

# Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference National Synthesis Document

[kugwaalfonce](#) [Uncategorized](#) August 12, 2022

6 AUGUST 2022

## I INTRODUCTION

1. This synthesis seeks to convey the main fruits of the discernment of the People of God across the 8 dioceses of Zimbabwe on the diocesan phase of the synod on synodality between November 2021 and August 2022. The essence of the voice of the Family of God is drawn from the summaries received from the eight dioceses, Women Religious in Zimbabwe, the Catholic University of Zimbabwe, National Major Seminary, Lay Associations and Guilds. Our report is presented in three parts which are: ***The Experience of the synod***; followed by sections, ***'Fruits and Weeds of Synodality'*** and ***'Towards a Synodal Church: Dreams and Aspirations'***.
2. In the effort to capture the common voices of the people's discernment and dialogue, we have also managed to consolidate some views of the marginalized. The report also captures some surprises in the listening process. We have tried to discern from all these voices the direction which the Spirit is calling the Church in Zimbabwe to take.
3. The cultural image we have used and drawn upon to sum up our experience of the Synod is that of a family. This is a central concept in our African culture which expresses the

profound Christian and African values of communion, fraternity, solidarity and reverential dialogue. We looked at ourselves as a family made up of many different parts and types of domestic families, Small Christian Communities, Deaneries, Dioceses, regional and international Church bodies, Associations, Guilds, Commissions, other Christian Churches, Religions and indeed the whole human family.

4. Our understanding of the Church as Family of God challenges us to improve the quality of our journeying together within individual families and with other families in the journey of life and faith. We are conscious that this model should help us to deepen our interrelationships between the Laity, Religious, Priests and Bishops and our brothers and sisters from other Christian Churches and Religions and to be translated into effective modes of action and living. We also believe that the mission of evangelization is carried out through proclamation and practical life witnessing in service to the Church-Family and by the Church-Family within the extended family of God.

## 1. THE EXPERIENCE OF THE SYNOD

- The invitation by the bishops to every member of the church and others who are non-Catholics come forward and freely share their views, experiences and vision of the Church was received with excitement by many.<sup>[1]</sup> However, some were pessimistic about the whole process questioning if their voices were going to reach the ears of bishops and Pope. Others still questioned if the hierarchy was ready to listen and act on their views and concerns. Some priests were concerned that opening up space for everyone to speak openly would harm the Church.<sup>[2]</sup>
- The Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference and most dioceses invested a lot of financial and human resources in the synodal process with programs for the synodal journey at all levels. The bishops dedicated their 2021 and 2022

annual Plenary meetings to reflecting on the Synod and Collegiality. Towards the close of the diocesan phase the bishops of Zimbabwe issued a pastoral letter entitled “*Together on the journey of faith and life*” reflecting on the synod and its implications for the Church and the world today.

- Numerous initiatives of raising awareness and promoting consultation were done. Synodal materials were simplified and prepared in local languages. Trainings were done for all the synod contact persons and the diocesan synod extended teams which comprised of priests, religious and lay facilitators. Various forms of consultations were prepared with most done in the context of prayer and scripture. Most dioceses used simplified questionnaires with the traditional methods of assembling people according to the different groups. The synod Prayer, said in various languages and in songs accompanied the process at most liturgical celebrations and meetings.
- Most dioceses are by and large rural with vast distances and poor road and communication infrastructure. This made it difficult for synodal teams to reach everyone in time. The extension of the diocesan phase was appreciated but even after the extension many referred to the timing of the consultation period as insufficient.
- Many dioceses made efforts to reach beyond the Church confines which included groups such as prisoners, the homeless and non- practicing Catholics and Christians belonging to other Churches. One diocese particularly made an effort to engage the leaders of the African Traditional Religion. Some dioceses felt that they failed to reach out to some groups such as politicians, small tribes and some sects for various reasons. In some dioceses smaller tribes were overwhelmed by the dominant tribes.<sup>[5]</sup> In some instances it was difficult to reach out to politicians out of fear and the toxic nature of the political environment.

- Generally, the listening and discernment made use of the existing structures in the dioceses such as the various pastoral councils at different levels, Commissions such as the Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, Education, Associations and Guilds, and Religious Communities.

## 1. SEEDS AND WEEDS OF SYNODALITY

- **A variety of travel companions**

1. The African philosophical thought: *I am related therefore I am* is especially true of the Church in Zimbabwe as far as travelling companions are concerned.<sup>[4]</sup> The voices from many dioceses and groups pointed out that our journeying is multi-layered, with companions who hail from both within the Church as well from its exterior. From the inside, co-travellers are the baptized, the elderly, the sick, those that share the same views as ourselves as well as those we pray with in Small Christian Communities, Sections and Mass Centres. In our neighbourhood, we walk hand-in-hand with members of other churches with whom we fellowship from time to time. Community (social) leaders are vital travelling companions. Formal and informal encounters take place at regional, national, interdiocesan, diocesan, deanery, parish and other lower levels through the bishops' Conference Commissions such as Caritas, Health, Inter-religious dialogue, Ecumenism, Education and Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace.<sup>[5]</sup>
2. There is a broad sense that the Church needs to be a more welcoming family, particularly for all people who have experienced exclusion. Some individuals and groups left behind on the journey include those in prison, single mothers and fathers, widows and widowers, those in polygamous marriages, homebound individuals, the blind, the unemployed and the youth and young adults. Other groups identified as left behind are those who belong to

minority groups such as the coloured and white community, foreign nationals, street kids and people living with disabilities. There are also the nominal Catholics, lapsed Catholics and Christians from other denominations who focus only on criticizing the Catholic ways of life. Some have identified those who do not belong to any established guild or association as a part that is forgotten or left behind. Some voices also identified people who suffer from what they believe to be spirit possession, witchcraft and curses as the overlooked or outrightly dismissed by their leaders. Others have expressed concern about the attitude of parish priests, bishops and some lay people towards members of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal who are treated with suspicion and even left out. Some marginal voices have also identified those with different sexual orientation as part of the group left behind. Others note that ex-priests and ex-nuns are usually left behind and even treated as outcasts.<sup>[6]</sup> Some also view some religious congregations operating in dioceses as part of those left behind or in some cases as those who deliberately choose to exclude themselves.<sup>[7]</sup>

3. Reasons for this situation have been described by some as emanating from cultural differences, socio-economic hardships, political differences, jealousy and unequal treatment of people in the Church. Some do not believe that the existing synodal structures fully answer to their call for communion, participation and mission for they feel these structures actually suffocate them. Most parishes and Catholic institutions do not have provisions for people with disability which does not facilitate their participation. The divorced feel left behind because most parishes do not have relevant programmes that cater for them.<sup>[8]</sup> Negative attitudes and prejudices lead to judgements, unfair treatment and discrimination against single mothers and the divorced.<sup>[9]</sup> Guilds and Associations which are exclusive by nature are replacing the SCC's which are more family

based and inclusive. Some feel like the Catholic Church pays little attention or plays down instances when a person needs to be protected against the power of the devil or to be delivered from his spiritual dominion.<sup>[10]</sup>

## **(ii) Listening and speaking out**

1. Many voices have expressed that lack of listening and speaking out may be a serious obstacle to authentic dialogue and the whole process of journeying together.<sup>[11]</sup> On a positive note, most people appreciate that to a certain extent the Church listens informally and formally using canonical and non-canonical synodal bodies and structures.<sup>[12]</sup> Listening helps people to know that they belong, that they are loved, and that they are valued. Some have shared that they have had poor experiences of listening in the Church. Some of the people in positions of power more often than not exercise their power without listening especially to the marginalized such as women, children and youth.
2. The reasons for not speaking out which were noted include fear of victimization,<sup>[13]</sup> poor leadership, gender discrimination.<sup>[14]</sup> Ignorance about the formal reporting structures, rigidity of church structures, and absence of formal online communication channels.<sup>[15]</sup> Another hindrance to listening and speaking out is the attitude by leadership who refuse correction from lay people and are intolerant to divergent viewpoints. Failure to properly articulate issues by leadership also leads to confusion with people filling the gaps with damaging rumours and misinformation. Communication channels in most parishes and Catholic institutions is top-down/monologue with little or no room for feedback, dialogue and listening.

## **(iii) Liturgy and prayer**

1. A Shona idiom, “*Ukama igasva hunozadziswa nekudya!*” which means relationships are hardly complete unless you partake of a meal together expresses the centrality of sharing a meal together in the family. The synod reports confirm the centrality of the Eucharist in the lives of Catholic communities. Communal listening to the Word of God and active participation in the celebration of the Eucharist brings about healing, unity and growth in faith.
2. Many express the joy of active participation in the vibrant rich and inculturated liturgy.<sup>[16]</sup> Lay people appreciate their roles in liturgy as Readers, Service Leaders in the absence of a priest, Extraordinary Ministers of Communion, Funeral ministers, hospitality members, animators, choir members and many other liturgical responsibilities.<sup>[17]</sup> There is a deliberate effort to involve children and the youth in the liturgical celebrations serving as dancers and altar servers.<sup>[18]</sup> Other lay ministries such as the permanent diaconate and lector are highly developed in some dioceses.
3. Some voices bemoan the lack of understanding of the sacraments and the Holy Mass in particular. A number of those who cannot receive the eucharist due to various reasons feel excluded. Some members of the Catholic family such as single mothers, feel excluded in prayer and communal celebrations with some parishes exerting unjustifiable long probation periods on these women. One diocese strongly expressed the poor attendance and participation by men.<sup>[19]</sup>
4. Some of the reasons shared for lack of active participation include a lack of understanding and appreciation of the liturgy. The failure to pay attention to minority races and tribes and use of their languages has also been seen to contribute to lack of active participation. Some have decried poorly prepared liturgies and little attention given to the liturgical needs and sensitivities of young people which have

contributed to the exodus of many youths and young adults from the Church.[20] Some marginal voices decried the poor homilies and abuse of the pulpit by some priests.[21]

5. Voices from missions and 'out-stations' have expressed the insufficient attention given to them by their pastors due to sparse population distribution and the poor road infrastructure. Such centres only have mass once in a while and this affects their spiritual well-being. Poverty which is very prevalent in rural areas also affects the services given by the priests as they struggle with resources. Participation in liturgical celebrations is biased against people with disabilities.[22]
6. Some voices raised concerns of liturgical celebrations and spiritual gatherings appearing to be used as occasions for fundraising. This practise paints a bad picture on the real purpose of these occasions. Others still noted that the noble cause of stipends and stole fees is sometimes exaggerated by some priests and leaders who tend not to pay attention to the poor who cannot afford the stipulated fees. Some have even raised cases where some people are denied sacraments and services such funeral and memorial masses because they cannot afford the stole fee or the transport for the priest. In some such cases pastors of other Churches end offering services to Catholics.

#### **(iv) Co-responsibility between clergy, consecrated and laity**

- Many reports acknowledge the principle that all; the clergy, consecrated and laity are sent as co-workers from the time of baptism, even though we exercise different roles and responsibilities. Many people are proud of their faith with several efforts made to grow in understanding the faith by lay people. Guilds and Associations play a key role in evangelization. Others acknowledge growth in steps towards collaboration and healthy relationships.[23]

- The consultations revealed that as much as Catholics are convinced and proud of their faith, they are not confident to actively share their faith with others.<sup>[24]</sup> A lack of deep knowledge and scarcity of substantial faith reduces the laity's performance to liturgical and a few other undertakings in the church. Basically, people feel ill-equipped to respond to the call to evangelise. Some still have the misconception that priests and the consecrated have to do it all while they occupy the backbenches.<sup>[25]</sup> Others still feel the church stifles them that they cannot express fully their potential. Some tend to even shine and become ardent evangelizers once they leave the Catholic Church.<sup>[26]</sup>
- There is a common cry of the poor quality of catechesis due to lack of serious involvement by the ordained in planning, directing and overseeing catechesis and the poor formation of lay catechists. Parents are also not well prepared to play their role as family catechists. Some pointed out the lack of updated catechisms which address modern issues affecting the faithful.<sup>[27]</sup>

#### **(v) Companions on the journey of life**

- The structures and pastoral programs that exists in the country at national, inter-diocesan and diocesan levels helps the Church in Zimbabwe to be a family. Commissions, Associations, Clergy and religious, diocesan and national bodies play a crucial part are beautiful avenues for our walking together.
- The experience of dialoguing with other spheres of society such as culture, the civil society and people who live in poverty has been mutually enriching.

The Church cooperates with government, NGO's and civil society in offering important services to all people without discrimination in the areas of education, health and justice and peace. The Church is a

well-respected partner in the journey of life. She supports members committed to the service of the society like teachers, nurses and social workers.

- Besides offering the basic services the Church also plays her prophetic voice. Unfortunately, whenever the Church plays her prophetic role, it is construed as 'political'.<sup>[28]</sup> Even when the Church would make an effort to dialogue with the state on matters concerning the human condition on poverty, human dignity and rights she is held with suspicion. The Church has therefore, unfortunately limited dialogue going on local levels of the Church except for bishops' conference through formal, informal meetings and pastoral letters.<sup>[29]</sup> Freedom in proclaiming the Gospel is scarce as threats of victimisation by political leaders, loom large over the proclaimers' heads.<sup>[30]</sup> The number of Catholics in civic and political positions of influence is dwindling.<sup>[31]</sup>

#### **(vi) Dialogue with Christian Brethren**

- Most dioceses expressed positive experiences consisting of healthy and respectful relationship with Christians of different confessions. Key areas in which the local church collaborates with other churches at grassroots level include communal moments of funerals, weddings, Holy Week celebrations and praying for rain.<sup>[32]</sup> At the national level more is done in areas of peace education, health, reconciliation, social justice and development.
- On the darker side some have indicated that there is discrimination between the Catholics and some non-Catholics. Some denominations tend to look down upon others hence creating animosity among churches.<sup>[33]</sup> Of concern, however, was the experience of churches and sects which seem to be aiming at degrading and attacking the Catholic Church and proselytize, targeting Catholics.

It was noted that Catholics are prey to all new Churches scouting for new members. Dialogue with such groups has been difficult. Some voices agree that as Catholics, we usually do not reach out to other denominations, we rather avoid getting into deeper conversation that has to do with faith practices and mostly we retreat allowing to hear them or hide ourselves.

- Several reasons have been identified for the above situation such as prejudices, misconceptions, presumptions and personal bias. Lack of knowledge of the other also contributes to this. Catholic priests are well trained compared to other ministers and this contributes to the tendency on the part of catholic priests to look down on pastors of other churches.[34]

#### **(vii) Authority and participation**

- The Church community usually identifies the goals to be pursued and the way to reach them, the steps to be taken through structures, pastoral plans, meetings, congresses, workshops, retreats, and pilgrimages. Synodal bodies such as Pastoral Councils in parishes and dioceses, Presbyteral Council and others are in existence and satisfactorily function well in a synodal manner. There is a deliberate effort through pastoral plans and training centres to promote lay ministries and the responsibility of lay people. There is a growing awareness on the need to involve the youths and women in decision making.
- Some women religious have noted that there is a lot of male dominance in the Church with a tendency by some priests to treat women religious as subordinates or inferior. Their contribution is sometimes interfered with even barred by the Priests. Clericalism is a cancer that has manifested in some communities where priests want to do and control everything at the parish with cases of the abuse of power, money and Church property by the clergy and religious in

some instances. The laity in some cases are just expected to pay, pray and obey.

- Although there is representation of the lay in the structures and a semblance of consultation, authority and governance is still seen to be by and large a preserve of the ordained.[35] Owing to this, there appears to be very little or no accountability by the clergy to their parishioners. Efforts to build teams and promote co-responsibility are realized in Small Christian Communities, parishes, Associations and Guilds.

### **(viii) Discerning and Deciding**

- Discerning and deciding are a serious challenge in the local Church because of the reality of the existence of different voices on issues. There are different voices, and there are diverse spirits moving people and so the need to always discern. Many voices have expressed the positive role of synodal structures that aid discerning and deciding. The various Councils in the Church are avenues through which discernment and decisions are reached, each in its own special way. Regular meetings are held by each council so as to decide on the running of the Church affairs.
- Some voices however expressed those decisions do not always seem to be reached after listening to everyone. It is easy to just discuss issues, share views and wait for the bishop or priest or leader to decide. The process of discernment demands patience, prayer, humility. We do not know how to discern well together. We are yet to learn to be a discerning church, a Church able to identify the work of the Holy Spirit among us and to follow its lead. The discernment process also helped us to be aware of the importance of recording, reporting and filing of minutes which are important voices in the process of discernment and deciding.

## 1. TOWARDS A SYNODAL CHURCH IN ZIMBABWE

2. The Church is invited to revisit the existing synodal structures, review the spirit to fully live communion, achieve participation and realize our mission in the local church in Zimbabwe. There is need to consider setting up councils of the Laity.[36] Pastoral Councils are called to use a round table approach where everybody can be recognized and listened to. The formation and resuscitation of Small Christian Communities for everyone to be involved in the life of the Church is essential.
3. The Holy Spirit is calling us to be a listening and discerning Church, to listen to the multitude of voices that speak to us.[37] Listening to the voice of the youth was frequently mentioned and deemed crucial. We should also take heed of the thoughts and ideas of the extended family and companions in the journey; non-Catholics, Politicians and non-believers. These are voices in our neighbourhood we cannot afford to avoid lest we miss out God's whispers through them! [38]
4. The Holy Spirit is inviting us to reflect the fact that a good number of its family members do not receive Holy Communion. A human, Christian and common approach urgently needs to be implemented to address the question of this group such as single mothers and those in polygamous marriages. There is need for the Church to pay serious and urgent attention to the people who are struggling with issues of spirit possession, curses and witchcraft.
5. The Holy Spirit calls us to grow in synodality by actively seeking out the poor and minority groups and tribes. This could be done through effective pastoral programmes which directly address the needs of these groups. Our church buildings have to be constructed in a way to accommodate people with disabilities and the elderly.[39]

6. The Holy Spirit calls us to be open and receptive to change and ongoing formation. Journeying together entails receptivity to change, formation, and ongoing learning. Canon law needs to be constantly updated and to be contextualized. Constitutions of guilds and associations need revision and updating in the spirit of the gospel and synodality.[40]
7. The Holy Spirit invites us to create deliberate open and safe platforms for listening and speaking out. In cases of abuse people should be made aware of the processes of inquiry. Church governance issues should be marked by transparency and inclusivity. Lay people expect to be part of wide and more informed consultation by the bishop, Chief Shepherd in the diocese in the placement and transfers of priests, hoping this will translate into right priests being placed in parishes and places commensurate with their gifts.
8. The Holy Spirit calls on the Church to a well-developed programme of liturgical and missionary formation of lay people in order for them to be empowered to be missionary disciples and to participate in liturgical celebrations in a meaningful manner. Priests are expected to be more involved in coordinating catechesis in missions and parishes.
9. The Holy Spirit calls on the ordained and consecrated to recommit themselves in the life and service of the church and remain true to their vocation in the background of alcohol abuse, sex and financial scandals.[41] Some people even suggested that our priests should marry as a solution to do away with the scandals. The voices of the baptized also call for the regulation of the stole fees and the sensitivity on dealing with the poor when it comes to the contributions in the Church.[42]
10. The Holy Spirit calls for the Church to a continual engagement and dialogue, both reverential and prophetic

with the world of politics even at local levels. There is also a serious need to form of our Catholic politicians in the Social Teaching of the Church.[43]

11. The Holy Spirit calls on the Church in Zimbabwe to continue promoting ecumenical and interfaith dialogue through common theological reflections, shared worship, dialogue and action on social justice. It is important for all parishes and Catholic institutions to embrace ecumenism without judging the 'other' as being inferior or misguided. This requires openness and the suspension of presumptions, individualism, and bigotry while adhering to the Catholic faith and ethos.[44]
12. The thirst for formation runs through almost every synod submission. The Holy Spirit calls on the local Church to build on existing formation programs to develop clear programs of formation in synodality at all levels of the Church.[45] Forming ourselves in synodality entails receptivity to learning and change, both personal and institutional. The formation should cover areas such as synodal structures, servant leadership, listening and speaking and discerning and deciding. It should help us broaden our approach to decision-making help us to see to it.

- **CONCLUSION**

- Largely, what emerges from the fruits, seeds and weeds of synodality are voices that have great love for the Church, voices that dream of a Church of credible witnesses, a Church that is inclusive, open and welcoming Family of God and a Church where everyone is conscious of their responsibilities in the mission. There is a strong sense of the need to repent from our failures, avoid the spirit of the world from entering the church and its structures and live up to what God expects of us as Church.

- 
- [1] Chinhoyi Diocese, Harare Archdiocese, Hwange Diocese, Gweru Diocese, Gokwe Diocese, Mutare Diocese
  - [2] National Pastoral Team, Gweru Diocese, The Conference of Major Superiors in Zimbabwe (CMRS)
  - [3] The Tonga in Gokwe, Ndebele in Gweru and Shangani and Vhenda in Masvingo.
  - [4] Chinhoyi Diocese
  - [5] Bulawayo Archdiocese, Chinhoyi Diocese, Gweru Diocese and Harare Archdiocese.
  - [6] Women Religious, Chinhoyi Diocese, Masvingo Diocese and Mutare Diocese.
  - [7] ZCBC Plenary on Synodality 2022
  - [8] Catholic University of Zimbabwe (CUZ)
  - [9] Marian Guilds in Zimbabwe, ZCBC Plenary on Synodality 2022.
  - [10] Catholic Charismatic Renewal members (a small group that visited the office of the national contact person)
  - [11] CUZ, Harare Archdiocese, Masvingo Diocese
  - [12] Bulawayo Archdiocese, Hwange Diocese,
  - [13] Masvingo Diocese, Harare Archdiocese
  - [14] Mutare Diocese, Gokwe Diocese, Women Religious,
  - [15] Harare Archdiocese
  - [16] Gokwe Diocese, Women Religious in Zimbabwe, Hwange Diocese.

- [17] Gokwe Diocese, Hwange Diocese, Bulawayo Archdiocese
- [18] Bulawayo Archdiocese
- [19] Bulawayo Archdiocese.
- [20] CUZ
- [21] Women Religious, Youth (Synod Consultation with National Youth Leaders)
- [22] Harare Diocese, Gokwe Diocese, Gweru diocese.
- [23] Chinhoyi Diocese, Women Religious, Gokwe Diocese,
- [24] Bulawayo Archdiocese.
- [25] Chinhoyi Diocese, Women Religious in Zimbabwe,
- [26] ZCBC Plenary 2020
- [27] Mutare Diocese, Marian Guilds, National Pastoral Team, ZCBC Plenary Meeting 2022
- [28] Chinhoyi, National Pastoral Team
- [29] Masvingo Diocese
- [30] Chinhoyi Diocese
- [31] Bulawayo Archdiocese
- [32] Bulawayo Archdiocese, Mutare Diocese, Hwange Diocese, Chinhoyi Diocese, Gweru Diocese.
- [33] Masvingo Diocese, Marian Guilds
- [34] Conversation with a Pastor of Zimbabwe Assemblies of God Africa (ZAOGA), one of Zimbabwe's oldest Pentecostal churches.
- [35] ZCBC Plenary 2022

[36] National Pastoral Team, ZCBC Plenary 2022

[37] Harare, Bulawayo, Gweru, Hwange, Gokwe dioceses.

[38] Chinhoyi Diocese

[39] National Major Seminary

[40] National Pastoral Team, Marian Guilds,

[41] Harare

[42] Mutare, Harare, Masvingo Diocese.

[43] National Seminary

[44] Masvingo, Mutare Diocese.

[45] Harare, Masvingo, Hwange

Share this: