

## African synod heard the cry of women, laity

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Should historians in the future rummage through the final documents of Vatican synods, they will find tepid accounts, blandly written and largely cleansed of the motivating tensions and contentious discussions of the moment.

We expect the same of documents that ultimately will be compiled and then stashed as a result of the recently completed Synod on Africa. The sad consequence, if past experience is any indication, is that the life in evidence at the synod, the energy bubbling up from this somewhat newly minted and wildly growing version of an old, old church, will be ignored. Much of that life issues from the questions being raised about the future, about the empowerment of women, about a larger role for laity. It is the result of the kind of back-and-forth that disturbs the Vatican's meta-narrative, a vision of calm continuum that needs only to be reinforced.

That view of church, however, is simply unrealistic. The valuable documents out of synods are the accounts of conversations, those patched together from secondhand accounts about what went on inside the meeting hall, and from firsthand interviews. In that regard, *NCR*'s John Allen has provided abundant insight into workings of the synod and the issues most on the mind of some of the continent's most prominent Catholic leaders. His story on the synod can be found on Page 5 and much more can be found at [NCRonline.org/synodforafrica](https://www.ncronline.org/synodforafrica) [1].

Much is understandably made of the swelling numbers of Catholics and the growth of religious vocations throughout Africa. That depiction often goes hand-in-hand with the presumption that the African church is a model of docility and traditionalist behavior.

In some sense, the impression is true. But the degree of candor we heard from a few of the leading African bishops and the amount of time given to the surprising number of women among the synod's auditors suggests that this is hardly a compliant colonial church waiting for marching orders from headquarters to the north.

As we have seen in the case of synods for Asia and other groupings around the globe, the questions voiced at the bottom of the hierarchical pile, no matter how logical or timely or appropriate, will ultimately run into an ecclesial wall if answering them requires a deeper look at changing church structure and practice.

That's what has made the synod experience an exercise in frustration, some would say futility. The idea for these kinds of gatherings grew out of that brief but powerful experience in the worldwide church that anticipated a more decentralized community with greater participation at all levels. So synods on such issues as laity or priesthood, for instance, were expected to accommodate new questions and new ideas and to lead to change.

Little of that has occurred in this period of retrenchment when some are attempting mightily to push the church back into some nonexistent, idealized period when things were tidier, women were subservient, laity were uninformed and quiet, and authority, warranted or not, was unquestioned.

The reality of this time, however, is that questions and assertions from the ground were heard. Religious women from Africa, who have suffered not only at the hands of patriarchal cultural systems but at the hands of clergy as

well, were heard in full voice. "The synod fathers have heard the cry of women," said Cardinal Peter Turkson of Cape Coast, Ghana. "Women need to be recognized in society as well as in the church as active members."

His words could hold more significance than one would otherwise impart to them because little more than a decade ago it was reported that sexual abuse of religious women by priests, including rape, was an especially serious problem in Africa. The accounts at the time hit on the problem, lightly treated during the synod, of breaches of celibacy by African clergy, some of whom were approaching nuns because they were thought to be safe targets on a continent being ravaged by AIDS. In one synod report, a speaker noted as a topic covered: "The difficulty that some pastoral agents have in being faithful to their vows, vocations and states of life."

The language of respect for women was echoed by Ghanaian Archbishop Charles Palmer-Buckle, who also candidly noted that the church had failed throughout Africa to make a difference in such matters as political corruption and violence. "I think we're going to go away from here concerned that we need to do more about our own faithful, our Catholics, particularly our Catholic politicians," said Palmer-Buckle. "We need to accompany them, particularly in terms of the church's social teaching."

Palmer-Buckle also suggested that synods, exclusive of women and laity by their "very nature," might evolve into "something more like a pastoral congress of the universal church." As long as it remains a synod of bishops, let's put it this way -- the rules and regulations limit not just the contributions of laity, but even the priests. I believe the cry of women is actually the cry of the laity as a whole."

So what do African leaders and the rest of the world take away from the synod? Leave the documents in Rome. The conversation that evolved, the questions that emerged, the voices they heard, will follow them back to their countries and dioceses. Perhaps the discussion will influence their notions of church as they move into the future. Perhaps African church leaders will even decide to have that pastoral congress, as a trial, on African soil. They might teach the rest of the church some valuable lessons.

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