

Clericalism and Synodality: Towards a Listening Church through an African Ethics of Ubuntu

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Abstract

Clericalism, a misleading conception that the clergy are the empowered “owners” of the church compared to the laity, disrupts the spirit of synodality that calls for communion, co-responsibility and full participation of the faithful in the life and mission of the church. The paper utilizes scholarly writings, encyclical letters, biblical insights, and the authors’ experience. It proposes ethics of synodality, reflected in the African concept of *Ubuntu*, as a contribution to developing new dialogical and collaborative structures in the Catholic Church. *Ubuntu* ethics describes, among other things, an inherent impulse or “inner voice” that compels each human being to become each other’s keeper. To have *Ubuntu* is to be compassionate, open-minded, humble, considerate and attentive to the needs and well-being of fellow human beings. *Ubuntu* ethics, as a sense of togetherness, strongly opposes the mentality of “superiority” and “inferiority” that broadly characterizes the phenomenon of clericalism. It inspires “equitable collaboration” through inclusive dialogue and collective discernment. Embracing the spirit of *Ubuntu* may empower clerics and the laity to establish a listening church that takes Jesus as the model of the listener and joyfully fulfils her redemptive mission of making this world a better place to live in.

Keywords: Clericalism, Synodality, *Ubuntu*, Dialogic Ethics, Listening Ministry

Introduction

Today, clericalism features among the key challenges faced by the Catholic Church.¹ Clericalism describes [among other things] a culture or mentality that concentrates ecclesial and ministerial powers exclusively in the hands of the clergy (deacons, priests, bishops and the Pope) while ignoring or giving less attention to the role of the faithful (lay people) in the

¹ Neil Ormerod, “The Parable of the Good Samaritan, Clericalism and the Sexual Abuse Crisis in the Australian Context,” *Revista Iberoamericana de Teología* xviii, no.34(2022): 105-121. Lawrence Anselm Prior, “The Development of Clericalism and the Need for a Theology of Secularity,” *ResearchGate* (January 2013): 1-20.



life and mission of the church. It is a mentality that considers lay people as simply “helpers” of clerics. In other words, helpers whose services can be withdrawn or maintained provided their work remains in the interest of the clergy.² Clericalism is a mentality that sees “the church as the domain of the clergy and the world as the domain of the laity.”³ Such a conception allows some clerics to feel they are socially and formally “set apart” and are thus outstandingly superior to the people they are called to serve. Clericalists tend to conceive of the ministry received from ordination as more to do with ecclesial power or status rather than pastoral care. For Pope Francis, clericalism stems from “an elitist and exclusivist vision of vocation that interprets the ministry received as a power to be exercised rather than a free and generous service to be given.”⁴ Such a vision of vocation makes some clerics (ordained ministers) think they possess sufficient knowledge of church matters and people’s existential problems. Thus, they may not see the need to listen to or learn from the faithful. This clericalist mindset weakens the church’s redemptive mission by reducing “the faithful (laity)... to submissive bystanders.”⁵ Paradoxically, clericalism can be strengthened by the faithful when they allow themselves to be led passively or attribute excessive powers to their church leaders. Yet, the faithful (laity) also have “the right and duty to be apostles” by virtue of their baptism, without undermining the clergy’s role in the church’s life and mission.⁶ Through this “path of synodality” [unity, communion, collaboration, full participation of all the faithful], the church can spread the Kingdom of God, a reign of righteousness, justice and peace.⁷

This paper intends to address the following questions: What exactly is clericalism, and how does it undermine the spirit of synodality in the Catholic Church? How can the church be more open to inclusive dialogue, collective discernment and active participation of the faithful in the life and mission of the church? Put differently, how can the church involve more people, especially the laity, in decision-making? What mode of life can bring attentive listening and joint discernment in the church?

² Laurence Prior, *Towards a Community Church: The Way Ahead for Today’s Parish* (Germiston: Lumko Institute, 1997), 12-16.

³ Francis Appiah-Kubi, *Understanding Some Teachings of the Catholic Church* (Accra: Quality Type, 2022), 22.

⁴ Pope Francis, “Address by His Holiness Pope Francis at the Opening of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment.” October 2018.

⁵ Jennifer Slater, “The Catholic Church in Need of De-clericalisation and Moral Doctrinal Agency: Towards an Ethically Accountable Hierarchical Leadership,” *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 75 n.4 (2019): 1.

⁶ Pope Paul IV, *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, chapter 1, art 3. In Austin Flannery (ed), *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents* (Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2010).

⁷ Pope Francis. “Address by His Holiness Pope Francis at the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops.” 17th October 2015.



Clericalism

Clericalism is a divisive mentality that places the clergy on a higher ecclesial pedestal while relegating the laity to a secondary role in the life and mission of the church. It is an erroneous belief that the church *is* the clergy, and as such, deacons, priests, bishops, and the Pope have unquestionable powers to decide on matters of the church and her mission without necessarily involving the laity in decision-making processes. Clericalism blocks the spirit of communion and collective discernment. Pope Francis calls it “a perversion of the priesthood. And rigidity is one of the manifestations...rigidity lacks humanity,” and the tendency is to place hierarchical supremacy and “personal comfort ahead of service.”⁸ For R. J. Neuhaus, clericalism is a form of exclusive elitism whereby clericalists think and feel that they are intellectually, socially and religiously above the people they are supposed to serve.

Similarly, Russell Shaw conceives of clericalism as “an elitist mindset” coupled with a lifestyle that allows most people to believe that clerics are “intrinsically superior to other members of the Church and [thus] deserve automatic deference.”⁹ Jesus became a victim of the clericalist mentality of the Scribes and Pharisees, who considered themselves superior to anyone else in matters of religion and social life. Their assumed superiority accorded them the power to define laws and impose them on the people, laws that were often suffocating (Matt 23:1–25).

Jennifer Slater identifies a connection between clericalism and the formation of young people towards priesthood whereby candidates begin to see themselves as special people set apart for a special mission.¹⁰ Candidates start to develop an attitude of self-elevation or lordly supremacy over the people they are to serve. The clericalist mentality that only clerics have the authority to decide on matters of the church distorts the synodal nature of the church by compromising the spirit of co-responsibility, collaboration and full participation of all the faithful in the life and mission of the church.

Notice that the phenomenon of clericalism essentially plays on the concepts of “superiority” and “inferiority,” whereby clerics are believed [or consider themselves] to have more power than the laity on the ecclesial pedestal. This mentality engenders a culture of passive submission on the part of the faithful in matters of church animation and leadership. Yet, the church is a community of all those who have been baptized into one body and who

⁸ Pope Francis, “Rigid Priests are a Manifestation of Clericalism,” *Vatican Media*, Vatican City June 10, 2021.

⁹ Russel Shaw, *Nothing to Hide: Secrecy, Communication, and Communion in the Catholic Church* (San Francisco, CA: St Ignatius Press, 2008), 16.

¹⁰ Jennifer Slater, “The Catholic Church in Need of De-clericalisation and Moral Doctrinal Agency: Towards an Ethically Accountable Hierarchical Leadership,” 1.



believe that Jesus Christ is their Saviour, whether they are clerics or not (1 Cor 12:13). Clericalism has been identified as one of the root causes of certain ills in the church such as sexual abuse of children and vulnerable adults, excessive religious entitlements, unethical hierarchical claims and privileges, etc.¹¹ The link between clericalism and the ills mentioned above can be identified in the different forms of clericalism highlighted below.

Forms of Clericalism

Clericalism may be described in three forms, namely, (1) self-constructed clericalism, (2) socially-constructed clericalism and (3) ecclesiastically-constructed clericalism. These three are fundamentally interwoven; they all pivot on the concepts of “superiority and “inferiority” because clerics are placed in a higher ecclesial position over the faithful.

First, “self-constructed clericalism” designates a situation in which some cleric ministers think they are religiously, socially and intellectually above the people they are called to serve. Such clerics believe they have absolute knowledge and authority to define truth and other moral tenets for the faithful. The apparent “supremacy” is based on the fact that clerics are ordained ministers and, therefore, are socially “set apart” and religiously “closer to God” as compared to the faithful. In this context, clerics see themselves as “lords” over those under their pastoral care. The Pharisees and Scribes at the time of Jesus were prototypes of self-constructed clericalism (Matt 23: 5–7). In his humble and humorous way, Pope Francis talks of “rigid young priests all stiff in black cassocks and hats in the shape of the planet Saturn on their heads,” priests who hardly become “shepherds with the ‘smell of the sheep.’”¹² It is certainly not the wearing of “black cassocks and hats” that raises concern but rather the clericalist disposition of “rigidity,” “superiority,” and “stiffness.” Yet, Jesus constantly reminded his disciples that their mission was to serve and tend the flock, not to seek greatness and positions of honour (Matt 20:25–28).

The second form of clericalism may be termed “socially-constructed clericalism.” This is a situation in which the faithful themselves think and believe that clerics are religiously, intellectually, and socially... superior to them and that they have all the authority

¹¹ Jennifer Slater, “The Catholic Church in Need of De-clericalisation and Moral Doctrinal Agency: Towards an Ethically Accountable Hierarchical Leadership,” 1. See also, Pope Francis, “Address by His Holiness Pope Francis at the Opening of the Synod of Bishops on Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment,” October 2018.

¹² Pope Francis, in “Pope Francis: Clericalism linked to Fixation on Sexual Morality,” by Courtney Mares, *Catholic News Agency*, Sep 26, 2019. See also “Pope to Priests: Be ‘Shepherds with ‘the Smell of the Sheep’” by Robin Gomes, *Vatican News*, June 07, 2021.



to run the church the way they want and to define truth for everyone without involving the laity in the discernment process. Beneath this mentality is the belief that clerics are ‘set apart’ by their ordination and, therefore, are well-versed in human and spiritual matters. With this mindset, the laity takes it for granted that only clerics have the final word in matters of the church and that their words, behaviour, lifestyle, etc., cannot be challenged. As such, the clericalist mentality is not only an “illness” of ordained ministers; lay people can develop a clericalist mentality equally. Socially-constructed clericalism can block pastoral proximity and the feedback that clerics need to serve the church faithfully.

The third and last form of clericalism may be termed “ecclesiastically-constructed clericalism” or “institutionalized clericalism.” In this situation, some church authorities prioritize and protect church interests and laws over the well-being of the faithful. In other words, the interests of the church as an *institution* take precedence over the interests of the faithful, who desire only pastoral care. Here, clericalism discloses itself as a calculative mechanism of maintaining ecclesial authority and religious influence over the people of God regardless of people’s pastoral and immediate concerns. A concrete example of ecclesiastically-constructed clericalism is the “culture of cover-up” surrounding sexual abuse of children by some clerics. The culture of cover-up, in some way, was a mechanism of protecting the name and interests of the church as an institution. For instance, a cleric whose moral integrity is questioned in a particular parish would receive an immediate transfer to another parish to avoid their pending immoral issues becoming known to the public. As such, many abuses continued in the church due to this form of institutionalized clericalism (cover-up culture).

It should thus be taken into account that clerics and the faithful share the blame for fostering a culture of clericalism in the church. If the faithful continue to put clerics in an overly elevated position, they unknowingly perpetuate clericalism. Likewise, if ordained ministers pompously make decisions on matters of the church without involving the faithful at some level, they also perpetuate clericalism. As mentioned earlier, clericalism compromises the spirit of synodality in the church. Yet, by virtue of their baptism, all the faithful are partakers in the ministry of the church as a chosen race (1 Peter 2:9). As such, clericalism at all levels of the church should not be entertained if the church is to embrace the spirit of synodality and journey together in the light of Christ towards the fullness of life. How, then, should one understand the spirit of synodality in the context of the Catholic Church?



The Concept of Synodality

Synodality is “a way or style of being Church.”¹³ It is a path that draws on collaboration, collective discernment and full participation of the faithful in the life and mission of the church. Collective discernment entails a back-and-forth movement between the voices of the faithful and the leadership of the church, taking people’s concrete life situations and the Word of God as a starting point. In other words, the path of synodality considers the faithful’s voices right from particular individuals, families, small Christian communities, parishes, and dioceses to the Holy See in Rome. This path has greater prospects of enabling the church as an institution to engage with everyone, to care for everyone, and to allow each faithful member to feel at home.

Etymologically, the term “synodality” can be traced to two Greek words, namely, *syn* (“together,” “with” ...) and *hodos* (“method,” “path” or “way”). Put together, synodality simply means “journeying together” or “taking the same path.” It is a path along which the people of God ought to walk together in the light of Christ to make human life more meaningful. As a path, synodality requires sincere commitment, collective discernment and active participation of all the faithful in the life of the church, whether they are clerics or not. Concretely, synodality denotes engaging in genuine dialogue with every church member, regardless of age, social status, gender or race, keeping in mind that God constantly speaks to His people whether they are clerics or not. The church is not the domain of the clergy alone. All the faithful are called upon to participate in the saving mission of the church fully.¹⁴ By their baptism and according to their diverse gifts, Christians are called to actively participate in the church by taking up complementary functions.

While previous Popes have spoken about the importance of synodality in the life of the church, but without using the term “synodality,” Pope Francis has gone a step further by constantly alluding to the importance of the spirit of synodality in reforming and transforming the Catholic Church into a vessel of God’s love and mercy for humankind. For Pope Francis, “A synodal Church is a Church which listens.”¹⁵ Clerics and the faithful are called to listen to each other under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Sincere listening takes place in genuine dialogue. Through dialogue, clerics and non-clerics encounter each other,

¹³ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Unpacking Synodality: Understanding and Engaging the Synodal Path,” Vatican City State. Libreria Editrice Vaticana (LEV), 2022.

¹⁴ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, (21 November, 1964), no. 33a.

¹⁵ International Theological Commission, “Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” (2 March 2018), no. 110.



pray together, discern and work together to establish God’s Kingdom here on earth.¹⁶ Indeed, the first community of believers was united “heart and soul,” they worked together and had everything in common (Acts 2: 44, 4:32). They would listen to each other life experiences, doubts and hopes and allow the risen Lord to take part in their lives.

The path of synodality can be traced to Jesus’s innermost prayer for humankind: “Father, I pray that all of them may be one, just as you are in me and I am in you.” (Jn 17: 21). A synodal church is a church that is truly faithful to the life and message of Jesus, a church whose members talk to each other, deliberate together and work together for the cause of the most vulnerable people of this planet. Synodality offers a renewed vision of the church where all members feel they are agents of evangelization and where the lay people have a legitimate opportunity to understand the hierarchical ministry of the church through close collaboration and openness to the Holy Spirit.¹⁷

A synodal church is crucially necessary in contemporary times when the waves of radical capitalism and “Godless secularism” slowly sweep most parts of the globe. Many people are induced to believe that material prosperity alone is what brings happiness in human societies. Countless men and women spend most of their time endlessly toiling to accumulate as much wealth as possible. Yet, human experience shows that too much material comfort is as much life-destructive as the extreme lack of it. A synodal church is thus necessary to help people realize that deep human longings can only find satisfaction in the spiritual realm.

A synodal church is equally relevant today, especially when the church is attempting to heal the wounds of the past, especially the wounds of the victims of child sexual abuse, by setting up strict measures to ensure such evils do not happen again. It shows the importance of inclusive dialogue and collective discernment in order to listen to what the Spirit [of God] says to churches (Rev 3:22). The path of synodality as a new missionary vigour promotes the values of the Kingdom of God such as faith, love, justice, compassion, unity, humility, forgiveness, hope, peace, reconciliation, etc. A synodal church can only survive on the power of love. As Szaniszló rightly puts it, “If the ecclesial institution uses any power other than the power of love, it ceases to have a Christian and ecclesial character.”¹⁸

As a way of being church, synodality also reaches out to the people of God outside the Catholic Church. This ecumenical vision can be traced to the words of Pope Paul VI:

¹⁶ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, Abuja (Paulines Publications Africa, 2020), no. 198.

¹⁷ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), no. 120.

¹⁸ Inocent-Mária V. Szaniszló, “Procedures of Democratic Participation in Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,” *Asian Horizons* 14, No. 1, March 2020), 147, (Pages: 137-150).



Speaking generally of the dialogue which the church of today must take up with a great renewal of fervor, we would say that it must be readily conducted with all men of good will both inside and outside the church. The church can regard no one as excluded from its motherly embrace, no one as outside the scope of its motherly care. It has no enemies except those who wish to make themselves such. Its catholicity is no idle boast. It was not for nothing that it received its mission to foster love, unity and peace among men.¹⁹

The above quotation shows that the path of synodality naturally opens avenues for ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. The Catholic Church does not exclude anyone. Human beings share a common origin as creatures of a loving God who made humankind in His own image (Gen 1:26) and who desires that every human being obtains life in its fullness (Jn 10:10).

It is worth noting, however, that synodality *as a way of being church* does not seek to confuse the different roles and ministries within the church. Clerics still have a particular service reserved for them by their ordination, especially the administration of sacraments and other pastoral needs. Likewise, the role of the faithful (non-clerics) should not be limited to participation in liturgical activities only. Considering each person's God-given charism, it should be extended to other areas of the church's life and mission.

However, as mentioned earlier, clericalism among some clerics and the faithful remains an obstacle for the church to *journey together* with all her members in the light of Christ. Clericalism opposes the spirit of synodality by disrupting attentive listening and communal discernment. At this point, fundamental questions arise: How can the church address the challenge of clericalism? What steps can the church take to be more *synodal*, i.e., open to equal, inclusive, and participatory dialogue?

Towards a Synodal Church: Ubuntu Ethics

Though articulated differently, *Ubuntu* ethics represents an “inner voice” that compels each human being to become each other's keeper. *Ubuntu* describes a sense of togetherness that springs from the existential fact that one's life is causally dependent on other human beings; hence, the philosophical expression “I am because we are.”²⁰ *Ubuntu* ethics is concretized in life-giving human attitudes and acts such as love, faith, compassion, solidarity, hospitality, dialogue, collaboration, understanding, reconciliation, forgiveness, etc. *Ubuntu* ethics mainly operates at the level of human sensibility before seeking validation from already established

¹⁹ Pope Paul VI, Encyclical letter of Pope Paul VI, *Ecclesia Suam* (August 6, 1964), nos. 93 & 94.

²⁰ John S.Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Second ed. (London: Heinemann, 1989), 106



societal laws.²¹ It designates an *inner sense of rectitude* that may guide a person to perform life-giving acts and avoid life-destroying acts.

Etymologically, the term *Ubuntu* stems from the *Bantu* people of Eastern, Central, and Southern Africa. Though these people speak different dialects, they share a common language branded by the root word *ntu or nhu*. This root is detectible in the *Bantu* terms for a human being, namely, *mtu, omuntu, umuntu, munhu, etc.* Some studies show that while *Ubuntu* is a *Bantu* word, the concept permeates almost all African cultures.²² In all, *Ubuntu* is largely interpreted as an “innate duty” or a “spirit from within” that compels human beings to be ethically responsible for the lives and needs of fellow human beings.²³ *Ubuntu* connotes a sense of “humanness” that defines what it really means to be human since, for the African, not every human being is *truly* human. To be *truly* human is to be compassionate, selfless and altruistically mindful of the needs of others.

A relevant example of *Ubuntu* ethics is portrayed in the Parable of the “Good Samaritan” (Luke 10:25–37). The Good Samaritan impulsively allowed himself to be driven by the spirit of *Ubuntu*, an *inner voice* that told him to tend to the needs of the wounded traveller. Meanwhile, the priest and the Levite ignored that *inner voice* by refusing to offer help, most likely due to societal laws prohibiting priests from “touching” or staining themselves with blood (Lev 21: 1–17). Notice that the Good Samaritan prioritized the life of the traveller over his personal affairs. He spontaneously saw the wounded traveller as a fellow human being, a brother who desperately needed immediate assistance.

Unfortunately, *Ubuntu* ethics as a “moral voice” has been, in some way, ignored in contemporary times. Experience shows that many problems, especially on the African continent, still affect countless people, such as corruption, human trafficking, war, theft, xenophobia, gender-based violence, etc. These evils have made some scholars question *Ubuntu*’s ethical aptness, claiming that *Ubuntu* ethics is more of an “idealistic idea” than a reality.²⁴ Despite this legitimate observation, *Ubuntu* ethics remains a powerful weapon that

²¹ While *Ubuntu* ethics in certain circumstances goes beyond normative structures of conventional morality, it does not ignore them. Normative structures are essential in fostering constructive human relations and peaceful-coexistence. Imagine a church without laws or guidelines. Such a church would not stand and be able to accomplish her prophetic mission in this volatile world.

²² In Western Africa, the word *Ibummadu* (humanness) among the Ibo people of Nigeria carries the same essence as *Ubuntu*. In Northern Africa, the Arabic word for *Ubuntu* is *Insaniyya* (humanness). Kingsley N. Okoro, “Ubuntu Ideality: The Foundation of African Compassionate and Humane Living,” *Journal of Scientific Research & Report* 8, no.1(2015), 4.

²³ Claire Oppenheim, “Nelson Mandela and the Power of Ubuntu,” *Religions* 3 (2012), 370-371.

²⁴ Vhumani Magezi & Clement Khlopa, “The Tenet of Ubuntu in South (African) Ethics: Inclusive Hospitality and Christian Ethical Disposition of Effective Pastoral care in Africa,” *Stellenbosch Theological Journal* 7 no.1 (2021): 1–32 (2).



can transform human societies and churches into better places to dwell in and belong to. It challenges human beings to get together collaboratively and compassionately care for one another regardless of differences in age, gender, race or social status.

Foundations of Ubuntu Ethics: Philosophical and Theological Insights

African philosophical traditions prioritize communal life over individualized life experiences.²⁵ Community interests take precedence over individual interests. Beneath this position is the African conviction that the community [cultural, social or religious] receives, creates and nurtures an individual. The individual existence is necessarily owed to other human beings who could be parents, relatives, neighbours, friends, colleagues, fellow church-goers, educators... and even the living-dead (ancestors). As such, life must be approached from the perspective of “we” rather than “I.” To be (to exist) is to be-with and for-others. People rely on each other to meet their basic human needs. Human beings are necessarily interconnected. No one can claim to lead a successful or meaningful life without necessarily involving others in one’s life plans. Desmond Tutu uses the expression “Me-We” to describe the element of human interconnectedness.²⁶ If I want to flourish, I must make sure my community flourishes first. In other words, if I sincerely work for the well-being of my community, I am indirectly working for my own well-being, since my well-being is largely dependent upon the well-being of others (my community, culture or church). *Ubuntu* ethics is the inspiring force beneath the African communitarian way of life. Many Africans believe that for a community to flourish, it must be built on the pillars of solidarity, solicitude, dialogue, forgiveness, communion, understanding, collaboration and so on.

Theologically, human beings and other creatures share a common divine origin.²⁷ For the African, God is the creator, giver and sustainer of life; it is from Him that “the vital force” flows and that all good things come.²⁸ God created human beings not as isolated entities but as interconnected beings capable of living together, working together, discerning together, and forging ways for meaningful co-existence. As a product of God’s goodness, every human being *naturally* embodies a level of goodness. This goodness (*Ubuntu*) enables human beings to connect with one another and assent to work together towards a fruitful co-existence. Vices of brutality and maliciousness arise when the natural goodness in humankind (*Ubuntu*) is

²⁵ Bonaventure Gubazire, *Communitarian Cultures and the Challenge of Liberal-Human Rights: Reflections from an African Perspective* (Balaka: Montfort Media Press, 2014), 97.

²⁶ Desmond Tutu, *No Future without Forgiveness* (London: Rider, 1999), 34-35.

²⁷ Laurenti Magesa, *African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 2008), 50.

²⁸ Benezet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2003), 116.



obscured by greed for power, greed for wealth, sentiments of jealousy, hatred, etc., or by the presence of life-threatening external factors such as hunger, war, ideological manipulations, etc. Otherwise, every human being is *naturally* good. For Tutu, human goodness (*Ubuntu*) is a confirmation of the “image of God” in humankind that constantly reminds each human being to worship God and to show love to one another.²⁹ This *inherent goodness* permits human beings to conceive of each other as brothers and sisters with a common origin and destiny.

In a nutshell, *Ubuntu Ethics* represents a sense of togetherness concretized in life-giving human values such as love, compassion, harmony, dialogue, consideration, friendliness, collaboration, etc. It reminds humanity that they are all interconnected and that one can only grow and develop oneself through the growth and development of others. How, then, is *Ubuntu* ethics opposed to the phenomenon of clericalism in the Catholic Church? How can *Ubuntu* ethics contribute to developing new dialogical and collaborative structures in the Catholic Church? This paper highlights three points as follows:

Ubuntu Ethics as Communal Discernment

First, *Ubuntu* ethics inspires the need for *communal discernment* in all aspects of life, including matters about the church. Communal discernment, as a consensus-building process, stems from the fact that no one [except God] has the monopoly of truth; no one has the monopoly of wisdom. Truth is always in the making; wisdom is always sought. An African proverb goes: *Knowledge is like a baobab tree; no one can embrace it alone*. It is through collaboration that human institutions can thrive and achieve their objectives. As such, *Ubuntu* ethics takes a stand against the clericalist mentality of envisioning a class of “knowers” on top and another class of “less knowers” down the ecclesial hierarchy. It opposes the mentality of “superiority” and “inferiority” that lies beneath the phenomenon of clericalism. *Ubuntu* ethics inspires a spirit of “equitable collaboration” that encourages the faithful to actively participate in the life of the church at different levels and according to each person’s giftedness. Without claiming *equality* with clerics or seeking to override their ministerial responsibilities, the faithful can joyously assume their duties as collaborators in the mission of Christ. *Ubuntu* ethics equally challenges the faithful to understand that they *are* the church and are, therefore, supposed to take an active role in the spiritual and material development of the church.

²⁹ Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2009), 5.



Communal discernment brings “harmony” and dynamism to the church by recognizing and bringing to service the gifts and talents of each member. The principle objective of communal discernment is the enhancement of unity in diversity. If the Catholic Church as an institution of divine origin is to thrive and fulfil her prophetic mission of spreading the Good News of Christ in the world, she must constantly rely on communal discernment by involving the faithful in decision-making processes, irrespective of their differences of age, social status, culture, race, gender, etc. After all, God’s spirit works in human hearts in ways that humans cannot predict (Jn 3: 8).

Ubuntu Ethics as Supererogation

Second, *Ubuntu* ethics inspires people to perform *supererogatory acts*. A supererogatory act is a charitable act that goes beyond the call of duty or what societal laws demand of an individual. A supererogatory act is not based on the logic of rights and duties; it simply takes place at the level of human sensibility [compassion and understanding] to save human life. For example, a genuine beggar has no right over my coin, but I am compelled to offer him something. There is no legal obligation to share food with a hungry neighbour, but one is compelled to offer something to alleviate their suffering. A supererogatory act springs from one’s innermost conscience, a kind of *inner voice* that tells one to sacrifice one’s time, energy and resources to save the lives of others. Clerics and the laity are called to be witnesses of Christ through their modes of living and works of charity. They are called not only to be attentive to the cries of the poor and the marginalized but also to compassionately do something concrete to alleviate their suffering, even if their acts require surpassing certain societal laws.

An example par excellence of a supererogatory act is earlier alluded to in the parable of the “Good Samaritan” (Luke 10:25–37). Unlike the priest and the Levite (clerics), who avoided tending to the agony of the wounded traveller [for some reasons], the Good Samaritan (a layperson) spontaneously and unconditionally became ethically responsible for the half-dead traveller. Moved by compassion (*Ubuntu* ethics), he spontaneously took pity on the wounded traveller, while the “clerics” of the time – the priest and the Levite – simply “passed by on the other side.” The life of the wounded traveller – a stranger, for that matter – took precedence over the Good Samaritan’s personal projects and societal laws. Notice that this parable opposes what has been termed *self-constructed clericalism* and *institutionalized clericalism*. According to the religious laws of the time, priests were not supposed to “get their hands dirty” in order to “preserve” their religious purity (Lev 21: 1–17). Without



undermining the importance of legal justice or Canon Law in the church's life, Ubuntu ethics emphasizes life-saving dispositions and actions such as love, compassion, solidarity dialogue, consideration, forgiveness, etc. These are supererogatory values.

Ubuntu Ethics as Inclusive Dialogue

Third and lastly, *Ubuntu* ethics provides a solid basis for inclusive dialogue. Inclusive dialogue is based on human life being a communal project, and every member has a role to play. Individual and societal flourishing is a product of collective work through mutual trust, commitment and co-responsibility. An *Ubuntu-awakened* individual does not see others as a threat to their existence but as partners in shaping a meaningful existence. *Ubuntu* unlocks the spirit of tolerance. It enables one to accept the different opinions, beliefs and practices that build human societies. An *Ubuntu-awakened* individual transcends geographical, racial, gender or biological differences and sees alterity as richness. Inclusive dialogue in the spirit of *Ubuntu* is not so much a formalized or argumentative dialogue. It is rather a spontaneous conversational encounter similar to the “African palaver model dialogue.”³⁰ People spontaneously come together and share with each other their opinions, desires, worries, aspirations, fears, etc., with a common vision of making their lives more meaningful. A *palaver* is basically an interactive space where concerned parties openly talk together, listen to each other and collectively seek solutions to their existential problems. Its main objective is to maintain a healthy relationship between people through attentive listening, mutual understanding, forgiveness, and reconciliation. The dialogue here prioritizes the well-being of people (humans) over mundane things.

In the church context, the fundamental intent of inclusive dialogue is not so much to achieve mutual agreement or consensus but to create a platform for sincere dialogue between clerics and the faithful (laypeople). Experience shows that Christian communities become livelier and more *kerygmatic* (Gospel proclaiming) when the faithful are given the opportunity and appropriate space to share their different charisms. For example, many people become materially generous and volunteer to participate in church responsibilities when they are helped to know and feel that they themselves *are* the church. The church is “the whole universal community of believers... drawing her life from the word and the Body of Christ...”³¹ As such, church leaders (mostly clerics) should not ignore the views of the faithful at the grassroots. Likewise, the faithful should not remain passive in matters of the

³⁰ Benezet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2003), 68.

³¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, New Jersey, Paulist Press, 1994. Art 752.



church and pretend they are true Christians. Inclusive dialogue builds on the ethical values of openness, tolerance, understanding and collective discernment.

On a related note, inclusive dialogue opens room for inter-religious dialogue and ecumenism. A lot of inter-faith tension or misunderstandings stem from ignorance coupled with prejudices. Ignorance generates suspicion. Suspicion generates insecurity and fear, which leads to violence. The inclusive dialogue, in the context of *Ubuntu* ethics, can break through mutual suspicions because it does not seek to impose or persuade others to accept one's religious convictions but rather aims at fostering a genuine encounter of human beings sharing a common humanity with a common vision of making human life more meaningful. As Martin Luther King Jr. once said: "People fail to get along because they fear each other; they fear each other because they don't know each other; they don't know each other because they have not communicated with each other."³² Inclusive dialogue is, therefore, essential in the fight against religious extremism and other vices related to interfaith intolerance.

Towards a Listening Church: Some Concrete Recommendations

For the church to concretely embrace the spirit of synodality [i.e., being more open to equal, inclusive, and participatory dialogue] and remain faithful to Christ's message and mission, this paper recommends the following points.

First, the *ministry of listening* ought to be prioritized at all levels in the life of the church. People feel more valued and loved when they are attentively listened to. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, "The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them."³³ Clerics and lay people should listen to one another in a spirit of love, understanding, collaboration and mutual respect. For Pope Francis, a synodal church is characterized by reciprocal listening whereby the clergy and the lay faithful learn from one another.³⁴ Listening allows the church to renew and evaluate herself constantly the light of the Gospel. For Diarmuid Martin, a church cannot properly discern if she cannot attentively listen to the people and Word of God.³⁵

The *ministry of listening* was always at the heart of Jesus' mission. Jesus found time to listen to those who came to Him seeking healing, comfort and guidance despite His busy schedule. Recall the story of the Samaritan woman who met Jesus at the well (John 4:5–30).

³² Martin Luther King Jr., cited in Mathabane, *The Lessons of Ubuntu: How an African Philosophy can Inspire Racial Healing in America*, 102.

³³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "The Ministry of Listening," in *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), 97-98.

³⁴ International Theological Commission, "Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church," no. 2.

³⁵ Diarmuid Martin, "A Listening and Humble Church," *Public Lecture*, Dublin, 30 November 1999.



Through attentive listening, Jesus was able to renew her life and make her a disciple. In the same vein, as Jesus was on the way to Jerusalem, He stopped and attentively listened to the blind man in Jericho and restored his sight despite the attempted disruption of some people (Luke 18: 35-43). Again, Jesus secured time to attentively listen to Zacchaeus, the tax collector, whom his contemporaries had tagged as a public sinner (Luke 19: 1-10). Many more biblical events portray Jesus as the model of the listener. Jesus also created time to listen to His own disciples, especially in private. He often explained to them the meaning of the parables used (Mark 4:34). On one occasion, Jesus listened to the Apostles' pastoral experiences, and after realizing how tired they were, He compassionately suggested to them to be "by themselves and rest for a while" (Mark 6:31). Also, Jesus transformed the life of Mary Magdalene by offering her an attentive ear and showing her love, kindness and understanding (Luke 7: 36-50). Mary Magdalene eventually became the first person to encounter the risen Jesus and to announce the good news that Jesus was alive.

Second, for the church to be more dynamic and "kerygmatic," the *youth apostolate* ought to be accentuated in the life of the church. The youth should be given leading roles and opportunities to exhibit their talents and feel that they *are* the church. It is clear that the future and strength of the church largely depend upon the vigour of the youth. Church institutions ought to create engaging activities for the youth to motivate them to attend church celebrations and actively participate in the life and mission of the church. When the youth are fully involved in church activities, the possibility of developing a personal relationship with Jesus is very high. Also, the possibility of migrating to other churches or secular movements is largely lessened when the youth are fully involved in church activities. Young people naturally search for a purpose in life. They find themselves pulled between fideism and secularism. The present world, which is mainly capitalistic, tends to seduce people by promoting false ideologies that humans can lead a meaningful life without God as long as they have money. The youth need to know that what the world offers cannot fulfil their deep human longings; only God does.

Third, *pastoral proximity through home visitations* ought to be encouraged among church ministers, whether they are clerics or not. Pastoral proximity entails leaving behind one's comfort zone and reaching out to those who find themselves in precarious situations, people who desire to feel the presence of God in their lives and homes. Another word for pastoral proximity is *presence*. With *presence*, church ministers become "an icon of faith,



holiness, and salvation.”³⁶ One does not necessarily need to preach, say extraordinary prayers, or bring material needs. The best gift one can give to another person is time (presence). Physical presence, sometimes, coupled with silence, can touch the lives of many. The world is becoming more and more stressful due to various factors such as family breakdowns, incurable diseases, endless geopolitical conflicts, religious tensions, economic uncertainties, etc. Many people seek to be listened to and to be cared for. *Home visitation* as an apostolate is a powerful gesture that makes people feel they are loved, treasured and needed in the life of the church. Many people hope to find concrete and reassuring answers to their existential challenges. Unfortunately, some Christians often end up in the hands of false pastors or prophets who take advantage of people’s spiritual and emotional precarity to enrich themselves financially.

Fourth, *the principle of subsidiarity* ought to be applied in the life and mission of the church. In this context, subsidiarity means sharing administrative and animation roles at a more local level. It is one of the means to avoid or reduce the phenomenon of clericalism among the clergy. For instance, where it is not yet a practice, non-clerics such as Nuns (Sisters), Brothers or catechists could be given a well-defined position in the life and mission of the church. These can easily take an active role in the animation and administration of some Parishes or Small Christian Communities if needed. They can also get involved in classical pastoral ministries such as young ministry, animation of women groups or male groups, leading prayer groups, visiting the sick and elderly, etc. Again, where it is not the practice, ongoing formation programmes could be extended to non-clerics so that they are not left behind in the teaching and vision of the church. Proper formation nourishes their faith and gives them self-confidence in carrying out their respective ministries.

Fifth and last, where it is not a practice, Catholic lay movements and devotions ought to be encouraged. Such movements are privileged occasions for the laity to express their communion of faith and their willingness to participate actively in the life and mission of the church. There are a good number of lay movements recognized by the Catholic Church. These include Legion of Mary, Xavierians, Catenians, Marriage Encounter Movement, Night of Columbus, Kolping Family, etc. Lay movements and devotions bring more dynamism to the ecclesial community. Not only do these movements encourage regular presence and active participation of their members in the life and mission of the church, but they also

³⁶ Michael Boakye Yeboah, *Stabilita: Psychological Health, Personal, Social and Spiritual Formation of Candidates for the Priesthood and Consenscrated Life* (Kumasi: Graduate Standard Secretarial Services, 2023), 272.



nourish and strengthen the faith of their members and probably the faith of their neighbours through Christian witness. The laity becomes participants in the mission of the church, especially by “conforming their lives to their faith” through practising honesty in their dealings with other people.”³⁷

Conclusion

This paper attempted to show how the phenomenon of clericalism can disrupt the spirit of *synodality* in the Catholic Church. Clericalism tends to place the clergy on a higher ecclesial stand while, in some way, relegating the laity to a secondary role in the church’s mission. Yet, a synodal church is open to dialogue and equal participation of all the faithful in the life and mission of the church. This paper proposed *Ubuntu* ethics as an African contribution to establishing a synodal church that calls for openness, communion and active participation of all the faithful in matters of the church. *Ubuntu* ethics represents an *inner voice* that compels each human being to be kind, considerate and attentive to the needs and well-being of fellow human beings. It draws on the fact that human life is a communal project. To be (to exist) is to be-with and for-others. To thrive is to thrive-with and for-others. Individual or societal flourishing is a product of collective work through mutual trust, commitment and co-responsibility. *Ubuntu* ethics challenges clerics and other pastoral agents to leave behind their “comfort zones” and “smell like the sheep” through [among other things] pastoral *presence* and attentive listening.

However, it must be acknowledged that the path of *synodality* is not easy. Some aspects of *synodality* still need to be judiciously studied: How far should the faithful be involved in the life and mission of the church? Where does one draw the line of operation for clerics and non-clerics (in terms of church ministry) without being too Canonical and too liberal? Difficult still, how far can the faithful be involved in decision-making processes and in the administration of the church? Other issues in the life of the church still need close attention: religious fundamentalism, hierarchicalism, centralization of power, entitlements, honorificialism (excessive title-mindfulness), power relations between women religious and clerics, etc. As such, this paper is a little contribution to building a synodal church of the third millennium.

³⁷ Francis Appiah-Kubi, *Understanding Some Teachings of the Catholic Church*, 14.



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