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Synodality at Home: Accompanying Parents for the Integral Formation of Children in Nigerian Families

1. Introduction

The family occupies a foundational place in Christian life and pastoral praxis as the primary community where human and Christian formation begins. *Lumen gentium* describes the family as the domestic church, emphasizing its ecclesial identity and formative responsibility.[1] Within this community, children first encounter faith, moral values, relational responsibility, and a sense of belonging. However, in the Nigerian context, these formative processes are increasingly strained by socio-economic pressures, insecurity, cultural transitions, and digital influences. These conditions reveal an urgent need for ecclesial support that moves beyond doctrinal exhortation toward sustained, context-sensitive pastoral accompaniment.

The study therefore asks: How can contextual pastoral strategies, grounded in cultural values, Catholic social teaching, and synodal spirituality, enhance parents' capacity for integral formation of children in Nigeria amid contemporary challenges? I argue that Nigerian homes are privileged spaces where synodal praxis – listening, dialogue, discernment, and shared responsibility first take root. The integral formation of children is most effective when pastoral accompaniment integrates Catholic social teaching, synodal spirituality, and the African communal ethos of solidarity and mutual care, particularly expressed in the proverb "Kawon a yet anyi anyet ayring ba."[2] The saying can be translated as, "a child does not belong to one person". This saying implies communal ownership of children as well as collective responsibility for their upbringing.

While the apostolic exhortation on the family, *Amoris laetitia*, which was the fruit of the two synods on the family, offers a compelling vision of the integral formation of children and the church's role in accompanying parents, it largely leaves unexplored what such accompaniment looks like in concrete cultural

1 Second Vatican Council: *Lumen gentium*, 21 November 1964, 11.

2 This is a popular pithy saying among Bajju ethnic group of Kaduna State in Nigeria. It expresses an ethos of shared communal ownership of children and shared responsibility for the moral upbringing of every child, both within the community and beyond. Comparable sayings conveying a similar moral vision exist among many other ethnic groups in Nigeria, articulated in their respective languages.

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contexts. This article explores contextually grounded pastoral strategies for accompanying Christian families in Nigeria. The aim is to empower parents to respond to Pope Francis's invitation in *Amoris laetitia* to take up this essential role of accompaniment and "carry it out consciously, enthusiastically, reasonably, and appropriately".[3] In this study, children are spoken of in an extended sense to include individuals from birth to 25 years, encompassing childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood.

The study employs pastoral-practical theology as its primary methodological framework, engaging in critical and constructive reflection on the lived experiences of Nigerian families as a "living human document".[4] Within this framework, the study integrates interdisciplinary resources from African anthropology, Catholic social teaching, synodal spirituality, and African cultural hermeneutics to critically interpret lived experience and articulate contextually grounded pastoral pathways for the integral formation of children toward human flourishing. The article first examines the contemporary context of child formation in Nigerian families through attentive listening to families' lived experiences, needs, and the signs of the times. This is the "see" or "insertion" in the pastoral spiral cycle, corresponding to "listening" in the synodal approach. Second, it develops a theological and ethical framework grounded in synodality, family ethics, and the theology of the domestic church ("judge"/discerning). Third, it proposes pastoral strategies shaped by the paradigm of pastoral ubuntu and synodality ("act"/accompanying).

2. *The Context of Child Formation in Christian Families in Nigeria Today: A Pastoral Listening and Discernment of Contemporary Challenges*

In contemporary Nigeria, many children are growing up in environments that fracture rather than nurture their human flourishing. The experience of a healthy, secure, and nurturing childhood has increasingly become a privilege enjoyed by only a few rather than a common human experience that many children enjoyed a few decades ago.

During a retreat I facilitated on a Good Friday at St. Finbarr's Parish in Nigeria, in 2018, parents, youth, and children were invited to reflect separately on the theme of parenting and the transmission of Christian values in the contemporary world. When the groups reconvened, parents expressed deep anxiety about their diminishing influence amid socio-economic pressures, political instability, high levels of insecurity, the pervasive influence of digital media, and shifting cultural values. Young people, in turn, voiced a desire for greater dialogue, understanding, and authentic parental witness rather than authoritarian instruction. Throughout the retreat, the parish priest and his assistant remained actively present among

3 Francis: *Amoris laetitia* (AL), 19 March 2016.

4 Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (ed.): *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, Wiley Blackwell, 2014, 1.

the parishioners. A traditional ruler, speaking on behalf of the parents, remarked poignantly: "We want the best for our children, who are the hope of the church and society, but we do not have it all. We cannot give what we do not have. We need the support of the church."[5]

The challenges of child formation in Nigeria cannot be understood apart from the formation and accompaniment of parents themselves. Practical theology begins with attentive listening, not merely as a methodological step but as a theological act that reflects God's attentive presence in human history.[6] In that sacred space of prayer and reflection, the family of God encountered the enduring wisdom of the familiar Latin insight, *nemo dat quod non habet*: one cannot give what one does not have. This experience also revealed the transformative potential of creating synodal spaces where families listen to one another and to the Holy Spirit who inspires and directs all to authentic Christian discipleship. Such listening reveals a reciprocal struggle: parents feel inadequately equipped, while children desire guidance grounded in a loving relationship and credibility. They also invite children to be open to learning from them. The traditional ruler's poignant statement thus captures the ethical and pastoral core of the challenge.

Scholarly analysis confirms these lived pastoral realities that beset parenting in the Nigerian society. Oladele Olabode identifies parenting as a critical global challenge with far-reaching consequences for social and moral development. He notes, "Parenting is the most critical and challenging issue facing the church, society, and the world today. Its implications have resulted in childhood illness, accidents, teenage pregnancy, substance misuse, truancy, school disruption, underachievement, child abuse, inability to become employed, juvenile crime, and mental illness."[7] Similarly, examining the implication of the church-as-family imagery proposed by the synod fathers of the First African Synod (1994), Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator highlights a range of complex challenges confronting the domestic church in many African contexts, including Nigeria. He situates family life within a broader socio-political crisis marked by widespread poverty, persistent governance failures, political instability, social unrest, and growing social fragmentation.[8] These pressures manifest concretely in Nigeria through economic instability, which limits parents' capacity to provide for their children's educational, emotional, and spiritual needs. Widespread insecurity manifested in terrorism,

5 This account is grounded in my pastoral ministry in the Archdiocese of Jos (2011-2021), particularly during Good Friday retreats I directed at St. Finbarr's Parish on 30 March 2018 (approx. 2500 members) and, over a period of six years, at Martyrs of Uganda Parish, Kuru (approx. 15,500 members). In both contexts, participants repeatedly testified to the formative significance of intentionally created sacred spaces that engage the entire family in processes of spiritual, moral, and communal formation.

6 See Claire E. Wolfteich (ed.): *Invitation to Practical Theology: Catholic Voices and Visions*, Paulist, 2014, 324.

7 Oladele Olabode: "Administrating Strategic Parenting in the Church: A Christian Education Perspective", in: *Journal of Biblical Theology* 6/1 (2023), 150-170.

8 Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator: *The Church as Family: African Ecclesiology in Its Social Context*, Paulines Publications Africa, 2000, 51.

kidnappings, displacement, and violence has devastated families, leaving many children orphaned and traumatized. In some instances, such violence has been stirred and worsened by political manipulation and the misuse of religion by self-interested actors.

Archbishop Lucius Iwejuru Ugorji lamented the gravity of the nation's insecurity crisis: "Our country has continued to experience rising security challenges. We continue to hear sad tales of senseless massacres, mass burials, endless tears and grief." He said that Nigeria "continues to bleed endlessly".[9] These realities leave deep scars on children, whose emotional, moral, psychological, and spiritual formation is increasingly shaped by fear, displacement, trauma, and the loss of the sacredness of human life. The incessant killing of parents, young people, and children by bandits has devastated families and eroded the social cohesion that once existed in communities of different faith traditions. In light of these realities within the Nigerian context of child formation, one can discern the wisdom of Pope Francis in calling each local context to address its concrete pastoral challenges, lest such conditions become "capable of setting off processes of dehumanization which would then be hard to reverse".[10] In the Nigerian context, this call demands renewed pastoral attentiveness to the lived realities of children and families, particularly amid poverty, violence, digital fragmentation, weakening communal bonds, and the growing crisis of moral and spiritual formation.

Elizabeth Okpallenne underscores the urgent need for the evangelization of families within the African context, particularly in light of growing threats to family communion, service, and Christian witness. Among the challenges she identifies are corruption, exploitation, declining interest in spiritual life, religious divisions, domestic violence, irresponsible child upbringing, and various forms of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse.[11] Empirical studies from different African educational contexts further affirm that marital instability, inadequate preparation for marriage, and oppressive cultural structures that limit spousal agency negatively affect the academic and integral development of children.[12] Additionally, many young people feel abandoned by unjust structures meant to protect and empower them. Consequently, some perceive education as futile when employment opportunities depend more on corruption and social connections than on merit or qualification. Such frustrations have deepened distrust in social institutions and, at times, even in the church, which many still regard as their last source of hope.

9 Lucius Iwejuru Ugorji: "Address at the Opening of the 2026 First Plenary Meeting of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria", Abuja, February 2026, quoted in: Jude Atemanke: "Nigeria 'Continues to Bleed Endlessly': Archbishop Concerned about 'Senseless Massacres'," *EWTN News*, 25 February 2026; available at: https://www.ewtnnews.com/world/africa/nigeria-continues-to-bleed-endlessly-archbishop-concerned-about-senseless-massacres.

10 Francis: *Evangelii gaudium* (EG), 24 November 2013, 51.

11 Elizabeth Ngozi Okpalaenwe: "Contemporary Approaches to Evangelization of Families in Africa", in: Elizabeth Ngozi Okpalaenwe (ed.): *Family Life in Contemporary Africa*, Franciscan Kolbe Press, 2022, 20.

12 See Gregory Ekene Osuji: "Challenges Faced by Families in Contemporary Africa: An Educational Response", in: E.N. Okpalaenwe: *Family Life in Contemporary Africa*, 31-47.

This underscores the urgent need to promote Catholic social teaching that upholds human dignity, justice, and the common good in Nigeria.

Within this evolving landscape, the rise of digital media and technology constitutes a critical locus for discerning the changing dynamics of family life and child formation. Digital culture introduces a formative environment for children and families. At the same time, the emergence of artificial intelligence increasingly challenges a well-known Nigerian proverb: "What an elder can see while sitting down, even if a child climbs a tree, he or she cannot see it."[13] This proverb underscores the value of the wisdom of elders, acquired through experience over time, as a vital resource for both initial and ongoing formation in Nigerian families. Yet, with the rapid expansion of the digital world, particularly with vast information technology, many parents are often ill-equipped to navigate this digital landscape, resulting in weakened parental control over the social and moral influences on their children.[14] From the Synod on Young People with the theme, "Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment", the church recognizes that the digital world reshapes how young people understand reality, relationships, and identity, describing it as, "a highly digitalized culture that has a profound impact on ideas of time and space, on our self-understanding, our understanding of others and the world, and our ability to communicate, learn, be informed and enter into relationship with others".[15] Thus, information technologies offer significant opportunities but also present serious risks. This growing ecclesial attention constitutes a clarion call within the Nigerian context, where many young people spend significant time online, often at the expense of their studies and work, while also internalizing content that can be detrimental to character formation. In Nigeria, this digital shift often exceeds the guidance of many parents, whom children dismiss as "old school", implying they are out of touch. Richard Rwiza notes that young people must be "made aware, initiated, formed, and educated in the language of media. Unavoidably, children must be given at least rudimentary instruction in media ethics, especially in the use of the Internet."[16]

Although digital media increasingly shape contemporary childhood and youth formation in Nigeria, many rural children and young people remain completely excluded from meaningful digital participation. This growing digital divide deepens educational inequality, as many children in rural communities lack the technological resources necessary for learning and human development. Although

13 This African proverb affirms the wisdom that comes with age and experience as a form of moral authority within the community, one that both grounds parental guidance and cultivates in children a receptive disposition toward elders; theologically, it resonates with the biblical tradition of wisdom and the formation of persons in virtue through attentive listening and lived experience (see Prv 1:8, Lk 2:51-52).

14 See Richard Rwiza: "Towards a Better Education of Children", in: Stan Chu Ilo (ed.): *Love, Joy, and Sex: African Conversation on Pope Francis's Amoris Laetitia and the Gospel of Family in a Divided World*, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2019, 193.

15 Francis: *Christus vivit*, 25 March 2019, 86.

16 R. Rwiza: "Towards a Better Education of Children", 193.

many church-owned institutions are making significant efforts to bridge this gap, such opportunities often remain out of reach for children from poor families.

Cultural and social shifts alongside changing family structures further complicate the formation of children in Nigeria. The growing influence of Western individualism has weakened the transmission of communal moral and cultural values such as friendship, hospitality, generosity, mutual care, and mutual responsibility. Instead, in some contexts, many children and young people are exposed to social environments in which ethical values are treated as flexible, subjective, or dependent on personal advantage. Kevin McKenna avers, "The danger of extreme individualism weakens family bonds as it segregates members of the family into isolated units, with each person's individual desires seen as absolute. When freedom lacks noble goals or personal discipline, it risks degenerating into an inability to give oneself generously to others."[17] In this context, child formation has gradually shifted from a shared communal responsibility, where adults were once culturally authorized to contribute to the child's and society's common good, toward a more cautious and fragmented individualism.[18]

As communal structures weaken, some parents and guardians exploit children through trafficking, forced domestic labor, abuse, and neglect, often with little effective enforcement of child protection laws or strong communal accountability. Bullying, coercion, excessive punishment, and harmful peer influence within schools and social environments further fracture healthy child formation, leaving many children struggling with exclusion, inferiority, and psychological trauma. As Rosemary Edet observes, the girl child in some contexts continues to face gender-based discrimination in access to quality education, which subsequently limits her opportunities for human flourishing both in the church and in society.[19] Beyond educational inequality, many girls also experience sexual exploitation and abuse within homes by family members, in educational institutions, and, in recent times, through attacks by bandits. Many bear these wounds in silence because of shame and cultural taboos surrounding public discussions of sexuality and sexual abuse. While dioceses in Nigeria have developed safeguarding policies, some women religious have also created safe spaces within their schools to listen to children's experiences of abuse and distress. This reflects both the depth of these wounds and the urgent need for women's leadership and pastoral co-responsibility within the ecclesial structure of mission in a truly synodal church.[20]

17 Kevin McKenna: *A Concise Guide to Catholic Social Teaching*, Ave Maria Press, 2013, 29.

18 See Andrew A. Kyomo/Sahaya G. Selvam: *Marriage and Family in African Christianity*, Acton Publishers, 2004, 7.

19 See Maureen Ahyuwa: "The Ethics of Liberation of Rosemary Nkoyo Edet and Peggy Mulumbya-Kabonde", in: Beatrice Okyere-Manu and Léocadie Lushombo (eds.): *African Women's Liberating Philosophies, Theologies, and Ethics*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2024, 101.

20 In one of our meetings as the Conference of Women Religious in the Jos Archdiocese of Nigeria, sisters working in the education sector recognized the need to create safe spaces for children in schools, giving them opportunities to disclose abuse and emotional distress they often could not disclose even to their parents.

This experience is not isolated. It reflects a wider pattern in which children's voices are silenced or disbelieved to preserve family reputation, often at the expense of their dignity and healing. Such moments reveal a profound breakdown in communal responsibility and moral formation within the domestic church. Read through a synodal lens, this narrative exposes the urgent need for a church that truly listens, especially to the most vulnerable, and fosters participation and co-responsibility in safeguarding life. Within the framework of ubuntu, the call is to reweave the fabric of care, where families and communities become spaces of accountable relationships, attentive listening, and shared responsibility for the integral formation and protection of every child. In this way, synodal accompaniment becomes not merely a pastoral method but participation in the Spirit's healing and truth-telling mission, where the silenced are heard and human dignity is restored.

Despite these concerns, the Nigerian socio-cultural context remains a place of hope. Embodied indigenous cultural values such as respect, discipline, hospitality, solidarity, and relational belonging continue to offer vital resources for integral formation. Within the African worldview, children are widely regarded as a gift from God, inspiring parents to make profound sacrifices for their wellbeing, even amid challenges and uncertainties. Parenting in this context is not merely a duty but a lived expression of love, communion, and responsibility.[21] These enduring values provide fertile ground for a renewed pastoral vision rooted in both African tradition and synodality. In light of the above challenges and the opportunities within the Nigerian socio-cultural context, the question that emerges is not only how children are formed, but how the ecclesial community is called to reimagine its mission of formation.

3. A Synodal-Theological Framework and Pastoral Trajectories for the Integral Formation of the Domestic Church in Nigeria

The family, as the domestic church, is not merely a metaphor but a theological reality. It is the primary space where the seed of faith, moral consciousness, and communal identity are first lived, nurtured, and transmitted. Within this intimate ecclesial space, children are not merely passive recipients but active participants in a living tradition of faith shaped by relationships, daily practices of care, discipline, and shared accompaniment. Integral formation, therefore, is inherently holistic, encompassing the physical, spiritual, moral, intellectual, affective, psychological, social, and civic dimensions, ordered toward human flourishing. It unfolds through practices of care, discipline, education, and accompaniment that culminate in social responsibility, ecological awareness, and engagement with the common good.[22] *Gaudium et spes* appropriately describes the family as a

21 See Barnabas Shebanyang: "Love Made Fruitful", in: S.C. Ilo: *Love, Joy, and Sex*, 139.
22 See Francis: *Laudato si'*, 24 May 2015.

"school of deeper humanity", in which parents, as the first catechists and formators of their children, nurture spiritual growth and moral formation through both word and example.[23] Likewise, *Familiaris consortio* emphasizes that the family is a "school of social virtues", called to foster human and Christian formation, serve life, participate in social development, and share in the church's mission.[24] Consequently, these teachings situate the family at the intersection of ecclesial life and social transformation, revealing the need for a synodal approach in which families, the church, and society collaborate in the noble task of the integral formation of children for the common good. In his reflection on Benedict XVI's *Caritas in veritate*, Kevin McKenna argues that "to desire the common good is a requirement of justice and charity".[25]

Integral formation, therefore, extends beyond private devotion to include social responsibility, ecological awareness, and engagement with the common good. Within the African worldview, John Mbiti corroborates the view that integral formation encompasses the totality of the human person: physical, spiritual, intellectual, social, psychological, and moral.[26] The child is formed not in isolation but within a web of life, where community mediates identity and belonging. Accordingly, Mbiti maintains that education seeks "to mold and bring children up so that they become integrated, responsible, and happy individuals who can stand on their own".[27] Within this framework, pastoral accompaniment emerges as a central theological category. It is not programmatic but relational, marked by presence, discernment, patience, and respect for the gradual unfolding of moral life. Pope Francis describes it as the art of "removing our sandals before the sacred ground of the other" (EG 169). He exhorts, "today more than ever, we need men and women who, based on their experience of accompanying others, are familiar with processes which call for prudence, understanding, patience, and docility to the spirit, so that they can protect the sheep from wolves who would scatter the flock" (EG 171). The shepherd/sheep metaphor refers to the pastoral imagery of a leader and the people they lead. In the context of the family, parents are the first shepherds, the accompanists to their children, while the church and larger society are co-formators from different angles.

Pope Francis insists that the church, in a culture marked by both a lack of genuine personal connection (anonymity) and an unhealthy fixation on others' private lives (morbid curiosity), must adopt a more intentional, empathetic, and discerning approach to engaging with individuals, focusing on authentic understanding and necessary care. He encourages collaborative ministry in the act of accompaniment, thus, "The church would have to initiate everyone, priests, religious and laity into this art of accompaniment which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other." (EG 169) By this, Pope Francis

23 Second Vatican Council: *Gaudium et spes* (GS), 7 December 1965, 52.
24 John Paul II: *Familiaris consortio* (FC), 22 November 1981, 42.
25 K. McKenna: *A Concise Guide to Catholic Social Teaching*, 24.
26 John Samuel Mbiti: *Love and Marriage in Africa*, Longman, 1973, 168.
27 Ibid. 180.

teaches that pastoral accompaniment is a process of walking with others in a way that embodies compassion, fosters healing, and encourages their growth in faith, while respecting their unique journey.

3.1. Synodal Spirituality as a Paradigm for Formation in Families

Synodality offers an ethical and pastoral-theological lens for understanding family life as a space of communion, participation, and shared responsibility. Synodality is not merely a structural or procedural reform; it is a spirituality of communion rooted in the Trinitarian life of God. At its core, synodality calls the People of God to journey together through mutual listening, discernment, participation, and shared mission.[28] Within family ethics, synodality becomes a praxis of relational co-responsibility among spouses, parents, children, pastoral ministers, and political leaders, who together discern and respond to the moral, social, cultural, and spiritual realities shaping human flourishing and the common good. This approach underscores the argument that the theological basis for accompaniment is rooted in the church's mission and emphasizes a pastoral approach of closeness and dialogue. Bill Huebsch explains Pope Francis's acts of accompaniment using a metaphor of a piano player, in which "a musical accompanist is somewhat in the background of the performance, allowing the singer to shine. It is the singer who sets the stage and who determines the phrasing and tempo of the song. The role of the accompanist is to help the singer stay on tune and to embellish the singer's performance with stunning beauty."[29] The pianists are not to choose the song, set the tempo, or dominate the conversation. Similarly, accompaniment does not dominate but supports; it does not impose but enables. Like a pianist accompanying a singer, the accompanist creates space for the other to flourish.

Pastoral ministers, therefore, bear the responsibility of intentionally cultivating sacred spaces within families and parishes where synodal practices may take root and mature to the extent that every member of the parish community experiences not only having a synod but of becoming a synod as Pope Francis envisions.[30] Huebsch streamlined principles to guide pastoral leaders in the accompaniment of both individuals and families. He sees accompaniment as a pastoral strategy and a sacred task which is based on grace. Accompaniment for him encompasses the formation of conscience, discernment through practical life-changing questions, and fostering a parish that accompanies with love and mercy."[31] Pastoral accompaniment is essential for families in Nigeria as the traditional ruler exclaimed during the retreat, "we don't have it all, we need the support of the church".

28 See Francis: *Walking Together: The Way of Synodality*, Orbis, 2023, 164.
29 Bill Huebsch: *The Art of Accompaniment: Four Essential Conversations on Becoming the Kind of Parish the Church Needs Today*, Twenty-Third Publications, 2017, 9.
30 See Francis: *Walking Together*, 100.
31 B. Huebsch: *The Art of Accompaniment*, 46.

Julie Hanlon Rubio asks a pertinent rhetorical question: Can the church help parents raise their children well?[32] Rubio argues that the church supports parents in raising their children not by imposing rigid rules or controlling family life but through starting processes of growth that help children develop freedom, responsibility, and the capacity to love in everyday family life. Within this theological and synodal framework, the church assumes a pastoral and relational role: encouraging parents, honoring the gradual formation of conscience, and strengthening the family as a "school of deeper humanity" where virtue is cultivated through the rhythms of everyday life.[33] Stan Ilo's incarnational understanding of accompaniment, marked by vulnerability, presence, and identification, grounds this theology within African pastoral realities. In the Nigerian context, marked by the challenges already identified, Ilo insists that pastoral ministers become a compassionate and loving presence, listening attentively to the lived experiences of the family of God and concretely empowering them to take ownership of their lives and future.[34] To embody this synodal spirituality as a way of life for the church, Orobator highlights the gift of diversity and argues that synodality must take root within concrete cultural contexts shaped by the lived experiences of the people. In his words, "a synodal church thrives in diverse cultural contexts, with culture shaping synodality, which in turn is deeply rooted in these contexts".[35] In this sense, Nigerian cultural realities do not stand outside synodality but become important loci through which mutual listening, dialogue, discernment, shared decision-making, and co-responsibility are lived within families and communities.

Ubuntu here emerges as a contextual African paradigm that actualizes the ecclesial vision of communion and shared responsibility. It articulates a relational anthropology in which personhood is constituted through belonging: historically, communally, and cosmically.[36] As Niels Weidmann observes, ubuntu understands personhood as historically rooted, universally relational, and dynamically experienced through active belonging. The individual exists within an interconnected web that embraces the living community, ancestors, future generations, and the wider order of creation.[37] This anthropology resonates deeply with synodal ecclesiology, as both privilege relationality over individualism, participation over isolation, and shared responsibility over fragmentation. In this light, ubuntu offers

32 Julie Hanlon Rubio: *Reading, Praying, Living Pope Francis's the Joy of Love: A Faith Formation Guide*, Liturgical Press, 2017, 80.

33 Ibid. 80.

34 Stan Chu Ilo: "The Church of Pope Francis: An Ecclesiology of Accountability, Accompaniment and Action", in: Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator (ed.): *The Church We Want: African Catholics Look to Vatican III*, Orbis, 2016, 26.

35 Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator: "Introduction: Of Roots and Trees", in: Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator (ed.): *African Synodal Theology: A Tall Tree Is as Strong as Its Roots*, Orbis, 2025.

36 See Julius M. Gathogo: "John Mbiti's Ubuntu Theology: Was It Rooted in His African Heritage?", in: *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 48/2 (2022), 8.

37 See James Ogude/Unifier Dyer (eds.): *Ubuntu and the Everyday in Africa*, Africa World Press, 2019, 150.

a theological horizon for understanding the church as a communion of interdependent relationships, where identity and mission are shaped through participation in a shared life, and every person is embedded within what Anke Granes describes as "a network of mutual dependence and relational becoming".[38]

Within this framework, responsibility is freely embraced rather than imposed, and life is lived in mutual accompaniment, where joy, struggles, and sorrows are shared both effectively and concretely. Such practices are embodied in the communal patterns of the Nigerian society, where families and neighbors contribute resources to support one another in celebrations, illness, loss, and daily labor. Such practices reflect a relational anthropology of shared humanity and mutual care, aptly described by Michael Battle as a "dedicated network of interdependence".[39] Through these acts of love and solidarity, children grow in empathy and in the recognition of the dignity of every person, preparing them to contribute to a just and loving society. In this way, ubuntu emerges as a contextual hermeneutic for interpreting synodality within lived Nigerian experience.

3.2. Pastoral Ubuntu: A Synodal Pathway for Accompanying Parents in the Integral Formation of Children in Nigerian Families

The Final Document of the Synod affirms that synodality is not merely an ecclesial aspiration but a lived reality already embodied in many local communities.[40] Nigeria offers a compelling witness to this reality, an ecclesial landscape where relational life, communal belonging, and shared responsibility reflect the very grammar of synodality. Yet this latent gift calls for intentional cultivation through contextually grounded pastoral approaches such as pastoral ubuntu.[41] Pastoral ubuntu, as I am proposing in this study, is both theologically grounded in the church's communion and teleologically oriented toward human flourishing. It proposes context-sensitive pastoral strategies for accompanying families in the integral formation of children toward relational maturity, and fullness of life (see Lk 2:52, Jn 10:10). Human flourishing within this framework may be understood as the integral wellbeing and the fulfillment of the human person, ordered toward

38 Anke Granes: "Becoming a Person: Personhood and Its Preconditions", in: James Ogude (ed.): *Ubuntu and Personhood*, Africa World Press, 2018, 44.

39 Michael Battle: *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, Pilgrim Press, 2009, 35.

40 XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission*, 28; available at: https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG---Documento-finale.pdf.

41 Pastoral ubuntu, as used in this study, denotes a pastoral-practical theological appropriation of relational anthropology within a synodal ecclesial framework of communion, participation, and shared responsibility. It is rooted in the African philosophical insight, "I am because we are, and because we are, therefore I am". See John S. Mbiti: *African Religions and Philosophy*, 2nd ed., Heinemann, 1990, 106; Bénézet Bujo: *African Christian Morality at the Age of Inculturation*, Paulines Publications Africa, 1990, 18-25; Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator: *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, Orbis, 2008, 1-5, 98-103.

the actualization of one's God-given potential through Christ-centered relationships of communion with God, with others, with oneself, and with the whole of creation. Within Catholic theological ethics, such flourishing is framed by James F. Keenan as a relational vocation shaped by virtue and responsibility toward the common good.[42] Similarly, African theology, particularly in the work of Orobator, understands life as a shared and participatory reality marked by vitality, dignity, and communal wellbeing.[43] In this light, pastoral ubuntu emerges not merely as a conceptual lens but as a lived pastoral praxis rooted in African relational anthropology and resonant with a synodal pathway for nurturing human flourishing.

Rooted in the anthropology of "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am", and drawing on the edited work of James Ogude and Unifier Dyer, I approach ubuntu as embedded in the ordinary day-to-day life of African communities.[44] Against this backdrop, pastoral ubuntu situates pastoral ministry as a web of life in which families, communities, and ecclesial structures collaboratively foster the integral formation of children through relationships of belonging, care, and mutual accountability as an African way of life. It reimagines and reclaims a profound indigenous wisdom encapsulated in a Nigerian proverb, "it takes a village to raise a child".[45] Pastoral ubuntu thus provides the theological and pastoral horizon within which the integral formation of children in Nigerian families can be reimagined as a shared ecclesial and social task. To translate this vision into praxis, the study proposes five interrelated pastoral strategies, which may be understood within three broader movements: reclaiming relational foundations, renewing ecclesial structures, and engaging contemporary contexts.

4. Reclaiming Communal and Relational Foundations of Formation

4.1. Reclaiming Communal Responsibility Through the Integration of Ubuntu in Catechesis

Given the increasing individualism already evident in contemporary Nigerian society, a moral discourse of privatization has also emerged, captured in the pervasive saying "mind your business". This mentality normalizes non-interference and gradually erodes communal accountability for the moral and social formation of children. Consequently, there is an urgent pastoral and ecclesial imperative to

42 James F. Keenan: *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences*, Continuum, 2010, 6-8, 213-218.

43 A.E. Orobator: *The Church as Family*, 149-165.

44 Niels Weidmann: "Ubuntu: An African Concept of Human Being?", in: *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 40/1 (2014), 7-26; and J. Ogude/U. Dyer (eds): *Ubuntu and the Everyday in Africa*, 1-24, 25-61, 67-85.

45 African wisdom is embedded in traditional proverbs, which, when used alongside Scripture, serve as formative resources for cultivating human, social, and gospel-based virtues.

reclaim communal responsibility for child formation as an essential dimension of both African relational anthropology and the church's vision of a synodal church. Such a task calls for a pastoral conversion that leads to renewal and reform, as Luciani posits. In his vision, pastoral conversion is a *sine qua non* of authentic ecclesial reform towards a synodal church.[46] Within this horizon, pastoral ubuntu offers a vital theological and cultural pathway for renewing, through catechesis, a participatory ethic of care, responsibility, and accountability, with child formation as the most essential place to begin. Although the rise of individualism seems to dismiss the validity of ubuntu, Ogude and Dyer argue that its perceived decline is not evidence of irrelevance but rather a consequence of colonial modernity, which marginalized indigenous African knowledge systems. This raises the critical question of "whether the erosion of communal values stems from their inadequacy or from their historical suppression".[47] Similarly, Chiseche Mibenge and Irene Hadiprayitno assert that even when ubuntu is reclaimed as Africa's gift to humanity, its reception remains conditioned by asymmetries of social and political power within global systems.[48] This calls for a process of synodal conversion, namely, the retrieval, decolonization, and reappropriation of ubuntu through catechesis as an inculturated theological pathway responsive to contemporary African realities.

Integrating ubuntu into catechesis as both a pedagogical approach and an embodied communal way of life is essential because, despite the pressures of individualism and social change, the communal ethos of ubuntu continues to find expression in many African societies, especially within Nigerian communities where shared forms of life and mutual care endure. Such practices embody the conviction that "your child is my child, and my child is yours".[49] A living human document from a Nigerian ecclesial community (Kafanchan diocese), illustrates this vividly: a group of twelve women, who identified themselves as a "committee of friends", gathered monthly for prayer, fellowship, and mutual support, meeting in one another's homes on a rotating basis. Upon the death of one member, the others collectively assumed responsibility for raising her children into adulthood. In this small but significant practice, the church appears in miniature, a micro-ecclesial embodiment of synodality, where communion, participation, and shared responsibility are lived concretely. Moreover, this communal ethic also finds expression in the moral consciousness and generosity shown toward children from less privileged backgrounds through support for school fees, medical expenses, and other basic needs.

However, a pastoral gap remains: the enduring communal spirit that sustains ecclesial life is mostly selectively deployed, often mobilized for the building of church structures. This reveals a narrowed pastoral imagination that invests in

46 Rafael Luciani: *Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church*, Paulist, 2022, 15.
47 J. Ogude/U. Dyer (eds): *Ubuntu and the Everyday in Africa*, 1.
48 See Otrude Nontobeko Moyo: *Africanity and Ubuntu as Decolonizing Discourse, Human Rights Interventions*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2021, 196.
49 Emily Kerama/Eunice Kamaara: "*Amoris Laetitia* and the Pastoral Challenge Facing the Family in Africa Today", in: S.C. Ilo: *Love, Joy, and Sex*, 158.

institutional formation while underutilizing its own communal resources for the life of the family. If the family remains a school of deeper humanity, "the first and vital cell of society", then the communal responsibility, so readily mobilized for ecclesial structures of mission, must be reoriented toward the integral formation of children within families. In this light, ubuntunization emerges as a concrete pastoral imperative to restore networks of solidarity, foster shared responsibility across families and parishes, and ensure that no child's formation is left to isolation. Such practices respond concretely to contemporary challenges of social fragmentation, economic hardship, and parental isolation by reclaiming child formation as a shared ecclesial and communal responsibility.

4.2. Formation of Families in Synodal Spirituality

The renewal of communal responsibility must be sustained through the intentional formation of families in synodal spirituality and leadership. Parents are to be formed through shared prayer, Scripture reflection, communal discernment, and participatory practices that cultivate relational faith and co-responsibility toward human flourishing. As Stephen Bevans observes, "the first of these practices is the recognition and empowerment of the dignity and giftedness of every person in the community".[50] Frequent family meetings, already a common practice in many parts of Nigeria, can be facilitated by pastoral ministers through the model of "together at the table," inspired by the recent bishops' synods. When intentionally cultivated and guided by well-formed parents, such gatherings become loci of synodal spirituality marked by attentive listening, dialogue, discernment, friendship, and shared responsibility. In contexts marked by violence and insecurity, synodal and ubuntu-centered family formation nurtures a culture of peace, reconciliation, mutual protection, friendship, and human dignity capable of resisting the normalization of violence. Formation in synodal spirituality should also include competencies in emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and moral discernment, empowering parents to move beyond top-down approaches toward participatory conversations that honor the distinctive voice of every family member, even amid differences. In this way, the family becomes, in the sense articulated by Marie-Dominique Minassian, an epiphany of a synodal community, where fraternity is stronger than division and all strive to witness the love most needed within the community.[51]

Renowned African theologians have not wasted time exploring the reception of synodality within the African context. Their reflections highlight the resonance between synodality and African participatory traditions such as *ujamaa*, ubuntu,

50 Stephen B. Bevans: *Community of Missionary Disciples: The Continuing Creation of the Church*, Orbis, 2024, 345.

51 Marie-Dominique Minassian: "Community of Discernment Amid Violence: The Monks of Tibhirine", in: Jos Moons (ed.): *Witnesses of Synodality: Good Practices and Experiences*, Paulist, 2024, 74.

and *palaver*.[52] As Anne Arabome notes, these communal practices embody an African synodal spirituality rooted in effective communication, communal discernment, and inclusive relationality, creating space for all to listen together to the voice of the Holy Spirit, the true protagonist of synodality.[53] Formation in synodal spirituality thus could transform authoritarian parenting patterns and foster deeper practices of spiritual accompaniment that uphold the dignity of everyone. However, during pastoral-theological training sessions with pastoral ministers, I listened to testimonies that revealed a notable gap in competencies for pastoral accompaniment beyond preaching and advisory approaches. In this regard, interdisciplinary pastoral formation is essential for cultivating an ubuntunization that harnesses the diverse charisms of Christ's faithful for the integral formation of children and the promotion of human flourishing within families and the wider community.

5. Renewing Ecclesial Structures for Pastoral Accompaniment

Parish-based structures remain vital loci of formation in the church in Nigeria, but the parish must be reimagined as a synodal community that accompanies families in their sacred formative vocation of children. As Pope Francis exhorts, "If the parish proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptivity, it continues to be the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters."[54] Thus, the parish must accompany parents through ongoing formation, counseling, and spiritual support, and collaborative initiatives involving clergy, religious, and lay leaders should strengthen families' formative capacity. This entails integrating parenting formation, small Christian communities, youth mentorship, family counseling, and structured intergenerational dialogue into a coherent pastoral framework rather than fragmented initiatives.

In contexts marked by insecurity, displacement, and limited access to psychosocial services, pastoral ministers require formation in basic counseling, safeguarding, and trauma-informed care. Parishes and Catholic schools must establish safe and confidential spaces where children and young people can speak freely and receive appropriate support. Existing ecclesial associations, such as the Block Rosary Crusade, Holy Childhood, Catholic Cardet, Catholic Youth Organization, the Catholic Men Organization, and the Catholic Women Organization, remain vital spaces for faith formation. However, their pastoral approaches require renewed efforts at reaching families at the grassroots.

52 See Ikenna U. Okafor/Josee Ngalula/Nicholaus Segeja/Stan Chu Ilo (eds.): *Toward a Synodal Church in Africa: Echoes from and African Christian Palaver*, Orbis, 2024.

53 Anne Arabome: "A Spirituality of Synodality: Drawing from the Wells of African Spirituality," in: A.E. Orobator: *African Synodal Theology*, 13.

54 Francis: *Go Forth: Toward a Community of Missionary Disciples*, Orbis, 2019, 17.

6. Engaging Contemporary Contexts for Integral Formation

6.1. Ethical Digital Formation of Children

Digital spaces offer unprecedented avenues for learning, connection, and creativity, but they also shape the moral, relational, and identity formation of young people in ways that require critical discernment. For Generation Z and Generation Alpha digital natives formed within networked cultures, the digital sphere constitutes not merely a context but a formative environment. A synodal pastoral response, therefore, must move beyond caution to intentional accompaniment, equipping both parents and children with the capacity for ethical discernment, responsible engagement, and critical agency. As John Palfrey and Urs Gasser observe, with the digital age, humanity is faced with crucial choices that will determine whether humanity will benefit or not from these new developments.[55] In this light, the church's mission must extend into the digital realm through contextually grounded catechesis, parent formation, and dialogical online communities that embody synodal praxis and resonate with the communitarian anthropology of ubuntu. Pastoral ubuntu within the digital space could also inspire pastoral initiatives that foster global networks of formation by connecting Nigerian children with peers worldwide. In the spirit of the Pontifical Mission Societies' motto, "Children Helping Children", such encounters can promote intercultural learning, mutual solidarity, and a synodal consciousness rooted in shared human dignity and global Christian communion.

6.2. Advocating Public Policies that Support Families

David Schindler observes that, "children, as humanity's most vulnerable beginning, require not only physical care but also a nurturing domestic environment that fosters intellectual growth and the virtues necessary for participation in society".[56] As a school of social virtues, the family possesses both the right and the responsibility to contribute to shaping policies that affect life and mission (see FC 44-46). To this end, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria has exercised a prophetic voice in challenging oppressive structures. Likewise, consecrated men and women contribute significantly through education, health care, and social ministries. Nevertheless, persistent gaps in governance continue to hinder the provision of basic necessities and a safe environment for the flourishing of children and young people, many of whom demonstrate remarkable potential when afforded opportunities elsewhere. What is needed, therefore, is not merely advocacy on their behalf but the empowerment of their own voices through a transformative faith that does justice. My experience at the Ignatian Network

55 John G. Palfrey/Urs Gasser: *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives*, Basic, 2008, 6.

56 David L. Schindler: *The Generosity of Creation*, Humanum Academic Press, 2018, 4.

of Solidarity, where young people critically engaged social issues in their contexts and participated in advocacy at the level of governance, was particularly illuminating.[57] This holistic approach reflects the church's commitment to integral human development. For, as wisdom reminds us, it is easier to shape fresh wood than dry; thus, the call to "catch them young" must be taken with renewed seriousness and intentionality.

7. Conclusion

The integral formation of children cannot be separated from the flourishing of families and the life-giving presence of the church. In the Nigerian context, the convergence of ubuntu's relational vision with a synodal praxis of pastoral accompaniment offers a hopeful horizon for renewing the formative mission of families. When parents are accompanied, encouraged, and sustained within the communion of the church, they are empowered to nurture the moral, spiritual, and social growth of their children. Thus, the family emerges as a true school of humanity, an ecclesial space where virtues are embodied through the ordinary rhythms of shared life, oriented toward the flourishing of the human person and the common good.[58]

To walk with families in a spirit of listening, solidarity, and co-responsibility is to participate in a relational vision of life deeply resonant with both Christian anthropology and the African understanding of existence as shared vitality.[59] In such a synodal journey, the church helps form children capable of freedom, responsibility, and love – persons who become agents of human flourishing in both church and society. Synodality at home is therefore not ancillary but constitutive of the Church's mission. Where families embody listening, dialogue, discernment, and shared responsibility, they become living laboratories of faith and schools of communion. The pastoral pathways proposed in this study seek to empower parents, strengthen families, and rekindle a shared sense of responsibility within the wider ecclesial and social community. For the renewal of the church begins in the domestic church: when parents are accompanied, families are strengthened; when families are strengthened, children flourish; and when children flourish, the church and society are renewed.

My claim in this study does not romanticize African communal life as inherently harmonious or free from conflict, power imbalance, or gender inequality. Rather, ubuntu is engaged in critical and theological dialogue with Christian anthropology, which upholds both relational belonging and the God-given dignity,

57 This was at the Ignatian Solidarity Network conference "Ignatian Family Teach-In for Justice" in Washington, DC, 15-17 November 2025.

58 See James F. Keenan: *Moral Wisdom: Lessons and Texts from the Catholic Tradition*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2010, 13-18.

59 See J.S. Mbiti: *African Religions and Philosophy*, 106-108. A.E. Orobator: *Theology Brewed in an African Pot*, 25-30.

freedom, conscience, and moral agency of the human person. Within this framework, authentic communal life does not suppress individuality but situates personal freedom within relationships of mutual responsibility, justice, discernment, and the common good. Consequently, when critically appropriated alongside Catholic social teaching and synodal spirituality, pastoral ubuntu offers a constructive framework for addressing contemporary questions of relational responsibility, moral formation, mutual accountability, and communal flourishing essential for synodal family life in Nigeria.

Beyond the Nigerian context, this study contributes to the wider ecclesial and pastoral conversation on family life by echoing the urgent call that emerged throughout the synodal process: "Formation must consequently engage all the dimensions of the human person (intellectual, affective, relational and spiritual) and include concrete experiences that are appropriately accompanied."[60] In this light, the family must be reclaimed as a privileged theological locus and domestic church where faith is embodied, discerned, transmitted, and continually renewed through relationships of communion and care. Ultimately, this study calls for a renewed pastoral imagination grounded in synodal spirituality, one that accompanies families with attentiveness, creativity, and hope, so that children may grow toward integral human flourishing and become co-responsible builders of a more just, humane, and life-giving world.

Summary

Synodality at Home: Accompanying Parents for the Integral Formation of Children in Nigerian Families

This article examines pastoral strategies for the integral formation of children in Nigerian Christian families through the lens of synodality as a spirituality and praxis of communion, participation, and co-responsibility. Drawing from pastoral and practical theology, family ethics, Catholic social teaching, and African cultural anthropology, the study situates the family as a privileged locus of ethical and ecclesial formation. By integrating contextual analysis with theological reflection and pastoral praxis, the article engages contemporary realities of families in Nigeria, highlighting listening and discernment as essential pastoral and synodal dispositions. It argues that the pastoral accompaniment of parents is an ecclesial imperative for a synodal church in Nigeria and proposes pastoral ubuntu (ubuntunization) as a contextual paradigm that brings African communal anthropology into dialogue with synodal ecclesiology. This approach strengthens parental formation, fosters relational responsibility, and promotes collaborative ministry among families, parishes, and local communities toward human flourishing.

60 XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: *For a Synodal Church*, 143.

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