



**FINAL DOCUMENT
OF THE CONTINENTAL
STAGE IN
AFRICA AND MADAGASCAR**

“I came here to encourage you to take this synodal process seriously and to tell you that the Holy Spirit needs you. It is true: the Holy Spirit needs us. Listen to him by listening to each other. Leave no one behind or excluded.”

(Pope Francis)

I. Introduction

From 9th – 10th October 2021, the Holy Father Pope Francis officially launched the Synod on Synodality and on the 17th of the same month the initiative was launched in all the Dioceses of the world. This first phase of the Synod was experienced in the local Churches. This involved consultations, seminars and sensitisation activities at the various levels of the Dioceses. Different religious bodies and groups in the local Churches were organised to express their views on the new initiative. The results of these consultations were brought together by each Diocese and were, further, collected at the national levels. The National Episcopal Conferences, finally, produced the national syntheses of the lived experience of Synodality which contains the expectations of the people of God concerning the Synodality initiative. These syntheses were sent to the General Secretariat of the Synod in Rome.

In September 2022, the Secretaries General of the Regional Episcopal Conferences in Africa submitted the syntheses of the contributions of the National Episcopal Conferences of their regions to the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM). From these, SECAM produced a document that recapitulates the expectations of all the regions in Africa.

Having gone through the syntheses of the Episcopal Conferences from all the countries of the world, the General Secretariat of the Synod on Synodality produced a universal synthesis from what was received from the local Churches called “Working Document for the Continental Stage” (DCS). From 5th -9th December, 2022, and from 22nd-26th January, 2023, SECAM brought together the members of the Continental Team for the Synod on Synodality, namely: Secretaries General of the Regional Episcopal Conferences, members of the African Synodality Initiative, theologians, religious and some lay faithful, numbering 28 and 20 persons respectively, to receive the Working Document for the Continental Stage and to familiarise themselves with the practice of the Spiritual Conversation method towards the Continental Assembly.

The final phase of the continental celebration of the Synod on Synodality took place in Addis Ababa in Ethiopia from 1st to 6th March 2023. This event brought together about 209 people made up of Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops, Priests, Religious men and women, and lay faithful, with the lay faithful being in greater number. It was an occasion for an inclusive listening where, using the Spiritual Conversation Method, everyone was given the opportunity to express his/her views about Synodality, guided by the Document for the Continental Stage. For five days, the Church Family of God in Africa through the continental representatives prayed, listened and reflected on the new way of being a Church today, i.e. the Synodal way. It was a spiritual Synodal journey of the Church Family of God in Africa, an opportunity to practise Synodality in reality. At the end of the session, the assembly went through the Final Document and officially adopted it as the Document for the African Church.

In the spirit of collegiality, all the Cardinals and Bishops sat together in another

meeting on the last day of the Assembly to evaluate the whole Synodal process. They expressed satisfaction about the process, especially about the family spirit that prevailed throughout the Assembly. They, equally, went through the Final Document and unanimously adopted it as the Final Document for the African Continental Synodal Assembly.

These meetings became the basis for the elaboration of the present document which took into consideration all the main ideas raised during the discussions.

At the opening of the first working session in Accra, the purpose of the session was given as follows:

- To come to know one another better, a way of living the Synodality in a concrete manner.
- To enter into communion with the universal Church in the process of deeper prayer, listening and discernment to hear what the Holy Spirit is saying to the Church.
- To listen to what the people of Africa said during the first year of the Synod.
- To reread the Document for the Continental Stage in the context of the Church in Africa.

The method used in the work is the Spiritual Conversation Method. The method was not familiar to most of the participants. It was, therefore, taught to the group.

Having learnt the method, the group practised it for the remaining days of the working session starting from the first day. The evening session of the first day was devoted to the practical aspects of the method. Five groups were constituted and asked to give their "personal impressions from the regional summaries and synthesis: What have the people of God from the Church in Africa said in the first year of the synod?" The session ended with the reports of the various groups on the outcome of their reflection on the question.

The second day of the session was devoted to the study of the Document for the Continental Stage. This was done with two presentations on the major outlines and logic of the document. After the exposé, the participants were given time to pray, reflect and study the document individually. The evening session was, then, devoted to group study of the documents focusing on:

- Intuitions that resonate most strongly with the lived experiences and realities of the Church on the African continent.
- Questions or issues that should be addressed and considered in the next step of the process.
- Priorities, recurrent themes and calls to action that can be shared with other local Churches around the world and discussed during the first session of the Synodal Assembly in October 2023.

At the end of the first working session in December 2022, each participant was

asked to practise what was learnt, especially the use of the Spiritual Conversation Method, with the people of his or her faith community or Regional Conference as the case may be. This was meant to be a way of renewed listening to the people at the grassroot levels and a way of mastering the method which would be used in facilitating the continental event in March 2023.

The working session in Accra was followed by another in Nairobi, Kenya, from 22nd – 26th January, 2023. The aim was to continue deepening the knowledge of the Document for the Continental Stage and training members of the working team to help them in facilitating the planned Continental Assembly to be held in Addis Ababa from 1st to 6th March, 2023.

The working session of Nairobi was an opportunity for members of the team to share their experiences with regard to the use of the Spiritual Conversation Method in the study of the Document for the Continental Stage with their various communities after the Accra session. The sharing of the experiences exposed some difficulties that occurred while listening to others in the spirit of Synodality. These difficulties include:

- Listening to the other was not easy, as most people wanted their positions to be taken into account.
- Some people were not happy that they were not consulted at the initial phase of the consultation only to be invited at the continental phase.
- There was a sort of reticence from some people who felt that having worked at the Diocesan phase, they should not start the same work all over again.
- The time was too short to reach out to the right persons to deepen the understanding of the document and obtain the desired result.
- It was difficult to apply the Spiritual Conversation Method to a big text like the Document for the Continental Stage.
- There was difficulty in meeting people physically and the alternative means which was that of telecommunications also met with the problem of insufficient resources.
- Those who were not in an official position in the Church found it difficult to bring people together to study the Document for the Continental Stage using the Spiritual Conversation Method because people listen more to those in authority in the Church.

The general experience of the participants was that people were eager to be involved in the life of the Church and that the Synod on Synodality has awakened a new desire for a Church that takes into account the thoughts, concerns and feelings of every member. They were ready to make contributions and wanted to be sure that their expectations would bear durable fruit by bringing lasting changes in the life of the Church and her institutions.

The two previous experiences of Accra and Nairobi formed the basis for the Addis Ababa event which involved representatives from all the countries of Africa and the Islands. The group used the same method of prayer, silence and Spiritual

Conversation. They worked in plenaries and in small groups and were able to discern the Synodal Priorities for the Church in Africa.

The choice of Addis Ababa as the venue for the Continental Assembly was conditioned by a number of factors: it is the seat of the African Union (AU), a body that unites all the countries of Africa; it is a country that has the three monotheistic religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam; it is a country marked with a welcoming culture.

2. The Synodal Experience at the Continental Stage

The encounter as a concrete experience by Africans of Synodality by working and journeying together for five days helped us to become aware of some intuitions that generally resonate from one country to the other and raised some pertinent questions concerning Synodality.

2.1. Intuitions

Our prayer and reflection on the Document for the Continental Stage gave rise to the following intuitions from our African background:

1. **The Church in Africa has lived out Synodality from the time of the Second Vatican Council. The fruit of this is seen in the formation of SECAM and other Regional Episcopal Conferences during and immediately after the Council.**

Some important documents on and from the African Church are also fruits of Synodality. They include *Ecclesia in Africa* (1995), *Africae Munus* (2011) and the Kampala Document (2019).

The Small Christian Communities are the fruits of Synodality at the grassroot levels where people live and act together with common faith concerns.

2. **The image of the tent as the principal image for Synodality "enlarge the space of your tent" (Is. 54:2) was heavily contested by many, who associate the image with warfare, displacement and refugee situations.** The assembly preferred the image of the Family of God where everyone has his or her place and responsibilities according to 'family values' (though there is no homogeneity on what the latter includes in all countries).

3. **Listening is an attitude of the Synod and the Church must be a listening Church if it is to remain Synodal. However, the realities listened to are not always the same: family, church, national issues, social problems, spiritual problems, etc., often vary in interpretation or social importance.**

Listening helps to bring healing to those who are wounded. Listening invites us to another way of celebrating our liturgy in a culturally authentic manner. Applying the culture of listening to the liturgical celebration will help to put the

people at the forefront, enhance their active participation and make them more actors than spectators.

The Church listens to all, but the listening disturbs in such a way that the Church is, sometimes, so overwhelmed that some persons feel that the Church does not listen, or at least is selective in whose voices matter. Many would want the Church to listen to all and bring solutions to all problems of the society, thus confusing the role of the Church with that of the State and government.

Listening is not only listening to people. It involves listening to the local culture with the dynamics of co-responsibility and with the consciousness that culture is dynamic and evolving. The Church in Africa is a fruit of the endeavours of Western missionaries. The Church came with a culture into another culture. Synodality should help to listen to the cultural practices that have been either ignored, condemned or suppressed by the Western culture through which the Gospel was preached to Africans. These cultural practices, some deeply influenced and changed by Western and Christian cultural influences, continue to affect the way Christians live out the Gospel. They should, therefore, be listened to in view of either integrating, purifying or collectively rejecting them based on a clear understanding of the exigencies of the Gospel.

4. The need for the participation of women, youth and physically challenged persons in the life of the Church is another intuition that comes out strongly in the Document.

Women form a greater percentage of active members of the Church. They make meaningful contributions to the life and mission of the Church. Many of them feel that they are not given a sufficient place in the decision-making structures of the Church. There is a call to create more opportunities and structures for women to do more in the Church.

The youth also complained that they would like to be more visible in the life of the Church. An idea that was strongly felt was that of a preferential option for the youth. There is a call to adapt the activities and celebrations of the Church to styles that will attract and maintain the youth in the Church.

The need to enhance the participation of persons with disability in the life and mission of the Church also came out clearly in the Document. The Church should guard against the way the society tends to cast them aside. They are often considered as not having much to offer based on the false idea that their lives are worth less than others. If the appropriate opportunity is created, they can feel at home in the Church and can contribute towards the progress and growth of the Church. This calls for special initiatives, formations and structures that will help them to have a prominent place in the Church.

5. It is evident that there are mundane forces that are opposed to the mission of the Church. Such forces include ideologies and economic or political policies that are prejudicial to the doctrines of the faith. Some of these forces influence Church leaders and put pressure on theologians with the intention of diluting the content of the faith. There is a call for the Synodal Church to be awake to such influences and remain focused on the Word of God and the firm tradition of the Church.

6. **Synodality draws everyone's attention to the need for co-responsibility – making it relevant to learn to walk together through listening, discernment and dialogue.**

Many expressed the view that decisions in the Church are sometimes taken without sufficient dialogue, but Synodality requires taking everyone as important and responsible. The recognition of the value of everyone in a Christian community imposes the necessity of taking their opinions into consideration for proper discernment and decision-making.

7. **The Synodal Church should seek to balance her efforts in addressing the concrete issues in people's lives with the spiritual aspects.**

This idea comes from the experience of some people who believe that the Church seems to concentrate more on their spiritual needs than on concrete material needs. Just as Jesus fed the hungry, the Synodal Church should learn to balance her care for spiritual issues with her care for material problems.

8. **A sensitisation on Synodality as tied to evangelisation:** from the image of the Church as a Family of God where efforts should be made to accommodate everyone who so desires and even those who are deliberately outside comes the intuition that inclusivity should be harmonised with conversion, since walking together in communion, participation and mission cannot be divorced from evangelisation. The mission of the Church to spread the Gospel of Christ to the ends of the earth should be based on the need to help people abandon their old ways that are not in conformity with the Word of God and embrace the truth of the Gospel.

9. **There is the need for openness of all Catholics to continuous formation.** The understanding of the Synodal Church as one that walks together with everyone calls for the formation of the clergy and the laity on this new consciousness. Pastors who lead the people of God should be the first to imbibe the Synodal mentality and apply it in their life and ministry. There is an urgent need for educational and formational programmes for the clergy and the lay faithful to initiate the necessary conversion to imbibe the new culture of walking together as a Synodal Church, especially at the local Church level. This formation should touch on the formation received in the seminaries, so that future pastors are prepared to embrace the new culture of walking together and acquire the capacity for listening to the Spirit of God and to the people.

10. **Some feel that the Synodal Church should be less conservative and have the courage to do a self-examination on how she has accepted new ideas.** The new culture of the Synodal Church would demand a lot of openness and a learning attitude from the Church, in order to remain relevant in the world. However, some feel that the Church must not be too open to every new idea since some ideas are perceived as not for the betterment of the world. In such cases, the Church should even have courage to go against certain currents of thought. Much depends on Christians' perception of new social forces – some well-informed, others less so – and the degree to which such ideas that challenge the Church's official positions might have valid points should be discerned more openly and thoroughly.

11. **The care and protection of children and vulnerable persons was also invoked as an integral aspect of the mission of the Synodal Church.**
12. **To open the family means accommodating those who feel marginalized, for example, people in polygamous marriages, divorced and remarried, and single parents.** Many people expressed the desire to revisit the position of the Church on those that considered themselves officially marginalized due to irregular family situations. How does the openness of the family apply to such people in the spirit of Synodality that encourages the Church to walk together with all believers? And what domestic arrangements have we overlooked?
13. **About clericalism, there is a new awareness that clericalism is even present among lay people who give credence to or accept without question what the priest says.** Inasmuch as some priests could be accused of being closed and authoritative, the internalised clericalism of laity is also seen as promoting such a culture by not playing its proper role in the Church and by deferring to priests to carry all the burden of leading, teaching and making all the decisions. This deference is seen as another form of clericalism.
14. **There is the need to deepen reflections on no. 35 of the Document for the Continental Stage about the youth with regards to real accompaniment and the need to help the youth and be close to them in their crucial moment to help them rediscover the value of marriage.** Give more attention to the youth in the Church by providing more formative programmes to deepen their faith, give them a voice, and create opportunities (through structural changes) that allow the youth to bring innovative ideas to the Church today. Without attending to the issues faced by the youth, we cannot walk together. The issues of the youth go beyond religion. We need to reflect on contemporary political and economic systems like new capitalism that will not only lead to unemployment but also to redundancy (caused by lack of jobs through technological advancement).
15. **There is the need to keep alive the Synodal spirit in the Church beyond the Continental Assembly in Addis Ababa.** Many issues that are local to Africa came up in the discussions and such problems can only be treated locally. Based on this, there is a call for each local Church to continue deepening the experience of Synodality in order to evolve a more dynamic Synodal Church that goes beyond the Continental Synodal Assembly.
16. **Give Stage and make deliberate efforts to overcome cultural marginalisation of minority groups, especially the indigenous peoples. more attention to cultural issues as in nos. 55 and 56 of the Document for the Continental.** There is the need to reread the history of the indigenous people and then recover, promote and integrate their cultural practices into the liturgy. This is a proper inculturation which enhances diversity, moving from multi-culturality to interculturality where different practices complement and enrich one another.
17. **To deepen the study of no. 88ff of the Document for the Continental Stage on Liturgy which seems more theoretical.** This process could help to make it more practical and sensitive to cultural differences. The emphasis here should be on getting people to participate more actively in Liturgical and community prayer gatherings. This will require getting in deep contact with the people's

cultural ways of worship. There is the call to make Liturgy more contextual.

18. **Liturgically, the Church should find a way of doing things differently, so that those who come to Liturgical celebrations should feel that they are actually considered and given an opportunity to express themselves and participate actively.**
19. **African Unity:** To be able to ask questions and try to resolve problems without removing our capacity to reflect and achieve what we need by ourselves. Undertaking a deep evaluation of all the documents, for example, the Kampala Document, so that we do not look for answers outside us. At the level of Solidarity, we are weak: a problem in Uganda should be of concern to Algeria. A Synodal African Church should be able to unite Africans.
20. **The need for Church authorities to engage the political leadership of the society in advocacy for Good Governance and Justice.** This is to be seen as part of the missionary mandate of making Christ known to the world. A Synodal Church should, therefore, be a Church in continuous mission in all the dimensions of human existence.

2.2. Questions or issues

A careful study of the Document for the Continental Stage raises a number of questions and issues that need to be clarified. They include:

1. What mechanism do we put in place to cater for the respect for diverse cultures?
2. How is the Synodal Church more empathetic and what are her means of promoting concrete Solidarity?
3. There is a tension between a strong understanding of truth and the principle of mercy (particularly the accommodation with difference, minority views and dissent), between belonging to the Church and not living as a full member of the Church, between autonomy and co-responsibility. How do we deal with it?
4. Where is Synodality taking us as we listen to the voices of diverse people? Is this not leading us to democracy? Thus, there is only a thin line between dialogue, listening and decision making and the rule of the majority.
5. Everything we have raised is important. How would the local Church make use of all the points that are being raised in our discussions?
6. In listening to others, to the Holy Spirit and to the Word of God, what are the criteria for discernment and judgement?

3. Conclusion

Having listened to other Churches and to the experience of Africans, we consider the following eight points to be recurrent and urgent priorities on which it is important to continue discernment at the level of the universal Church. These points are directly related to manner of living out the Synodal spirit of Communion, Participation and Mission.

1. **To deepen Catholic Synodality according to the values of the Church as Family of God, nurture life from conception to natural death, based on co-responsibility, biblical hospitality (Eph. 2:19), dignity of children, women and men, and reaching out to the entire human family and all creation, from the Small Christian Communities to the Vatican level.**

The Church is built on the Word of God, Tradition and the Magisterium. The Synodal Church style should be founded on the Traditions and teachings of the Church through which the Church has engendered values that have stood the test of time. Synodality should stand on such values to be able to have a firm foundation that could lead the Church to the desired renewal, even as we draw on Reason and the lived Experience of all the faithful.

2. **African voices and values should be taken into consideration when elaborating the doctrines and teachings of the church, values such as family, solidarity, communitarian life, reverential dialogue, hospitality and co-responsibility.**

Africans have equal responsibility for the doctrines and teachings of the Church in collaboration with other local Churches (Eph. 2:19). Accordingly, it is paramount that their experiences and ever-evolving cultural values be taken into consideration and their problems be always equally considered. This will help them to own the teachings and to be committed to living them out.

3. **The commitment of the Church, Family of God (*Africae Munus*, 1) to conflict resolution, to fight against economic colonialism and illegal exploitation of resources in Africa, and the promotion of Good Governance, Justice and Peace.**

Peace has become so fragile in our time that sometimes, securing an end to conflict is difficult because of the vested interests of the intervening powers. In such situations, it has become necessary for the Synodal Church to get involved in advocacy and concrete negotiations for peace, especially among warring nations and communities. The Synodal Church should make more effort to devise effective mechanisms for active engagement in peace making at the international and local levels in the manner of Christ, the Prince of Peace (Is. 9:6).

Religion is, equally, a cause of conflict in Africa. The desire to promote peace should also lead the Church to promote ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue. There is need for the Synodal Church to work together with other faith communities in the promotion of peace and conflict resolution in building the kingdom of God on earth.

It is clear that one of the major causes of conflict in Africa is the manipulative

attitude of the exploiters of natural resources. The Church should stand with the people and ensure that there is no exploitation without free, prior and informed consent of the population.

The Church should equally foster good governance in African countries, including the pastoral accompaniment of the faithful engaged in social, economic and political life.

4. The process of synodality must also involve inculturation and liturgical renewal in order to respond to the aspiration, participation and overall growth of the African faithful.

Inculturation helps the faith to be rooted in the life and practice of the people. Worship in Africa is an integral experience involving the whole person: mind, spirit and body. The current ways of celebrating the liturgy sometimes leave many Africans unfulfilled. A synodal Church should take into consideration the nature of Africans to have a more participatory liturgy, in line with authentic liturgical theology and doctrine.

5. Synodality is the way of being Church and hence the necessity of formation as a means of making the synodal model a pastoral model of the Church's life and practice.

The new understanding about the synodal Church would lead to a new way of understanding and exercising authority in the Church like Jesus (Lk. 22:27). This new understanding will necessarily demand the formation of the clergy, consecrated persons and the laity in the practice of synodal leadership. An African proverb says "crops are to be cultivated whereas weeds grow on their own." The synodal model needs to be planted in the life of the people of God. Each group must be open to ongoing formation in the synodal way of being Church, including bishops, clergy, lay women and men, young people and consecrated persons.

6. Synodality should strengthen subsidiarity on all levels of the Church's life so as to promote the inclusion, participation and communion of all the members, especially women, the youth and persons living with disability.

The principle of subsidiarity helps each group to autonomously contribute its quota in the development of society and to deal with local pastoral challenges. This should apply to the activities of the synodal Church in all its dimensions.

Women form the greater percentage of active members of the Church. They continue to make enormous contribution to the Church in Africa. However, there are not enough structures to encourage and enhance their participation, especially in the decision-making processes and platforms of the Church. The Church in Africa wishes that, following the principle of subsidiarity, formal forums for women participation in the Church be enhanced.

The above is also true of young people who form the greater percentage of the African population. They have creative ideas and desire to take initiatives in the Church and in society. Often they do not find enough space to exercise their initiatives in the Church. In Africa most young people are faced with the difficult decision of remaining Christians in the face of many competing options.

For persons living with disability, there is need to offer them opportunities to feel

at home in the Church. This will demand putting in place structures that should be concerned with them at the highest level of the Church. The Church should not only listen to the challenges of the people but also, based on the principle of subsidiarity, find ways of creating opportunities for them to contribute to the life of the Church.

7. The family is an important structure in the promotion of the synodal Church and demands pastoral care that focuses on marriage and family and their challenges in the present-day Africa, especially situations of polygamy, divorced and remarried people, single parenthood and child protection.

In Africa we are faced with the challenges of broken marriages based on traditional practices that have been difficult to transform through Christian values and other socio-economic factors, including polygamy which is still imposed by some social conditions in African societies. Divorce is also becoming a common occurrence. There is equally the situation of elective and circumstantial single parenthood, widowhood and cohabitation. We equally note the necessity of protecting children from abuse. People involved in these still want to remain practising Catholics. There is a need to develop an evangelising family pastoral care and catechesis that will make it possible to help them to live their faith with confidence and joy.

8. Ecological justice and stewardship should become a way of life of the synodal Church.

Climate change is an existential threat to the whole world and the Church is not separated from the world. Africa bears the brunt of the current climate crisis, although it contributes the least to it. The Church ought to continue to do more in finding solutions and developing innovative strategies to respond to this urgent crisis as an integral part of her mission.

To conclude, Synodality, founded on love, inclusion and respect for all, particularly those who are marginalised, has engendered a new dynamism through the synod on synodality. This dynamism should be sustained so that synodality becomes a Christian identity (Jn. 13:35), a way of being Church from the grassroots to the highest level. This can only happen if everyone sincerely opens up to the gospel and to the Holy Spirit who has enkindled this synodality as a new way of Christianity in our time.

*Adopted Unanimously by the African Continental Synodal Assembly Addis Ababa, Ethiopia
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