



Africa Prepares for the Synod on Synodality

A Summary of the Synodal Conversation (16/08/2024)



THEME: THE ROLE OF PAPAL REPRESENTATIVES IN A MISSIONARY AND SYNODAL CHURCH-FAMILY OF GOD IN AFRICA

Summary

This week's synodal series reflected on some of the voices of African prelates, theologians, laity, clerics, and religious during this synodal process on the role of papal representatives (specifically nuncios) in the local churches of Africa. Inspiration for this week's discussion was drawn from the teaching of Pope Francis on the reform of the Curia in the Apostolic Constitution, *Praedicate Evangelium*. The reform of the curia has been a central concern since Vatican II (CD, 9). Chapter 13 of the Synthesis Report affirms that the reform of the curia is "an important aspect of the Catholic Church's synodal journey" (13, c).

Opening Speech

Milliam Kayange, the English language moderator welcomed everyone to the 11th African Palava Session hosted by PACTPAN. She introduced the IT Manager Stanley to take the participants through a technical brief of navigating the zoom application and thereafter welcomed the French language Moderator Bergerac Likibi from Congo Brazaville who invited **His Grace, Archbishop Fortunatus Nwachukwu** from Nigeria, Secretary of the Section for First Evangelization, Dicastery for the Evangelization of Peoples, who gave the opening prayer and Allocutio. The allocutio for the day addressed the theme in the wider context of the communion between the prelates of Africa and the Roman Curia and particularly the office of the Propaganda Fide. The moderator for the day was Ms Redemtor **Atieno from Kenya.**

INTRODUCTION

The moderator Redemtor Atieno introduced herself and outlined the structure of the meeting which explored the role of papal representatives, particularly nuncios, in the local churches of Africa, focusing on their impact within a missionary and synodal Church-Family of God. The meeting had 4 main speakers who were:

1. Prof Eduardo Ade
2. Rev Fr Idara Otuu
3. Archbishop Fortunatus Nwachukwu
4. Sister Rosemary Nyirumbe

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FIRST SESSION OF THE PALAVER

Part One

Synodality in the Church and Missionary Work

Nuncios play a fundamental role in the process of choosing Bishops but even more so they represent a fundamental link of the interplay between the local and universal levels of the Church's life. Their ministry and the way it is carried out must therefore be attuned to the attention of the local Churches typical of a synodal Church (cf. SR 13c).

The first speaker, Archbishop Fortunatus spoke about the role of Apostolic Nuncio in a synodal church, emphasizing the importance of synodality in the Church. He used the example of the Israelites' journey from Egypt to the Promised Land to illustrate the concept of synodality and how it was addressed through the election of representatives and the reception of God's word. He further gave a historical overview of the Apostolic Nunciature discussing its longstanding tradition which dates back to the 4th century when the Holy See began sending out delegates to represent the Pope at various councils.

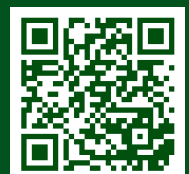
He further highlighted the important figures who emerged throughout this history, such as the apostolic collector and the legati missi. Archbishop Fortunatus also identified four key moments in the recent history of the apostolic nunciature: the 1917 Code of Canon Law, the Second Vatican Council, the 1965 Apostolic Letter, and the 1983 Code of Canon Law. He emphasized that while there have been reforms to this institution, it remains a significant part of the Catholic Church's diplomatic tradition.

The reform of the curia

The reform of the curia has been a central concern since Vatican II (CD, 9). Chapter 13 of the Synthesis Report affirms that the reform of the curia is “an important aspect of the Catholic Church's synodal journey” (13, c).

Prof Fr Eduard Ade, a member of SECAM's Theological Commission led the assembly deeper into reflection on the question: How does this reform apply to the Church in Africa and what are the contributions of the Church in Africa to this reform through the African ecclesiology of the Church-Family of God?

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Relationship between the Roman Curia and African local churches

The Universal Church exists through a union of love and communion existing between the particular churches. Fr Idara Otu, the Head of the Vital Church Unit of research of PACTPAN and an African ecclesialogist and lecturer at the Missionary of St Paul's Seminary, Abuja, Nigeria introduced the theme by suggesting ways through which a theology of communion being developed in Africa can improve the relationship between Rome and African prelates and churches.

He said the role of the Roman curia in Africa has been the subject of substantial criticism and has often been accused of cultural insensitivity and imposing Western norms leading to a perception of excessive centralization that undermines the identity and mission of particular churches, the over-emphasis on administrative duties at the expense of pastoral care, and limited support for local initiatives. There is a need therefore for the Roman Curia to reflect on their role in light of the church's teaching on communion, synodality, core responsibility, subsidiarity, and inculturation.

Fr Idara Otu further noted that the Roman Curia is primarily an instrument at the service of the Pope, its mission being to assist the Pope in his role as a visible source and foundation of the unity of bishops and of the universal church. "It is designed to be of assistance to bishops, particular churches, and episcopal conferences. Therefore, the Roman Curia is not the universal church but at the service of the church, a service that natures the relationship between the universal church and particular churches and the growth of particular churches" he stated.

He cited challenges such as ethnicity, tribalism, clericalism, ineffective governance structure, incompetent personnels, and the church of Africa's dependency on the West as part of the difficulties between the Roman Curia and particular churches in Africa. On the other hand, the relationship with the Roman Curia is strained by ineffective communication, bureaucracy and lack of transparency which he noted creates a sense of paternalism, authoritarianism, and excessive control by the Roman Curia.

To strengthen the relationship between the Roman Curia and local churches to enhance mutual relationship between the Roman Curia and particular churches,

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he made three proposals: (1) re-imagine the role of Apostolic Nuncio as pastors as they play an important role in helping local churches in Africa in their work of evangelization; (2) Roman Curia should see itself as bridge builders between the pope and local churches and between particular churches and universal churches in promoting communion and service; (3) the relationship between Roman Curia and particular churches in Africa is contingent upon credible episcopal leadership in Africa by having the bishops of Africa embody the principle of communion, core responsibility, subsidiarity, and synodality to build a vital church capable of engaging, dialoguing and collaborating with Rome in matters of faith, morals and ecclesiastical governance. This, he said will be achieved by particular churches undertaking reforms of the diocesan curia, continental curia, building of effective governance structures and the training of competent pastoral agents.

The Role of the Apostolic Nuncio and Diplomacy

Archbishop Fortunatus discussed the role of the Apostolic Nuncio, emphasizing its diplomatic function as a bridge between the Holy See and local nations. He highlighted the Nuncio's role in providing information to the Pope, sharing local developments, and seeking support. He further shared his experience of how an African country received significant financial aid from the European Union and the Holy See, highlighting the often-overlooked support given by the latter. He also discussed the delicate and crucial role of the apostolic nuncio in the appointment of new bishops.

Archbishop Fortunatus also touched on the challenges faced when the Nuncio's role is not respected, using the example of his own experience as a young secretary. He said the work of the Nuncio is to create the necessary environment for the church to have the right and freedom to exist.

The archbishop also gave some practical lessons on how the relationship between the nuncios and African prelates should proceed based on his many years of serving as an Apostolic Nuncio and a papal representative to the United Nations.

He shared the experience of the apostolic nunciature Cardinal Filoni who remained in Baghdad when bombs were falling and all embassies closed down. "The work of the Nuncio is to build bridges and sometimes he has to sacrifice his pleasure and everything in order to be there. They don't run away even in situations of war," he said.

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Relationships between Africans and international partners

Finally, Sister Rosemary Nyirumbe, a Catholic Sister of the Sacred Heart Sisters in Gulu, Uganda and a Founder and Director of Saint Monica's Girls Tailoring Centres in Gulu and Atiak talked about best practices in relationships between Africans and international partners and what African prelates could learn from these best practices in their relationship with Nuncios and the Roman Curia.

The best practices suggested included being focused in the process of evangelization by examining the context, knowing who you are evangelizing to, and being constant in your effort and process. "Six years is too short in a mission and this doesn't create constancy for special evangelization. We need to mentor and also have a plan of how the projects can go on without us" she suggested and added that it is essential to take risks and share with those near you.

She also added that it is important to learn from those who had started earlier. "We need to remember we are just agents for a continuous process of transformation and we must equip ourselves with effort, love, and dedication. We need to build bricks and put new bricks on top of old bricks, and build new structures in our church and to find how our structures can fit our churches," she advised.

She called on the participants to ensure that they focus on best practices and examine the methods of evangelization that have worked. "In our churches let us look at things that have worked such as evangelization of the poor, evangelization of women, etc. but not to focus on too many things. We should look at outcomes that are evidence based and can be measured. We need to be flexible and broad-minded," she emphasized.

She cited lack of education as a key challenge in Africa and advised the church to act on improving education especially among women in Africa and more so on quality education. She asked the prelates and priests to learn to collaborate with the laity and to also learn to be humble and tolerant of diverse views.

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PART TWO OF THE PALAVER

The second part of the palaver focused on interventions from the participants. Various speakers asked questions, gave comments on the issues discussed and/or shared their experiences, expectations and/or best practices from their parishes, dioceses or country.

Margaret Mary noted that the place of women is missing at the table and pleaded with the priests, bishops, cardinals, and the clergy to put in place structures that will accommodate women because currently there are no structures in place in the church to give room for sisters. “I would appeal to our brothers to prepare a place for sisters at the table so that we can be heard and together we can work on synodality, subsidiarity, accountability, formation, and evangelization because we want the church that we love to love us back,” she appealed.

Sr Josephine Awino spoke about the book “New Wine in old wineskins” which calls on evangelizers to be ready to take risks wherever they are sent and renew their methods and approaches to reach modern audiences, evangelizing to them while maintaining the core of their faith.

Cardinal Wilfrid Napier wondered whether people’s expectations of the nuncios were not quite unrealistic and shared his experience on the main tasks of the nuncio which is to ensure that messages, policies, and teaching that are generated at the Vatican get through to the local church and what the local church is experiencing is transferred back to Vatican so that adjustments can be made some times with regards to the issues to be considered. He added that the Nuncio is also responsible for choosing of bishops for the dioceses.

Sr Leonida asked about the role and place of Nuncios in the politics of a country they are sent to. Archbishop Fortunatus responded that while he was in Nicaragua the relationship was perfect, the church was not persecuted and the government built a museum in honour of St Pope John Paul II who had been insulted in the same country in 1983. Redemptor Atieno asked why there is no African cardinal heading any of the Roman Curia offices and Cardinal Napier responded by saying that Cardinal Peter Turkson is the head of a department in Rome dealing with intervention of the church in the area of economic and finances in Rome. He added that there have been a few African cardinals heading departments in the Vatican.

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Cardinal Onaiyekan Emeritus Archbishop of Abuja, Nigeria noted that in regards to the role of the Roman Curia viz a viz the local churches, a lot has happened and will continue to happen in the years to come. Fr Ikenna Okafor supported the suggestion of giving women a seat as cardinals considering what can and cannot be changed. He interpreted the resurrection event where Jesus chose Mary Magdalene as his legate “And so the question we should be asking is not whether women should be ordained but whether only ordained ministers are supposed to represent the pope. If we go back to history there was a time when the papal legate were not all ordained ministers.

“So if allow that the papal legate to be lay people or religious women then that should be an opportunity for women to represent the pope as diplomats and be bridge builders in the church even if they are not ordained. This will give a good opportunity to widen the synodal way to accommodate and include women in a more fraternal synodal process in our church,” he advised. He said this can justified by the resurrection event, the role Mary Magdalene played in bringing the message of Christ and the message of the resurrection to the apostles and it might be a way of rectifying some of the grievances about marginalization of women in the church.

Fr Peter wondered whether there is a way Nuncios can act as a team of interventions in conflict zones such as in Cameroon where the church has been putting alot of efforts to foster peace and build the bridge between the separatist movement and the government and the people as a whole but very often this reality is challenging to local churches. Is there a way to form a coalition of intervention when the church is facing this crise, he asked.

Closing

The moderator Redemtor Atieno wrapped up the discussion and thanked the main speakers for a job well done. She also thanked all the participants who spoke and everyone else who took time to join the palaver session. The final blessings were given by Cardinal Napier who prayed for discernment of their vocation. He asked God to strengthen their faith, hope, and the love that they need to truly live as the disciples of Jesus and be able to discern more clearly their vocation and be perfect like the Father in heaven.

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