

Introduction:

In the [history of Small Christian Communities \(SCCs\) in Africa](#), the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) holds a special place. The very first Small Christian Communities in Africa started in the then Belgian Congo in the late 1950s (then DRC at independence in 1960, then Zaire from 1971 to 1997 and now DRC again) and officially in 1961. Within DRC Kinshasa Archdiocese holds a special place. The actual launching of SCCs in DRC goes back to the period 1971-1972 when there was a confrontation between President Mobutu Sese Seko and the Catholic Church. Mobutu's "authenticity" campaign suppressed the missionary institutes and associations. To meet the crisis the church established the priority of the creation and organization of SCCs. The pioneering and visionary Cardinal Joseph Malula of Kinshasa Archdiocese stated: "The Living Ecclesial Communities are slowly becoming the ordinary place of Christian life with the parish as the communion of the Living Ecclesial Communities." This included emphasizing lay ministries and implementing Vatican II's theology of laity, "the People of God." In his characteristic humor, Malula described his initiative as an effort to "bomb the existing parishes to make them explode in small communities." It seems appropriate that Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo, OFM Cap, the present Archbishop of Kinshasa and the President of the Symposium of the Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar ([SECAM](#)) now charts the way forward in developing SCCs in a Synodal Church in Africa.

[2023 Africa Synodal Continental Plenary Assembly](#)

Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

2 March 2023

SECAM President's Opening Speech

By Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo, OFM Cap

Your Eminences, Excellencies,
Rev. Fathers, Religious Men and Women,
dear delegates of the regional conferences of SECAM,
distinguished guests, brothers and sisters in Christ.

I warmly and happily welcome you to this Continental Assembly of the Synod on Synodality. I welcome you to Addis Ababa, the political capital of Africa (headquarters of the African Union). Welcome to Ethiopia, a historic and biblical country and cradle of inculturated Christianity. We are here to celebrate together the continental phase of this ongoing Synod on Synodality, that in the words of Pope Francis is a "journey together, in order to experience a Catholic Church that receives and lives the gift of unity, and is open to the voice of the Spirit" (Address of His Holiness Pope Francis for the Opening of the Synod, 9 October, 2021). We have come from all over Africa and beyond.

We are so grateful to the Holy Father for this pastoral initiative to call the entire Catholic Church to rediscover the precious value of Synodality. This synodal process, under the sign of communion, participation and mission is really a time of grace and a great moment of ecclesial communion for the church.

On the one hand, this synodal process came to confirm the way that the church in Africa has been doing. In fact, rooted in African anthropological principles, especially *Palaver*, *Ubuntu*, *Ujamaa* (and *Baraza*) that emphasis community spirit, familyhood, teamwork, solidarity and togetherness, the Catholic Church in Africa has been growing as the Family of God. The Fathers of the Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops in 1994 recommended the image of the Church as the Family of God because this image emphasizes “care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationships, acceptance, dialogue and trust” (*Ecclesia in Africa*, No. 63). They wanted to use the African family as the model for being and living church. They wanted to imprint in the church the African values of family.

The privileged place to experience the sense of family spirit and synodality is the [Small Christians Communities](#). In fact, in many parts of the continent Small Christian Communities are the hallmark of the Catholic Church in Africa and the space where the faithful are renewed and confirmed in their baptismal ministry; and where they experience and live synodality as mission, communion and participation. As a way of being church, Small Christian Communities nurture strong interpersonal relationships, deepen our sense of communal belonging and promote the active proclamation of the Gospel of the Risen Lord. They offer opportunities for communal prayer, interaction, collaboration and reflection, thereby welcoming and celebrating the unique gifts and charisms of each member.

On the other hand, the papal initiative to undertake this synodal journey has arrived as an invitation to all members of the Church Family of God in Africa and the Islands to stop and evaluate their journey as a family. Despite this remarkable growth of the Church Family of God in Africa and the Islands, there are visible situations of weaknesses including the “bitter and painful experiences of conflicts and war, racial tensions and tribalism, xenophobia, political instability, injustice, selfish political actions, looting of the national wealth and quick enrichment by illegal means” (*Kampala Document*, No. 156).

As such, this synodal journey is giving us the courage to evaluate our faith and to speak with freedom, courage and charity about the challenges we face in Africa, both in the church and in society, and to become deeply involved with these challenges in order to respond with concrete transformations. In fact, focusing on listening, this synodal process is leading the journey of the Church, Family of God in Africa and the Islands to its fulfilment. Indeed, a true encounter as family members, a true walking together as brothers and sisters only arises from listening.

Listening implies going further than just hearing. In order to listen, it is indispensable to be quiet and to listen what the other has to say. Listening requires that one has to leave one's world to immerse oneself in that of the other. The lack of listening is largely a cause of conflict, disagreement, division and violence in society and even in the church. We cannot walk together as a family, as a church, without listening to each other. This synod is offering us the opportunity to become a listening church and in permanent exercise of mutual listening.

My dear brothers and sisters, we have come together to truly listen to each other and to the voice of the Holy Spirit. Let us make this African Synodal Plenary Assembly a vibrant experience of listening to one another and walking forward together guided by the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit asks us to listen to the questions, concerns and hopes of the church in Africa and beyond, African people and the world. This Synodal Assembly calls on pastors to listen attentively and with love to the faithful entrusted by Christ to their care. This Synod Assembly also calls upon the laity to freely express their views with honesty and respect. We are guided by the three questions presented in the [*Document for Continental Stage \(DCS\)*](#) of this ongoing synod:

1. “After having read and prayed with the *Document for Continental Stage*, which intuitions resonate most strongly with the lived experiences and realities of the church in our continent? Which experiences are new or illuminating to us?”
2. “After having read and prayed with the *Document for Continental Stage*, what substantial tensions or divergences emerge as particularly important in our continent’s perspective? Consequently, what are the questions or issues that should be addressed and considered in the next steps of the process?”
3. “Looking at what emerges from the previous two questions, what are the priorities, recurring 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?”

Let us, then, identify the significant tensions, questions and issues that should be addressed by the Synod of Bishops during the [*16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*](#) to be held in two sessions: the first in October 2023 and the second in October 2024.

Gathered in Addis Ababa, at the beginning of this Lenten period, we humbly ask the Almighty God to mercifully guide our Plenary Assembly, hear our prayers and we ask Mary, Queen of Africa, to intercede for us. I wish you all a very good and prosperous Synod Assembly. Let us enjoy the beauty of being together, walking together, celebrating the bond of our communion and sharing the joys and sorrows of our life and mission.