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# A Church in Dialogue as the Family of God

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## Fundamental Option of the Church-as-family

What is the church? Many African Christians will probably still remember the classical catechism answer to this question: The church was the assembly of all baptized Catholics, outside which there was no salvation. This assembly comprised three categories of people: those who have died and gone to heaven (triumphant church) and those who are still here on earth, combating the forces of evil (church militant). Between these two was the suffering church (in purgatory). It was this doctrine that the catechumens were taught in catechism. They memorized it and hardly ever bothered to reflect on what it meant for the church to be the congregation of all baptized Catholics. In fact, this common conception of the curch dates back many centuries. For a long time Christians were used to understanding the church in this way. Then came Vatican Council II which discarded this view as inadequate, and redefined the church as a "mystery," "sign" and an "instrument" of unity. The council went further: the church is a "communion" of the "people of God."[1] This became the standard way of seeing and understanding the nature and mission of the church. Admittedly, for Christians in Africa, this conception of the church still had to be brought closer home.

If, as African theologians hold, inculturation is a process whereby the Word takes flesh and "dwells among us," or the "Divine Seed" absorbs food nutrients from the milieu where it is sown, it should be necessary for the mystery of the church to be exemplified using an African model. African Christians must also have their own way of seeing and living the church. The question, in fact, is: For

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[1] *Lumen gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, see Chapters 1 and 2.

you Africans, what do you say the church is? This was the "main question" the fathers of the synod asked themselves: "Church of Africa, what must you now become so that your message may be relevant and credible?"[2]

From the extensive preparatory consultations of Christians, which covered practically the whole of the African continent, and the profound deliberations at the Synod, the fathers of the synod made a "fundamental option of the church as family."[3] To qualify this option as *fundamental* is to affirm at the same time that it is to become an integral framework of our understanding of the church, such that whenever we think of the church, we express its meaning in our lives as family.

In this chapter, I shall examine the model of the church which the synod adopted, and ask the questions: Why this model of church-as-family? What does it mean theologically speaking for the church to be a family? What are the implications of this understanding of the church for our christian living, especially with regard to authority, christian communities, women and youth, and dialogue?

## Why Family?

No one would dispute the fact that in Africa, despite the progressive mutations in the structural organization of our societies and communities, the institution called family remains an important value and dimension of life. It constitutes part of the wealth of our cultural life which the church of Africa seeks to share and offer to the entire church.[4] In this way, when we say, according to Vatican II, that the church is a *communion*, we understand this to mean that within the setting of the African christian community, the church is a family.[5] In other words, the corresponding and appropriate model of the local church of Africa is: *church, the family of God.*[6] This model is deeply rooted in the anthropologi-

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[2] *Report at the Beginning of the Synod*, n.34, *Bulletin* no.5, 11.04.1994, p.19.

[3] *Report after the interventions*, n.5, *Bulletin*, no 25.

[4] *Working Document*, n.16.

[5] *ibid*, no.25.

[6] *Report after*, n.3.

cal configuration of every African[7]. To take one obvious example, an African would hardly define him/herself without reference to his/her immediate, or extended family.[8] To situate, then, our understanding of the church at this level is to acknowledge that, "the African family is a living cell from which models of the church and experiences lived in Africa are found."[9] This is a reminder of what Pope Paul VI meant when he referred to the family as a "domestic church" in which there is to be found "the various aspects of the entire church."[10]

In summary, the key point that is emphasized here is the centrality of the African conception of family. As I mentioned above, and the fathers of the synod admit, the family constitutes the pivot of African social systems, "the fundamental base of humanity and of the society;"[11] and "the sacred place where all the riches of our tradition converge."[12] This point amply illustrates Pope Paul VI's affirmation that African culture is defined by its palpable "sense of family, a high spiritual vision of life, and the sense of community."[13]

## Values of the African Family

What was obvious at the synod was that the concept of family in Africa constitutes an inexhaustible mine of values, ideals, images and symbols which can be effectively utilized to express the model of the church-as-family.[14] When we talk of family in Africa the following elements readily come to mind: unity, solidarity, participation and co-responsibility; family-based and centred

[7]   Bishop B. Bududira, *Bulletin*, no.12, 15.04.1994, pp.11-12; see also Bishop L. Monsi-Agboka, *Bulletin*, no.15, 18.04.1994, pp.3-4.
[8]   See Group Reports, French D, *Bulletin*, no.30, 28.04.1994, pp.2-3.
[9]   *Report after*, n.5.
[10]  *Evangelii nuntiandi*, n.71.
[11]  *Report after*, n.5; and see *Working Document*, n.105.
[12]  *Message*, n.27.
[13]  *Africae terrarum*, 1967 in Hickey R (ed) *Modern Missionary Documents and Africa*, Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1982, p.180, quoted in *Report after*, no.9.
[14]  Among the many synod texts, see, *Working Document*, nn. 25,48,36; *Report after*, nn. 5,9,11,18; Bishop Sanon, *Bulletin*, no.10, 14.04.1994, pp.8-9; Group Reports, English C and D, *ibid.*,n.29, 28.04.1994, pp.12-14; French C, *ibid.*, no.31, 28.04.1994, pp.5-6; French D, *ibid.*, no.30, 28.04.1994, pp.2-3.

education, fecundity; the family as a place where life is welcomed, nurtured and revered; shared in common with the living and the living-dead (ancestors); understanding, living and being together, fraternity, mutual aid, trust, reconciliation through rites; non-gender based respect for age, tradition and authority; and hospitality.

When translated into the model of the church these positive values offer us a living, vibrant and promising ecclesiology of church-as-family.[15] However, to say that these are the positive elements of the African conception and concrete expression of family is to imply that there are also negative elements. These negative aspects can neither be denied nor ignored, precisely because they could occasion a misconception of the symbol of family as a model of the church in Africa. What are some of these limitations of the family in Africa?

## Limitations of the Family Model

Before considering these limitations, it is important to note — as some fathers of the synod point out — that, the symbol of the family like any other symbol cannot at any time exhaust the unfathomable mystery of the church.[16] Whatever symbols we adopt, they will always fall short of expressing the fullness and depth of the mystery of the church. We can identify some of the known defects of the institution of the family in Africa.

Experience has repeatedly shown that in contemporary Africa the values of family life barely transcend the confines of tribal, clannish and ethnic affiliation. Very often, it is "inward looking," built on blood ties and particularisms which exclude non-consanguineous relations. Bishop A.K. Obiefuna vividly expressed this reality when he affirmed that for many Africans: "Blood (consanguinity) is thicker than water (of baptism?)."[17] A concern which Cardinal J. Tomko also echoed when he queried: "Is psychology stronger than our faith?"[18]

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[15] See, Sanon, *loc.cit;* Group Reports, French B, *Bulletin,* no.30, 28.04.1994, pp.4-5.

[16] See, Group Reports, French C, *loc.cit.*

[17] *Bulletin* no.8, 12.04.1994, p.5; See also, Group Reports, English B, and C, *Bulletin* no.29, 28.04.1994, pp.9-10, 12-13.

[18] *Bulletin* no.11, 14.04.1994.

The obstacle posed by this limitation is not insurmountable, precisely because the church-as-family, properly understood, comprises all God's children who are born from on high (cf. Jn 3). Consequently, for all co-members of the church-as-family, the absolute and ultimate point of reference should be the only God and Father of all (Eph 4:6), not the clan or tribe.[19] This understanding radically reverses the point of emphasis, because "through baptism, 'water becomes thicker than blood.'"[20]

But this is not easy! Of course not. As Christians, we are used to our *traditional* ways of seeing things, and that includes our conception of the family. This new model of church-as-family, though old in the tradition, is a new teaching for us Africans. It calls for a new catechesis, addressed not to new converts, but to all Christians. Its aim will be to teach us what it means to be Christians and co-members of the church-as-family, where there is "neither Jew nor Greek, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female" (Gal 3:28). This new catechesis challenges our narrow conception of the family in order to open it to the stronger, more universal bonds of baptism.

In addition, the institution of the family is exposed to external and internal forces of destabilization. Some of these include the oftentimes negative influence of the media, poverty, tribal wars, AIDS, political oppression, indiscriminate and imposed methods of birth control, etc.[21] The cumulative effect of these factors is the gradual erosion of age-old family values which form the substance of African societies.

One final point on this issue. One could also object that this African model of church-as-family is not entirely novel. That is true. Already among the fathers of the church, we find such images of the Church as "the ark of God," "the household of God," "the family of God," and many other terms which are suggestive of being together as God's family.[22] In addition, many African theologians have proposed that the Church should be considered as a family so that it may be truly incarnated in the African mentality and tradition. But what these previous attempts lack is an appropri-

[19] Bududira, *loc.cit*; see also, Group Reports, French B, *loc.cit*.

[20] Group Reports, English D, *loc.cit*.

[21] See, *Working Document*, nn. 23,24; *Report after*, nn. 10,35,39.

[22] See, Sanon, *loc.cit*.

ate *theology* of the church-as-family. It is not enough to say that the Church is family like an ordinary African family. This assertion must be grounded on our life of faith. We must show how this understanding of the church falls in line with our experience of the life of God within us. The synod understood this demand, and it proposed an outline of the theology of the church-as-family. This theology will still have to be further explored and developed. I shall examine briefly some of the essential aspects of this theology.

## Theology of the Church-as-family

The fathers of the synod outline a theology of the church-as-family which, for practical purposes, could be treated on three basic levels.

The first level is the *doctrinal* level. In an analogical way we sometimes speak of God as Family, that is, the Trinitarian Family: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Theologically, this Family is a mystery of unity and of communion in diversity.[23] The Father is the Supreme Creator who communicates life in abundance to all men and women (cf. Eph 4:6). The Son is the incarnate Word who, by the mysteries of his incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension and sending of the Holy Spirit, became the elder brother and ancestor of the multitude of God's children. It is he who made us all sharers, brothers and sisters, in the life of God, our Supreme Father and Creator. Simply put: the same life-blood of Jesus Christ now circulates in our veins. Finally, this initiation into the universal family-of-God is made possible by the action of the Holy Spirit, the breath of life who constituted the earliest gathering of the family of God in Jerusalem.[24]

The second level is *scriptural*. There is an abundance of scriptural references, texts and images which convey the idea of the church-as-family. Let us consider just one of these: the commandment to love.

[23] See E.-J. Péoukou, *Bulletin* n.20, 20.04.1994. p.6.

[24] See LG no.4; Message nn. 3,24,25; *Report after,* no. 3; Sanon, *loc.cit*; Group Reports, English D, French D and E, *loc.cit.*

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Christ gave us a new commandment, to love one another, all men and women (Jn 13:34; 15:12, 17). This injunction is echoed and concretely applied to life in the "way the Africans understand and live community life... (and) perceive family life."[25] Therefore, the model of the church-as-family emerging from this African internalization of the love of God and neighbour is that of a church constituted by unconditional love, and not by the walls of the house.[26]

The third aspect of this theology is situated at the level of an African understanding of the *Eucharist*. The Eucharistic meal is the centre of unity, a place of gathering of the children of God. It brings all of God's children home to the table of love where the very life of God is offered to all co-members of God's family. From an African perspective, the church-as-family receives its fundamental identity in the Eucharist not only because it is a sharing in the Body and Blood of Christ, and in the life of the family, but also because it constitutes the "centre" around which the family gathers in order to evoke its ancestral memories.[27] In this sense, as some African theologians already hold, the Eucharist is an *ancestral meal*, an inexhaustible source of life for all the co-members of the church-as-family.

## Questions to Be Asked

Before elaborating a comprehensive outline of the concrete implications of this model for the church of Africa, a few questions could be raised:

a) If the Church is the family-of-God, wherein hospitality is offered to all, how then can one justify the exclusion of some members from the sacraments (baptism, eucharist,...) for reasons connected with particular problems, for example, of marriage, the decisive moment when the family paradigm takes shape?[28]

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[25] Bishop B. Haushiku, *Bulletin* no.10, 14.04,1994, p.7.
[26] See Group Reports, French C, *loc.cit.*
[27] See, Bishop Monsi-Agboka, *Bulletin* no.15, 18.04.1994, pp.3-4.
[28] *Report after* no. 6,21.

b) How can the present perception of the laity as inferior helpers of the ordained ministers find justification in the church-as-family, where all co-members share an equal responsibility for its growth?[29]

c) What, then, is the role of the priest in the family of God's people? Is he to be treated and related to as an animator and facilitator; a solitary collaborator with the family-of-God,[30] like other co-members of the same family? Or is he a man of authority;[31] a "father figure"?[32]

d) What is the role of the bishop? Is he a hierarchical and ecclesiastical administrator or an "elder brother," a servant of the family-of-God, upon whom devolves the task of coordinating the different charisms and roles in the church-as-family?[33]

The questions can be multiplied, but these will suffice as indicators and reminders of the enormous task which lies ahead in the effective implementation and application of the model of the church-as-family.

## Pastoral Implications, Adaptations and Applications of the Model of Church-as-family

As I mentioned above, the idea of the church-as-family is a new teaching for us which, by all indications, bears profound consequences for the life of the African church. On this point the synod fathers deserve special commendation for highlighting the numerous — albeit not exhaustive — pastoral implications, adaptations and applications of the model of church-as-family. Let us consider some of these.

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[29] *Ibid.* no.8.
[30] *Report at the Beginning* no.9.
[31] *Report after* no.6.
[32] *Message* n.26.
[33] See Group Reports, French E, *loc.cit.*

In the Church-as-Family all are welcome. There is a "home"[34] and a "sense of belonging"[35] reserved for everyone in the extended family-of-God, "from which absolutely nobody is excluded."[36] In this disposition, the tensions which arise in the church-as-family (marriage problems, family life, differences, leadership conflicts, etc) are constructively resolved, and estranged parties are harmoniously reconciled.

From the documents of the synod, it appears without the slightest doubt, that one of the most serious implications of the church conceived as family converges on the question of the role of women in the Church. The synod fathers recognize and emphasize the urgent need for a *just* re-definition and acceptance of the appropriate role of the African woman in the church-as-family, *her family*. I underline the term just, because the issue is best treated as a question of justice. No one will challenge the assertion that "in Africa the woman is at the heart of the family."[37] She is "the backbone and the stability of the family."[38] The fact remains, however, that she suffers the most as the victim of many forms of injustice, abuse and oppression, such as marginalization, sexual discrimination, inferior and relegatory roles both within and outside the church.[39]

In indicating how this re-definition of her role applies concretely, it is important to avoid precipitate conclusions concerning, for example, the question of the ordination of women to priesthood. The synod avoids such delicate issues, but clearly underlines the following points as imperative:

a) Women are an integral part of the life of the church-as-family. This fact necessarily demands that they be involved in decision-making at all levels of the family-of-God.[40]

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[34] Group Reports, English B, *loc.cit.*

[35] *ibid.*, English A, *Bulletin* no.29, 28.04.1994, pp.10-12.

[36] *Message* n.28; see also, *Report after* nn.11,12.

[37] *Report after* nn.9,10.

[38] *ibid.*, no.32.

[39] *Report after* nn.10,30,32.

[40] See *Report after* nn.16,32.

b) In the present-day context of religious pluralism, women have proved to be effective agents of dialogue with Christians and non-Christians, but especially with Muslim women, in several countries of Africa. Therefore, the church-as-family should consider "seriously training well and utilizing the catholic women to promote effective dialogue of life where men have often failed."[41]

c) For the African women-folk to participate fully in the life of the church-as-family they must have unhindered access to quality formation and education in all spheres of the Church and the society.

The significance of according new roles to women (or recognizing their God-given roles) in the church-as-family cannot be over-emphasized. The *Message of the Synod* put it very clearly: *"The quality of our church-as-family also depends on the quality of our women-folk, be they married or members of the institutes of the consecrated life."*[42] "The value of woman is the value of the church."[43] In this line of thought, the notion of the so-called *spiritual* motherhood that has been used to exclude women from the sacramental, ministerial and structural life of the church loses its validity. The woman is not mother in the idealized and spiritualized sense, but more importantly in her active role and participation in nurturing the life of the church-as-family.

The youth are not left out. In the church-as-family there is a special place for the young members. These latter enjoy a life-giving link with the parents and elders of the family.[44] They are the future of the church-as-family. Their numerical strength alone bears testimony to their importance in the life of the church. Moreover, they are special in the eyes of God, deriving from Christ's own life the primary source of their youth.[45]

Finally, if the church-as-family is home to all, it also embodies the spirit of sharing. In it the goods of the family are held in common and shared by all. The readiness of the co-members of the church-as-family to share, is a concrete indicator of the sense

[41] Group Reports, English, D, *loc.cit*; see also *Report after* n.27.

[42] *Message* n.68, also nn.65-67.

[43] Bishop Monsi-Agboka, *loc.cit*.

[44] See *Report after* n.9.

[45] *Message* nn.52-63.

of solidarity present at all its levels, that is, within the parishes and dioceses; and between the various particular churches.[46]

## The Church-as-family Is Universal and Blessed with Diversity

The model of church-as-family poses a serious challenge to any narrow conception of the universality of the Church. If within the family there is diversity and complementarity of roles and charisms of co-members, both vertically and horizontally, the corresponding model of church-as-family, rather than being a "uniformity," is embraced and lived as a "communion in diversity." This coordinated diversity precludes all forms of passivity and exclusive appropriation of power and authority; and especially any animosity between ordained and non-ordained ministers. Finally, it admits of the principle of subsidiarity.[47] In this approach, the essential point to remember is that, as co-members of the Church-as-Family, we all hold the same faith, but live it in a variety of ways.[48]

In the immediate local church-as-family, the question of ministries cannot be overlooked. Diversity of roles and charisms necessitates a diversity of ministries. The church-as-family requires a re-organization and re-orientation of existing ecclesial structures with the view to facilitating the emergence and growth of *new ministries*. One advantage of taking this question seriously is that ultimately, these ministries which are open to all co-members facilitate the collective and common responsibility of each and every member for the task of evangelization.[49] Some of the ministries recognized and recommended by the synod are: community leaders and elders, ministries of the eucharist, the sick, the word; mediation, arbitration and reconciliation; promotion of life, rehabilitation of widows and widowers; father and mother catechists.[50] As is evident, the list is inexhaustible, and these ministries are

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[46] See *Report after* n.13; *Message* n.44.

[47] See *Message* nn.7,57; *Report at the Beginning* n.8; Sanon, *loc.cit.*, Bududira, *ibid*; Group Reports, English, A, *loc.cit.*

[48] Sanon *loc.cit.*

[49] Group Reports, English A, *loc.cit.*

[50] See *Report after* nn.22,35; Bishops J-B. Somé, *Bulletin* n.12, 15.04.1994, pp.10; Jitangar, *ibid*. no.21, 21.04.1994; Monsi-Agboka, *loc.cit.*

always in function of the particular needs and circumstances of the local church-as-family.

## The Church-as-family Is Lived in Small Christian Communities

This idea of the small christian community and its desirability as the privileged place for the realization of the model of church-as-family is not a new one. Several African theologians have studied this subject, and it has been a successful experience in a number of dioceses of Africa. In itself, it is based on the sociological set-up in Africa. It recalls the idea of family, clan and kinship as effective means of promoting communion and co-responsibility, as well as providing a sense of belonging.[51] Unfortunately, as became more evident during the synod, the systematic organization of the church in small christian communities is not widespread in Africa, especially in West Africa. The reality of enormous sprawling parishes, where many African Christians live their christian life in anonymity, is familiar to many of us.

In the new scheme proposed by the synod, the importance of these small christian communities is stressed. They form the "cells of the church-as-family," and are discretely active as the salt of the earth and the human, visible and palpable presence of the Kingdom of God.[52] It is here, for example, that the church-as-family concretely embraces and effectively translates into reality its mission and concern for justice and peace, and the promotion of life: "The church as family, fraternity or communion, leads us to justice and peace issues. Christian communities are a privileged place to practise justice and peace."[53]

## The Church-as-family Is Celebrated in the Christian Family

Expectedly, a model of the church based on the family must give particular attention to the christian family. This is no less true for the model of church-as-family. In this model, the christian

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[51] See *Working Document* nn.45,59; *Report after* n.5; Archbishop A. Ntalou, *Bulletin* no.23, 22.04.1994, p.8.

[52] *Message* n.28; see also Sanon, Somé, Bududira, *loc.cit.*

[53] *Report after* n.30; see also n.31. See also the chapters below on Small Christian Communities and on Justice and Peace.

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family, considered as an "authentic domestic church,"[54] becomes the place of inculturation, that is, the "original space for the meeting of culture and Gospel."[55] If the church is family, christian families must themselves become authentic domestic churches.[56] And in these domestic churches the centrality of the "Word" is vigorously accentuated, joyfully celebrated and fruitfully shared as the Word of alliance of the family of God.[57] Consequently, the christian family becomes, "the very first forum for the appreciation of the value and effectiveness of the Word. Our christian families must be made to devote some time to the reading of the Word daily, and make it touch every aspect of their family life... In the Bible they should feel the touch of God, the Father of all families."[58] To this the synod does not forget to add that it is within the family that an adequate programme of catechesis can be elaborated.[59]

### The Church-as-family Is the Place of Dialogue

One could ask the question: What connection is there between the church-as-family and the notion of dialogue? The answer is simple: The church-as-family forms a basis for dialogue. In Africa, the family is the place par excellence for dialogue.[60] Family life facilitates dialogue by the very fact that it is open to and offers welcome to all co-members who are not necessarily adherents of the same religion or faith. In reality, many African Christians belong to families where there are as many religious confessions as there are members in the family. Therefore, dialogue begins in the family. It is, "a family affair" which seeks "to bring all believers to the realization that we are all children of the same Father, God."[61]

Once dialogue is situated within the family, it can no longer be conceived purely in terms of exchange between systems, structures,

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[54] *Message* n.27.

[55] *Report after* n.20

[56] Group Reports, French C, *loc.cit.*

[57] See Sanon, *loc.cit.*

[58] Group Reports, English C and D, *loc.cit.*

[59] *Report after* n.10.

[60] Group Reports, French B, *loc.cit.*

[61] *Report at the Beginning* n.19; see also *Working Document* n.98; *Report after* n.24; Group Reports, English B, *loc.cit.*

or beliefs. It is an exchange between "persons," an openness towards, a willingness to listen to and welcome the other co-members of the family in an atmosphere of mutual reciprocity, acceptance and tolerance, and a common search for the life-giving truth.[62] In this conception of *dialogue-between-persons* it will be tenuous to still argue, for example, that dialogue with African Traditional Religion is impossible due to lack of structures in this latter.[63]

Like the model of the church-as-family, the concept of dialogue can be given a theological foundation. The very act of creation embodies a dialogue which God gratuitously initiates with all men and women. We are constantly reminded in the Scriptures that from the very beginning God established a communication with humanity; and this dialogue reached its climax when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn 1:14). In addition, the Gospel imperative to preach the Good News to all peoples (Matt. 28:19-20) entails a willingness to enter into dialogue with these same people. It is in this sense that one should understand the affirmation that dialogue is a constitutive element of the task of evangelization.[64] The church-as-family cannot proclaim the Good News and make disciples of every nation, if it does not enter into dialogue with all men and women to whom the Good News of salvation is addressed.

In Africa, particularly, dialogue is of capital importance in the church-as-family. The church of Africa cannot ignore the fact, for example, that the Catholic Church constitutes only a meagre 13-14% of the total population of Africa, where there abounds a multiplicity and multiplication of traditional and contemporary religions, spiritual movements and sects.[65] To this fact one must not fail to add that the scandal of the division among Christian churches stands as a regrettable obstacle to the work of effective evangelization in Africa.[66] I have already alluded to the partners of dialogue in the preceding paragraphs. The diversity of these partners is a further evidence of the urgency and complexity of dialogue, understood as an "apostolate of unity," in the church-as-

[62] See Group Reports, French C, and English B, *loc.cit.*
[63] See Group Reports, English E, *loc.cit.*
[64] See *Working Document* n.77,90; Group Reports, French C, *loc.cit.*
[65] *Working Document* n.80.
[66] *Working Document* n.83.

family. One of the extremely important insights of the synod is that it situates dialogue on two interrelated levels. The first can be termed dialogue *within the church*, and the second, dialogue with other christians, other religions and all people of good will. One way of looking at these two levels is to say that the latter presupposes the former. The church-as-family cannot dialogue credibly with others, if all the co-members are not seen to be living a life of dialogue.

If we take the foregoing points into consideration, the principal implication of the model of church-as-family is that dialogue must begin *first within* the Church. It must permeate without exception all the rungs of the Church's pastoral and institutional organization. The pastors (bishops) must dialogue with their co-members of the hierarchy (priests). The same holds for parish priests and their parishioners. For it is only then that the Church's involvement in dialogue with others can become credible.[67] Who are these others? Let us see some examples.

An important and by far the most difficult partner of dialogue of the African Church is Islam. As the varied experiences of the synod fathers show, the degree of openness, or aggressiveness of Islam to dialogue very often depends on its status in the society and the kind of values promoted by its adherents. It is a known fact that in many parts of Africa (due to external influences which are often fundamentalist in nature) Muslims offer neither room for freedom nor a gesture of reciprocity in dialogue. This situation is compounded by the divergence of Islamic tendencies.[68] The synod does not gloss over these obstacles. However, it recognizes that if it is the case that a doctrinal dialogue with Islam is practically impossible (as may well be the case with other religious groups and movements also), dialogue with Muslims in a variety of areas must not be ruled out and must be sought.[69] I shall mention later, some of the ways recommended by the synod for proceeding along this path of dialogue.

The other major partner of dialogue, which the church-as-family cannot afford to overlook, is African Traditional Religion(s). It

[67] See *Report after* n.25; *Message* n.20; Group Reports, French A, B, C, E; English, A, C, D, E, *loc.cit.*

[68] See *Working Document* nn.91-94,97; *Report after* n.27; *Report at the Beginning* n.21; Group Reports, French C, *loc.cit.*

[69] See Group Reports, French B, English C, *loc.cit.*

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is true that African Traditional Religion has often been considered as an inferior partner in dialogue.[70] But it is no less true that it forms the context from which emerges and operates the African world-view with its rich heritage of cultural symbolisms and positive outlook on life. Consequently, African Traditional Religion is a vital element both for the in-depth appropriation of the faith by African Christians and for any serious project of inculturation, be it liturgical, doctrinal or pastoral. Unfortunately, even among the synod fathers, there still persists the outdated and untenable conception of African Traditional Religion as the breeding ground for potential converts. Hence some fathers still hold that, "it is from this group that the christian churches have new members."[71] This attitude smacks of condescension.

The church-as-family does not stand aloof in society. As I mentioned earlier, the small christian communities bear witness to the discrete, but concrete presence of the Kingdom of God here on earth. Therefore, the church-as-family must be in constant dialogue with society in its various dimensions: civil authorities, secular organizations and various contemporary trends in thought and behavior.[72] This is best realized in the struggle for justice and peace, and the promotion of human life and development to which I have already alluded.

Finally, the church-as-family must enter into dialogue with other christian churches, groups, movements or orientations, which in their own way are also striving to become a family of God's people here on earth.[73]

How then is this dialogue to be attained in the church-as-family? Here again the synod proffers clear-cut ways and means of dialoguing with all the groups.

To begin with, and as already mentioned, it is important to reiterate that dialogue has several dimensions. It operates effectively at the levels of life, of deeds, of specialists, and of religious experience.[74]

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[70] See *Working Document* nn.101-107; *Report after* n.28; *Message* n.21; Group Reports, French E, *loc.cit.*

[71] Group Reports, English A, *loc.cit.*

[72] See *Report after* n.24.

[73] *Report after* n.26

[74] See *Working Document* n.78.

When it comes to Islam, particularly, a necessary distinction has to be effected between Islam as a religion with which we share common values, Islam as an ideology, and Muslims themselves. In addition, all Christians, including pastoral agents, should be formed to acquire sufficient knowledge of the different tendencies, temperaments and strategies of Islamic ideologists as well as fundamentalist Muslims.[75] It is for the foregoing reasons that the synod recommends the creation of an Institute of Islamic Studies in Africa.[76]

There is also the witness through authentic christian living, especially where common grounds for unity can be identified, such as the belief in one Supreme God, who is Creator.[77] In addition, there is the possibility of working with moderate Muslims in mixed commissions at all levels of the Church which promote dialogue.[78] This implies that dialogue in the church-as-family is not only theological, but also "practical." For example, dialogue can be constructively facilitated in the areas of Bible translation, social work, promotion and defence of human rights, development, justice and peace, communications, and common prayer services.[79]

In the final analysis, however, when the lives of Christians are threatened without provocation by adherents of other faiths and confessions, the option of legitimate self-defence remains a valid and legitimate alternative.[80] As mentioned already, women must be at the forefront of this task of dialogue with other groups.

## Conclusion

One of the very important insights of the epoch-making synod of Africa is the proposition of the model of the church-as-family. This model draws upon the profound anthropological, sociologi-

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[75] See *Working Document* n.98; Group Reports,French A,E; English A,C,E, *loc.cit.*

[76] See Group Reports, French D; English B, *loc.cit.*

[77] See *Message* n.23.

[78] See Group Reports, French A, *loc.cit.*

[79] See *Working Document* n.85; Group Reports, French D; English B, D and E, *loc.cit.*

[80] See Group Reports, English B, *loc.cit.*

cal and cultural resources that are discernible in the African way of being family. There are limitations to the model, first, because, the reality it seeks to express is a mystery, whose profound meaning cannot be adequately expressed or exhausted by any given symbol. And, second, the reality called family in Africa is not immune to imperfections. However, the church-as-family is not the only model; rather, it is *an African way* of being Church. As such it makes no pretension to absoluteness. Furthermore, as it is clear from the proceedings of the synod, this African way of being church challenges and transcends the restrictive view of family, and opens it up to the broader and fuller reality of the universal family-of-God.

In adopting this model of the church, the synod opens up a new and promising path for the inculturation of Christianity and the promotion of evangelization in Africa. The task now is for theologians to work out the practical details of what it means to be church-as-family. The synod recommends and vigorously encourages the development of an African ecclesiology based on the church as family. A word of caution is in order here: this development is not just to be theological or conceptual; it must also extend to the roots of people's lives, their concrete experience of living the christian faith.

Finally, it is necessary to point out that the implementation of this model is not without risks. The implications are promising, but they demand a new mentality. The pertinent question now is: will the church-as-family take these risks, so that it may make significant progress on its path to becoming a truly African church? If the church of Africa must become credible and attentive to the signs of the times, it must become the family-of-God in Africa. In response, therefore, to the question, "For you Africans, what is the church?", the synod answers decisively: "The church is the family-of-God where communion, solidarity, sharing, openness and dialogue form the hallmark of christian living."