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Zimbabwean children are pictured in a file photo carrying vegetables as they walk past a house in Harare. A Vatican diplomat said deprivation and poverty among the laity could obstruct Pope Francis' vision of synodality in southern Africa, where challenges are widespread. (CNS photo/Philimon Bulawayo, Reuters)

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A Vatican diplomat in southern Africa warned that deprivation and poverty among the laity could obstruct Pope Francis' vision of synodality in the region, where the challenges are widespread.

Archbishop Peter B. Wells, apostolic nuncio to South Africa, spoke Sept. 23 at the opening of the 13th assembly of the Interregional Meeting of Bishops of Southern Africa (IMBISA) in the Namibian capital, Windhoek.

"The primary concern of the least privileged and poor is how to feed their families and survive in a rather inhumane set of circumstances," said Archbishop Wells. "It may be that they do not particularly dream or think of making decisions for their

local church communities, where the cleric's traditional role is still solid and decisive."

The diplomat said journeying together or synodality was evident when people of God listen to one another and hear what God is saying to all of them.

"The synodality of the whole church requires that everyone is heard and can contribute," he said.

About 120 people -- including bishops, priests and young adults -- attended the Sept. 22-27 meeting, which reflected on the role of young people in the church. IMBISA unites bishops' conferences in Namibia, Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Mozambique, Sao Tome and Principe, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

"Young people are not only the future of our society and the church, but the present as well," said Archbishop Liborius Ndumbukuti Nashenda of Windhoek.

Nashenda, who serves as vice president of IMBISA -- said the presence of the young adults meant that they could no longer be regarded as passive participants in the life of the church and society.

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"They have the right to contribute to the mission of the church and, in particular, the development of society in general. This assembly … gives us a chance to work with young people," he said.

Bishop Thomas R. Zinkula of Davenport, Iowa, a member of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Subcommittee on the Church in Africa, said his presence at the meeting was of particular significance in the light of the theme. He said the USCCB was developing and drafting a new framework on young adults.

"We hope to craft a renewed vision for local implementation of a synodal, accompanying and engaging the church in relation to young people," he said, "I am here to assist in your efforts, but also listen to and learn from your important deliberations."

As he outlined the U.S bishops' long engagement with churches in Africa, Zinkula said the U.S. bishops had issued "A Renewed Call to Solidarity with Africa," as a

follow-up to their 2001 pastoral letter on solidarity with the continent.

"The bishops in the United States are interested in collaborating in a respectful way with their brother bishops in Africa," said Zinkula.

Catholic parishes in the U.S. supported a solidarity fund for Africa, but U.S. support was more than economic, the bishop said.

Exchange visits and sharing experiences and pastoral practices have "resulted in long-lasting fraternal relationships that surpass mere transactional dealings, which benefit the church on both sides," he said.