

Synod on Synodality: Areas of Concern for the Church in Nigeria¹

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Presenting its teaching about the one-person and two natures in Christ, the “Definition of the Faith” of the Council of Chalcedon which took place in 451 referred to the Council as, “The holy and great and ecumenical synod, gathered in virtue of God’s grace and at the command of our pious and Christ-loving emperors, the Augusti Marcian and Valentinian, in Chalcedon...”²

Before the Council of Chalcedon, the first ecumenical Council, the Council of Nicaea which took place in 325 used the word “synod” to refer to itself. Canon 3 of the Council of Nicaea stipulated: “The great synod altogether forbade any bishop, presbyter, or deacon, or anyone in the clergy, to have a housekeeper unless a mother, sister, or aunt, or only a person who escaped all suspicion.”³

Canon 5 of the same Council of Nicaea says: “Let the synods meet, one before the forty days of Lent, so that when all faintheartedness is taken away a pure gift may be offered to God, the second synod around the season of autumn.”⁴

There are many other citable instances. But these suffice to make a point. And that point is this: the Church is no stranger to synods. It is important to highlight this point because, thanks largely but not solely to the secular media, it is not uncommon to hear some people speak as if the Synod on Synodality were the first synod in the life of the Church.

The Greco-Latin etymology of the word “synod”, it is generally accepted, conveys the idea of a journey undertaken together. With that in mind, it needs be said, by way of implication, that to assume that the Synod on Synodality is a novelty is to have failed to journey with the past, which is the same as adopting an ahistorical disposition to ignore the past.

Synodality in time and space

If the examples I have cited belong to a distant past, in a perhaps not too distant past, the eighth chapter of *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church of the Second Vatican Council, aptly describes the Church as a “Pilgrim Church”, that is, a Church on a journey to eschatological perfection. In that sense, the Church is synodal. Her synodality is an expression of her nature as communion. As she journeys through history, she must be guided by the word of God in Scripture and Tradition. She must keep to mind the words of the Psalmist: “Your

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² “The Council of Chalcedon’s ‘Definition of the Faith’” in *The Christological Controversy* Trans/Ed. Richard A. Norris, Jr. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980) 155f

³ “The Canons of Nicaea, AD 325” in *The Trinitarian Controversy* Trans/Ed. William G. Rusch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1980) 43f

⁴ *Ibid.*

word is a lamp for my feet, a light for my path” (Ps 119:105). It is a matter of synodality with the word of God, with its integral preservation and faithful transmission. That is synodality with the past. We must walk together with those who have received, interpreted, and preached and taught apostolic doctrine before us. Teachers of doctrine must see the Christian tradition as a conversation that has been going on for over two millennia. We must walk with those who began the conversation before we arrived. That is synodality in time.

But, apart from synodality in time, there must also be synodality in space. In concrete terms, there must also be synodality with local Churches in Africa and in the global south whose voices have been drowned by the voices of some local Churches in the global north in the build up to this synod. In the build up to the first session of the Synod, there were those who asked: will the south be allowed to speak? Will the north listen or just speak to the south? Here, we have legitimate concerns, questions that demand yes or no answers. Unless answers to these questions are positive, synodality runs the risk of being reduced to a slogan. History testifies to the legitimacy of these concerns.

History shows that sub-Saharan Africa has been largely absent and or silent when it comes to councils and synods prior to the Second Vatican Council. Even at the Second Vatican Council, the Church in sub-Saharan Africa was only marginally represented by her Bishops who were, for the most part, missionaries from Churches in the global north. That is not to say there was a deliberate ploy to exclude sub-Saharan Africa. It is, instead, a first practical implication of the history of evangelization of Africa. After the initial proclamation of the Gospel to devout men and women gathered in Jerusalem at Pentecost, a gathering which included Africans, after Africa’s first encounter with Christianity, which lasted 800 years, it took her second encounter with Christianity in the 19th century before Africa could again be counted within Christianity.

A second practical implication of history of Christianity and Africa is that issues that necessitated the first ecumenical Councils, and the Councils of Trent, Vatican I and Vatican II were not issues that originated from sub-Saharan Africa. The first ecumenical Councils of Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus and Chalcedon were convoked because of the Christological controversy. The Council of Trent was convoked to respond to the challenges of the Reformation; while the Councils of Vatican I and II were convoked to address issues that modernism posed to the Church in the global north.

Not only the agenda of our world, but also the agenda of the Church has always been dictated by the global north. The Synod on Synodality eminently exemplifies this. It is clearly evident that its hot button issues—women’s diaconate, communion for divorced and remarried, blessing of same-sex couples—loudly express the agenda of post-modernism. A remark regarding postmodernism provides an anchor for this assertion.

It has been rightly remarked in a coauthored work by Diogenes Allen and Eric O. Springsted that “if there were a single word to describe the intellectual tenor of postmodernism, it would be ‘difference’. Postmodernism does not look for common themes, essences, and

principles that systematically bind disparate phenomena together so much as it does for differences.”⁵ In other words, postmodernism is characterized by its affirmation of primacy of alterity of the autonomous self.

Allen and Springstead concluded that “What this means can be seen in the philosopher who is most closely associated with underlining the importance of the ‘other,’ namely, Emmanuel Lévinas (1906-1995). Few, if any have emphasized more strongly the primary importance in philosophical thought of the ethical, which consists in respect for the other, than he has. Indeed, Lévinas’s claim that ‘ethics is first philosophy’ has become a slogan for this side of postmodernism.”⁶ Not only do the concerns of the Synod on Synodality reflect the concerns of post-modernism and its affirmation of the primacy of the autonomous self, and the primacy of the “other”, they are not issues that originated from sub-Saharan Africa.

If, as I have been arguing, the agenda of the Synod reflects issues that did not originate from sub-Saharan Africa, what of continental discussions that took place before the Synod?

My answer: in the build-up to the first session of the Synod, voices from the global north, in previews and commentaries were domineering and loud. The power of the media in the global north, even ecclesiastical media, surpassed the power of the media in local Churches of the global south. Discussions preceding the first session unveiled an ideological civil war within the global north, a war fought by proxy within the Church in the global north. And as the cavalry of contending armies in that civil war galloped into the sacred precincts of the Church of Christ, the Gospel seemed to have been wheeled out of the Church.

Nonetheless, in the wisdom of divine providence, of God’s direction of the affairs of the world to goodness, the Church, both north and south of the globe, is provided with an opportunity to recall what synods are meant for. The real issue that confronts every synod is not how to win an ideological war. The real issue is this: how can the Church be faithful to Scripture and Tradition? How can we as a Church receive anew, preserve anew, transmit and proclaim anew the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ?

If we are to find answers to these questions, we must recognize and identify factors and issues that promote and challenge fidelity to the faith that comes to us from the apostles. If and when a pastoral praxis is adopted by the Church, she ought to be able to say what is said by the minister of baptism after the profession of faith made in the name of and together with the baptized: “This is our faith. This is the faith of the Church. We are proud to profess it in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

⁵ Read Diogenes Allen and Eric O. Springsted, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology* (Louisville. London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), ch. 13: “Postmodernism: Moral Philosophy”, 231

⁶ Ibid.

Areas of concern for the Church in Nigeria

It is with respect to what I have just said that I would like to highlight three areas concerns which, I am convinced, should preoccupy the Church in Nigeria in her preparation for the second session of the Synod on Synodality. The first is fidelity to apostolic tradition, the second is the synodal process. The two areas of concerns also invite us to look inwards to the realities of our own social and ecclesial experience, to our third area of concerns.

Fidelity to apostolic tradition

The issue here is fidelity to the faith that has come to us from the apostles, those to whom Jesus said: “teach them to observe all the commands I gave you” (Mt 28:20). What comes to mind here is the wisdom of Pope John XXIII in his discourse at the Opening of the Second Vatican Council on October 11, 1962, when he said,

The major interest of the Ecumenical Council is this: that the sacred heritage of Christian truth be safeguarded and expounded with greater efficacy. That doctrine embraces the whole man, body and soul. It bids us live as pilgrims here on earth, as we journey towards our heavenly homeland... If this doctrine is to make its impact on the various spheres of human activity—in private, family and social life—then it is absolutely vital that the Church shall never for an instance lose sight of that sacred patrimony of truth inherited from the Fathers. But it is equally necessary for her to keep up to date with the changing conditions of this modern world, and of modern living... This... Council... is to give to the world the whole of that doctrine which, notwithstanding every difficulty and contradiction, has become the common heritage of mankind—to transmit it in all its purity, undiluted, undistorted... And our duty is not just to guard this treasure, as though it were some museum-piece and we the curators, but earnestly and fearlessly to dedicate ourselves to the work that needs to be done in this modern age of ours, pursuing the path which the Church has followed for almost twenty centuries... What is needed is that this certain and immutable doctrine, to which the faithful owe obedience, be studied afresh and reformulated in contemporary terms. For this deposit of faith, or truths which are contained in our time-honored teaching is one thing; the manner in which these truths are set forth (with their meaning preserved intact) is something else... In these days... it is more obvious than ever before that the Lord’s truth is indeed eternal. Human ideologies change. Successive generations give rise to varying errors, and these often vanish as quickly as they came... The Church has always opposed these errors, and often condemned them with the utmost severity. Today, however, Christ’s Bride prefers the balm of mercy to the arm of severity. She believes that, present needs are best served by explaining more fully the purport of her doctrines, rather than by publishing condemnations... The great desire, therefore, of the Catholic Church... is to show herself to the world as the loving mother of all mankind; gentle, patient, and full of tenderness and sympathy for her separated children... She unseals the fountains of her life-giving doctrine, so that men, illumined by the light of Christ, will understand their true nature

and dignity and purpose. Everywhere, through her children, she extends the frontiers of Christian love, the most powerful means of eradicating the seeds of discord, the most effective means of promoting concord, peace with justice, and universal brotherhood.

In these words of Pope St John XXIII, one finds an echo of St John Newman's theory of development of doctrine. Newman's theory stands on two feet, namely, permanence and immutability of doctrine, and new ways of understanding, interpreting and formulating immutable doctrine. At the same time, Newman foresaw the possibility of misunderstanding, misinterpretation and erroneous reformulation of immutable doctrine. For this reason, he drew a contrast between genuine developments and corruptions of doctrine. In order to grasp this differentiation, he presents seven notes or characteristics of a genuine development of doctrine, the first of which is what he calls "preservation of its type".

Explaining this first note of a genuine development, Newman wrote:

This is readily suggested by the analogy of physical growth, which is such that the parts and proportions of the developed form, however altered, correspond to those which belong to its rudiments. The adult animal has the same make, as it had on its birth; young birds do not grow into fishes, nor does the child degenerate into the brute, wild or domestic, of which he is by inheritance, lord.⁷

It has been said over and over again that this Synod is not out to change doctrine. At the same time, it needs to be said that whatever is said or proposed at this Synod must meet this requirement of preservation of type. Pastoral dispositions and actions must not be seen as out of sync with doctrine. We cannot rely on Newman without the Vincentian Canon on which Newman himself relied.

Synodality must not walk away from apostolic doctrine. It obliges us to walk within apostolic tradition. It was to keep us away from walking together but away from apostolic tradition that Vincent of Lérins put forward his famous canon that revealed and apostolic doctrine is "quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus". Revealed doctrine is what has been held always, everywhere, and by all. In treating each of the so-called hot button issues of this synod, the bottom line question is: does the doctrinal and pastoral outcome fit into the description of what has been held as apostolic doctrine always, everywhere, and by all? The answer can only be yes or no. But these are questions that demand clear answers.

Pastors are teachers of apostolic doctrine, not teachers of doctrines they have invented, nor proponents or spokespersons of ideologies at odds with apostolic doctrine. Their exercise of pastoral office involves receiving, preserving and transmitting apostolic doctrine without distorting it. The wisdom of Vincent of Lérins offers an admonition in this regard. He wrote:

⁷ John Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Doctrine*, ch 5, section 1.1.

Guard this deposit [of faith]. What has been entrusted to you and not what you have invented: a matter not of wit, but of learning; not of private adoption, but of public tradition; what you have received and not what you have thought. You are not the author but the guardian, not a teacher but a learner, not the founder but a follower. Guard this deposit. Preserve the gift of Catholic faith. Keep it from violation or adulteration. What has been entrusted to you keep in your possession and let it be handed on by you. You have received gold, give back gold. Do not substitute one thing for another.... Teach that just as it has been taught to you. And while you express yourself in a new way do not utter new things.⁸

Pope St John XXIII differentiated between the unchanging matter of doctrine and the changing manner of teaching it. But in the build up to the Synod on Synodality, voices were being heard of those who would want to change both the matter and the manner, or change the matter by changing the manner. It is an attempt to embrace Newman's theory of development of doctrine while repudiating the Vincentian canon. The consequence can only be repudiation of both. For there can be no Newman without Vincent, no Vincent without Newman.

The Synodal Process

So far, I have concentrated on the imperative of fidelity to apostolic tradition. The synodal process is of vital importance here. It is a prerequisite for fidelity. For if the synod is a journey, the process is the route, or the road map. A false route will not take us to our destination.

The Synod should be a journeying together within tradition and not away from tradition. If pastors are teachers, they must not do pastoral work without doctrine, they must not exercise the will without the intellect. We cannot truly love without being truthful in love. It seems a current climate of antipathy to the intellect has engendered an "all are welcome" inclusivism. All are welcome into the Church. But not all who were invited accepted the invitation. Some, like the rich young man, "went away sad". The imperative of repentance and the invitation to discipleship go hand-in-hand. In fact, if we are to go by the chronology of Mark's Gospel, the imperative "repent" was spoken by Jesus before the imperative "follow me". Discipleship comes with a cost. The Church, like her Lord, must be honest to those who are invited, those she wants to include, by letting them know that discipleship comes with a cost. It is the imperative of evangelical honesty. To follow Jesus is to repent, and to repent is to follow Jesus. To be admitted into his community of disciples is to part with a past that is incompatible with the Gospel.

As the synodal Church journeys through history, in order not to take a wrong route, she must be guided by the word of God in Scripture and Tradition. She must keep to mind the words of the Psalmist in the liturgy of the word on the Saturday after Ash Wednesday. In that liturgy, the Psalmist prayed in the Response to the Responsorial Psalm: "Show me, Lord, your

⁸ Vincent of Lérins, *Commonitorium*, n. 53.

way so that I may walk in your truth” (Ps 85). And the response to that prayer of the Psalmist came in the invitation of our Lord to Levi in the Gospel passage read at the same Mass: “Follow me” (Lk 5: 27).

The synodal process is a process of discipleship. The synodal Church, like the Psalmist, implores the Lord, “Show me, Lord, your way so that I may walk in your truth.” And the Lord answers the synodal Church with the words he spoke to Levi: “Follow me.” That is the sense in which synodality is about discipleship. It is a matter of synodality with the word of God, with its preservation and transmission that preserves the type. That is synodality with the past. We must walk together with those who have interpreted apostolic doctrine before us. Teachers of doctrine must see the Christian tradition as a conversation that has been going on for over two millennia. We must walk with those who began the conversation before we arrived. That is synodality in time.

While we promote the virtue of listening to each other, we must avoid a presumption, which may border on arrogance, that our generation, or this Synod on Synodality is the first to listen. Indeed, if we have been listening, we would have known that we are not the first to listen. That would portray an absence of synodality in time.

But, apart from synodality in time, there must also be synodality in space. In concrete terms, there must also be synodality with local Churches in Africa and in the global south whose voices have been drowned by the voices of some local Churches in the global north in the build up to this synod. Will the south be allowed to speak? Will the north listen to the south? Here again, we have questions that demand yes or no answers. Unless answers to those questions are positive, synodality runs the risk of being reduced to a slogan.

The synodal process, as it is, is in need of liberation. Despite all profession and appearances of inclusivity, this synod turns out to be insufficiently inclusive. Some are even convinced that it is not at all inclusive. From the perspective of the local Church, we must ask: how much input did the man or woman in the pew make in the discussion of the Lineamenta, and in the construction of the Instrumentum Laboris? Did they even know that a synod was being prepared? We in the Church in Nigeria need to interrogate ourselves: how prepared were we for the first session? It’s not just about the preparation of clerics, but about preparation of the whole Church, of the laity and of consecrated persons?

From the perspective of the global Church, there is need to take a critical look at the agenda of the synod, its process, its choice of resource persons. These seem to point to an ideological coloration. The synod looks like a fixed match. Its objective seems to be fixed already. The fact that while the first session of the synod was on, redaction of the Declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* was on, without the knowledge or input of synodal delegates and episcopal conferences raises a question: are we really journeying together? Does the timing of publication of *Fiducia Supplicans* not suggest that it is intended to preempt discussions in the second session of the Synod on Synodality? Does its redaction without consultation not negate the spirit of synodality? *Fiducia Supplicans*, in its tone, logic and content, manifests a

disconnect between doctrine and pastoral praxis. While it reaffirms the doctrine that marriage is permanent and indissoluble union of a man and a woman, its affirmation of the possibility of blessing same-sex couples undermines the doctrine it reaffirms. If we as a Church embrace a pastoral praxis that undermines our doctrine, if our pastoral praxis is at odds with the doctrine we preach, it is our credibility itself that is undermined. The Synthesis published at the end of the first session is already hinting at modification of the Code of Canon Law. Would that be a way of grasping what could not be possessed at the Synod? Would it be a way of canonizing what could not be passed through the synod?

A final note on the synodal process. It's about the "conversation in the Spirit" which has been promoted by the synodal process but which is in need of clarification. While the spirit must not be stifled, every spirit is to be tested. That is what discernment is about. And the outcome of the process of discernment may be the inability or unwillingness of some who, like the rich young man, will go away sad, or of some disciples, who will find the teaching and language of the Gospel unacceptable.

Looking inwards

The Church in Nigeria should not only look outwards. She must also look inwards. We have encouraging and discouraging news at home. Among encouraging news, we have the demographic growth of the local Church. A year ago, the Centre for Applied Research in the Apostolate of Georgetown University published figures showing that Nigeria has the highest percentage of Catholics who go to Mass on Sundays. All other published figures point out that the Church in Nigeria is growing and noted for the enthusiasm of its lay faithful. There are Nigerian missionaries on every continent, and many of them are exemplary agents of evangelization where they are. All that is in consonance with the legendary African religiosity that many scholars have alluded to. Yet, in looking inwards, we must not ignore what discourages.

The Church in Nigeria must pay attention to doctrinal deviations, liturgical aberrations, and pastoral malpractice. These appear to be going on while we are looking the other way. Our failure to intervene, especially as bishops, tend to portray us as aiding and abetting this. It is a well-known fact that in Nigeria, our Catholic space has been invaded by Pentecostalism. I prefer to call it contemporary Nigerian religiosity in its expression within and outside the Catholic Church. This is a greater concern than blessing of same-sex couples. We have witnessed an explosion of new religious communities some with little or nothing in terms of spirituality and charism of consecrated life. Thankfully, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria looked into this phenomenon.

But there is another phenomenon the Conference needs to look at, not to stifle but to discern the Spirit. It is the explosion of ministries in the Church in Nigeria established and patronized by some priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful. Some of these ministries and ministers pretend to be Catholic. They even display statues of our Blessed on their websites or

expose the Blessed Sacrament in a way that points to sacrilege. Fake prophecies and arranged miracles are being touted before a traumatized, bewildered and gullible populace while shepherds fail to rescue the flock from ravaging, ravaging and manipulative wolves. The populism of these ministries, the advertisement of un-authenticated miracles and prophecies, the opium these ministries administer on our people, erode the credibility of Christianity, of Catholicism in particular, in our country. A more critically-minded generation will emerge and is already emerging that would repudiate Catholicism because it is unable to see the difference between the Pentecostal pastor and a Catholic priest. But there is good news.

The good news is that formation is the answer: formation of everyone in the Church, beginning with us ecclesiastics. Our seminary formation must be constantly reviewed to attain the objective of safeguarding the faith. And the Church recognizes that it ends neither with priestly nor with episcopal ordination. We must be formed to respect and to lead the people, to appreciate the baptismal dignity and charism of the lay faithful, and of consecrated persons who are sometimes treated like tenants with clerics as their landlords. We are doing well. But we can do better.

Conclusion

A synod, in the true ecclesial sense of the word, is an expression of communion. Here, one needs to recall the ecclesiology of communion taught by the Second Vatican Council. It is a desire for union with one another in our desire for communion in God and with God who is truth.

A synod is not a political consensus. For there is political synod and there is ecclesial synod. The former is what happens when political activists and ideologues strategies and “walk together” in their quest for votes and for political power. If a synod, in the ecclesial sense of the word, is desire to be in communion with God who is truth, then it can never be an arrogant pretension that we have found the truth. Rather, it is unity in our desire to be found by Truth.

We would be living in veritable synodality if we would allow the truth of the Gospel, as unfashionable as it is, to find us, if we would be humble enough to allow the truth to find us. For the Gospel is not truth we have found but Truth who has found us.

A synod, again in the true ecclesial sense of the word and not in the sense of political or ideological consensus, is participation in the task of going to the whole world to announce that we have been found by Truth while we were seeking truth. Our mission to preach the Gospel is a mission to bear witness that Truth has found us, and to invite the world to turn to Truth who finds us. Peter, on the day of Pentecost, announced this to the whole world represented by people of diverse nationalities present in Jerusalem.

Just as Peter’s audience was shocked, that is, surprised at his proclamation, we too are going to be shocked when we allow Truth to find us, and our preaching will shock the world when we tell the world that there is truth, and that Truth has found us. The world is shocked because the world says there is no truth, and that, in the spirit of postmodernism, all we have

are opinions. That shock may occasion indifference or resistance or rejection or ridicule, even persecution.

Consequently, if we wish to preach a Gospel that is domesticated, customized and attractive, a Gospel that makes the world applaud our political correctness or our politically correct pastoral initiatives, then we had better forget going on this mission. For there is no such Gospel except in political campaign slogans.

The initial proclamation of the Gospel by Peter on Pentecost Day invited the people to conversion. Our mission is to invite people to conversion. The Gospel demands conversion. The invitation of the Gospel is a demand. Such invitation will or may attract unpleasant consequences visited on the preacher of the Gospel.

Despite these risks, the Church of our time, the Church in Nigeria in particular, must have the courage of martyrs of old in receiving, preserving and transmitting the Gospel that comes to us from the apostles. She will exercise this courage by identifying, raising and addressing issues of concern for apostolic tradition, for the synodal process, and for social and ecclesial realities that confront her.