THE PALABRA, AFRICAN WOMAN

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2. The African *palabra*/palaver. Could it serve as a model for an inculturated reform of ecclesiasticall structures?

Were these Conciliar prospects assimilated by the churches in the decades following the closure of Vatican II? The question is very broad and complex. The scope of this article covers both the rethinking of the global ecclesiological model of reference and the importance attributed to humanity's multiple cultural spheres. The analysis of just one single piece of the relevant, complex picture could provide a sample, albeit limited, of the extent and complexity of the question.

The tessera chosen here consists in considering the African *palabra* as a possible model to re-organise the structure of the African churches, drawing useful criteria from it. However, this calls for discernment and its implementation in successive stages in order to introduce synodality, the keystone of the hoped-for reform of Church structures not only in Africa. This transition has as its horizon the Church-Family of God whose focus, in the first instance, is on the Word, basic reference for everyone and every individual in the diversity of prerogatives, roles and tasks, because the Word creates, heals and forgives. Indeed, that Word once received bears fruit, because it demands a personal and community response in order to bring about the harmonious, integral and holistic transformation of existence. Such transformation is not imposed from above, nor does it depend on the decisions of some or of a few, for each and every member plays an active part in it in his or her own way.

The above assumptions are the guidelines for this text and follow up three characteristics of the African *Palabra* in an ecclesiological key, developing it in two stages.

2.1. Preliminary considerations

Before tackling the topic, one should remember that the issue of the inculturation of the Gospel in Africa is not new and can be counted among the foundations — which from certain aspects are probably the most important — of African Theology. In the post-Conciliar period, there were certainly innovative attempts to find a way to make the African Churches authentically Christian and authentically African. In fact, whoever says "African Church", means a church rooted in the African culture and traditions, and on the biblical, theological and ecclesiological foundations of the Christian faith [1] that, in the Gospel perspective, requires — or even demands — on-going conversion.[2] In other words, it is a "dialogue between the Gospel and African cultures".[3]

Starting from the cultural background of Africa, African Theology has basically two constants that are actually fundamental for every effort the Christian mission makes to inculturate: christology[4] and ecclesiology. If, on the one hand, "in the Christian religion the person of Jesus is at the center, rather, he is the decisive factor of theological evaluation",[5] on the other, "the ecclesial nature of any missionary activity" [6] represents a crucial point and a criterion of authenticity. In other words, the effort to inculturate rests on two main axes: Christ and the Church. The first is more easily verifiable in the development of African ancestral Christology,[7] while the second concerns the search for an African Ecclesiology which makes the African churches the protagonists of the mission[8] on the continent. The vital link between Christology and ecclesiology also depends on

drawing up an African Ecclesiology, which implies the reorganization of the aforementioned ecclesial structures too. In fact African theologians think that the Church in Africa needs to be re-thought, including its organization and type of animation, by drawing on the customs of society on the continent. African Christology (mainly ancestral) proposes a "Christological-Eucharistic Ecclesiology based on the African concept of life"[9] that is, on the traditional African model of society, in which "every member is required to make his/her own contribution to the vital force of the whole community",[10] and facilitates a positive and prudent journey of inculturation.

Referring once again to Congar and the need to choose the way of total Gospel radicalism and creativity as an obligatory stage, though not the only approach; and to study the traditional models of African society and their constituent customs, since these provide a good background for that *invenire*/creativity which suggests in a special way both the possible reform of the ecclesial structures, and how to implement them. It should be noted that among these models the *Palabra*, in traditional African societies, plays an active role in community life because it fosters social relations besides expressing the vitality of a culture of peace. This is a more or less open meeting whose holistic mission is to find, through discussion, solutions to some problems which an individual, family or the whole community may have.[11] The *Palabra* is not *per se* a predetermined, homogeneous and uniform structure, but a mode of encounter and relating, that takes place in specific ways. This gives it vitality and a certain character of universality, inasmuch as it is common to a number of African cultures. Moreover this form of dialogue is current practice in modern African societies, and it serves to reach a truly peaceful solution by encouraging and supporting the process of reconciliation, the promotion of justice and the creation of harmony within a community that is more or less extended.

2.2 *The meaning and essential features of the African* Palabra

In traditional African societies, the success of a project of life depends on how happy and good are the relations between human beings. In fact, in the traditional African concept of humanity, the community comes first, and includes not only the living but also the dead and those who are not yet born and, by extension, all of Creation, thus giving rise to an intergenerational, intercultural and inter-creature dialogue. In the African context, the process of dialogue and reconciliation often highlights the importance of the sense of community that Africans attach to life. This feeling appears in various forms and modalities; among these, the *palabra* represents one of the most meaningful expressions, because it is essentially rooted in communitarian African anthropology.[12] However, while maintaining the same base and the same principles, the modality of the *palabra* may vary from one tradition to another, in so far as it depends on the purpose and the people involved.[13] So, what is the *palabra* and what are its essential characteristics?

2.2.1. *What is the African* palabra?

The *palabra* is a traditional African practice. It is also in current use regarding different aspects of social and family life. It is an old practice that has received new impetus from philosophical reflection, ethics and theology in modern Africa. According to some African theologians and philosophers, the word *palabra* might be a derivation of the Portuguese word *palavre*, which indicates a dialogue between the settlers and the indigenous peoples; for others, it might derive from the French term *palabre*, in the context of a heated discussion, or a process in a village tribunal.[14] In

this regard it concerns a debate, bargaining or a measure to reduce hostilities by means of talks; in volatile circumstances to restrain human violence, which could explode during the discussion, by submitting it to the creative power of the word.[15] Other scholars consider this a technical term, deriving from the noun *palabra* of Spanish origin, understood as a method by which a word, addressed to someone, demands, so to speak, reception and a response.[16]

Indeed all the references to the term *palabra*, which is of foreign origin, indicate a public assembly in the family and social sphere, where everything concerning the life of individuals or of the entire community is discussed. In this way at the *palabra* the discussion concerns public affairs, conflict resolution, legal acts, etc. The *palabra* meeting offers a common path to search for a law for social life, and a life-style of communion, which can fill existence with joy and happiness for all. It has a community and family character and its real aim is to serve the interests of the community and of each person. Both in the community and the family contexts the *palabra* places the creativity of the word and the importance of listening to everyone at the centre.[17]

Naturally, to involve the whole community in the *palabra* meeting, the choice of place and date is important. In most African traditions before the *palabra,* especially that of sports, there is a pre-*palabra*[18] to summon people and make preliminary plans, in view of the preparations for the *Palabra* Assembly, an event which must not take anyone by surprise. Therefore, the pre-*palabra* is decisive, because it answers not only the question of why the *palabra* is being held, but also explains how, who, and what is involved. Although one may come across the *palabra* at all levels of social life, according to Bidima there are generally two types of *palabra*: the Sports *Palabra*, understood as the process of reconciliation in the context of conflict resolution and the *irenic/*peace *palabra* that is held outside of every conflict.[19]

Why is a *palabra* convened? In general there must be either the awareness that a problem exists (in the case of Sports *Palabra*), or an intention to plan something for the good of the group (Peace/*irenic Palabra*). Although, due to the escalation of conflict which relentlessly afflicts the African continent, many prefer to indicate the Sports *Palabra* as a model of reconciliation, also from the theological point of view.[20] However, in our opinion, it would be better to emphasize the Peace/*irenic Palabra* that takes place outside of any conflict. This is because the *Palabra* Assembly has a holistic vision of the life of the community and tries first and foremost to create and promote harmony.[21] In this sense one might say that the *palabra* is a community practice of reconciliation, for the reconstruction of the social fabric and a plan for strengthening the life of the community. Despite differing from one culture to another or from one context to another,[22] the practice of the African *palabra* has certain common characteristics of which three are particularly important for the subject of this text: its community dimension, its free dialogical character, and the role of third parties.

2.2.2. *The community dimension of the* palabra

The *palabra* is first and foremost a popular assembly that involves all the members of the community; it is an area of vital relationality. The role of the community in a *Palabrical* Assembly is complex because it is, at one and the same time, the subject and the object. On the one hand, in fact, the community is the principle protagonist of the *palabra* as it is actively involved in it; on the other, it can either benefit from, or be a victim of, the decision of the *Palabrical* Assembly. For this

reason, the community dimension of the *palabra* is of crucial importance. Furthermore, since the primary purpose of the *palabra* is to establish harmony in the Community, it requires, so to speak, that everyone participate in it.

The *palabra* is a holistic and integral dialogue that touches all the fields of life, both personal and communal, as well as the generational dimension.[23] It is a dialogue in which the life of the Community is subjected to the reflection of every member. This very important perspective promotes and requires the cooperation of all, especially in fields as vital as education, health, care of creation, the culture of peace, justice and reconciliation. Since, numerous realities, figures and people are involved in the *Palabra* Assembly one can say that it is a space of cosmic and intergenerational dialogue. In this assembly, then, not only is the individual or the individual community brought into play, but also the honour of the entire ethnic group including the ancestors, the living and those who are not yet born.

From this point of view, one can understand how grave the *Palabrical* Assembly's decision to exclude a member from the community would be; thus cutting a member of the community off from communion with the living and the dead. This would be the worst decision a *palabra* could make, because the excluded person would lose the support and esteem of the Community. A person who is alienated and uprooted from the Community is as dead, even if that member eats and continues to move and move about, he is excluded in some way from the quick and the dead, and so to speak deprived of divine grace and far removed from the ancestors. To understand the gravity of this situation, it should be recalled that, in Africa, as Amadou Hampaté Bâ has stressed, the individual is never separable from his tribe that continues to live through him and of whom he is only an extension. This is why when one wishes to honour someone, one greets him by calling not only his personal name, but that of his clan too several times, because one is not greeting an isolated individual, but through him, the whole group of his ancestors.[24] Thus, in order to mitigate the consequences of the exclusion, although exiled from his village, the individual, whose fault was recognized by the Assembly, might not be totally excluded, in so far as the family or the Community might find another tribe or society prepared to host him.[25]

2.2.3. *The* palabra, *a free space for dialogue*

One important, central element of the *palabra*, being primarily a space of relationality, is *palabrical* dialogue. This expression means an exchange of words, gestures, symbols, of silence and of other communicative elements during the Assembly. The *palabra* uses some well-known traditional cultural elements such as proverbs, tales, riddles, fairytales, puzzles, parables, judicial and *palabrical* songs, symbols and gestures,[26] all of which form part of the *palabrical* scene. As Pesa has rightly affirmed, the African *palabra*, thanks to its capacity for social interaction and dialogue,[27] coordinates the discussion, since it allows for a creative practice of the word.[28] It thus becomes, so to speak, an appropriate place and a privileged space for the word — whether active or passive, theoretical or practical — to express communication and communion.[29] In *palabrical* dialogue, not only the word enunciated, but also pauses of silence are factors of harmony, becoming cosmic bonds of cooperative socialization. such dialogue is a means of education and progress *par excellence*,[30] because its action and form promote harmony in society.[31]

More than a physical place, the space of the *Palabrical* Assembly (whether under a tree, in the public square, in the house of the chief...) is a psychological and social space open to communication;[32] it is a symbolic space to encounter and discover the other; it offers space and time for the identification of oneself and of the other/s. In short, a community of free subjects in interaction.[33]

During the *Palabra* Assembly the voice and the personal identity of each participant constitute elements for discussion and for the commitment of the entire community. To question and to allow oneself to be questioned, being willing to allow others to express their thoughts and opinions on their rules of conduct, on their way of seeing and behaving,[34] is what makes *palabrical* dialogue the privileged forum of the word and of discussion.[35]

The choice of venue for the meeting of the *Palabra* Assembly is therefore important. Indeed, during the *palabra*, every member has the right to take the floor to express what he has at heart and the *palabra* does not end until all the participants have spoken. In speaking freely the word that heals is pronounced which helps the community to resolve conflicts.

The *palabra* guarantees the equality and access of all to have a turn to speak, in view of the liberation of the individual, the strengthening of the Community or the family. During the *palabra,* in addition to the primacy accorded to the elderly, there is the "prohibition to interrupt, the need for complete frankness.... Each one is invited to comment in turn. All the participants have the duty to listen to the end without interrupting".[36] The *Palabra* also highlights the healing function of the word. In fact, before the invention of writing the word was at the center of life and many African cultures have maintained this sacred principle, which emphasizes the importance attributed to the word and therefore to the *palabra*, whose function also consists in ensuring that a word, pronounced in community, bear life and not death. This forum gives access to the "Other". The *Palabra* is therefore also considered to be *therapeutic,* because its purpose is to destroy the infernal cycle of violence in order to restore harmony and peace.

2.2.4. *The role of third parties*

To ensure fairness in the discussions and decisions which engage the community as a whole, the *Palabra* is organized on various levels and involves people with different responsibilities that are more or less defined. The protagonists of the *Palabra* Assembly are the king or the chief, the wise men, the parties concerned (in the case of the Sports *Palabra*), the speakers and the spectators. The team of moderators plays a decisive, fundamental role in *Palabra* Assemblies, especially in Sports events, because of the risk of falsehood, inconsistency, cheating and smart dealing in the way the evidence is presented.[37] Therefore, one important aspect which should not be overlooked in the *Palabra* Assembly is the choice of the third parties, also called the team of moderators, whose absence or inefficiency may simply render the purpose of the Assembly void.

In most cultures, due to their important role, the choice of the third parties is often defined by tradition. Generally, as Bidima states, the team is composed of members of: the royal family, the winners in the preliminary contests, middle-aged people and, if the jurisdiction covers a limited territory, of the elders. However, in the case of very serious matters, the heads of families will address the king or the sovereign directy.[38] However, whatever the tradition and the modality chosen, the team of moderators should be composed of morally upright and spiritually sound

people, who are above suspicion, modest and not greedy for fraudulent gains. In short, blameless people, known for their honesty and good reputation. Rather than implacable judges, they must show mercy and compassion, and bear witness to their ability to serve peace and harmony.[39]

One characteristic of the *palabra* dialogue is the fact that the chief or the king, or in general whoever presides over the *Palabra* Assembly, intervenes to deliberate, to sum it up, draw a conclusion or take a decision which involves the whole community, after hearing the people and the opinion of the Council of the Wise-men or team of moderators. Normally, the latter, after having listened to the opinion of the sports parties', to that of the competitors/participants, ask for time to deliberate so as to analyze the evidence they have heard in order to come to an agreement. The concerted verdict is then presented to the king, or to the chief, who takes it into account in order to take a decision for the good of the whole community.[40]

The above reflection on the *palabra,* taken as a model of organization, has examined two types of relationship: that within family and social life, as well as their implementation in a particular structure. It has focused on three characteristic aspects: its community dimension, which implies the involvement of each and every individual in his private, family, and social life; open, free dialogue, in order to evaluate the word and its function in creating, strengthening or healing human relations; the role of third parties engaged in the search for a common solution for the good of each person and of the community, whatever it may be. These three characteristics, albeit by analogy, resemble the Church inasmuch as it lives from the Word and is enlivened by the Spirit, to whose service some are chosen and empowered by God to serve as guides and animators.

Inasmuch as the *palabra* forms an integral part of African culture, it could be employed in the context of the ecclesiological model of Church-Family of God, or to help achieve an inculturated reform of Church structures in a synodal key?

The next section will briefly consider some of the *palabra's* implications subsequent to the event, to help people to think of the Church-Family of God in a new way as a *palabrical* community, a true space for the Word which, on the one hand, creates, strengthens and heals relations that constitute the Church (God, self, others and Creation) while, on the other, it actively calls into question all the Church's subjects, regardless of the different charisms and ministries, and without overlooking the special role of third parties (pastors and community leaders).

2.3. The African *Palabra* and some of its ecclesiological implications

The African *Palabra* has already been used in various ways; firstly, as a community approach to the Sacrament of Reconciliation in a festive way.[41] In the *palabrical* dynamic this does not necessarily imply the idea of condemnation,[42] rather it implies the commitment of the entire community to accompany the journey of conversion of its own members. Despite some initial difficulty concerning an overall comparison of the Gospel to the *Palabra* of African cultures, the use of some *palabrical* elements (especially the common search for consensus) is already a fact in the life of Christian communities, showing their ability to adapt the management of power in the Church.[43] For example, "the 'Truth and Reconciliation' Commission in South Africa, and in other States, succeeded in employing the traditional African model of the *l'arbre à palabre* and Christian elements (granting forgiveness to the person who confesses his sin) to prevent the Country from falling into chaos".[44]

Now, the crucial question is not so much whether and how the African *palabra*, so to speak, can occupy space in the life and mission of the African churches, something that has already happened, but rather to check the theoretical and practical possibility to extend them, with reference to the overall ecclesiological framework and the reform of its structures. The proposal to take the African *palabra* as a model of reference might encourage people to accept the challenge to share responsibility in the Church "which goes forth" and, according to the words of Pope Francis, "is a community of missionary disciples who take the first step, who are involved and supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 24).[45] In fact, among other things, the *palabra* is a space for sharing, festivity, freedom of expression that adopts the word received, redirects it and welcomes it so as to build up the Community.

2.3.1. *The* palabra *community in a Church-Family of God CHECK AGAIN*

To take the *Palabra,* because it places emphasis on the community and the family dimensions, as a possible model as explained above, to reform the structures of the African churches, estimating its potential to exercise synodality, requires some clarification concerning the impact it might have — to be ascertained — on the model of Church-Family of God, because this would mean that the Second Vatican Council's guidelines for the Continent of Africa had been accepted. To understand this issue better, it should be remembered that the Church, inasmuch as it is a pilgrim community and given its theandric nature, was presented at the Second Vatican Council with various symbols and figures. Basically, these described the Church as a mystery of communion, sacrament and People of God, thus indicating both its community nature, [46] implying the involvement of everyone (pastors and faithful), and its intrinsic relationship with the mystery of the Trinity.

The model of the Church as the People of God was addressed by Cardinal Hyacinthe Thiandoum in his introductory discourse on the occasion of the Synod for Africa in 1994. It was not merely a passing reference, but a broader passage in which he interpreted in an African key the Conciliar concept of reconciliation, and dwelt on such positive cultural aspects as (the strong sense of being a people and of belonging to a people; and on relations of mutual solidarity). He treated some negative aspects too such as (the sometimes unavoidable degeneration in to forms of tribalism and ethnicalism), and summed up saying that, "in the concept of the Church as the People of God, which cuts across and unites all tribes and nations, the African value of "people" and "tribe" find a more adequate and broader expression" (n. 3).[47] In the passage immediately preceding this, Thiandoum, mentioned the answers to the *Lineamenta* which used the expression "family of God" with reference both to humanity, the recipient of evangelization, and to African culture. In the first case, he explained that evangelization concerns the building up of the family of God on earth. Thereby extending evangelization to a universal dimension; humanity is considered to be one great family formed of all the peoples of the earth.[48] With reference to African culture, the concept refers to deep Christian and African values, such as: communion, fraternity, solidarity and peace. It should also be noted that in a real African family, its joy, difficulties and trials are voiced in trusting dialogue (cf. n. 3).

During the Synod, however, the African Church wished to describe itself as the Church-Family of God.[49] This description did not exclude the richness of the Council's definition, for example, that the Church is the People of God, but seen in the context of the local churches with their respective

cultural expressions. The Bishops thought that the concept of the Church-Family of God might help the Africans to respond to their aspirations and this was the conviction of the Synod too:

> "Not only did the Synod speak of inculturation, but it also made use of it, taking the *Church as God's Family* as its guiding idea for the evangelization of Africa. The Synod Fathers acknowledged it as an expression of the Church's nature particularly appropriate for Africa. For this image emphasizes care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationships, acceptance, dialogue and trust", (n. 51, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*).[50] In addition, "The Synod Fathers rightly affirmed that 'a serious concern for a true and balanced inculturation [of the Gospel] is necessary in order to avoid cultural confusion and alienation in our fast evolving society'" (*ibid*., n. 48), [51] but also to ensure an authentic inculturation of the Gospel, it cannot but pass through the family structure, which is a characteristic of the Church Family of God in Africa.[52]

Our aim here is not to study the figure of the Church as Family of God, as outlined by the Synod in 1994 , which has already been the object of some research.[53] It is enough to note that even were a risk to be involved in the adoption of this model of the Church, for example that of a return to, a negative re-proposal of structures whether patriarchal or tribal,[54] or of both, it is equally true that an ecclesiology which takes the family as its point of departure could constitute a great wealth, and not only for Africa. The adoption of the family as the common symbol of the ecclesial community, its life and mission, implies and entails the application of a correct conception of the African family, besides a re-interpretation of the teaching of Jesus and of the New Testament tradition.

As regards a correct concept of the African family, one must first of all remember that it extends beyond the reduced nucleus of father, mother and children. In fact, it extends well beyond a purely biological bond. However it is not only an extended family, a figure of speech that does not adequately express nor adequately represent the full concept of the African family. This is because the family exists only in its three-dimensional composition: the living, the dead and the yet-to be-born. The family members who are alive only constitute the visible part of this family, which is only truly complete through communication with the other two dimensions — the dead and the yet-to be-born —, and ultimately its foundation is in God. This communication does not preclude the community of the living from having its own autonomous organization in the world, even if the latter must take into account the other two.[55] The family, thus understood, is in fact a community in a dialogue of life with the living environment too.

To propose the Church-Family as a model for Africa requires serious consideration of the manner in which Jesus and the entire neo-testamentary tradition viewed the reality of the family. Bujo, referring to some exegetical studies, remarks that Jesus adopted a critical and positive stance in regard to the family. Jesus proposes a new conception of the family that, without denying the earthly origin of the family, is that of a family that fulfills the will of God and that can be called *familia Dei*, because it is made up of those who listen to the word of God.[56] To understand the Church as the family of God, on account of the centrality it attributes to the Word, on the one hand permits comparison to the African *palabra* and, on the other, proposes it as a model for a *palabrical* community. Given the theandric nature of the Church, to consider the Church as the Family of God as a *palabrical* community might, on the one hand, open a broad perspective of communion, since the Word creates, renews, strengthens and heals all relationships, and, on the other, exert an

influence on the ecclesial institutions.[57] In fact, based on the new conception of the family mentioned above, that started from the life and teaching of Jesus, it would be possible to consider reforming the structures of the Church, for example: organizing better communication among its different subjects; comparing it to a family that is never closed in on itself, in which each member has a role. Also in this context, one might wonder whether the *palabra,* as an institution, could manage the use of the word both in the family and in society.

The word represents a decisive element for the cohesion of the members of a family and more broadly of a group, because everything that concerns the family and social life cannot be left to chance nor to the decision of a single individual, even though the latter may exercise or in fact fulfill a decision-making responsibility. It is in this sense and by analogy that the Church family of God, understood as a *palabrical* community, must be able — not only in theory — to convene, to sit down together to discuss matters concerning the life and mission of the Church.

2.3.2. *Joint Management of the* Palabra: *to apply the* Palabra *to achieve an inculturated reform of the ecclesial structures*

Therefore to refer to the model of the Church as the family of God in Africa allows one to stress in particular that the *Palabra* could be used as a fundamental opportunity for cohesion within the Church.[58] In fact, the *Palabra* is the place where one eats, chews and assimilates the received word in company.[59] A word can build up the community when appropriately applied after having been thoroughly masticated and digested. The *Palabra* is therefore a time during which the Community focusses its attention on each individual, offers its mouthpiece and its communal stomach, to then enable each one to thoroughly ruminate, digest and re-elaborate the word received in private.[110] Re-reading what has been said in an ecclesiological key shows, in the first place, that the Church, as the family of God, is founded on the Word of God. The Word *par excellence* that gives it life too; secondly, the correct use of the received word in a communal space implies that it is also decision-making. Thus, from this point of view, the Christian community is the community that ruminants on the Word of God which, like rain, does not return to God without bearing fruit (cf. *Is* 55:10-11). During the *Parabla* every relationship and situation may be reviewed by chewing on the Word of God in the Community's mouth and digesting it in an ecclesial stomach. An ecclesiology firmly based on the *Palabra* model will thus have a positive outcome not only for Africa but also for the universal Church which, today, is looking for new forms to implement the synodality that constitutes her nature and mission.

At the various levels of ecclesial life in Africa, the *palabra* is already used at group meetings, parish gatherings, diocesan, national, regional and continental assemblies where discussion, sharing, planning take place, and examines all that affects not only the life of individuals but also that of the community and of the whole Church. The possible extension of the use of the *palabra* model, as a criterion configuring *infra, inter* and *extra* ecclesial relations, to promote a more appropriate proclamation of the Gospel, is therefore based on something that was already lived and experienced in the African context, as well as in the Ecclesial. However, actually recognizing the Church-Family of God as a *Palabra* community whose organization and appropriate structure should not be left to chance but correctly implemented. In other words, the *palabra* should represent not only the reorganization of the ecclesial structures but their effective implementation too, beginning with the "ecclesial basic communities". In the African context, the *palabra* as a model that gives priority to

fraternity, harmony and the prospect of a life in community finds its implementation in those contexts where the local churches encourage small basic communities (CEB) and the living ecclesial communities (CEV). As John Paul II noted:

"The 'ecclesial basic communities' (also known by other names) … are proving to be good centres for Christian formation and missionary outreach. These are groups of Christians who, at the level of the family or in a similarly restricted setting, come together for prayer, Scripture reading, catechesis, and discussion on human and ecclesial problems with a view to a common commitment. These communities are a sign of vitality within the Church, an instrument of formation and evangelization, and a solid starting point for a new society based on a 'civilization of love'. These communities decentralize and organize the parish community, to which they always remain united. They take root in less privileged and rural areas, and become a leaven of Christian life, of care for the poor and neglected, and of commitment to the transformation of society. Within them, the individual Christian experiences community and therefore senses that he or she is playing an active role and is encouraged to share in the common task. Thus, these communities become a means of evangelization and of the initial proclamation of the Gospel, and a source of new ministries. At the same time, by being imbued with Christ's love, they also show how divisions, tribalism and racism can be overcome. Every community, if it is to be Christian, must be founded on Christ and live in him, as it listens to the word of God, focuses its prayer on the Eucharist, lives in a communion marked by oneness of heart and soul, and shares according to the needs of its members (*cf.* Acts 2:42-47)" (*Redemptoris Missio,* n. 51).[60]

In these communities, considered areas for witness and evangelization, the use of the *palabra* constitutes a very valuable element. In listening to the Word of God and guided by the Holy Spirit, the faithful discuss all their problems in the light of the Word of God. The decisions are reached by consensus that does not betray the Word. Therefore, in this sense, when the *palabra* is taken seriously as a space for proclamation, listening to, and sharing the Gospel, bearer of novelty for the Church and its structures of animation, one can truly speak of an ecclesial and evangelical *palabra.* 112 In these communities, faith is interiorized and accepted as the font and inspiration of individual and social behaviour. These communities, as already mentioned, are nourished by the Word of God read and meditated on together, in prayer, and with the regular reception of the sacraments.

Indeed, these communities, in which the use of the *palabra* constitutes a very valuable element, could also constitute the point of arrival, starting from the base, of a structured exercise of ecclesial synodality, developing by analogy elements of the traditional *palabra*, listed above. In this case one might hypothesize the following procedure. Some decisions regarding the affairs of the small communities could be dealt with by the communities themselves, in the presence of third parties (usually community leaders, the parish priest, according to the importance of the case). On the same lines, one might then think of other forms of the *palabra* at the parish, diocesan, national and supra-national levels. They could retain both their autonomy, dealing with specific duties and private matters, as well as intervening in their own interests in very serious or complex cases. This second point of view, would lead to the decisions taken at the *Palabra* of the different communities being discussed at the level of the parish *Palabra*; those of the parish *Palabra* would then be re-examined by the diocese; those of a local church at the level of the Episcopal Conferences — whose theological-ecclesiological Statutes should be further clarified. There is no doubt that, in this

perspective, the See of Rome would play a fundamental role to guarantee and safeguard unity and diversity, as well as their integration.

A project to introduce effective synodality, including the three fundamental aspects of the *Palabra,* mentioned initially: — community, dialogue in freedom, and the role of third parties — could promote and support that healthy decentralization which Pope Francis speaks of concerning the reform of the ecclesial structures for missionary outreach. Moreover, once this were implemented it would make all the ecclesial basic communities true and proper missionary structures. They would be ideal places for a church without illusions, with strong foundations of the Church of today and tomorrow, that offer an appropriate setting for interiorization and testing the Gospel values, areas for creative initiatives, sharing of physical and spiritual, social and economic life, etc., as well as opportunities and times to analyze, identify and combat all types of conflict in African societies (tribalism, racism, selfishness, incommunicability, etc.), to learn that love and service to God is inseparable from love of, and service to, neighbour.

Ultimately, the idea to use the *palabra* as a practical model to reform the structures of the Church is extremely timely, even though one recognizes that this established practice in the cultures and traditions of Africa needs to be purified and enlightened by the Gospel. Here, the topic has only been introduced, but this short summary, which has not even touched on all the aspects, affirms the need for supplementary, interdisciplinary reflection, involving theology, ecclesiology, canon law, cultural anthropology, etc., and their implementation, recognizing that, although the Church has given and gives much to the world and human society, the Church has also received and receives much from them in turn. Precisely for this reason, the reform of the ecclesial structures in a missionary perspective, Pope Francis has proposed and promoted as a task for the Church understood as a whole, with the Local and Particular Churches, requires that complex and fruitful procedures of inculturation be put into practise.

FOOTNOTES:

[1]   *Cf.* K. Amaglo, *Mission et éducation en Afrique indépendante* (1960-2010). *Le dialogue éducatif comme perspective africaine de la mission chrétienne.* Doctoral thesis, s.n. Rome, 2016, p. 60.

[2]   This is a paradox that nourishes theological reflection on the continent, even though one should recognize that inculturation is a vital dimension of the whole Church: cf. B. Awazi-Mbambi-Kungua, *Panorama de la théologie négro-africaine contemporaine*, L'Harmattan, Paris, 2002, p. 39.

[3]   F.A. Oborji, *La téologia africana e l'evangelizzazione*, Leberit, Rome, 1999, p. 103.

[4]   To these two constants, A. Walls, Bevans and Schroeder proposed, another four are added: eschatology, salvation, anthropology, and culture: cf. S.B. Bevans — R.P. Schroeder, *Teologa per la mission oggi: costanti nel contesto*, (BTC 148), Queriniana, Brescia 2010, pp. 72-76; also see pp. 72-136.

[5]   Oborji, *La teologia africana e l'evangelizzazione*, p. 104.

[6]   Bevans — Schroeder, *Teologia per la missione oggi*, p. 74.

[7]   Those who uphold the ancestral African christology, are: Bénézet Bujo and Charles Nyamiti among others, cf. Oborji, *La teologia Africana e l'evangelizzazione*, pp. 107-126.

[8]   In line with *AG*, n. 2, the Local African Churches, aware of their missionary nature, are invited to take missionary initiatives: *cf.* J.M. Éla, *Repenser la Théologie Africaine. Le Dieu qui libère*, Karthala, Paris, 2003, p. 9.

[9]   Oborji, *La teologie africana e l'evangelizzazione*, p. 110.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 111.

[11] *Cf. Mission and Reconciliation: Theology and Pastoral Challenges of Social Violence*, Aracne, Rome, 2015, pp. 294-295.

[12] *Cf.* G.G. Tata, *Vivere-insieme, aspetti etico-sociali dell'antropologia africana*, Urbaniana University Press, Città del Vaticano, 2014, pp. 49-70.

[13] *Cf.* T.N. Mucherera, *Meet me at the Palaver*. Narrative Pastoral Counselling in Postcolonial Contexts, Cascade Books, Eugene (OR) 2009, p. 108.

[14] *Cf.* Oborji, Mission and Reconciliation, pp. 294-295.

[15] *Cf.* L.V. Thomas — R. Luneau. *La terre africaine et ses religions. Traditions et changements,* L'Harmattan, Paris, 2013, p. 56.

[16] *Cf.* J.G. Bidima, *La Palabre. Une Juridicion de la parole,* Michalon, Paris, 1997, pp. 9-10.

[17] *Cf.* E.E. Uzukwu, *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll (NY) 1996, p. 127.

[18] *Cf.* Bidima, *La Palabre*, p. 15.

[19] *Cf. ibid*., p. 10.

[20] *Cf.* Oborji*, Mission and Reconciliation*, p.298;   Éla, *Repenser la théologie africaine*, pp. 279-286.

[21] Although the *palabra* is often used to resolve conflicts, its primary function is more preventive and educative than therapeutic. In fact, it is often proposed as a pastoral method more suited to orphan boys and girls, as well as to other categories of people: *cf.* Mucherera, *Meet me at the Palaver*, pp. 99-133.

[22] Despite cultural differences, the African *palabra* mainly answers six questions: why, who, when, where, what and how.

[23] With regard to this, Jean-Marc Éla notes that the *Palabra* can be applied to all the problems of current transformation. In his opinion, dialogue can in fact cover all the affairs of the

community: the beer or cotton market, money, man/woman relations, departure for the city or seasonal migration, women's work in the rainy season, food, etc. In brief everything that can help the village develop is submitted to group reflection: cf. J-M. Éla, *L'Afrique des villages*, Karthala, Paris, 1982, p.190.

[24] "En Afrique traditionnelle, l'individu est inseparable de sa lignée, qui continue de vivre a travers lui et don't il n'est que le prolongement ....C'est pourquoi, losqu'on veut honorer qulqu'un, on le salut en lançant plusieurs fois non pas son nom personnel mais le nom de son clan … arc e n'est pas un individue isolé que l'on salu, mais a travers lui, toute la lignée de ses ancetres": Hampaté Ba*, Amkoullel, l'enfant peul. Mémoires,* Actes Sud, Paris, 1992, p. 17.

[25] *Cf.* Bidima, *La Palabre*, p. 112. Among the EWE (Togo) an individual who has been excluded from the community previously may be reinstated after a *Palabra* Assembly evaluates his position. In this sense, dialogue at the *palabra* may become a place for integration or re-integration.

[26] *Cf.* I.B. Pesa, *Ethique communicationnelle de la palabra africaine*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main-Berlin-Bern-Bruxelles-New York-Oxford-Wien, 2011, p. 33.

[27] *Cf. ibid.,* p. 7.

[28] *Cf. ibid.,* p. 31.

[29] *Cf. ibid.,* p. 32.

[30] *Cf. ibid.,* p. 33.

[31] *Cf. ibid.,* p. 111.

[32] *Cf.* A.F. Scheid, *Under the Palaver Tree: Community Ethics for Truth-Telling and Reconciliation*, "Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics" XXXI (2011), 1, 18.

[33] *Cf.* Pesa, *Ethique communicationnelle*, p. 38.

[34] *Cf.* Bidima, *La Palabre*, p. 113.

[35] *Cf.* Oborji, *Mission and Reconciliation*, p. 298.

[36] Tata, *Vivere-inseme, aspetti etico-sociali dell'antropologia africana, p. 139.*

[37] *Cf.* Pesa*. Ethique communicationnelle*, p. 35.

[38] *Cf.* Bidima, *La Palabre*, p. 14.

[39] *Cf. ibid.,* p. 39.

[40] *Cf.* Pesa, *Ethique communicationnelle*, pèp. 39-45.

[41] *Cf.* Éla, *Repenser la Théologie Africaine*, p. 285

[42] *Cf.* Bidima*, La Palabre*, p. 108.

43 According to Bidima, such difficulties arise from the lack of equality, third parties and, above all the will on the part of the community to engage in the *Palabra: cf.* Bidima, *La Palabre*, pp. 106-117; Amaglo, *Mission et éducation en Afrique indépendante* (1960-2010), p. 209.

44 *Instrumentum Laboris* of the 2009 Synod, n. 8, in G. Colzani (ed.)

45 Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 24, (24 November 2013).

46 *Cf.* Bidima – Schroeder, *Teologia per la missione oggi*, p. 111.

47 H. Thiandoum, *Relatio ante disceptationem – The Gospel, inculturation and dialogue,* in https://www.ewtn.com/new_evangelization/africa/synod/relatio.htm (accessed 24 August 2016.

48 Cf. M. Cheza (ed.), *Le Synode africain: histoire et textes,* (Chrétiens en liberté, Questions disputées), Karthala, Paris 1996, p. 30.

49 The idea to model the family on the Church was expressed first by Placide Tempels with his "Jamaa" movement: *cf.* B. Bujo, *Introduction à la théologie africaine*, Academic Press, Freiburg Schweiz/ Fribourg Suisse 2008, p. 58.

50 *Cf.* John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 63, (14 September 1995).

51 *Ibid.*, n. 48.

52 The Synod Fathers solemnly declared: The Church must continue to exercise her prophetic role and give a voice to the voiceless. However to achieve this, the Church must be: a community of faithful, a strong witness to Justice and Peace in her structures and in the relations among her members, n. 106.

53 For the ecclesiology of the Church/Family of God, see, A. Ramazani Bishwende, *Eglise-famille-de-Dieu: Esquisse d'ecclesiologie africaine,* L'Harmatton, Paris 2001; Bujo

54 *Cf.* R. Luneau, *Paroles et silences du Synode africain* (1989-1995), Karthala, Paris 1997, pp. 103-110.

55 Cf. Bujo, *Introduction à la théologie africaine*, pp. 93-102.

56 *Cf.* ibid, p.106.

57 *Cf.* Amaglo, *Mission et Education en Afrique indépendante* (1960-2010), p. 167.

58 Synod, 4-5 October 2009 - *Instrumentum Laboris*, n. 88 also n. 8. The First Special Assembly for Africa in 1994 "insisted on the Church as the family of God … children of God, and that in him we constitute one family"; "since founded on the fatherhood of God, the image of the Church … *Comunità Ecclessiale viventi*/ecclesial basic communities". *Ecclesia in Africa,* nn. 63, 48*:* "The Church, as a community of people reconciled with God and with one another, proclaims the Good News of reconciliation to the world".

[59] *Cf.* B. Bujo, *Le christianisme africain et sa théologie*, "Revue des sciences religieuses", LXXXIV (2010), 2, 159-174, 169.

[60] *Cf. ibid.,* 170.

[61] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio,* n. 51 (7 December 1990), confirmed the permanent validity of the missionary mandate.

[62] *Cf.* Bujo, *Introduction à la théologie africaine*, p.111.