

Third Session to cover the third priority in the document – “Participation, Governance, and Authority”

SynodWatch series covering the *Working Document* of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops

FutureChurch Link on YouTube:

[SynodWatch Session 3: Participation, Governance, and Authority - YouTube](#)

Wednesday, 12 July, 2023 at 7pm EDT

Synodality in the African Context

By Joseph G. Healey (in collaboration with African leaders)

Good day wherever you are. First I want to thank the leaders of FutureChurch and yourselves for wanting to hear the African context. Truly we are a World Church. We are a Synodal Church. We are guided by the Holy Spirit.

As an expatriate American missionary priest I should not be presenting. Rather Africans themselves should be making this presentation. But it is 2 am in Nairobi, Kenya right now. So I have prepared these reflections in a synodal way and gathered the views and voices of many African lay women, lay men, religious, priests and bishops.

I would like to begin by building on what Sister Lynn Jarrell said on Canon Law. This is the heart of the Synodal Process in a spiritual conversation (also called “conversation in the Spirit”) and dialog.¹ It fits perfectly with tonight’s theme of “Participation, Governance, and Authority.” In 2022 leaders of the Synodal Process in Africa met in a Zoom Session with Cardinal Grech. In the Q & A period an African layman asked the cardinal how African lay people can participate more in the Catholic Church? The cardinal answered immediately, “Be active members of your Parish Pastoral Councils (PPCs) and Diocesan Pastoral Councils (DPCs) (B 3.3).” This presupposes that active PPCs exist. This is not a given. In Eastern Africa 90% of our parishes have PPCs. Here in the USA as an example in Newark Archdiocese in New Jersey only 50% of the parishes have PPCs. In some countries in Europe it is less.

Grech said that the *1983 Code of Canon Law* needs updating. Two Canon Lawyers in his Synod Office in Rome are now drafting proposed changes to make PPCs mandatory (they are only “recommended” now) and more representative. This is not easy. I was in Rome at the beginning of the Synod on “Young People” in 2018. The synod delegates recommended that each Parish Pastoral Council have one young woman and one young man. Has this happened? In many countries it has not. Grech said that the PPCs should have deliberative powers in certain cases. This has not happened. The parish priest remains king in his parish. The bishop remains king in

¹ In the Synodal Process one step that is new and creative is deeper listening to the person who speaks before you, and then you build on and add to what she or he has said, **not** just plow ahead with your own ideas.

his diocese. One [Small Christian Community](#) (SCC)² lay leader in Nairobi said: “We lay people are the victims of the next parish priest that comes along.” I can give some examples of how the PPCs can have more deliberative, decision-making powers in the Q & A period.

In describing the various images of the Catholic Church the *Working Document* states that “Africa suggested the image of the Church as the Family of God, capable of offering belonging and welcome to all its members in all their variety” (B 1.2). Magdalena Chubwa from Tanzania says that we already have the Synodal Process in Africa through our African community values and our Small Christian Communities (SCCs). “It is easy. It is a piece of cake,” she says. “In Africa we have been exercising the themes of the Synod -- Communion, Participation, and Mission -- for years. A strong unity and communion built from the family level to all levels of the Local Church have allowed people to participate fully during this synodal process where they have openly shared experiences about the mission of the Catholic Church in their ordinary life.” In communion ecclesiology (this relates to the importance of theology that Lynn talked about) we begin at the grassroots with the family as the domestic church. The SCC is the communion of families. The outstation is the communion of SCCs. The parish is the communion of outstations. The diocese is the communion of parishes. The National Bishops’ Conference is the communion of dioceses. The Universal Catholic Church is the Communion of National Bishops’ Conferences.

The Small Christian Community or base community is an official ecclesial, pastoral structure in many countries in Africa. In the [nine countries of Eastern Africa there are 195,000 SCCs](#), yes, 195,000! A SCC is a small neighborhood, parish-based group in an urban or rural area that is a pastoral model of church that transforms the parish into a communion of communities and an instrument of evangelization. Ideally it has weekly lectionary based faith-sharing when SCC members reflect on the *Gospel* of the following Sunday and connects it to our daily lives and regular practical action and social outreach. Ideally the parish is a communion or network of SCCs. The Sunday Eucharist, the high point of the liturgical week, is the weekly union/communion/gathering of all the SCCs.³

² The term “Small Christian Community” is not well known in the USA. More common are the terms Small Prayer Group, Small Faith Sharing Group and Small *Bible* Group. Small Self-help Group, Small Self-interest Group and Small Support Group are a different model.

³ One of the most interesting questions in the Q & A period was about SCCs in the American context. In various parts of the USA some Catholic parishes are closing, some Catholic parishes are clustering/amalgamating and new Catholic megaparishes are being built. Can SCCs be part of these megaparishes? I answered that we need to be creative in the Catholic Church and we can learn from the megachurches in the growing Evangelical and Pentecostal Churches in the USA. To expand I could have described our SCCs research on what I call the Rick Warren Model of Church based on his Saddleback Church in California as follows:

This represents a new trend and pattern worldwide: the combination of a megachurch and a network of small groups. The big Sunday liturgies of thousands of people have an “entertainment,” charismatic style and the small groups in the middle of the week focus on faith-sharing, *Bible* Reflection and an interpersonal approach. What began as part of the evangelical movement (Rick Warren and

Cardinal-elect Protase Rugambwa of Tabora, Tanzania (who was just appointed by Pope Francis) says: “We need to always think of SCCs as relevant pastoral structures that foster the work of evangelization.” Another bishop in Tanzania stated that in his diocese “the entire pastoral work will be carried out by means of Small Christian Communities.”

Father Emmanuel Chimombo of the [AMECEA](#) Office in Nairobi says that “SCCs can act as a counterbalance to the culture of ‘individualism that has crept into the Catholic Church. Feedback from lay people is critical in “reawakening the spirituality” of SCCs to empower local leaders. SCC members are trained to identify the needs of their neighbors, not just their fellow Catholics, becoming in the process a ‘neighborhood church.’”

Unfortunately this is not brought out in the *Working Document* that only describes SCCs as “lay-led groups” (B 3.2 e) or the general “new communities.” Yet at the Press Conference in Rome on Friday, 20 April, 2023 Sister Nathalie Becquart presented the “Report of the Synodal Continental Task Force” and emphasized “that the strong

others) is now a trend in the Catholic Church in the USA especially in the South and Southwest. Can these small groups especially among Hispanic Catholics be the new face of SCCs?

We do not agree with Rich Warren’s top down style. His Saddleback Church is an Evangelical Baptist multi-site megachurch, based in Lake Forest, California. It is the largest church in California, and one of the largest in the United States of America. The church has several campuses in California and around the world. After his sermon on a particular theme or topic on Sunday that is broadcast simultaneously in the various campus/satellite churches of Saddleback Church in California, 1000s of small groups meet (in person or online) in the middle of the week to view a video based on the previous Sunday’s sermon. Then small group discussion follows. The initiative comes from Rick Warren and his team who produce the videos and choose the themes and topics.

Our Catholic SCCs Model is from the grassroots up. Ideally our SCCs are weekly lectionary based faith-sharing small communities that reflect on the *Gospel* of the following Sunday and connect it to our daily lives and promote regular practical action and social outreach. Ideally the parish is a communion or network of SCCs. The Sunday Eucharist, the high point of the liturgical week, is the weekly union/communion/gathering of all the SCCs.

Joseph Healey, *Building the Church as Family of God: Evaluation of Small Christian Communities in Eastern Africa*, Eldoret: AMECEA Gaba Publications – CUEA Press *Double Spearhead* Nos. 199-200 (Print Version 2012 and 1st Reprint 2014). 163 pages. The Online Digital Version, regularly revised and updated from the 2012 print version, is available as a free, online Ebook containing 1,426 pages as of 14 July, 2023 on the Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website: https://smallchristiancommunities.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Build_new.pdf, page 572.

experience of Small Christian Communities/Base Ecclesial Communities in Asia, Africa and Oceania is an experience of synodality.”

Sister Josée Ngalula of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is an important delegate to the October, 2023 synod in Rome. Deb showed her photograph in the first presentation. She is the only African woman on the International Theological Commission. In a webinar on "Synodality in Africa" on 18 November, 2021 she emphasized the importance of the “structure” of Small Christian Communities (SCCs) on the grassroots level in Africa. She said: “We have to use and consolidate this basic structure to help us listen to the People of God especially lay men and lay women. SCCs is an ecclesial model of the Catholic Church in Africa. The new language is spiritual conversation, mutual listening and prayerful discernment. SCCs represent the spirit of synodality and the synodal process.”

In this contextual process African theologians must be involved with the real problems of Africa. Ngalula points out:

Theological research and publications must be linked to the present life of the church in Africa. African theologians must be attentive to the ways African Christians try to live their faith in Jesus Christ and strive to give evangelical responses to the questions raised in their own contexts especially in Small Christian Communities (SCCs).

Alloys Nyakundi, a Young Adult leader in Kenya, feels we have to involve youth and Young Adults more in the Synodal Process. This means using the internet and social media. We have a saying: *Go digital or die*. He gives examples of St. Augustine Alumni SCC at Kenyatta University in Nairobi that gathers weekly in a hybrid way (both in person and online) and the Online [Young Adult Seekers Small Christian Community](#).

I end with two important books on the synod published by Orbis Books:

1. Francis, *Walking Together: The Way of Synodality*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2023. A compendium of Pope Francis’ reflections and talks on Synodality. Preface by Cardinal Mario Grech. Introduction by Sister Nathalie Becquart, XMCIJ.
2. Upcoming book; Ikenna Okafor, Josée Ngalula, Nicholas Segeja and Stan Ilo, ed., *Synodality in Africa*. The original Working Title is: *Journeying Together for a Synodal Church in Africa: Echoes from an African Christian Palaver*. Note that Josée Ngalula is one of the four editors.

Finally, an African proverb that expresses well the meaning and practice of synodality: *If you want to walk fast walk alone. If you want to walk far, walk together.*

Thank you.

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NOTE: This presentation on FutureChurch has been stored on YouTube for future viewing. This 10:22 minute talk “Synodality in the African Context” by Joseph G. Healey (in collaboration with African leaders) can be found on YouTube at: [SynodWatch Session 3: Participation, Governance, and Authority - YouTube](#) It is from the 30:58 minute mark to the 41:20 minute mark.