



Africa Prepares for the Synod on Synodality

A Summary of the Synodal Conversation (02/08/2024)



THEME: RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DIOCESAN BISHOPS AND MEN AND WOMEN RELIGIOUS IN AFRICA

Opening Prayers

The synodal conversation began with a prayer led by Cardinal Wilfrid Napier. He called on the participants to recognize the presence of God in their midst and to seek divine wisdom as they discern their vocations. Cardinal Napier's prayer centered on the need for faith, hope, and love, which are essential for being true disciples of Christ. He emphasized that the participants should strive to follow Christ closely so that they can live out their vocations in a way that aligns with God's will. Cardinal Napier concluded his prayer by invoking Mary, the Mother of God, to support them as they walk with Jesus, who promised to be with His followers until the end of time.

Introductory Speech

After the opening prayer, the conversation transitioned into its introductory phase, with Cardinal Wilfrid Napier delivering preliminary remarks. He initiated the discussion by deliberating on the pivotal role of consecrated men and women in the Church's mission, particularly in the African context. Throughout history, religious men and women have spearheaded the Church's missionary endeavors, often acting as pioneers in regions where the Church was still establishing itself.

Cardinal Napier emphasized the exigency of ensuring that both local and missionary religious individuals continue to lead and support the local Church in Africa. He referenced the post-synodal exhortation "Ecclesia in Africa," particularly focusing on paragraph 94, which underscores the role of consecrated life in the Church as the family of God. He elucidated that consecrated life not only directs all the faithful towards holiness but also serves as a model of fraternal life in a community. In this vein, those who embrace the consecrated life are called to collaborate with bishops, clergy, and laity.

Cardinal Napier also underscored the significance of nurturing religious vocations within the African Church. He stressed that these vocations should be chosen with discernment and provided with comprehensive formation encompassing spiritual, doctrinal, apostolic, and theological dimensions.

Learn More: <https://pactpan.org/synodal-conversations/>



PARTNERS



aciafrica





Africa Prepares for the Synod on Synodality

A Summary of the Synodal Conversation (02/08/2024)



This formation should be regularly updated to ensure that religious individuals are well-prepared to confront the challenges of their mission.

Another notable point raised by Cardinal Napier was the importance of adhering to the criteria set by the Second Vatican Council and current canonical norms when establishing new religious institutes. He advocated for a dialogue between religious institutes and local bishops, particularly concerning the establishment of residences and the undertaking of specific works within a diocese. He emphasized the need for juridical status and financial autonomy for these institutes, enabling them to autonomously manage their affairs while remaining aligned with the broader mission of the Church.

Cardinal Napier further referenced Pope John Paul II's acceptance of the Synod of Bishops' request to revise certain aspects of the document *Mutuae Relationes*, which aims to regulate the relationship between bishops and religious individuals. This document seeks to maintain a balance in these relationships to effectively advance the Church's mission. Cardinal Napier concluded by urging bishops and religious individuals in Africa to lay the groundwork necessary to remain effective agents of evangelization despite increasingly challenging circumstances, praying for God's blessings on their endeavors, as was bestowed upon the founders of their religious orders and the Church itself.

FIRST SESSION OF THE PALAVER: Designing Relationships for a Missionary Church

The first session of the palaver addressed the theme of how to design relationships between bishops and religious congregations in Africa to promote responsibility, mutuality, recognition, and the promotion of religious charisma for a missionary Church. The session featured two main speakers: Sr. Marie Diouf and Rev. Fr. Paulinus Odozor.

Sr. Marie Diouf began by acknowledging the sensitive and often complex nature of the relationships between religious orders and diocesan clergy in Africa. She did not shy away from discussing the implicit prejudices that continue to affect these relationships. According to Sr. Diouf, despite years of coexistence, a subtle but persistent tension remains between religious congregations and diocesan structures. She noted that members of religious congregations often feel

Learn More: <https://pactpan.org/synodal-conversations/>



PARTNERS



aciafrica





Africa Prepares for the Synod on Synodality A Summary of the Synodal Conversation (02/08/2024)



marginalized and perceive themselves as being on the periphery of diocesan life. She poignantly expressed this sentiment, stating, “Members of religious congregations often have the impression of being on the margins, of not being fully accepted or integrated into the dioceses.”

On the other hand, Sr. Diouf pointed out that diocesan authorities sometimes view religious congregations as a “state within a state”—an independent entity that does not always align with diocesan priorities. This perception, she argued, creates a barrier to truly harmonious collaboration. “It is true that some dioceses see religious congregations as a ‘state within a state,’ which creates a barrier to truly harmonious collaboration,” she explained. These underlying tensions, she argued, are not merely matters of perception but reflect deeper issues of trust, collaboration, and mutual respect. Sr. Diouf called for renewed dialogue that acknowledges these challenges honestly and seeks to create a more harmonious coexistence.

Rev. Fr. Paulinus Odozor followed Sr. Diouf’s presentation by reflecting on the broader challenge of harmonizing the various gifts that God has bestowed upon the Church. He reminded the participants that the Church in Africa is not alone in facing these challenges; rather, it is part of the global Church’s ongoing struggle to understand and live out its identity. Fr. Odozor emphasized that the document *Mutuae Relationes*, issued in 1978, arose from the need to find a way to ensure that all aspects of the Church work together more effectively.

Fr. Odozor further stressed the centrality of faith in Jesus Christ as the foundation for the Church’s life and mission, particularly in the African context. He posed the critical question of what Jesus Christ expects from the leadership and members of His Church in Africa. In response, he highlighted the need for bishops and Church leaders to be deeply committed to the Lord and to understand that their roles are fundamentally about service. He stated that bishops, as pastors, have responsibilities as fathers, teachers, and leaders of their local churches. However, he noted that fatherhood in this context is not merely a biological reality but a role that must be earned through service and leadership.

Fr. Odozor emphasized that while bishops are entrusted with the leadership of the Church, they do not own it; rather, they are stewards who must exercise their authority in a spirit of consultation and collaboration. He called on bishops to

Learn More: <https://pactpan.org/synodal-conversations/>



PARTNERS



aciafrica





Africa Prepares for the Synod on Synodality

A Summary of the Synodal Conversation (02/08/2024)



engage all members of their dioceses—clergy, religious, and laity alike—in the work of the Church, fostering a sense of shared mission and responsibility.

SECOND SESSION OF THE PALAVER: The Impact of African Culture on Church Relations

The second session of the palaver focused on how African cultural norms have influenced relationships between the clergy and religious men and women in Africa. The session was led by Sr. Elizabeth Nduku, who provided a critical analysis of the ways in which traditional African culture has shaped these relationships.

Sr. Nduku began by noting that in many African cultures, decision-making has historically been the domain of men, with women and children expected to obey without question. This patriarchal structure, she argued, has been carried over into the Church, where bishops—who are often seen as the heads of their dioceses—make decisions with the expectation that religious men and women will comply without questioning. She pointed out that women religious, in particular, have been marginalized and excluded from Church leadership, a situation that has persisted even with the advent of Christianity.

Sr. Nduku explained that the patriarchal mentality, which views women's silence as a sign of respect, has contributed to the challenges faced by religious congregations, especially women religious, in their interactions with diocesan authorities. She cited examples of conflicts that have arisen when religious are perceived as challenging the authority of bishops. According to Sr. Nduku, these conflicts are often rooted in the cultural norms related to leadership and gender roles that continue to influence the Church in Africa.

Sr. Nduku also referenced a study conducted by PACTPAN in October 2023, which revealed that the Church in Africa is significantly influenced by cultural norms, particularly in the areas of leadership, power relations, and property ownership. She noted that some bishops have refused to allow religious congregations to own title deeds for their lands, leading to tensions and conflicts. Additionally, she highlighted issues of unhealthy competition and materialism within the Church, as well as instances where bishops have overturned decisions made by religious superiors, undermining their authority.

Learn More: <https://pactpan.org/synodal-conversations/>



PARTNERS



aciafrica





Africa Prepares for the Synod on Synodality

A Summary of the Synodal Conversation (02/08/2024)



In response to these challenges, Sr. Nduku recommended that the Church in Africa take a critical look at the cultural influences that affect its operations and address them in a way that fosters more effective relationships between bishops and religious congregations. She emphasized that the synod on synodality presents an opportunity for the Church to walk together in a spirit of mutual respect, collaboration, and empowerment.

Interventions and Reflections

Following the presentations, the moderator invited participants to share their thoughts and reflections on the topics discussed. Several key points were raised during this session of interventions.

Sibiri Félix Koala emphasized the importance of recognizing and valuing the unique contributions of all members of the Church, regardless of their role or position. He highlighted the need for healing relationships between different groups within the Church to foster a more united and effective missionary Church in Africa.

Kyaterekera Matthias highlighted the necessity of obtaining written agreements from bishops before religious congregations embark on projects or activities in their dioceses. He argued that such agreements would help avoid conflicts over authority and rights, ensuring that all parties are clear about their roles and responsibilities.

Fr. Norbert Attah raised concerns about the proliferation of new religious congregations in Africa. While he acknowledged that the growth of religious communities is a blessing for the Church, he also noted that it poses challenges for bishops in some dioceses. Fr. Attah called for a deeper understanding of the theological role of bishops in a diocese and the importance of integrating the charisms of religious institutes into the local Church.

Archbishop Charles Gabriel Palmer-Buckle responded to these interventions by acknowledging the concerns raised. He emphasized the need for all religious leaders to strive for unity and maturity in Christ, guided by the Holy Spirit. He called on religious communities and bishops to engage in open dialogue, to listen to each other, and to work together for the good of the Church and its mission.

Learn More: <https://pactpan.org/synodal-conversations/>



PARTNERS



aciafrica





Africa Prepares for the Synod on Synodality

A Summary of the Synodal Conversation (02/08/2024)



Prof. Clement Majawa and Prof. Fortunatus Nwachukwu provided additional reflections. Prof. Majawa suggested that the Church consider adopting a family model as a way to foster better relationships within the Church. He also called for further discussion on ecclesiology from an African perspective, where hierarchy, charism, and authority are seen as complementary elements in the Church's mission. Prof. Nwachukwu emphasized the importance of revisiting the 1978 document on Church relationships, arguing that it needs to be updated to reflect the contemporary challenges faced by the Church in Africa.

Closing

The session concluded with prayers for improved relationships within the Church, particularly between bishops and religious congregations. The participants prayed for humility, mutual respect, and divine guidance as they work together towards a more collaborative and synodal Church in Africa. Cardinal Napier offered a final blessing, asking for God's grace to guide their efforts and ensure that their work bears fruit in the ongoing mission of the Church in Africa. The conversation ended on a hopeful note, with participants committed to continuing the dialogue and striving for greater unity and cooperation in their shared mission.

Learn More: <https://pactpan.org/synodal-conversations/>



PARTNERS



aciafrica

