

Plenary of the Dicastery of Communications Synod and Communication: A look At Various Continents

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The Communication Apostolate of the Church in Africa has engaged remarkably with the current Synodal process through many communications/media institutions, associations professionals and practitioners who are participating in and is strategically contributing to the processes of the Synod. This reality has many dynamic aspects even as it presents many challenges. The synod on synodality and the synodality process have energized the pastoral communications apostolate in Africa.

The very structure of the Synod on Synodality, spread as it is over a few years period and planned for execution in stages, is itself for Africa, a strategy for good communication. The diocesan, national and continental stages helped to deepen the message of synodality in many segments of the faithful and involve others outside the Church too, producing positive content for communication within (*ad intra*) and outside (*ad extra*) of the Church. At the Assembly of *Signis* Africa, the Association which brought together Catholic communication professionals and practitioners in Africa in July 2022 in Kigali, Rwanda, I concluded that “the ongoing synod on synodality.... is a communication project that challenges media (professionals and) practitioners in Africa to devise practical ways of giving voice to those marginalized by some church structures and by the broader society.” The Association resolved that all communication structures in Africa make it their priority to introspect and bring about a more participatory Church especially by bringing more women and youths on board of their governance structures and harmonizing traditional means of communication more with modern ones.

A good corollary of the above resolution is the confirmation that listening, the kind which is induced by the synodal process, remains essential, and even indispensable, to contemporary communication in Africa. Pope Francis’ message for the World Communications Day for 2021, “Listening with the ear of the heart” called on professionals and communicators to be constantly attentive to everyone. It ensured that the theme of the Synod on Synodality: “Communion, Participation, and Mission” in addition, emphasize the values which traditional African societies and communication have always fostered. To paraphrase the words of Fr. Don Bosco Onyalla, Editor-in-Chief of ACI Africa, a service of EWTN news working in Kenya, communion is captured in the spirit of *Ubuntu*, *Ujamaa*, *Harambee* (standing and

building together) and in notions such as “you are because we are”. Such participation, which defines the very reality of African cultures cannot exclude the capacity to listen and really, without participation there can be no belonging. Walking together in solidarity entails such listening at a deeper level to all people without biases.

As an accessory, to the listening facility, members of *Signis* Africa resolved to all master more than one international language in order to build bridges, encourage the sharing of media projects and contents and guarantee a more efficient and effective engagement with the church’s mission on the continent and beyond.

Since the launch of the synod on synodality, *Signis* has increased its effort in empowering its national associations and members in the processes of the Synod at the grassroots, in the parishes, dioceses and countries. This is done through meetings, training sessions, courses, webinars, content production, media coverage and more widespread talent discovery. It is for this purpose that *Signis* Africa held its continental Congress and Assembly in Kigali, Rwanda in July 2022 on the theme: Communication, Synodality and the Church in Africa.

Other Associations of communication professionals have also developed a new vision for accompanying the church in her mission through the synodal process. The African Catholic Union of the Press, (UCAP) the surrogate association of *Signis* Africa, is very engaged with synodality as well. Thanks to the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) and the Pan-African Episcopal Committee for Social Communications (CEPACS), UCAP has been actively involved in the Synodal process from the time of the opening of the preparatory work by Pope Francis in October 2022. Indeed, a Catholic journalist, Mr. George Sunguh from Kenya and a former President of UCAP, was part of the African delegation present in Rome at the launch of the process of the Synod on Synodality. His participation in the launch led to his appointment as a member of the Communication Commission of the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican. He thus joined the 57 experts of the four Commissions in charge of working on the synodal report.

This was a rare motivation and impetus for the Association. According to UCAP’s current president, Mr. Charles Ayetan from Togo, through his participation, UCAP members engage better with the synodality process. Since May 2022, UCAP publishes a monthly newsletter on *Synodality in Africa*. This editorial work consists of the collection of news (articles) from UCAP members in different countries and from several sources of information on the synodal process from all over Africa and is made available electronically for free access and use by all. This enhances grassroots participation by many who would normally have remained at the margins.

On the Episcopal level, SECAM has complimented the activities and resolutions of these professional bodies. One of the issues that emerged from the SECAM Plenary Assembly held in July & August in Accra, Ghana is the perennial need to continually simplify the language and vocabulary of Church documents on Synodality (and other documents to) to make them easier to understand for the faithful. SECAM committed itself to reinterpreting the message of the Synod on Synodality in local languages while collecting local metaphors and idioms which already express the same ideas and are found in many local languages across the continent for pastoral use.

SECAM also endorsed highlighting the important role of the church communicator as one who determines what individual gets the microphone to analyze the life of the Church whenever the opportunity presents itself; the well-known dignitaries and celebrities or the very ordinary catholic, rich in faith and life experience but whose voice is hardly ever heard.

SECAM also endorsed the engagement and empowerment of the youths with their own communication strategies and metaphors and idioms as allies in the synodality process. This is a pet project of the President of *Signis* Africa, Professor Walter Ihejirika of Nigeria who is a professor of communication at the University of Calabar, Nigeria. SECAM applauded this effort of *Signis* Africa to empower and enable young people through what has been tagged “CITIZEN JOURNALISM” aimed at training hitherto incapacitated youths in the art and skills of communication for the service of the gospel. Some of the young people who had been trained participated in the continental Congress and Assembly which took place in Kigali, Rwanda this year.

Mention must be made of other areas of strength for communication in Africa which have been enhanced by the synodality process:

- a. The committed work of some regional offices of communications in the dissemination of information
- b. The services rendered by the African Communications Institute ACI, in publicity and coverage of pastoral activities and matters arising on the synod for a much wider audience
- c. The ongoing conversation of the Holy Father Pope Francis with the young people and university students from all over Africa has gotten the young people more interested than ever in making themselves heard, and of course with their own form of media. With a number of priests, religious and Bishops getting involved, this has drawn the old and the new, the young and adults together on the same conversation and issues and through the same medium It has injected a new level of encounter into Church pastoral communications.

d. The new collaboration with the Africa Press Organization (APO) group for media coverage and training. New hope for a better communication apostolate for the Church in Africa emerged in the partnership agreement with the Africa Press Organization (APO) during this period of the synodality process. This was achieved with the collaboration of SECAM, CEPACS and the African member of staff of the Dicastery of Communications Msgr Javier Yameogo. The APO group is a foremost international public relations organization which has offered to support the church in some areas of communication. It is currently distributing content on behalf of the General Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops all over the continent and beyond. The group is also already providing support for the Church in Africa across a broad range of public relations services, including the distribution of press releases, training of communications staff, and the facilitation of meetings with media and other organizations intended to foster new relationships and raise the profile of the Catholic Church in Africa.

The offer of the support of the Dicastery of Communications to encourage International Catholic Media Organizations to be closer to their members and to organize programmes and projects that will make members experience progress in their professions and faith. To this end *Signis* Africa is committed to finally unite all subsidiary media/communications groups and associations under one umbrella for better networking and collaboration. This is a clear help for the effective animation and promotion of the synodality process in the Church in Africa.

Areas which still need attention include:

- The lingering weakness of the structures of the Pan African Episcopal Committee for Social Communications CEPACS to better animate and coordinate pastoral communication in Africa although these are currently being revisited and revived;
- The reluctance of the regional communication offices to collaborate at the level desired by CEPACS due to lack of funds and a long lay-off in the office activities
- The temporary non-functioning of the SECAM website

In conclusion, the words of Sir Ben Assorow, Managing editor of the Catholic Standard national newspaper of Ghana gives a good summary that this Synodal process has given the Church in Africa a renewed impetus. It has helped to reappraise and increase her attention and engagement with the communication apostolate through more contemporary means and strategies without jettisoning her traditional methods and metaphors. That, I find, is an overall positive reality.