conduct on the Gospel. His ordination and official appointment are not enough for him to exercise his office fruitfully. He must also be morally credible and follow the example of Christ. The same demand also applies to the clergy.

Here it would be necessary to observe that a number of African bishops and priests are autocratic and dictatorial. Within their respective jurisdictions, they assume the position of Lord and Head of the Church. This is unfortunate because they rob Christ of the position which is due to him as the Son of God. The exercise of authority in the Church is valid only when it manifests the sovereignty of Jesus Christ, openness to the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and filial adoration of God.

Conclusion

In this work, we have shown why and how the Church is a communion. We noted that communion is fundamental to understanding the Church because it helps us grasp the Church's inner reality and, hence, her origin in the mystery of the Trinity. In this light, the Church is called to be communion because that is what God is: Persons-in-communion. As such, we must prioritise understanding the Church as a web of interwoven relationships, an icon of Trinitarian life, a

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spiritual fellowship, and an organically structured community, rather than juridical approaches that place too much emphasis on the Church's institutional and legal aspects.

The communion model of the Church has helped us place ecclesial authority in its proper perspective, since communion has important consequences not only for the Church's self-understanding but also for her actual organisation as a community of the faithful. It has helped us to understand authority in the Church as an agent or servant of communion. After considering the meaning, significance, and use of authority in the Roman Catholic Church, we next discuss its inculturation in the African context in light of communion ecclesiology. We began this discussion with the understanding of the Church as the family of God, an image that expresses the African version of the ecclesiology of communion. In this context, the inculturation of Church authority was rooted in African culture and its basic human and family values, which naturally express communion in family relationships.

We also showed that, in African culture, Church authority cannot be authoritarian or vested in a single person. This is because authority in African traditional societies, in either of their two patterns of social organisation, dispersal of authority (or authority in many hands) and centralised authority, is shared and participated. Finally, based on what we have already seen, we identified the palaver model of leadership as characteristically African. This model, which involves wide-scale consultation and deliberation at many levels to arrive at consensus, underpins our inculturation of Church authority in the African context, making it truly Christian and truly African in light of synodal ecclesiology.

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