

ANALYSIS

The African case explains the chaos a synodal Church produces

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Though it has been underway for three years now, many Catholics are still unclear as to what a Synod on Synodality actually means, and what Synodality will look like when it is rolled out as a new normal through the Church, as the Synod members are currently

discussing. Synodal life, Synodal authority and Synodal discussion appear as hazy concepts, with a lot of talk taking but little information appearing.

But perhaps there is an example of what the Church will look like under the new path of Synodality. With the Synod on Synodality's October 2023 meetings having concluded at the Vatican, the entire Church was taken by surprise when Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernández published the declaration *Fiducia Supplicans* in December. Allowing for the blessing of same-sex couples, the document sparked heavy debate and controversy throughout the Church.

Some like Cardinal Robert Sarah argued that it is a contradiction of the Faith and the Gospel. Others, like Father James Martin SJ, welcomed it eagerly and performed a blessing for a same-sex couple within hours. Still more, however, quietly grumbled that the document had essentially bypassed the entire Synod, with high-ranking prelates in Rome favorable to the text even being disconcerted at the way it was issued.

Though *Fiducia Supplicans* and the Synod on Synodality are officially separate, the response to the former serves to highlight what the implementation of the latter could look like. The continent of Africa serves as the perfect case study, where firm rejection and acceptance of *Fiducia Supplicans* both appeared, and both received papal approval.

In a letter issued January 11, Cardinal Fridolin Ambongo – the president of the episcopal conferences of Africa and Madagascar – announced that *Fiducia Supplicans* would not be implemented in the entire continent.

“We, the African bishops, do not consider it appropriate for Africa to bless homosexual unions or same-sex couples because, in our context, this would cause confusion and would be in direct contradiction to the cultural ethos of African communities,” read his letter.

Ambongo, a close advisor to Pope Francis, insisted the African bishops “strongly reaffirmed their Communion” with the Pope, though they would not be implementing the blessings which he had authorized.

Were the African bishops to offer blessings of same-sex couples it would be “very difficult to be convincing that people of the same sex who live in a stable union do not claim the legitimacy of their own status,” he wrote. Instead, Ambongo’s letter noted that the bishops – drawing heavily from Scripture – “insist on the call for the conversion of all.”

But just days later, Cardinal Cristóbal López Romero in the north of Africa

announced that the bishops conference he leads in the region would be implementing *Fiducia Supplicans*. Romero – president of Regional Episcopal Conference of North Africa (CERNA) – wrote that “When people in an irregular situation come together to ask for a blessing, we can give it provided that it does not cause confusion for the interested parties themselves or for others.”

Romero’s decision was handed down on January 15, and appeared at the time as a direct rebuttal of Ambongo’s continent-wide declaration. Though Ambongo’s own diocese of Kinshasa is home to some 7 million Catholics, Romero’s district is much more sparsely populated with members of the Church.

It later transpired that Ambongo’s January 11 letter was written with the direct, line-by-line input of Pope Francis and Cardinal Fernández. Troubled by *Fiducia Supplicans*, Ambongo had requested a meeting with the Pontiff, and received Francis’ personal approval on the letter by which he rejected *Fiducia Supplicans* in Africa.

Romero was already acting in line with the Pope’s wishes, implementing the document that Francis had promulgated.

For his part, Romero was keen to downplay the concept of a formal rift between himself and Ambongo, but nevertheless the two responses to *Fiducia Supplians* remain in contradiction to one another. “We have not issued our communiqué in opposition to anyone or to distance ourselves from other events,” he told this correspondent via email. He, and subsequently CERNA’s secretary general Fr. Michel Guillaud, added that Ambongo had pre-empted CERNA’s response. According to Romero, Ambongo had requested the African bishops send him their responses to *Fiducia Supplicans* by January 15. With Romero’s CERNA holding its assembly January 11 through 15, this – Guillaud said – would have allowed CERNA time to submit its decision to Ambongo. “We would have liked our point of view to have been taken into consideration by SECAM, but the Symposium’s statement came out on January 11, unfortunately before our meeting and before the deadline we had been given for making our views known (beginning of the second half of January),” Romero told me.

The CERNA president continued, commenting that if Pope Francis “has had the largesse and flexibility to allow a concrete point of his provision not to be put into practice in a concrete territory like Africa,” then Ambongo and the African bishops’ conferences “will have the flexibility to allow, to those bishops who consider it appropriate, not to forbid what the Pope has allowed.”

Commenting briefly on the matter during the current Synodal assembly, Cdl. Romero said there was no animosity between himself and Ambongo. The Church and its members “go through different moments where we need to apologize to another,” he told the press.

Romero stated that “Cardinal Ambongo apologized to me for not consulting and I to him.” It was, he said, “a matter of moving forwards and going backwards, and this” in reference to a Synodal Church “will make us be much more humble.”

Is this then a foretaste of Synodality in action? With its consistent emphasis on “listening and dialogue” with the Synod eventually lead to a Church in which a practice is considered licit in one diocese or region, and illicit in the next?

The positions of Ambongo and Romero contradict each other, one prohibiting and the other permitting a certain practice. But in the Synodal Church, as Romero himself highlighted, positions can change directions and be simultaneously accepted. A Synodal Church of “listening and dialogue” is thus transformed into “listening, dialogue and co-existing contradictions,” and if this spreads to each diocese then soon the Catholic Church will become even more akin to a Protestant manner of existence. One diocese might allow the practice of female deacons citing a specific necessity, while another will firmly condemn them as against Church teaching. Yet two contradictory practices and teachings cannot be in accord with the Church’s unchanging Truth.

In such a Synodal Church no longer will there be a unified teaching and practice, rooted in the Gospel and unchanging throughout the globe, but every could begin to present a differing understanding and practice of the Faith.

If a Synodal Church means permitting the mutual co-existence of division, then the centrality of the Catholic Faith’s rooting in Christ’s unified and precise teaching becomes doubtful. The “one, holy, Catholic and apostolic” risks become the “divided, contradictory and confused.”