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ARTICLE

Kinship, Rurality, and Reform: Towards an African Ecclesiology for the Local Church

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Abstract

A top-down approach to ecclesial reform inhibits reception at the local level. This is evident from pastoral realities in dealing with changes in the church. To ignore the dynamics of a local or rural church community is a recipe for failed reforms, which may negatively impact the community. Where ecclesial authorities have the good intention of building a healthy, vibrant faith community, then the process must involve a co-constructive model that takes into account the obligations of the Magisterium and the dynamics of the rural community, both of which are operating fields of the Holy Spirit that vivifies the church. This article argues that to arrive at such a co-constructive approach, there is need to propose an ecclesiological model of the rural church, one that could be found in the African kinship ecclesiology. The article, therefore, explores the concept of African kinship ecclesiology, with its tripartite dimensions of comprehensiveness, compassion, and celebration. It further demonstrates how this ecclesiology could foster a multi-dimensional reform of the rural church.

Keywords: Rurality, Kinship ecclesiology, Family of God, Local church, Comprehensiveness, Compassion, Celebration, Solidarity, Parish

Introduction: Rurality and the Construction of a Local Church

Most theological conversations on rural theology emerge from Anglican practical or pastoral theology (Church of England 1985; ACORA 1990; Bowden 2003). However, in constructing a Catholic kinship ecclesiology, a Catholic rural theology should serve as a starting point. Given the limited sources on this subject, George H. Speltz's 1963 article, "Theology of Rural Life: A Catholic Perspective" provides some useful perspectives. Speltz essentially analyses papal social teachings within the context of an agrarian understanding of rurality (1963: 33–49). He argues that the true piety of the rural dwelling is rooted in agriculture, which preserves a profound connection

between the farmer and the land, plants, and animals. By the same token, any attempt at recreating rurality as mini extensions of industrialized urban is detrimental to the life, spirituality, and even the theology of the rural (1963: 37–38).

Defining rurality from the perspective of agriculture has always been challenged as a single narrative (Ellis 2000; Siwale 2013) despite the support it enjoys among many scholars (Cloke 2003; Shubin 2006; Woods 2010; Madu 2010). Juliana Siwale, for instance, argues that in Zambia, rurality is rather characterized by "low population densities, an abundance of land, poverty and an environment in which barter and self-sufficiency from peasant farming is common" (Siwale 2013: 16). Of course, there are suggestions that rurality is a "subjective and socially constructed" reality. In Africa, the material instruments of such social constructions are often traced to oppressive arrangements of coloniality. Historically, two closely related broad foundations are implicated here, namely the structures of isolation of the colonial era and the post-colonial discriminatory policies that exclude rural areas from the sphere of governance. The colonial "enclavement" of many African communities was justified by an argument that Africans are by nature "rural" (Mandela 1994: 2). Such a pejorative vocabularization has, over time, reduced rurality to a place of isolation and confinement. Unlike the Western representation of rurality as idyllic countryside that evokes serenity, innocence, communion with nature, and "an escape from modernity" (Siwale 2013: 24), the rural area in most African communities remains demonized. Such a negative characterization was a product of sustained impoverishing of rural communities that rendered their inhabitants economically, socially, and politically disadvantaged.

Nonetheless, there are also instances in Africa where the rural space provides the "positive escape" from the noise, aggression, and stress of the cities. Home is not characterized by urbanity but is defined by rurality, a rallying point for the entire extended family. This function of rurality implies an epistemological and/or existential disposition that serves both the urban and rural spaces, including the understanding of the church and church life in both. In all, the rural area is characterized by low population, an organic lifestyle, and a communal sensitivity that contrasts the anonymity of urban dwelling. My focus is not to probe the complexities of rurality but to explore the complexities of rurality as a space for the emergence of a cohesive ecclesiology that uncovers the understanding of the church by/in such an organic community. Such a cohesive ecclesiology designates the rural area as a place of comprehensiveness, compassion, and celebration.

Central to such ecclesiology is the structure of the parish community, which is not only a liturgical space but a social symbol, a communal home or house. In the Pauline letters, there are references to the small communities (or domestic churches) as "house" (cf. Rom.16.3-5; 1 Cor.16.19-20; Phil. 4.22), and this presents us with "a foretaste of the birth of the first 'parishes'" (Congregation for the Clergy 2020:

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Instruction §6). In fact, the original idea of parish that emerged from the context of rurality designates it as "a house among houses" in response to "the logic of Incarnation" within the community (*Instruction* §7). More broadly, Pope Francis describes the parish as "a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary outreach" (Francis 2013: §28). For a rural community, the parish is the house of the community; the *community* of the community that transcends denominational boundaries. Such a cohesive and intense understanding of the parish is fast depreciating, especially in the urban and modern settings. Today, "the Parish finds itself in a context whereby the territorial affiliation is increasingly less evident, where places of association are multiplied and where interpersonal relationships risk being dissolved into a virtual world without any commitment or responsibility towards one's neighbour" (*Instruction* §9). This sad reality reinforces the need to rediscover a rural ecclesiology for the purposes of building the church from the ground up. It provides the ground for affirming the parish as a theological starting point, defined not only by the structures but by the lived experiences of the members.

Historically, the original designation of a local church is the rural parish, which is primarily a representation of a true community before being considered as a constitutive part of a local or *particular* church, namely a diocese. The prioritization of the organic nature of a rural faith community signals an ecclesiology that expresses the intensity of the relationship among the members with all the sociological attributes of a cohesive small group. This sociological characterization parallels the ecclesiological understanding of Family of God (*Familia Dei*) together with the elements of common discernment, co-participation, and co-responsibility that flow from a locus of true belonging or ownership. This ecclesiology is most evident in African kinship.

Developing Kinship Ecclesiology and the African Paradigm of *Familia Dei*

The Second Vatican Council provided the church with an opportunity to reconstruct its ecclesiology with attention to the communal nature of early Christianity. It was a rural ecclesiology of some sort when historically considered from the intense relationality that defined that community from the time they flocked around Christ, during the pre-Pentecost wait, and in the season of persecution that followed Pentecost. The New Testament community was a close-knit circle that provided a sanctuary for the spiritual, moral, social, and even economic needs of the members (Acts 4.32). As noted by the American Evangelical theologian, Joseph H. Hellerman, "the expansion of early Christianity owed much to the social cohesiveness of the local churches" and this "has driven researchers to attempt to define more precisely the nature of these communities in light of the social environment in which they were

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situated" (Hellerman 2001: 3). Accordingly, kinship concepts like "fictive family" and "surrogate family" have been deployed in making such anthropological analysis. In fact, Hellerman would later describe early Christianity as possessing a "collectivist mind-set" (Hellerman 2009: 32) that puts the group ahead of the individual, a culture that is characteristic of the Mediterranean and the African world. Describing the intensity of such mind-set, he argues that "the social solidarity that the early Christians enjoyed as a result of living out their strong-group family values ultimately brought a whole pagan empire to its knees" (Hellerman 2009: 33). The rurality of the early ecclesia which frittered away in course of the church's rise to political power following the Edict of Milan by Constantine in AD 313 is once again recaptured in Vatican II's understanding of the church as a mystery of communion (*Lumen Gentium* §9), thus underscoring its nature as an "organic reality" (*Nota Explicativa* §2).

In interpreting and appropriating the idea of church as communion, the church in Africa reaches back to its understanding of what a most organic reality of communion is, namely, the family. As such, the ecclesiology of the church, the Family of God, was adopted at the 1994 African Synod. Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator (1995: 35) remarks that "[w]hat 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." He outlines some of these values as including "unity, solidarity, participation and co-responsibility; family-based and centered 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" (1995: 35–36). Rurality emerges in this ecclesiology in two forms. The first is that the expansive nature of the African family is a product of the rural communal setting, with the boundaries of consanguinity marked by the kindred, and so it is not limited or closed like the nuclear family system. While this has a positive value, it has also been criticized as barely transcending "the confines of tribal, clannish and ethnic affiliation" (1995: 36) in some cases. Yet its expansive nature also implies that it is capable of accommodating a Christian interpretation, in which the waters (of baptism) become as thick as the blood (of consanguinity), two elements that are present in the Eucharist. The second is linked to the disintegrative nature of urbanity, in the sense that urban migration weakens the relationship among family members, disintegrating bonds, and stretching the distance between blood relations. Urbanity's favoring of individualism and artificially constructed social bonds already implies the incapacity to construct an organic bond, unlike the rural environment.

In transitioning from the proposal of the church as a Family of God to developing the theological justification of such an ecclesiological model, a few things need to be

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pointed out. The first is that the model cannot be considered sufficient in accounting for the ecclesiology of the church. The objective of this essay is to see how this model can easily advance authentic reform and renewal in the local church. The second point is that the model is not entirely new (1995: 37). There are other images of the church that are suggestive of the family. Nevertheless, the African church has created an awareness of the profound value of this model, while at the same time challenging itself by it. The third is that theology of the church as Family of God, like any other interpretation of the church as communion, is rooted in the Trinity. The Trinitarian God is a family of three persons, whose self-communication brings into being the human family and whose self-communion defines the nature of the human family. Through the Incarnation, the triune God gathers the scattered human family to Godself, around the Eucharist, to participate in communion as a Family of God. The fundamental theological ground expressed here is critical for a deeper understanding of this ecclesiology. Part of my goal is to stretch the understanding of the rural nature of this ecclesiology by exploring the dimensions of the African kinship ecclesiology upon which the African Family of God ecclesiology rests. This involves exploring the threefold characteristics of comprehensiveness, compassion, and celebration that define African kinship ecclesiology.

On the Tripartite Dimensions of African Kinship Ecclesiology

In constructing an ecclesiology with the attributes of rurality, the "Family of God" model ought to mirror, *par métaphore*, the extended family rather than the more exclusive nuclear family typology. In that context, it should be able to recapture broadly the values of "care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationships, acceptance, dialogue and trust" (John Paul II 1995: §63). This means integrating communio ecclesiology with an African Christian anthropology that extends beyond the boundaries of blood relations. Concerning the specific understanding of communio, the Kampala Document by the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM 2019) underscores that "The Church-Family of God in Africa implies both communion with God and communion with our brothers and sisters, Christians, called to a communion of life, love, and truth of action, faithfulness, and of witnessing. The Church is Family of interconnected persons. Love, acceptance, forgiveness, commitment, and intimacy constitute its very fabric; as well as the celebration of faith, pardon, joy, and sharing. It is a community in which justice, peace and mutual love are realized and lived." Baptism is the means of belonging to the family, which becomes as it were a "real participation in the death and resurrection of Christ, … the foundation of our oneness or unity in Christ" (§81) Regarding the pneumatology of this communion the document states that it is "the Holy Spirit

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[that] puts Christian communities and the baptized in a network of faithfulness to Christ and interpersonal Christian relations" (§83) The sense of communion within the church as the Family of God is ontological. It is neither defined by ecclesial structure nor does it consist of a psychological reality. Simply put, "[t]he Church is not merely the place where people feel they are in the Family of God, but also where they become in reality and ontologically a family" (§84).

Concerning the anthropological dimension, one observes that in the African ecclesiology of the Family of God, a certain intersubjectivity emerges that accounts not only for communion within the intra-ecclesial relationship but also beyond. In the context of synodality, Stan Chu Ilo (2023) describes this intersubjectivity as "samaritization of the process". He explains that the average Christian is invited to be the Good Samaritan who perceives in the other, particularly those in need, a representation of "nwanne m" (Igbo: "my brother or sister" – the one who belongs to the same Family of God with me), the one whose existence is entangled with mine, and so deserves my love and compassion. From an African worldview, Ilo further argues:

> *Samaritanizing the synodal process invites the church and its members to a renewal of inter-subjectivity in the church that begins from within the hearts of all persons as an inner grace and interior logic of love. From this interior desire, arises a movement in which the human person seeks the connection with the other in what the African ancestors captured as ubuntu, that is the wisdom that says that the recognition of the other makes me human or rather that in affirming the humanity of the other, I affirm my own humanity. (Ilo, 2023)*

Extending the conversation, Ilo insists that this ecclesiological model provides "a space for a polylogue" within the synodal process "where everyone shares their stories, lamentations, hopes and dreams". The idea is to facilitate an African Christian imagination of a kinship of faith where Christ is the head of a diverse faith family.

The implications of the proposed kinship ecclesiology are threefold, and these correspond to the key characteristics of such an ecclesiology.

- **Kinship ecclesiology is *comprehensive***. It accounts for both the vertical and horizontal dimensions of communion that emphasize the family vocabulary of the Trinity ("Father"', "Son"', "generation", and "filiation") as well as the "maternal" and "fraternal" images of the church (Congar 1970: 26). Comprehensiveness also points to the relationality between the universal and the local, the local churches with each other, and the denominations among themselves. Here, kinship is marked by baptism as highlighted by the Kampala document (SECAM 2019: §81) and sustained by the Eucharist: "Baptism incorporates all into the body that the risen Lord builds up and keeps alive through the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the

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creative and uniting force and source of life of members of the Church, because it unites each one of them with Christ himself." (§84) Recapturing this kinship sets the stage for a double reform. The first is based on the internal reconciliation with God and with one another, where injuries caused by sexual, spiritual, and power abuses are confronted and addressed as injuries caused to the Family of God. This interior, self-reflexive conversion does not simply separate the victim from the perpetrator since both belong to the same family, whereby the abuse of any member of the church is the abuse of the Family of God that is the church. The second reform is focused on becoming a better family where everyone cares for everyone in a co-responsible and co-participative way. By extension, this connects with an ecumenical dimension where the elasticity of baptism equally reflects the elasticity of the sanguinity of kinship. In that way, there is also a double healing, first of the memory of historical divisions and injury caused to one another, and second of contemporary rivalry and campaigns of calumny against one another. The remembering, healing, and metanoia open the path to sustainable solidarity, which is constitutive of the proposed African kinship ecclesiology.

- **Kinship ecclesiology is that it is *compassionate***. It flows from the cross of Christ. Thus, it recognizes that "the griefs and anxieties" (Gaudium et spes) of one's ecclesial community are inextricably entangled with the conditions of others, particularly those with whom we share the same waters of baptism. Whatever affects one, invariably affects all, both the negative and positive. A compassionate kinship ecclesiology is a lived expression of radical solidarity within and outside the ecclesial community. It is not evasive or dismissive of differences, whether of race, colour, sex, status, or class, but engages with these diversities together with the tensions and conflicts that emerge therefrom. It is not a *sanitized* community that is pretentious of the existential challenges and difficulties, but thrives in an openness and sensitivity that interprets suffering as a participation in the cross of Christ and in the tribulations of one another. Furthermore, this kinship ecclesiology is marked by the blood of martyrdom and suffering. While martyrdom expresses the extreme form of suffering on account of one's faith, the suffering caused by poverty, hunger, exclusion, and deprivation is shared by everyone. Martyrdom in this case is also defined by the radicality of love, the consequence of which is death, both in the figurative and literal sense. Love leads to death, yet the resurrection faith teaches us that death is not the end of love. The rural setting provides the setting for the attentiveness of love with all the practical implications. It offers a space for mutual accompaniment through the challenges of life, unlike urbanity that is characterized by the scarcity of time and attention. There is also an ecumenical extension in this case, where solidarity and dialogue constitute the appropriate response of the rural church community.

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The goal of constructing an ecclesiological behaviour that overcomes ecumenical apathy with a view to advance social transformation of the society (Okpaleke 2022: 390) begins with the rural setting and its conditions of martyrdom.

- **Kinship ecclesiology is *celebratory***. This is because the "Family of God" in Christ is a joyful invitation to a common life of thanksgiving. Community life of the rural area is centered around the Eucharist in its multiple senses of communion, memorial, sacrament, and particularly as real presence. Characteristically, 'the real' of the presence is active rather than passive, interactive rather than isolated. This is because life in the rural setting is defined by an availability that is not only limited to the body and space but marked by a certain form of vivacity that is enhanced by an in-depth knowledge of one another. Experiences of sharing, fellowship, and communication that take place in the daily lives of the people define rural life. The rural, local church reflects a complete understanding of the threefold real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, namely "his presence in the gathered community, his presence in the word proclaimed, and his presence in the food shared" (Lash 1967: 179). Celebration is at the heart of African kinship, whether in sharing common meals, festivals, marriages, or in the act of hospitality towards both familiar and unfamiliar guests. In that sense, the eucharistic presence of the rural kinship ecclesiology possesses an elastic boundary that reaches out in the service of the world, beginning with the ecumenical neighbours. The ecumenical dimension chimes with the convergences in the *Synthesis Report* of the First Session of the Synod on Synodality concerning ecumenical gestures and intermarriages, the consideration of "Eucharistic hospitality", as well as the proposal for common celebration. Within this context, one could also refer to the idea of inter-/trans-denominationality as a space for ecumenical co-celebration, the possibility of which is raised by African kinship. In this case, each common celebration is "eucharistic" so long as a) it reflects some sort of communion among the baptized as some sort of sharing in the joy of the redemption by Christ, and b) it is oriented towards the ultimate "communion in sacred things" (*communicatio in sacris*), marked by the same Eucharistic table. To ignore opportunities for these symbolic "eucharistic" celebratory communions is to diminish the *vital energy* of the kinship of African Christianity (Ilo 2013: 138). Nonetheless, the issue goes beyond the ecumenical space to all forms of relationships that we can ever have, all of which are in constant yearning for the eucharistic experience. As Nicholas Lash puts it, even if our eucharistic fellowship could be expressed and deepened in a certain direction (intra-Catholic and ecumenical), it is important to remark that "our relationships with other people are by no means limited to our relationships with our fellow-Catholics, or even our fellow-Christians." Thus, "if we really believe in the universality of the redemption event in Christ, then *all* our

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relationships, every form of human community cries out for eucharistic expression" (Lash 180).

Having outlined the threefold characteristics of the African kinship ecclesiology, it is important to turn to praxis. The task is to explore how such an ecclesiology could be deployed in the reform of the local church.

Exploring the Possibilities of Reform in the Local Church

How can a Family of God-inspired kinship ecclesiology that is comprehensive, compassionate, and celebratory become an asset for the renewal or reform of the local church? How does a kinship ecclesiology mobilize the faithful towards an intense communion in a fragmented and fragmenting church? To ask these questions in the context of the canonical understanding of a local church is to depart from the focus on the parish. However, to address the parish without distinguishing the rural from the urban raises yet another question of whether the rural ecclesiology can be appropriated for the urban parish setting. The problem is therefore to question whether urbanity is not to be considered as a theological object for a kinship ecclesiology. My argument in this case is that the urban area has its own dynamic, which is not the primary concern of this article. But then the understanding of a kinship ecclesiology is not geographically fixed, although the best qualities of a typical rural setting are appropriated in constructing an ecclesiology that is both intense in its expression of solidarity and dynamic in its radical inclusivity. While rurality is the context for the determination of its attributes, it is essentially a kinship ecclesiology, which in a way universalizes its application beyond the rural. Hence, there is the possibility of practising a rural ecclesiology in an urban setting, although this might require a condition of being a small group. The ethnographic study carried out by Candler School of Theology's Susan Bigelow Reynolds at the center of Boston's Egleston Square suggests this. According to Reynolds (2023: 4), the "quirky parish" of St Mary of the Angels distinguishes itself "by making solidarity with its neighborhood and among parishioners central to its way of being". The community's *way of being* coincides with a particular *way of doing* that recognizes "family" in the other.

Reynolds posits that often the ecclesiological model of communion is invoked as an ideology to smother differences, thereby creating ecclesial communities that are plastic in their interiority. She proposes a rediscovery of the Vatican II notion of solidarity, as a means to organically transverse "the intimate, immediate borderlines" within local church communities. According to her, "[s]olidarity centers human difference as a good; lifts up the agency, authority, and practices of grassroots communities; reaches toward a vision of the common good; makes demands of those with

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power; and, with eyes open to the pain of reality, maintains, against all odds, a fierce determination in the power and possibility of love" (2023: 11).

Vatican II's self-reflexive solidarity recaptures the original idea of a parish as a local church community that is closer to the New Testament understanding. Pope Francis's programme of dialogue and synodality is an example of the theological reception of the Council's teaching on solidarity. It focuses on rebuilding organic faith communities that thrive despite existential tensions, bearing witness to both the Spirit's gift of diversity and the radical charity of the gospel. Reynolds argues that the parish communities had already received the Council's unfinished project of interior solidarity because for many of the baptized "it was in the parish that the council's softening of borderlines had the most immediate effect" (2023: 43). She further contends that the "[p]opular reception of the people-of-God ecclesiology disclosed a desire for the transformation of power relationships and ministerial roles within parishes" such that contrary to being perceived as "a static arbiter of salvation, dispenser of sacramental grace, and insular refuge from the threats of the modern world, the parish was now seen as a historically and contextually situated community of pilgrims on a shared journey" (2023: 43). For the Council, the objective is not to introduce democracy within the structures of parish governance, but to initiate the spirit of dialogue and ecclesial co-participation that rests on the common priesthood of the faithful (*Lumen Gentium* §10).

Reclaiming an African-inspired kinship ecclesiology that is marked by the values of rurality, therefore, has consequences for reform and renewal of the church, particularly at the local church. I shall indicate two areas of concern, namely a) synodal governance, and b) solidarity with the poor and marginalized.

From Synodality to Synodal Governance

The reform programme of Pope Francis, which is captured by the notion of synodality, finds so much bearing with the kinship ecclesiology at two levels. The first is that synodality is rooted in the ecclesiology of communion that is captured by the notion of kinship or extended family, where the People of God journey together as one Family of God under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The second is that the elements present in the idea of synodality are captured by the values of the family. In the family, the identity of the family is a value in itself, such that, just as any member of the family can bring fame and fortune to the entire family, in the same measure, any evil action of one member could injure the prestige of all. In a similar way, within the Family of God, the praxes of co-responsibility, mutual accountability, and co-participation serve as means of exercising joint commitment to the integrity of the Family of God by all baptized.

Still on practical areas of reform and renewal, we need to move from the general understanding of synodality to the idea of synodal governance in the church in

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exploring the impact of kinship ecclesiology. The purpose of the synod is not to produce documents but to stimulate trust, heal wounds, build relationships, revive a dawn of hope, learn from one another, and create a positive vision that enlightens minds, warms hearts, and restores strength. A synodal reform of the parish requires that we apply the three characteristics of comprehensiveness, compassion, and celebration in living out the structures of governance within the parish. The relationship between the parish priest and other pastoral agents (parochial vicar, lay, and religious), even when defined within existing administrative structures, must be infused with this synodal spirit of kinship. Collaborations within the pastoral council structures must be focused on building the Family of God, where nobody is left out in the mission of salvation. To realize this challenge, we must consider the need for inclusive listening to give voice to those often forgotten or marginalized: young people, women, aged, the poor, people with disabilities, etc. Since the agency of every member of the parish is of value, the next point is to ensure that their gifts and abilities are respected in a 'shared decision-making' process. The final document of the *Synod of Bishops* (2024) refers to this as "differentiated co-responsibility" (§89), where all the faithful share a sense of belonging and commitment in the church.

Synodal governance is not so much interested in power as it is in the quality of service, which distinguishes the church from secular politics. Hence, the document emphasizes that "decision-making does not conclude the discernment process" rather "it must be accompanied and followed by practices of accountability and evaluation undertaken in the spirit of transparency inspired by evangelical criteria" (§95). Indeed, the practice of transparency, accountability, and evaluation "safeguards the trust and credibility needed by a synodal Church that is attentive to relationships" (§97). Coming from the bruises of sexual abuse, transparency and accountability are non-negotiables in a church reform that aims to deepen relationships. Comprehensiveness implies that nothing is kept behind closed doors, solidarity means that everyone is there for everyone, and true celebration can only happen in a context of trust and pure joy. Not being limited to ecclesial legalism, synodal governance aligns with the central tenets of kinship ecclesiology in creating a community of the baptized that is inclusive, respectful of each other's gifts, and joyful.

Redefining Ecclesial Identity through Solidarity with the Poor

Kinship ecclesiology creates an inclusive space where the dignity of the poor is safeguarded, and the marginalized find recognition and acceptance. Often, the idea of diversity is deployed to explain the non-homogeneous nature of the church, but often in a manner that only emphasizes differences of charism, ministry, and gender. Even where the diversity of status is considered, the poor is reduced to an object of pity and charity rather than an equal member of the Family of God. In this case, the image of the biblical Lazarus (Lk.16.19-31) is used in a deconstructive way, in which

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the poor finally receives attention, but remains the stranger, the beggar, and never part of the family. However, the fact is that the common denominator is the Family of God to which everyone belongs, irrespective of status, race, gender, sexuality, or age. No matter the popular opinion within the family, those who fall outside what is considered normative for most people are still embraced as family. Thus, since rurality is associated with poverty, the poor do not feel out of place within such a community, yet from a theological perspective, kinship ecclesiology satisfies the conditions for the construction of a church of the poor.

Within the context of what he considered as an 'ecclesiology of vulnerable mission', Ilo (2014: 241) considers the present vocation of the church today as an invitation "to become a poor church, for the poor of the Lord." This represents an invitation to enter into solidarity with the poor, not as outsiders, but to become a poor church that is only interested in giving, sharing, and uplifting the other rather than accumulating and living lavishly as Pope Francis advocates (2013: §198), and preannounced in the writings of liberation theologians, particularly Gustavo Gutiérrez (Nickoloff 1993). Such an ecclesiology is characterized, according to Ilo, by the three factors of peregrination, incarnation, and transformation, since it unsettles the church, takes it on a journey that leads towards a transformation into the image of the kenotic Christ. He further argues that a church of the poor embraces, on the one hand, a positive material poverty that is expressed in detachment from wealth while creating a new consciousness that transcends the trappings of wealth, and on the other hand, a positive spiritual poverty that is lived out in total humility and absolute trust in God.

The result is a renewed self-understanding of the church that could be practically lived out in a local church marked by rurality. Ilo (2014: 235) posits that such "[a] renewed Catholic ecclesiology, grounded in a Trinitarian image and a sacramental ecclesiology of communion and friendship, could become a strong cultural and spiritual influence in the church's search for a praxis for realizing her preferential option for the poor" (see Francis 2013: §§198–201). This is of primary necessity in the world today as the church responds to the divine invitation "to walk and work with the poor in finding answers to the challenges of poverty, diseases, abuse of the rights of the powerless and those on the margins, migration and human dislocation, ethnic and religious conflicts, radical Islamic fundamentalism, religious intolerance, all forms of discriminations against minorities, wars, political and economic problems, the effects of climate change, and natural disasters" (Francis 2013).

Conclusion

African kinship ecclesiology conceptualizes ecclesial bond within a larger framework of social bond that is rooted in an extended relationship of sanguinity, the family. It

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is an ecclesiology that relies heavily on the positive characteristics of rurality in terms of cohesiveness, serenity, withdrawal, interrelationship, and organic understanding of the other. Its approach is socio-theological since it combines the baptismal initiation with a traditional understanding of what makes one a member of a family. The understanding of the church as a Family of God does not begin and end with the baptism together with its Trinitarian implications, but also considers the interpretation of the lived reality of family in a people's pilgrimage with God. Of course, there are many bad examples of what family should be, and the negative understanding of kinship and rurality today, but these are not normative for kinship ecclesiology. Of course, I do not advocate a selective idealization of family or kinship as if it were in all cases a perfect unit. Not at all. Rather, the normative framework of the family is what makes inclusion, reconciliation, solidarity, and hospitality possible. Why? Because it is family.

In the proposed kinship ecclesiology, the church opens itself to the radicality of tripartite values of comprehensiveness, solidarity, and celebration, which align with the ideals of the Gospel. To realize these ideals, the kinship ecclesiology is best realized in the local church since both bear the attributes of rurality. In its small group set-up, the parish, which is an ideal local church, emerges as an ideal extended Family of God, a kinship of the baptized, where members bring together their individual charisms within the pool of a communal interrelationship. Relationship at this level generates reform and transformation, as I demonstrated in two examples. First is in the instance of an ecclesial lifestyle of synodality, where nobody is left behind in the governance of the church, and where trust and integrity are built on the parameters of transparency and accountability. The second is in a radical solidarity with the poor and marginalized. Also implicated in all of these is an extra-ecclesial relationality whereby ecumenical and interfaith dialogues are approached from a new perspective of extended kinship.

Finally, members of the local church must be ready for the confrontational dimension of the kinship ecclesiology where conflicts are not avoided but faced headlong (Francis 2013: §226). Contrary to this is a certain interpretation of the communio ecclesiology that "ultimately underwrites ecclesial colorblindness, a vision of church unity predicated upon an impossible unseeing of difference" (Reynolds 54). The truth is that some conflicts can never be solved, but the tension that they create can be resolved when frankly addressed from the perspective of the gospel and the love for one another in the one Family of God. Ultimately, the reality of interrelationship in kinship ecclesiology means that each one and everyone is affected by any (in)action that either improves or diminishes life in the church.

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