

**REIMAGINING SYNODALITY: LISTENING TO STUDENTS' VOICES IN
ZIMBABWEAN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS**

by

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Submitted to the Faculty of
The Catholic Theological Union at Chicago
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

May 1, 2026

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply grateful to the Catholic Theological Union at Chicago for the privilege of pursuing doctoral studies at this distinguished institution. My sincere thanks are extended to the entire faculty for their exceptional instruction, intellectual generosity, and pastoral encouragement throughout the program.

I am particularly indebted to my program Director, Professor Scott Alexander, whose wise counsel and dedicated mentorship over the past four years have been indispensable to my formation as a scholar. To my Thesis Director, Professor Steve Millies, I offer heartfelt gratitude for his tireless engagement, incisive feedback, and steadfast encouragement in shaping the present work. I likewise thank my Faculty Reader, Professor Christina Zaker, for the care, generosity of time, and scholarly attention she brought to reviewing this thesis.

I am grateful to my peer readers, Reverend Christopher Rajkumar and Doctor Manson Anane Adjei, whose diligent proofreading and constructive suggestions strengthened the final manuscript considerably.

I also wish to express appreciation to the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) for granting approval to conduct this research. My thanks are equally due to the administrators, staff, and communities of St. Bernard's High School, St. Pius College, and Minda High School for their cooperation, hospitality, and generous access during fieldwork. Above all, I am profoundly grateful to all the participants — students,

educators, parents, and clergy — whose candid engagement and invaluable insights made this study possible.

To my family, I owe an abiding debt of gratitude for their unwavering love, patience, and encouragement throughout this journey. Their partnership sustained me through its many demands and challenges.

This work stands as a testament to the collective wisdom, generosity, and support of all who have accompanied me along the way. It is offered with humility and in the hope that it may serve the ongoing renewal of the Church's mission in education.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

The following abbreviations are used throughout this thesis. Magisterial documents follow standard Catholic theological citation conventions. All Scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) unless otherwise indicated.

ACP	African, Caribbean, and Pacific Countries
CAMFED	Campaign for Female Education
Can.	Canon (Code of Canon Law)
CC	Code of Canon Law (Codex Iuris Canonici, 1983)
CCC	Catechism of the Catholic Church
CCE	Congregation for Catholic Education
CLC	Christian Life Communities
CTU	Catholic Theological Union at Chicago
CV	Christus Vivit (Pope Francis, 2019)
CYA	Catholic Youth Association
DV	Dei Verbum (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Vatican II, 1965)
EG	Evangelii Gaudium (Pope Francis, 2013)
ES	Ecclesiam Suam (Pope Paul VI, 1964)
FL	Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (2024)
FT	Fratelli Tutti (Pope Francis, 2020)
GE	Gravissimum Educationis (Declaration on Christian Education, Vatican II, 1965)
GS	Gaudium et Spes (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Vatican II, 1965)
IL	Instrumentum Laboris (Working Document for the Synod on Synodality, 2023)
ITE	Information and Communication Technology in Education

LG	Lumen Gentium (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Vatican II, 1964)
MoPSE	Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (Zimbabwe)
NDS	ZCBC National Diocesan Synthesis Document (2022)
OT	Old Testament
NT	New Testament
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PD	Preparatory Document for the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (2021)
PG	Patrologia Graeca (Migne)
PL	Patrologia Latina (Migne)
PTR	Practical Theological Reflection
RE	Religious Education
SASSAF	Students' Annual School Sports and Arts Festival
SCB	St Bernard's High School
SC	Sacrosanctum Concilium (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Vatican II, 1963)
SDC	School Development Committee
SPC	St Pius Enkanyisweni Technical College
SRC	Student Representative Council
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
<i>Ubuntu</i>	<i>Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu</i> (Ndebele/Zulu: "I am because we are")
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UR	Unitatis Redintegratio (Decree on Ecumenism, Vatican II, 1964)
Vatican II	Second Vatican Council (1962–1965)

ZCF	Zimbabwe Curriculum Framework
ZCBC	Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference
ZIMRE	Zimbabwe Reinsurance Corporation (contextual reference)
ZIMSEC	Zimbabwe School Examinations Council

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the transformative potential of synodality in Zimbabwean Catholic secondary education, with particular attention to the role of student voice in shaping learning environments and institutional culture. Drawing on Pope Francis's vision of a participatory, listening Church, the study argues for a paradigm shift in Catholic school governance — one that prioritizes inclusivity, communal discernment, and collaborative decision-making as constitutive dimensions of ecclesial and educational life.

Employing a qualitative case-study methodology, the research was conducted across three Catholic secondary institutions: Minda High School, St. Bernard's High School, and St. Pius Enkanyisweni Technical College. Data were gathered through structured interviews and focus group discussions with students, educators, parents, and clergy, with the aim of identifying both the barriers that impede meaningful dialogue and the conditions that enable it.

The findings reveal that while synodal principles enjoy broad theological affirmation, their implementation in Zimbabwean Catholic schools remains uneven and constrained by hierarchical cultures, limited structures for student participation, and inadequate formation in synodal praxis. The thesis proposes a contextually grounded framework — informed by *Ubuntu* philosophy, Catholic social teaching, and the theology of synodality — for fostering a culture of listening, mutual accountability, and shared responsibility within Catholic educational institutions.

Primarily, this study seeks to advance educational practices that honor the dignity, agency, and diverse experiences of students, thereby contributing to a more authentically synodal expression of Catholic schooling in the Zimbabwean context and beyond.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Synodality and the Student Voice in Zimbabwean Catholic Schools

1.0 Epigraph

"Synodality is precisely the path that God expects of the Church of the third millennium." — Pope Francis, October 2021¹

1.1 General Topic

In Catholic education, the voices of students are indispensable for shaping effective, just, and transformative learning environments. The synodal call to journey together — to embrace diversity, foster communal discernment, and practice inclusive dialogue — provides a compelling theological and pedagogical framework for educational renewal. At its heart, synodality invites all members of the Church, irrespective of age, role, or status, to participate meaningfully in the shared mission of building communities rooted in human dignity, social justice, and mutual responsibility.

Pope Francis formally initiated the Synod on Synodality in October 2021, launching a multi-year global process of listening and dialogue within the Catholic Church, aimed at deepening communion, participation, and mission. His vision positions synodality not as an occasional mechanism but as the constitutive mode of ecclesial life — a way of being Church that demands attentive listening and authentic dialogue at every level.² This vision profoundly impacts the educational landscape, particularly in contexts such as Zimbabwe where Catholic schools are simultaneously institutions of faith formation and civic development.

¹ Pope Francis. "Address at the Opening of the Synodal Process." Vatican City, October 9, 2021.

² Pope Francis. *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission: Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality* (Vatican City: General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, 2021), sec. 1.

The theological lineage of this vision extends from Pope Paul VI's *Ecclesiam Suam*³, which articulated the Church's vocation for dialogue with the world, to the Second Vatican Council's reorientation of the Church as the People of God, and onward to Pope Francis's insistence that the Church's credibility in the modern world depends on its capacity to listen. This research occupies the intersection of these ecclesial commitments and the concrete realities of Zimbabwean Catholic schools, exploring how synodality can be actualized not merely as theory but as lived educational practice.

This study examines the transformative potential of student-centred dialogue and participatory engagement in Zimbabwean Catholic schools through the lens of synodality. By recognizing students as active co-participants — not passive recipients of formation — the research challenges Catholic schools to cultivate environments that honor student agency, foster respectful dialogue, and embody the principles of communal discernment. Through this lens, the amplification of student voices is not simply a pedagogical strategy; it is a theological imperative grounded in baptismal dignity and the shared vocation of the People of God.

The contextualization of synodality in education serves to link the global call of the Church with the local realities of Zimbabwe. By connecting these dimensions, the research fosters a holistic understanding of how synodality can enrich educational experience, ensuring that insights gained at the local level contribute meaningfully to the broader synodal process within the universal Church.

³ Pope Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam* (New York: Paulist Press, 1964), 1ff.

1.2 Thesis Problem

In Zimbabwean Catholic schools, a significant disconnection persists between the institutional framework of education and the vital perspectives of students. This disconnect impedes the effective integration of synodal principles — such as communal discernment, inclusive dialogue, and active participation — into the daily educational experience. Students' voices, particularly those from marginalised backgrounds, are frequently overlooked in decision-making processes, leading to feelings of disengagement and disempowerment that contradict the Church's fundamental commitment to human dignity.

The central problem this thesis addresses is how to genuinely and sustainably incorporate student insights into the educational landscape of Zimbabwean Catholic schools in a manner that aligns with the Church's synodal vision and fosters an enduring culture of listening and co-responsibility. This is not merely a question of institutional management; it is a theological question about what kind of Church — and what kind of school — the community of the faithful is called to become.

This study seeks to address this problem by exploring the perceptions and experiences of students regarding synodality, and by identifying their proposals for enhancing participatory engagement in Catholic school governance and pastoral practice. The investigation will reveal the barriers inhibiting the actualization of synodal values and propose concrete, contextually sensitive strategies for cultivating an inclusive educational environment where every student's voice is respected, heard, and elevated.

1.3 Thesis Statement

This study argues that the principles of synodality — centred on communal discernment, inclusive dialogue, and shared co-responsibility — acquire renewed relevance and vitality when brought into dialogue with the Church's contemporary emphasis on listening to and amplifying the voices of marginalised participants, including students. The convergence of synodal methodology and student-centred approaches, anchored in the theological conviction that every baptised person is a co-responsible member of the Body of Christ, offers a transformative model for Catholic education in Zimbabwe where student agency and genuine participation can thrive.

Through qualitative case studies engaging student participants at Minda High School, St Bernard's High School, and St Pius College, this research employs interviews, questionnaires, policy analysis, and observational reflection to explore how students perceive and enact synodal values through their lived experiences. By amplifying student voices as primary contributors to this inquiry, the study seeks to understand how educators, administrators, and policymakers can collaboratively foster inclusive, participatory, and purposeful school environments that authentically reflect the synodal vision of the Church.

1.4 Research Questions

The following research questions guide this inquiry into the intersection of synodal principles and student participatory engagement within Zimbabwean Catholic schools:

1. How do students in Zimbabwean Catholic schools articulate their understanding and lived experience of synodality and communal discernment in relation to inclusivity, human dignity, and social justice within their educational contexts?

2. In what specific ways do students envision synodal practices and participatory governance being integrated into the daily operations and governance of their schools to enhance their agency and overall educational experience?
3. What structural, cultural, and psychosocial barriers do students identify as inhibiting the effective implementation of synodal values and inclusive dialogue within Zimbabwean Catholic schools?
4. How can actionable strategies informed by student and educator feedback shape policy recommendations that align with the principles of synodality, ensuring that student perspectives are integral to the decision-making process in Catholic education?

These questions illuminate the complexities of fostering a culture of listening and engagement within the unique context of Zimbabwean Catholic schools. By centring student voices and directly involving students in the research process, this thesis seeks to contribute meaningful insights to the evolution of Catholic education, promoting environments where every voice is valued in the educational journey.

1.5 Genesis of This Thesis Project

My journey as a Christian educator in Kariba and Matobo Districts, Zimbabwe, has been profoundly shaped by the principles of synodality, which I have come to regard as indispensable for creating inclusive, dignified, and transformative learning environments. With over twenty years in Religious Education and Catechesis, and through my doctoral studies at the Catholic Theological Union (CTU) at Chicago, I have deepened my appreciation of how synodality cultivates social responsibility, shared discernment, and communal growth.

A pivotal moment in my academic formation occurred during the Spring 2025 CTU course 'Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, Church, and Society,' taught by Professor Steven Millies, which explored Pope Francis's legacy and the contemporary renewal of synodality within the Church. This experience resonated with and deepened themes I first encountered in Professor Christina Zaker's 'Spirituality of Lay Vocation and Ministry' course in Fall 2024. These encounters convinced me that synodality, far from being an abstract ecclesiological category, has immediate and concrete implications for the way Catholic schools listen to, form, and empower their students.

Inspired by these interconnected academic and pastoral insights, I embarked on this project — 'Reimagining Synodality: Listening to Students' Voices in Zimbabwean Catholic Schools' — merging my dual roles as educator and theological researcher. Pope Francis's emphasis on a 'culture of encounter' further challenges me to cultivate relationships within the educational community that transcend superficial interactions and genuinely embody the Gospel call to recognise the divine in every person.

At the heart of this research lies an investigation into how synodal methodologies can amplify student voices, dismantle structural barriers to participation, and bridge the gap between theological theory and lived school experience. By centring students as key conversational partners, my approach aims to enhance their agency and sense of belonging, while generating practical recommendations for educational leaders committed to synodal renewal. Through this synthesis of ministerial experience and ecclesial vision, I aspire to contribute to the evolving role of Catholic education in promoting social cohesion, community engagement, and a school culture where every voice is recognised as essential to the shared journey of faith.

1.6 Intended Audiences

The primary audience for this thesis is Catholic educators and administrators in Zimbabwean Catholic schools committed to fostering inclusive, participatory learning environments that honour student voice and co-responsibility. By exploring the application of synodal principles in educational settings, this research provides these stakeholders with practical insights and policy recommendations for enhancing dialogue and collaboration among students, staff, and the broader school community.

The study will also resonate with Church leaders, bishops, and educational policymakers who exercise influence over Catholic educational policy and practice in Zimbabwe and across sub-Saharan Africa. By foregrounding the importance of synodality in Catholic education, this research contributes to the evolution of educational policies that promote inclusive and participatory cultures consistent with the ecclesial vision of Vatican II and Pope Francis.

Researchers and scholars in the fields of Catholic education, practical theology, synodality, and youth engagement will benefit from the study's qualitative findings and their theological interpretation. The project contributes to a growing discourse on the pivotal role of synodality in Catholic education for facilitating social cohesion, interfaith dialogue, and the formation of morally engaged citizens.

Finally, the research is relevant to all Catholic school stakeholders — including students, parents, parish clergy, and teachers — who are invested in the quality, integrity, and mission of Catholic education. By prioritising student voices and experiences, this project aspires to promote a transformative model that is genuinely responsive to the diverse needs and aspirations of learners in Zimbabwean Catholic schools.

1.7 Anticipated Outcomes

1.7.1 Achievable Goals

Enhance Student Co-Responsibility: Facilitate the active involvement of students by providing structured opportunities for them to articulate their experiences and insights regarding their education and school environment, fostering a genuine sense of ownership and co-responsibility consistent with synodal ecclesiology.

Promote a Culture of Listening and Dialogue: Establish inclusive mechanisms — such as regular forums, listening circles, workshops, and digital platforms — that encourage meaningful communication among students, educators, and administrators, thereby enacting the synodal principle that the Church's mission is advanced through attentive, reciprocal listening.

Generate Practical, Evidence-Based Recommendations: Collaborate with students and educators to identify and develop clear, actionable strategies grounded in synodal principles, producing recommendations that can be adopted by Catholic school administrators and diocesan policymakers to enhance participatory governance and inclusive formation.

1.7.2 Recognised Limitations

Limited Scope: The case study focuses on three schools — Minda High School, St Bernard's High School, and St Pius Enkanyisweni Technical College — which may limit the generalisability of findings to Catholic schools with significantly different demographics, diocesan cultures, or resource profiles. This focused approach is, however, intentional and strategic: it enables in-depth exploration of students' lived experiences within familiar institutional contexts, generating rich, contextually grounded insights that may be adapted and tested in other settings.

Variability in Stakeholder Engagement: The willingness of students and other participants to engage openly in interviews and dialogue sessions may vary, potentially introducing gaps in the data that affect the comprehensiveness of the findings. Ethical precautions and the researcher's established relationships within the schools were employed to mitigate this risk.

Institutional Resistance: Entrenched institutional cultures and hierarchical norms may resist the adoption of synodal practices, limiting the immediate implementation of the study's recommendations. This study anticipates such resistance as both an empirical finding and a theological challenge requiring ongoing pastoral formation.

1.7.3 Potential Broader Ministerial Import

Connecting the Universal Church with Local Contexts: By engaging synodality within the educational framework of Zimbabwean Catholic schools, this research serves as a vital bridge linking the universal mission of the Church with the distinct cultural and socio-economic realities of local communities. This alignment enables the Church to respond authentically to the specific challenges faced by students and their families, cultivating a learning environment where students articulate their unique narratives within the broader communion of faith.

Fostering Interfaith Dialogue: By cultivating a culture of dialogue and genuine listening, the study contributes to broader efforts of interfaith understanding and cooperation, promoting harmony among diverse belief communities within pluralistic school environments.

Advancing the Catholic Educational Mission: The study's findings can inform broader discussions on the mission and identity of Catholic education, reinforcing the role of listening, co-responsibility, and communal discernment in forming students not only academically but as active, morally engaged members of Church and society.

1.8 Definition of Key Terms

The following terms are central to this thesis and are defined here to establish conceptual clarity.

These definitions will be developed further in subsequent chapters.

1. Synodality: Synodality refers to the principle of journeying together as the constitutive mode of being Church, emphasising communion, participation, and mission. It invites all members of the Church — including students — to engage in collaborative discernment and shared responsibility. As employed in this study, synodality underlines the theological imperative of including student perspectives in educational dialogue and reform.

2. Participatory Engagement (Student Voice): This term refers to the structured and theologically grounded involvement of students in the life, governance, and formation processes of their schools. It encompasses both advisory and co-responsible dimensions of participation, ranging from consultation to genuine co-authorship of school culture and policy. The broader term 'participatory engagement' is preferred where precision is needed, encompassing 'student voice,' 'youth contributions,' and 'co-responsible participation.'

3. Communal Discernment: A process through which a community — engaged in shared reflection, dialogue, and prayer — collectively seeks the movement of the Holy Spirit to reach decisions and chart a course of action. In educational settings, communal discernment involves all stakeholders, including students, in recognising needs, aspirations, and pathways forward.

4. Co-Responsibility: The shared duty of all baptised members of the Church to collaborate actively in its life and mission. Co-responsibility is distinct from mere consultation; it implies genuine accountability, shared ownership, and the structural recognition of each person's contribution to the community.

5. Communion (*Koinonia*): A deep sense of togetherness within the Church rooted in shared faith, mutual support, and Trinitarian life. Communion is the theological foundation of synodality and the relational fabric within which co-responsibility and discernment are exercised.

6. *Sensus Fidelium*: The collective intuition and understanding of the faithful concerning matters of faith and morals, understood as a Spirit-guided capacity of the whole People of God to perceive the truth of the Gospel. In educational contexts, attending to the *sensus fidelium* of students means recognising their insights as genuine contributions to ecclesial discernment.

7. Baptismal Dignity: The inherent worth and vocation of every person as a child of God, conferred through Baptism. Baptismal dignity grounds the right and responsibility of every member — including students — to participate in the Church's life and mission.

8. Inclusivity: The practice of creating learning environments that welcome and affirm diverse identities, experiences, and perspectives, ensuring that every student — regardless of background, ability, or belief — has equal opportunity to participate and contribute.

9. Agency: The capacity of individuals to act independently and make informed choices. In this research, student agency refers to the autonomy and structural opportunity of students to influence decisions that shape their education, consistent with their developmental stage and communal responsibilities.

10. Ecclesiology: The theological study of the Church's nature, structure, and mission. The ecclesiological framework operative in this thesis is drawn primarily from Vatican II's *Lumen Gentium* and Pope Francis's synodal vision, emphasising the Church as a communion of co-responsible pilgrims walking together.

11. Theological Anthropology: The theological understanding of human nature, dignity, and vocation in relation to God. This thesis is informed by an anthropology that affirms the inherent worth of each student as made in God's image (*imago Dei*), called to flourish spiritually, intellectually, and socially.

12. Ubuntu: The African philosophical and ethical principle encapsulated in the maxim 'I am because we are' (*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* in Ndebele/Zulu). *Ubuntu* affirms that personhood is constituted through relationship, community, and mutual care — a conviction that resonates deeply with synodal values and provides a culturally grounded framework for understanding communal discernment in the Zimbabwean context.

13. Formation: The holistic process of intellectual, spiritual, moral, and social growth through which individuals are shaped for life in community and faithful discipleship. Formation in this thesis encompasses both catechetical instruction and the experiential learning of synodal virtues such as listening, discernment, and co-responsibility.

14. Institutional Resistance: The structural and cultural inertia within educational institutions that inhibits the adoption of synodal values, typically manifesting in hierarchical governance, clericalism, or reluctance to share deliberative authority with students and laity.

1.9 Summary and Chapter Overview

This introductory chapter has situated the research within the theological and pastoral context of Pope Francis's synodal vision and its relevance to Zimbabwean Catholic schools. It has articulated the thesis problem — the disconnection between institutional educational frameworks and student participatory engagement — and has advanced the thesis statement that synodality, properly inculcated and practised, offers a transformative model for Catholic education in

Zimbabwe. The research questions, limitations, intended audiences, and key terms have been established to provide a clear frame for what follows.

Chapter 2 develops the theological and historical foundations of synodality, tracing its scriptural roots, its evolution through Vatican II and subsequent magisterial teaching, and its contextualisation in the African and Zimbabwean worldview through *Ubuntu* and inculturation. It also identifies the challenges — clericalism, cultural tensions, resource constraints — that must be honestly acknowledged if synodality is to move from aspiration to practice. Chapter 3 examines the role of student participatory engagement in Catholic education, tracing its historical development, its theological grounding in synodal principles, and its practical expression through curriculum frameworks, school governance, and the Monte Cassino case study. Chapter 4 outlines the qualitative methodology — Practical Theological Reflection, phenomenological inquiry, and case study design — that governs the empirical inquiry. Chapter 5 presents and interprets the qualitative findings from the three schools. The thesis concludes with Chapter 6, which synthesises findings, proposes recommendations, and outlines implications for policy, practice, and future research.

CHAPTER 2

The Journey of Synodality: From Scripture to Contemporary Practice

2.0 Introduction

This chapter examines synodality as both a theological conviction and a practical paradigm shaping contemporary Catholic life and education. Synodality is presented not merely as a procedural reform but as a constitutive way of being Church: a pilgrim people who walk, listen, discern, and act together under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Tracing its origins from the communal discernment exemplified in Scripture — most notably the Council of Jerusalem — through the ecclesial reorientation of Vatican II, and into the pastoral emphases of Popes Paul VI and Francis, the chapter maps how synodality reframes authority, participation, and mission within a hierarchical yet co-responsible ecclesial structure.

The chapter then explores the theological underpinnings of synodality: pneumatology, ecclesiology, the *sensus fidelium*, and the tripartite pillars of communion, mission, and participation. It situates synodality within the Zimbabwean and broader African worldview, particularly the ethic of *Ubuntu*, while carefully distinguishing between *Ubuntu* as a lived communal practice and synodality as an institutional ecclesial framework. The chapter concludes by considering the concrete implications of synodality for Catholic education in Zimbabwe — in governance, formation, curriculum, and pastoral practice — and by honestly naming the structural challenges that must be addressed if synodality is to move from aspiration to practice.

It is important to acknowledge at the outset that, while synodality holds transformative potential, its implementation is not without difficulty. Entrenched clericalism, hierarchical resistance,

cultural tensions, and resource limitations constitute genuine obstacles. Naming these challenges honestly is itself a synodal act — and a precondition for meaningful reform.

2.1 Historical Evolution of Synodality

Synodality describes the mode of being Church in which the People of God walk together, with discernment and mission understood as shared responsibilities rather than the preserve of a few.⁴ Etymologically, the word 'synod' derives from the Greek *syn-odos* — 'a way together' — already pointing to a dynamic, ongoing journey rather than a fixed institutional arrangement. Historically, this impulse has taken diverse forms: the communal discernment of the apostolic age; the local and provincial synods of the patristic and medieval periods through which bishops and clergy addressed pastoral and doctrinal matters; the ecumenical councils that sought conciliar resolution of theological crises; and later centralising developments that concentrated authority within Roman structures. In each phase, tensions between collegiality, episcopal authority, and lay participation have shaped how synodality was practised and understood.

The modern renewal of synodality emerged most decisively in the twentieth century, as the Second Vatican Council rearticulated the Church as the People of God and called for greater participation by all the baptised. Pope Francis deepened this trajectory by reclaiming synodality as a constitutive dimension of ecclesial life — not merely a method for occasional consultations but a sustained way of living out communion, participation, and mission. The current Synod on Synodality is a concrete continuation of this development, seeking to recover the formative practice of communal listening and discernment across the whole People of God, engaging clergy and laity, centre and periphery, in a shared search for the Spirit's guidance.

⁴ Pope Francis, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission: Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality* (Vatican City: General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, 2021), sec. 1.

2.2 Scriptural Foundations

The scriptural basis for synodality is most clearly exemplified in Acts 15, the Council of Jerusalem, where apostles and elders convened to address whether Gentile converts must observe the Mosaic Law. That episode models communal discernment: debate and testimony are weighed, Peter and Paul's pastoral experiences are heard, James offers a judgment, and the community appeals to the guidance of the Holy Spirit — 'it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us' (Acts 15:28) — in reaching a decision. Far from being a merely procedural meeting, the Council of Jerusalem demonstrates synodality as a mode of listening to God together: integrating diverse voices and pastoral experience to discern what serves the mission of the Gospel.

Jesus' self-description as 'the way' (John 14:6) and the earliest disciples' identity as 'followers of the Way' (Acts 9:2) reinforce the theological depth of synodality: walking together after Christ shapes both the Church's self-understanding and its practices of governance and mission. Pope Francis underscores this scriptural link, noting that the word 'synod' itself 'indicates the path along which the People of God walk together.' This foundation invites contemporary communities — including Catholic educational institutions — to cultivate communal listening, give voice to the marginalised, and frame decision-making as a cooperative seeking of the Spirit's will rather than solely as top-down governance.

2.3 Vatican II and the Development of Synodality

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) was a watershed moment for the Catholic Church, fundamentally reshaping its self-understanding and operational dynamics. Central to this transformation was a renewed emphasis on dialogue — within the Church and in its engagement with the contemporary world. The Council's most important document on ecclesiology, *Lumen*

Gentium, presented a vision of the Church as 'the People of God,' highlighting the communal and participatory nature of Church membership while simultaneously affirming the hierarchical structure essential to its apostolic identity.⁵ This dual emphasis — communal identity and structured governance — facilitated a paradigm shift that promoted collaboration and participation by the entire baptised, not only the ordained.

Vatican II established the foundational elements for the modern development of synodality. Bishops were encouraged to engage in genuine consultation with their communities, enhancing a spirit of mutual responsibility and co-accountability. The Council affirmed that the Holy Spirit guides the laity in their contributions to the Church's life, recognising their irreplaceable role within the communion and pastoral order of the Body of Christ. Critically, Vatican II insisted that synodality goes beyond collective decision-making; it encapsulates a way of living as one Body — deepening relationships among the Church's members and between the Church and the world. This conciliar vision initiated an ongoing evolution toward a more inclusive, participatory, and dialogical ecclesial culture, the fruits of which continue to shape the Church's life today.

2.4 The Teachings of Pope Paul VI and Pope Francis

Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* marked a seminal moment in articulating the Church's pastoral approach in the modern world.⁶ Paul VI underscored the necessity of a Church that actively listens and responds to the 'signs of the times,' calling for a dialogical engagement with contemporary society — not a one-way proclamation but a two-way conversation enriching both the Church and the world. This foundational vision positioned dialogue as integral to the

⁵ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, nos. 32–33. In *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, edited by Austin Flannery (Northport, NY: Costello, 1992).

⁶ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, 12.

Church's identity and mission, establishing the theological ground from which Francis's synodal vision would later grow.

Building upon Paul VI's insights, Pope Francis has profoundly deepened and concretised the understanding of synodality. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, he envisions a Church that prioritises encounter and listening, approaching pastoral care with openness to the voices of all — especially the marginalised.⁷ Francis consistently emphasises that synodality transcends mere consultation; it embodies a way of being Church that is inclusive, missionary, and responsive to the complex realities of the contemporary world. In *Fratelli Tutti*, he expands this vision to encompass universal fraternity and social friendship, calling for a Church whose synodal culture extends beyond internal dialogue to embrace the wider human family.⁸ Through these documents, Francis has worked consistently to foster a participatory Church in which every voice — particularly those historically excluded — contributes to the shaping of its mission.

2.5 Pope Francis's Vision for Synodality

Pope Francis's vision for synodality became particularly concrete during the Synod of Bishops on Young People, Faith and Vocational Discernment,⁹ where he demonstrated an unprecedented commitment to listening to youth voices in shaping the Church's future. This synod was characterised by extensive engagement from laity and a deliberate emphasis on listening rather than merely discussing predetermined positions — a clear signal that synodality, for Francis, means genuinely opening the Church's discernment to those at its margins, including young

⁷ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), no. 1ff.

⁸ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), no. 1ff.

⁹ Synod of Bishops, *Final Document of the XV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2018), para. 120.

people. The resulting document, *Christus Vivit*, affirms youth not as passive recipients of the Church's care but as active agents in its mission.¹⁰

The synodal process initiated in October 2021 represented the most comprehensive realisation of this vision to date. The *Instrumentum Laboris* and the subsequent Synod assemblies of 2023 and 2024 — with their *Final Document* calling for 'participatory and co-responsible' processes at every level of Church life — confirm that synodality is not a temporary reform but a permanent reorientation of how the Church governs itself and carries out its mission.¹¹ This shift has direct implications for Catholic education: if the Church is called to be synodal in its governance and pastoral life, then Catholic schools — as institutional expressions of the Church's educational mission — must embody synodal values in their governance, pedagogy, and communal life.

2.6 Theology of Synodality

2.6.1 Ecclesiological Foundations: The Church as Communion

The theology of synodality arises from a profound rethinking of ecclesial identity, emphasising the Church as a communion of believers — gathered and sustained by the Triune God — who together embody the People of God. This theological claim transcends a merely sociological description; it is rooted in the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, who permeates the entire Body of Christ, enabling all members to participate actively in the Church's life and mission. Synodality therefore emerges as a defining mode of being Church, in which the gifts of the

¹⁰ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019), no. 47.

¹¹ Synod of Bishops, *Instrumentum Laboris for the First Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023).

Spirit, mutual belonging, and the shared vocation to witness to the Gospel take precedence over administratively driven governance structures.

As *Lumen Gentium* makes clear, this vision recalls the biblical and patristic understanding of a pilgrim people — guided by their bishops, united with the Successor of Peter — who listen together, discern collectively, and walk together toward the promised Kingdom.¹² The tripartite core values of synodality — communion, mission, and participation — function as mutually reinforcing theological pillars. Communion, modelled on the inner life of the Trinity, fosters a sense of belonging deepened through diverse relationships¹³. This communion-in-mission invokes a collective responsibility toward evangelisation, reminding each member that ecclesial identity is intrinsically linked to the Church's shared vocation in the world. Participation, in this light, is not an optional add-on but the concrete form through which communion becomes mission.

2.6.2 Pneumatology: The Spirit-Led Dimensions of Synodality

Synodality is, at its theological core, a pneumatological reality. It advocates for a Spirit-led communion actively participating in the divine mission of reconciliation and renewal, reflecting God's intention for humanity.¹⁴ The episcopal ministry and the Petrine office do not operate through unilateral decision-making; rather, they take shape through collegial discernment and the *sensus fidelium* — understood as the collective intuition of the Spirit guiding the faithful as a whole.¹⁵ Participation in this context is not a matter of consultative convenience but an intrinsic ecclesial right and duty; it demands the active engagement of lay faithful, religious, deacons,

¹² Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964), 8, 12.

¹³ Pope Francis, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission: Vademecum for the Synod on Synodalit.* (Vatican City: General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, 2021), sec. 1.

¹⁴ Rafael Luciani, *Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 2022), 46.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

priests, and bishops, each contributing their unique charisms to the Church's communal discernment.¹⁶

This pneumatological foundation illustrates the sacramental character of the Church: baptismal incorporation allows all the faithful to share in Christ's prophetic, priestly, and kingly ministries. If synodality is to be more than rhetorical flourish, it must develop as a sustained ecclesial conversion — demanding internal re-evangelisation and igniting bold prophetic engagement — fuelled by the conviction that the Holy Spirit guides the pilgrim people into ever deeper fidelity to the Gospel. As Rafael Luciani observes, the essence of synodality lies in a spirit of reciprocal relationships, forming the Church's capacity to engage the world with compassion, accompaniment, and a fervent desire for the flourishing of all.¹⁷

2.6.3 Authority, Co-Responsibility, and Hierarchical Structure

A critical clarification is required when speaking of authority and participation in a synodal framework. Synodality does not dissolve hierarchical structures or reduce the authority of the ordained ministry; it transforms and enriches their exercise. The episcopal ministry and the Petrine office remain constitutive of the Church's apostolic order — but they are enacted through collegial discernment, subsidiarity, and attentiveness to the *sensus fidelium* rather than through unilateral imposition. Synodality thus weaves together the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the Church's existence, establishing unified apostolic leadership while simultaneously fostering mutual listening and the co-responsible exercise of charity in mission.

¹⁶ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 13.

¹⁷ Luciani, *Synodality*, 89.

Institutionally, synodality carries significant implications for governance, formation, and the exercise of magisterial authority. It issues a thoroughgoing challenge to clericalism — the conflation of ordained ministry with spiritual superiority — and calls for structures that foster subsidiarity, where decisions are made at the level closest to the lived experience of the faithful, while maintaining accountability and harmony with the universal Church. This is not a dilution of authority but its proper ordering: authority in service of communion, discernment, and mission rather than authority as an end in itself.

2.6.4 Discernment: Methodology and Spiritual Practice

Practically and spiritually, synodality manifests as a disciplined methodology for discerning the signs of the times¹⁸. This process is characterised by communal listening, prayer, and deliberation, framing listening not as a passive activity but as an active theological act sustained by humility and openness to the Spirit's guidance. Synodal discernment — with its requirements of vulnerability, patience, and willingness to entertain contrary perspectives — shapes consensual outcomes that arise not from majoritarian dynamics but from a cohesive movement toward understanding what the Spirit inspires among the faithful.

The multi-stage synodal processes, extending from local parish consultations to diocesan, national, and global assemblies, institutionalise this spirituality of discernment: attentive listening is codified, diverse testimonies are integrated into cohesive pastoral proposals, and outcomes are subjected to communal testing and accountability. This approach emphasises the primacy of prayerful reflection and sacramental life while demanding inclusivity, transparency, and an orientation toward conversion and fruitfulness. Formation in discernment — across all

¹⁸ Pope Francis, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission: Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality* (Vatican City: General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, 2021), sec. 1.

levels of Church life — is therefore essential: it equips the People of God to practise listening and communal deliberation not merely as procedural steps but as expressions of their shared identity as the Body of Christ.

2.6.5 Magisterial, Canonical, and Eschatological Dimensions

Canonically, magisterial functions must not be sidelined by synodal processes but enriched through them, as the lived wisdom of the faithful illuminates magisterial judgment — especially the wisdom of those who remain marginalised by cultural or societal structures. This ongoing balance endeavours to sustain doctrinal integrity while ensuring that the Church can hear the voice of Christ speaking through the tapestry of lived experience¹⁹. Theological fidelity remains non-negotiable; the synodal aspiration is not to subject doctrine to popular vote but to deepen the community's capacity to receive and live the Gospel more fully.

Finally, synodality points toward an eschatological and missionary horizon: the Church is called to embody — and be credible as — a sign of God's reconciling love in the world. By committing to ongoing conversion and active listening, the Church positions itself to respond faithfully to the cries of the poor, the aspirations of youth, and the realities of a pluralistic world. Synodality is not a temporary innovation but a foundational modality of the Church's identity and mission: a collective journey toward holiness and service, animated by hope in the Spirit's ongoing guidance.

2.7 Synodality in the African Worldview: *Ubuntu*, Inculturation, and Distinction

2.7.1 *Ubuntu* as Lived Communal Practice

¹⁹ Christina Zaker, *Surprised by God: Teaching Reflection through the Parables* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), 65.

In the context of Zimbabwe and the broader African world, synodality resonates deeply with indigenous philosophies shaped by the rich tapestry of communal life and culture. At the heart of the African worldview is the philosophy of *Ubuntu*, encapsulated in the maxim 'I am because we are' (*Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* in Ndebele/Zulu).²⁰ *Ubuntu* emphasises interconnectedness, interdependence, and the value of communal identity over individualism, framing a theological landscape that naturally aligns with synodal principles.

Zimbabwean society is built upon relationships: familial, communal, and spiritual ties are woven through everyday life, reflecting the fundamental conviction that individuals are constituted through their relationships with one another. This communal ethos directly informs how the Church engages its members, enhancing the synodal vision that calls for listening, mutual respect, and active participation. The *dare/idale* — the traditional Shona/Ndebele forum of open dialogue held in community settings, where all members may speak and be heard regardless of status — offers a compelling indigenous model for synodal assemblies. Zimbabwean traditions similarly prioritise dialogue and consensus through communal deliberation, as evidenced in practices such as the *mariro* funeral rite, which not only honours the deceased but solidifies community bonds through collective mourning and reflection. Shona spirituality, rooted in communal identity and ancestral memory, further illustrates the depth of relational ethics that permeates Zimbabwean cultural life.

2.7.2 A Critical Distinction: Ubuntu and Synodality

A critical distinction must be maintained, however, when drawing on *Ubuntu* to illuminate synodality. *Ubuntu* is, at its core, a lived communal practice — organically woven into the daily

²⁰ Stanlake J. W. T. Samkange and Tommie Marie Samkange, *Hunhuism or Ubuntuism: A Zimbabwe Indigenous Political Philosophy* (Salisbury: Graham Publishing, 1980), 34.

rhythms of African social life. It is not a formal doctrine or institutional framework; it is expressed through concrete acts of mutual support, shared deliberation, communal mourning, and collective celebration. Synodality, by contrast, is an institutional ecclesial framework — a structured process developed and promulgated by the Church's magisterial authority, grounded in theological principles and governed by procedural guidelines that seek to make communion, participation, and mission operative at every level of the Church.

This distinction carries significant pastoral implications. If synodality is presented solely as a Vatican initiative handed down from Rome, it risks being received as an external imposition rather than an authentic expression of the community's own spiritual and cultural heritage — observed in letter but not embraced in spirit. *Ubuntu*, by contrast, moves from lived experience upwards: from the ground of community life toward broader moral expression. For synodality to bear genuine fruit in Zimbabwe, therefore, the two must be carefully distinguished even as their convergences are celebrated. The task is not to equate them, but to allow *Ubuntu* to enrich, contextualise, and give local expression to the synodal vision — allowing synodality to become not an imported programme but a way of being Church that is genuinely rooted in Zimbabwean soil.

2.7.3 Inculturation as the Bridge

The theological process required to achieve this integration is inculturation: the transformative encounter between the Gospel and its ecclesial expressions, and the cultures into which it is received. As articulated by Pope John Paul II and affirmed by subsequent pontificates, inculturation is not a superficial cultural decoration applied to an otherwise unchanged structure;

it is a genuine, mutual enrichment in which faith takes on new expressions through local culture, while local culture is transformed and elevated by the Gospel.²¹

In the Zimbabwean context, genuine inculturation of synodality means moving beyond translating synodal documents into local languages, to shaping synodal gatherings through the rhythms, forms, and protocols of African communal deliberation. It means formally engaging the custodian roles of traditional leaders — chiefs, elders, and community mothers — within the synodal process, recognising their moral authority as a legitimate bridge between traditional and contemporary ecclesial structures. It means allowing the *dare* and the *mariro* to inform the forms of synodal assembly, so that the universal aspiration of the Church to listen and journey together takes shape in practices that Zimbabwean Catholics recognise as authentically their own. Without genuine inculturation, synodality risks remaining a formal Vatican initiative; with it, synodality can become what the Church intends it to be: a way of being Church that is truly local and truly universal at once.

2.8 Key Documents Shaping Synodality

Several magisterial documents have provided the normative framework for the development and implementation of synodality:

- i. *Lumen Gentium* of Vatican II — presents the Church as the People of God, affirming co-responsibility and the role of the Holy Spirit in guiding communal discernment.²²
- ii. *Ecclesiam Suam* of Pope Paul VI — articulates the Church's vocation for dialogue, laying the theological groundwork for a listening, conversational ecclesiology.²³

²¹ Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 122–158.

²² Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964), nos. 1ff.

- iii. *Evangelii Gaudium* of Pope Francis — calls for a Church that listens, encounters, and journeys with all, especially the marginalised, establishing the pastoral framework for contemporary synodality.²⁴
- iv. *Christus Vivit* of Pope Francis — affirms youth as active agents in the Church's mission, grounding their participation in theological anthropology and vocation.²⁵
- v. *Fratelli Tutti* of Pope Francis — extends the synodal vision to universal fraternity and social friendship, underscoring collaboration and mutual respect as imperatives for Church and society.²⁶
- vi. *The Preparatory Document for the 2023 Synod on Synodality*: This document outlines the themes and pastoral priorities derived from the local consultations, providing a roadmap for the Church's future engagement on synodality.²⁷
- vii. *Synod on Synodality: Final Document* — calls for 'participatory and co-responsible' processes at every level of ecclesial life, confirming synodality as a permanent institutional reorientation of the Church.²⁸

2.9 Stages of the Synodal Process: From Local Engagement to Universal Reflection

The Synodal Process initiated by Pope Francis comprised three complementary stages. The first stage — **Consultation** with the People of God (October 2021 to October 2023) — unfolded in three phases: a diocesan phase (October 2021 to August 2022) in which local communities

²³ Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964), nos. 1ff.

²⁴ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), nos. 1ff.

²⁵ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2019), nos. 1ff.

²⁶ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), nos. 1ff.

²⁷ Synod of Bishops, *Preparatory Document for the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2021), 1–24.

²⁸ Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission: Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2024), nos. 1ff.

engaged in listening sessions capturing grassroots experience; a continental phase (September 2022 to March 2023) aggregating national and regional insights; and a universal phase (April to October 2023) consolidating results for the Synod of Bishops. The second stage — **Assembly** (2023 to 2024) — convened two sessions of the Synod of Bishops in Rome: the first in October 2023, which initiated discernment of the consultation findings, and the second in October 2024, which produced the Final Document establishing the path forward. The third stage — **Implementation** (from 2025 onward) — entrusts the results of the synodal journey to the entire Church, with a period dedicated to the reception, evaluation, and contextual adaptation of the synodal vision in local communities.²⁹

2.10 The Synodal Survey in Zimbabwean Catholic Schools

Zimbabwean Catholic schools were intentionally integrated into the global synodal process. Diocesan offices distributed resources and guidance enabling classroom- and parish-based engagement with synodal questions.³⁰ Pupils were invited to produce written and creative submissions; those responses were collated and forwarded to diocesan synthesis teams so that students' lived insights could inform local and national reports. In many schools, staff organized dedicated time for dialogue, and teachers from different institutions participated jointly in the synodal discernment process, modeling collaborative listening for learners.

For many participants, this experience produced a transformative shift in their sense of belonging: the Church was perceived not only as a hierarchy to be addressed but as a faith community in which their perspectives genuinely mattered. This shift from observer to

²⁹ Pope Francis, *Vademecum*.

³⁰ Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference, *National Synthesis Document* (Harare: ZCBC, August 6, 2022), 1ff.

participant is precisely the ecclesial conversion that synodality seeks to catalyze. Centering Zimbabwean Catholic students in this research responds to both methodological and pastoral imperatives: methodologically, it tests universal principles of synodality in a specific local context; pastorally, it honors the synod's emphasis on listening to those at the margins of decision-making and forming young people as active co-participants in the Church's life.

2.11 Global Reception and Implementation

The synodal journey initiated by Pope Francis captured the engagement of Catholics across the world, transcending cultural and geographical barriers and inviting all Catholics to share their experiences and insights regarding the Church's mission. Local gatherings facilitated by bishops and parish leaders became vital platforms for engagement, characterized by a spirit of openness and respect. The Preparatory Document for the 2023 Synod on Synodality articulated key themes and aspirations from these consultations, underscoring that listening is not only a critical act of communication but a spiritual practice essential for discernment. This global reception demonstrates a renewed commitment to fostering an inclusive ecclesial culture that values participation as a constitutive component of the Church's life — not a dispensable supplement to it.

2.12 Implementing Synodality in Zimbabwean Catholic Education

Implementing synodality in Catholic schools begins from the conviction that the threefold value of communion, participation, and mission are not abstract ecclesial ideals but practical educational imperatives. Theologically, synodality insists that all the baptised share in the Church's life and mission; pedagogically, this translates into learning communities where pupils, teachers, parents, religious, and clergy listen, discern, and act together. In the Zimbabwean

context, this theological anthropology resonates naturally with *Ubuntu* — the lived conviction that identity and flourishing emerge through relationship. Catholic schools are therefore fertile ground for synodal praxis because their institutional purpose already combines formation in faith and civic life, and because many communities continue to practise communal deliberation and consensus-building in social life and ritual.

Practically, synodality can be embedded across the whole life of schools. At the governance level, school boards and parent-teacher associations should be retooled to include structured processes of consultation and discernment that give voice to students, lay teachers, catechists, and parish representatives; subsidiarity must be honoured so that decisions closest to the lived realities of learners are empowered at the appropriate level. Curriculum development offers another immediate locus: Religious Education and Civic Education syllabi can teach not only doctrine but also communal discernment skills — prayerful listening, ethical reasoning, conflict resolution, and service learning — so that students develop the habits of co-responsibility. Student councils should function as genuine deliberative bodies, not merely ceremonial structures. Formation of staff is essential: priests, religious, and lay teachers require ongoing formation in synodal spirituality and pastoral methodology so they can facilitate, rather than dominate, consultative processes.

Culturally sensitive engagement with local communities is equally essential. The Church's teaching on listening and communal discernment can be articulated through familiar local practices of dialogue and communal rites, drawing on elders, traditional leaders, and parish networks. Partnerships with teacher training colleges and diocesan catechetical programs can institutionalize synodal competence among new educators, while school chaplaincy programs

can centre sacramental life and prayerful discernment as the spiritual backbone of participatory action.

2.13 Challenges to Communion, Mission, and Participation

The theological ideals of communion, mission, and participation do not unfold without friction. Several pastoral and institutional obstacles must be named honestly if synodality is to be more than aspirational rhetoric in the Zimbabwean context.

Clericalism remains one of the most tenacious barriers. While visiting Mozambique and Madagascar, Pope Francis told Jesuits that clericalism is a real corruption in the Church. He said it condemns, divides, discourages, and looks down on the people of God.³¹ When ordained ministry is conflated with spiritual superiority, it stifles the participatory dynamic at the heart of synodal ecclesiology. Lay voices — particularly those of women, youth, students, and persons from economically marginalised communities — may be formally invited into consultation while remaining structurally peripheral to actual discernment and decision-making. Hierarchical resistance, though often subtle, manifests in the reluctance of some diocesan and parish leaders to cede deliberative space to the wider faithful, whether from concern about doctrinal integrity or institutional inertia.

Cultural tensions introduce additional complexity, especially in Zimbabwe, where inherited colonial ecclesiastical structures sit uneasily alongside indigenous relational ethics. While *Ubuntu* principles of communal belonging resonate naturally with synodal values, traditional gender hierarchies and age-based deference can simultaneously constrain who participates and

³¹ Pope Francis, “The Sovereignty of the People of God: Meeting of the Pope with the Jesuits of Mozambique and Madagascar,” *La Civiltà Cattolica*, September 5, 2019.

how freely. Acknowledging these tensions is not a counsel of despair but an honest precondition for meaningful reform.

Resource limitations present practical obstacles to sustained synodal engagement: schools and parishes lack the formation, communication infrastructure, and facilitation capacity required for consistent implementation. Addressing implementation gaps requires not only institutional goodwill but intentional pedagogical formation that integrates synodal values with contextually sensitive practice. These challenges will be examined empirically in the qualitative findings of Chapter 5; here, they are named as the terrain of conversion that a genuinely synodal Church in Zimbabwe must honestly traverse.

2.14 Conclusion

Chapter 2 has shown that synodality is more than an organisational technique; it is a sustained ecclesial conversion that reimagines how the Church discerns, leads, and serves. Rooted in scriptural precedent and deepened by Vatican II and subsequent magisterial teaching, synodality integrates theological convictions about the Spirit's presence in the People of God with practical commitments to shared co-responsibility and collaborative decision-making. The theological account developed here emphasises that communion, mission, and participation are mutually reinforcing: authentic communion propels mission, mission invites participation, and participation makes communion concrete.

In the Zimbabwean and African contexts, synodality resonates naturally with *Ubuntu's* relational ethics and can be genuinely inculturated through deliberate engagement with local practices of communal deliberation. However, the distinction between *Ubuntu* as a lived practice and synodality as an institutional framework must be carefully maintained: inculturation is the

necessary bridge, not mere analogy. For Catholic education, this means moving toward inclusive pedagogies, participatory governance, and formation programmes that equip clergy, educators, and laity to listen, dialogue, and exercise co-responsibility. At the same time, the synodal path must preserve doctrinal integrity and acknowledge real obstacles — clericalism, cultural tensions, resource constraints — that require patient, honest, and courageous address. Chapter 3 builds on these foundations by examining the specific role of student participatory engagement in Catholic education.

CHAPTER 3

Student Participatory Engagement in Catholic Education

3.0 Introduction

This chapter argues that student participatory engagement is not an optional pedagogical add-on but a theological and educational imperative for Catholic schools. Rooted in the conciliar emphasis on human dignity articulated in Vatican II's *Gravissimum Educationis* and the contemporary call to synodality advanced by Pope Francis, attending to student perspectives enacts a vision of schooling as communal discernment: a learning community in which listening, participation, and co-responsibility shape formation, governance, and pedagogy. Far from being merely instrumental to improved outcomes, amplifying student voices incarnates the Church's mission to honour every person made in God's image.

A terminological clarification is necessary at the outset. The phrase 'student voice,' while common in educational discourse, risks reducing a theologically rich reality to a procedural mechanism. This chapter employs the terms 'student participatory engagement' and 'youth contributions' alongside 'student voice' to emphasize that what is at stake is not merely expression but co-responsible participation in the communal life of the school as a community of faith and formation. Participation encompasses both advisory dimensions — where students contribute perspectives that inform decisions — and co-responsible dimensions, where students share genuine accountability for the school's communal life and mission.

The chapter moves through four interlocking dimensions. It begins with a historical overview tracing how student participatory engagement has been variously marginalized and enabled

within Catholic education. It then examines the synodal principles most relevant to schooling — participation, dialogue, inclusivity, and mutual respect — and shows how these align with Zimbabwe's Curriculum Framework. The chapter next maps current trends and persistent challenges to student participation, building toward an examination of the role of educators and administrators as facilitators of dialogue. A case study of Monte Cassino High School illustrates these principles in action. The chapter concludes by foregrounding listening as the lynchpin of synodal education.

3.1 Historical Context of Student Participatory Engagement in Catholic Education

The historical development of student participatory engagement in Catholic education reflects broader socio-cultural and ecclesiological transformations. In the pre-conciliar era, Catholic education was structured around a model that emphasized rigid adherence to doctrine as articulated by ecclesiastical authorities,³² privileging content transmission over communal formation. Student experiences and voices were frequently marginalized, overshadowed by curricula entrenched in theological orthodoxy and clerical instruction. Students were viewed primarily as passive recipients of knowledge rather than active participants in their own formation.

This landscape shifted decisively with Vatican II, particularly through *Gravissimum Educationis*, which recognized the importance of fostering human dignity and the holistic development of students as integral to Catholic education.³³ The Council articulated a vision in which Catholic education is ordered toward the formation of the whole person — spiritual, intellectual, moral,

³² James Arthur, *Philosophies of Catholic Education: Linking Neo-Scholastic Legacies and Contemporary Concerns* (New York: Routledge, 2024), 2.

³³ Second Vatican Council, *Gravissimum Educationis: Declaration on Christian Education* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), para1.

social — and in which students are recognized as active participants in their own educational journey. This shift resonated with contemporary pedagogical movements, including Paulo Freire's critique of the 'banking model' of education in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* — in which teachers deposit information into passive students — and his advocacy for a dialogical, problem-posing pedagogy that respects students as co-creators of knowledge.³⁴

In the wake of Vatican II, youth groups and lay initiatives emerged within Catholic educational and ecclesial spaces, providing structured opportunities for student engagement.³⁵ While these movements advanced student participation, their influence within formal school governance remained limited, as institutions tended toward hierarchical models that resisted the redistribution of deliberative authority.

In the twenty-first century, the synodal ecclesiology advanced by Pope Francis invites a more fundamental rethinking of student participation. Synodality establishes a framework in which listening is integral to the pedagogical process — an ecclesiology of communion that recognizes all members, especially students, as contributors to the Church's mission.³⁶ Digital technologies have simultaneously opened new avenues for student expression: social media, blogs, and digital advocacy platforms enable students to articulate their perspectives beyond classroom boundaries.³⁷ This evolution signals an urgent need for Catholic educators to adapt methodologies that genuinely honor and amplify student voices. The challenge for contemporary Catholic schools is to embody the principles of synodality by fostering authentic dialogue, integration, and respectful relationships with their students.

³⁴ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 12.

³⁵ Arthur, *Philosophies of Catholic Education*, 59, 65.

³⁶ Pope Francis, *Vademecum*.

³⁷ Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence: A Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2023), 1–24.

3.2 Synodal Principles in Catholic Education

3.2.1 From Chapter 2 to Chapter 3: Operationalising Synodality

Chapter 2 identified the core theological elements of synodality: listening, mutual discernment, inclusivity, participation, co-responsibility, collegiality, mutual respect, collaboration, empowerment, dialogue, servant leadership, interconnectedness, and conversion. Of these, four principles are of particular pedagogical relevance and will be examined in detail in this section: participation, dialogue, inclusivity, and mutual respect. Together, they constitute the synodal architecture of a genuinely Catholic school community.

3.2.2 Participation

Within the context of Catholic schools, participation transcends mere attendance or compliance; it emphasizes the active engagement and meaningful involvement of students in every facet of their educational journey.³⁸ This means recognizing students not merely as passive recipients of knowledge but as co-creators of the educational environment, integral to the formulation of policies, curricula, and school culture — though always within structures that preserve appropriate accountability and adult guidance. Varied platforms for student participation — student councils, advisory boards, and feedback mechanisms — not only empower young people to voice their perspectives but also engender a cooperative spirit that reflects the communal nature of the Church.

Engaging students in participatory practices affirms their inherent dignity and agency, echoing the theological anthropology that underlies both education and faith formation. Pope Francis consistently emphasizes the need for a Church that embodies mutual participation, recognizing

³⁸ Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2022), para. 30.

that true communion involves the active involvement of all members.³⁹ The incorporation of such principles within education prepares students for lifelong discipleship and civic engagement, forming them in the understanding that sharing one's voice is itself a participation in the unfolding of God's mission in the world.

It is important to note, however, that participation carries different forms and levels. Advisory participation — where students contribute perspectives to inform decisions — differs from co-responsible participation, where students share genuine accountability for outcomes. Both are legitimate dimensions of synodal participation, but they should not be conflated. Clarity about the form and scope of participation expected in a given context is essential for avoiding tokenism and building genuine trust.

3.2.3 Dialogue

The principle of dialogue is central to the synodal understanding of education.⁴⁰ In Catholic schools, establishing a culture of dialogue entails creating spaces where students feel safe to express their thoughts, share their stories, and challenge assumptions respectfully.⁴¹ Dialogue in this sense goes beyond verbal exchange; it involves deep listening and the genuine integration of student experience and insight into the educational discourse. It is a mode of encounter — shaped by the Gospel values of respect, humility, and openness — that transforms classrooms from spaces of one-way information transfer into communities of mutual learning.

Schools can institutionalize dialogue through regular class meetings, reflection workshops, guided peer discussions, and structured forums where students articulate views on curricular

³⁹ Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission: Final Document* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2024), 12.

⁴⁰ Second Vatican Council, *Gravissimum Educationis* (1965), no. 8.

⁴¹ Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue*, nos. 27–30.

matters or school-wide issues. Pope Francis teaches that dialogue forms the basis for reconciliation and healing; in schools, this means cultivating spaces where students can speak candidly about their experiences, concerns, and aspirations — and where adults receive these contributions with genuine attentiveness. Through dialogue, schools cultivate not only academic competencies but the spiritual and social dispositions — empathy, critical thinking, ethical reasoning — that are essential for the Church's mission in a complex world.

3.2.4 Inclusivity

Inclusivity is pivotal to the mission of Catholic education from a synodal perspective. It requires intentional structural and relational effort to create environments where every student feels welcomed, valued, and affirmed, regardless of background, ability, belief, or identity.⁴² The call for inclusivity echoes the Gospel's message of love and acceptance: Christ consistently broke boundaries to embrace the marginalized, and Catholic schools are called to embody this same pastoral disposition. Inclusivity means ensuring that resources and modes of engagement are adapted to meet the varied needs of all students, including those with disabilities or unique learning requirements.

The Congregation for Catholic Education's *The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue* affirms that Catholic schools must actively promote a culture of dialogue and encounter, treating every student as a bearer of inherent dignity.⁴³ Inclusivity in Catholic education is therefore not merely a policy commitment; it is a theological imperative grounded in the conviction that every person is made in God's image and deserves an educational experience

⁴² *Ibid.*, 19, 27.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 30.

that affirms and develops that dignity. Fostering inclusivity is the concrete form in which the synodal value of communion is enacted in school communities.

3.2.5 Mutual Respect

Mutual respect is the cornerstone relational principle of synodality within the educational context.⁴⁴ It emphasizes the recognition of the inherent dignity of each person within the educational community, laying the groundwork for a culture of trust, co-responsibility, and authentic collaboration. Mutual respect fosters an environment where students feel genuinely empowered to voice their perspectives, and where those perspectives are received not merely as opinions to be managed but as contributions to the community's shared discernment.

Schools cultivate mutual respect through practices grounded in compassion and understanding: conflict resolution programs, peer mediation, restorative circles, and inclusive classroom environments where feedback is welcomed and mistakes are treated as opportunities for growth. Teachers model mutual respect by refusing to stigmatize, by welcoming challenge, and by transparently acknowledging the limits of their own knowledge. This mutual respect is not merely a relational nicety; it is a reflection of the theological conviction that every voice contributes to the collective wisdom and discernment necessary for building a vibrant community of faith.

3.2.6 Alignment with the Zimbabwe Curriculum Framework

The synodal principles of participation, dialogue, inclusivity, and mutual respect resonate strongly with the normative aims of Zimbabwe's Curriculum Framework (ZCF). Both registers — one theological and ecclesial, the other educational and civic — articulate a coherent

⁴⁴ Ibid., 30, 31, 40.

anthropology: learners are agents, communities are dialogical, diversity is a resource, and respect is foundational to formation. The ZCF's learner-centred and participatory pedagogies engage students as co-creators of knowledge,⁴⁵ directly echoing the synodal principle of co-responsibility. Freire's critique of the banking model of education and his advocacy for problem-posing pedagogy⁴⁶ resonate with both the ZCF and synodal pedagogy: both challenge teachers to become facilitators of inquiry and co-learners rather than sole authorities of truth.

Zimbabwe's Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education has further institutionalized inclusive education through its Practical Inclusive Education Handbook,⁴⁷ which translates national policy commitments into school-level practices covering learner welfare, safeguarding, psychological services, special needs provision, and the nurturing of gifted learners. The ZCBC's Child Protection Guidelines⁴⁸ and Child Safeguard Policy⁴⁹ provide an ecclesial framework for child welfare that complements these civil provisions. Together, the ZCF, the Inclusive Education Handbook, and the ZCBC safeguarding documents create the regulatory and ethical landscape within which synodal participatory engagement can be enacted. Synodal values and national educational policy are thus not in tension but in constructive alignment, each reinforcing the other's commitment to the formation of whole persons capable of participating responsibly in Church and society.

3.3 Trends and Challenges in Promoting Active Student Participatory Engagement

⁴⁵ Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, *Curriculum Framework* (Harare: Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2018), 12.

⁴⁶ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 12.

⁴⁷ Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, Zimbabwe, *Practical Inclusive Education Handbook for Primary and Secondary Schools* (Harare: Education Development Fund, 2016), 25–88.

⁴⁸ Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC), *Child Protection Teachers' Guidelines Handbook* (Harare: ZCBC, 2016), 1ff.

⁴⁹ Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC), *Child Safeguard Policy Document* (Harare: ZCBC, 2017), 1ff.

3.3.1 Current Trends: Positive Developments

Across Catholic schools in Zimbabwe there is a palpable shift in how student participatory engagement is understood and practiced. Where once the classroom was dominated by one-way knowledge transmission, educators, clergy, and school administrators are increasingly inviting students into the life of the school as active contributors. This change reflects both global developments in pedagogy and local commitments to forming whole persons. Several concrete trends illustrate this movement.

Empowering Student Agency: Drawing on *Christus Vivit's* affirmation that young people are 'protagonists of God's plan,'⁵⁰ Catholic schools are providing structural opportunities for students to identify issues, design responses, and evaluate outcomes. By involving learners in decision-making processes, schools nurture ownership, initiative, and ethical leadership consistent with Catholic Social Teaching's emphasis on the common good.

Curriculum Redesign: Many schools are embedding project-based and inquiry-based methods alongside the national syllabus, enabling students to ask questions, gather evidence, and present findings.⁵¹ This shift resonates with the theological conviction about personal experience, discernment, and vocation: when learners investigate local problems or lead cross-disciplinary projects, the curriculum becomes a vehicle for moral formation alongside academic learning.

Technology-Enhanced Engagement: Where infrastructure permits, schools are using digital platforms and group messaging tools (Whatsapp, TikTok, Telegram, Instagram, X, Threads by Meta and Facebook) and educational apps (Google Classroom, Zoom, Apple Classroom) to

⁵⁰ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, no. 13.

⁵¹ Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, *Heritage-Based Curriculum Framework (2024–2030)* (Harare: Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2024), 12.

facilitate discussion, collect feedback, and publish student work.⁵² Technology supports asynchronous participation, enabling quieter learners more time to formulate responses. Practitioners must, however, remain attentive to the digital divide, ensuring that technological tools complement rather than replace low-tech participation strategies.

Student Leadership and Governance: Prefects' Councils, Student Representative Councils, and Student Parliaments are increasingly given concrete responsibilities — budget input for student activities, leadership of welfare initiatives, participation in pastoral committees.⁵³ Training in governance, mediation, and project management equips students to negotiate with staff and shepherd peer initiatives responsibly.

Co-curricular spaces remain vital incubators for student voice. Debate societies, environmental clubs, chess teams and creative arts groups provide safe arenas for leadership, argumentation and teamwork.⁵⁴ These clubs translate classroom learning into tangible action—preparing policy proposals, organizing clean-up campaigns or entering interschool competitions—which reinforces students' competence and confidence. Such activities also broaden the school's conception of achievement beyond examination results to include creativity, ethical action and civic contribution.

Service Learning and Social Responsibility: Interact clubs, community outreach programs, and public liturgies link faith to action, enabling students to confront the realities of poverty, inequality, and human dignity through service. These encounters foster empathy and a commitment to solidarity consistent with the Church's preferential option for the poor.

⁵² Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence*. 1–24.

⁵³ In Zimbabwe, the Education Act [Chapter 25:04] and its associated regulations provide the overall framework for education but do not specifically outline rules for student bodies such as prefects or student councils. Individual schools develop their own guidelines in alignment with the national framework.

⁵⁴ Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, *Curriculum Framework* (Harare: Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2018), 12.

Academic Clubs and Inquiry-Based Learning: Subject focused clubs, such as History or science societies like Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM), are being reimagined as centers for inquiry and community memory.⁵⁵ Students curate exhibitions, conduct oral history interviews and submit research to local competitions, connecting classroom knowledge to cultural heritage and national narratives. Such work sharpens analytical skills, promotes archival awareness and positions students as custodians of collective memory—an educational aim that reinforces both intellectual development and communal identity.

Institutional School-Based Initiatives: Many schools, like Minda High School, have formalized participation through structures like Child Protection Committees,⁵⁶ Safeguarding Councils⁵⁷ and annual student led festivals (i.e. SASSAF)⁵⁸. These platforms give students’ voices institutional weight in areas that shape their wellbeing and school culture, while also teaching procedural responsibility. When well designed, such initiatives promote inclusion, protect vulnerable students and create routine channels for feedback and co-construction.

Faith-Based Small Christian Communities: Groups such as Christian Life Communities (CLC) and Catholic Youth Associations (CYA) provide integrative spaces where prayer, theological reflection, and practical action converge, helping students connect faith commitments to social justice advocacy and community development.

3.3.2 Persistent Challenges to Student Participatory Engagement

While the trends described above are encouraging, significant and persistent challenges constrain the meaningful implementation of student participatory engagement in Zimbabwean Catholic

⁵⁵ Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, *Curriculum Framework 2015–2022* (Harare: Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, 2015).

⁵⁶ Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops’ Conference (ZCBC), *Child Protection Teachers’ Guidelines Handbook* (Harare: ZCBC, 2016).

⁵⁷ Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops’ Conference, *Child Safeguard Policy Document* (Harare: ZCBC, 2017).

⁵⁸ Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education, *Curriculum Framework 2015–2022*.

schools. These challenges are structural, cultural, psychological, and theological in nature, and they mirror the broader obstacles to synodality identified in Chapter 2.

Institutional Resistance: Many Catholic educational environments operate under hierarchical models that privilege clerical authority⁵⁹ and educator expertise, often at the expense of student insight. Some educators — consciously or unconsciously — view student participation as a challenge to their authority rather than as an enrichment of the educational community. This disposition not only limits student agency but contradicts the synodal call for collaborative discernment.

Cultural Norms and Adult Deference: Entrenched cultural norms in many Zimbabwean contexts uphold adult authority and perpetuate the expectation that students should adopt primarily passive roles. While the relational values embedded in *Ubuntu* resonate with synodal participation, traditional age-based deference and gender dynamics can simultaneously constrain who participates and how freely. Addressing this tension requires deliberate cultural humility and the creation of forums that affirm diverse student voices.

Pedagogical Gaps: Many educators remain entrenched in traditional pedagogies emphasizing rote learning and authoritative instruction, limiting opportunities for collaborative, student-centred engagement. Transitioning to dialogical and experiential methods requires deliberate professional development grounded in both pedagogical skill and theological formation in Catholic Social Teaching.⁶⁰ Without such formation, teachers may default to power dynamics that marginalize student agency, undermining the inclusive culture synodality demands.

⁵⁹ Luciani, *Synodality*, 19.

⁶⁰ Second Vatican Council, *Gravissimum Educationis*, no. 8.

Economic Constraints: Financial limitations restrict access to resources,⁶¹ extracurricular opportunities, and support systems, disproportionately affecting marginalized students. Economic challenges — including part-time work commitments and family responsibilities — can impede students' capacity for active school participation. Addressing these barriers requires equitable institutional strategies: scholarships, financial aid for extracurricular engagement, and flexible participation mechanisms.

Microsystems of Power: Educational structures often mirror broader societal power dynamics, creating conditions where dominant voices overshadow marginalized perspectives. Students from underrepresented backgrounds may find their contributions consistently undervalued. Consistent with the theological principle of the preferential option for the poor,⁶² Catholic educators must actively work to elevate these marginalized voices, restructuring decision-making processes to promote genuine equity.

Structural factors within the Catholic education system can significantly influence how effectively synodal principles are implemented in schools. Often, existing frameworks and policies may be designed with a top-down governance approach, limiting input from various stakeholders, including students, parents, and local community members. Such structures can reinforce the perception that decisions are made in isolation from the broader community, stifling the spirit of collaboration essential to synodality. Therefore, it is crucial for educational leaders to critically assess and potentially revise institutional structures to promote shared governance and encourage diverse voices in decision-making processes.⁶³

⁶¹ Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue*, no. 82.

⁶² Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 12.

⁶³ Congregation for Catholic Education, *The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue*, nos. 48–51.

Theological Misunderstanding: Inadequate theological grounding in synodality can lead to misconceptions about its purpose, generating resistance among educators and administrators who conflate participatory governance with doctrinal relativism or a weakening of ecclesial authority. Clarifying the theological foundations of synodality — its roots in Vatican II ecclesiology and the theology of co-responsibility⁶⁴ — is essential for building institutional support for participatory reform.

3.4 The Role of Educators and Administrators

3.4.1 Facilitators of Dialogue

Educators and administrators are primary facilitators of dialogue ⁶⁵ within Catholic schools. By modeling listening behaviors and engaging in communal discernment, they set the tone for open, respectful, and genuinely participatory communication. This facilitative role is not merely a pedagogical technique; it is a theological vocation: the educator who genuinely listens to students embodies the synodal Church in miniature. Formation for this role must integrate active listening skills, conflict resolution strategies, empathy-building, and theological literacy in synodal principles. Effective facilitators create safe spaces for expression by establishing clear norms for respectful communication, affirming diverse perspectives, and cultivating a culture of trust in which students feel secure to share not only their ideas but their doubts, fears, and aspirations.

3.4.2 Collaborative Curriculum and Policy Development

⁶⁴ Ibid., 48–51.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 27.

For synodality to extend beyond classroom practice into institutional culture, it must inform the development of educational policies. Collaborating with students to co-create guidelines, curricular objectives, or safeguarding policies reflects a genuine commitment to participatory governance. This collaborative approach generates educational reform that is genuinely responsive to students' needs and aspirations, developing their sense of ownership and accountability for institutional life. Student councils and class representatives, when genuinely empowered, become authentic deliberative bodies through which student perspectives shape not merely extracurricular life but the fundamental orientation of the school's mission.

3.5 Challenges to Effective Implementation: An Integrated Analysis

The challenges to student participatory engagement identified in Section 3.3.2 are not isolated obstacles; they form an interlocking set of structural, cultural, psychosocial, and theological barriers that must be addressed simultaneously if synodal participation is to become a durable institutional reality. Institutional resistance and cultural norms operate in mutual reinforcement: where hierarchical governance is normalized, cultural expectations of adult authority are strengthened; where those expectations prevail, institutional resistance to participatory reform is rationalized. Pedagogical gaps compound the problem, as teachers without adequate formation in dialogical methods reproduce the power dynamics that participation is meant to challenge. Economic constraints intersect with both: students already marginalized by poverty face additional barriers to the extracurricular and governance spaces where participatory engagement is most visible.

Addressing these challenges requires a multi-pronged strategy combining structural reform, cultural formation, and ongoing pastoral accompaniment. Structural measures — credible student

governance bodies, formal consultation mechanisms, transparent feedback loops — create the institutional architecture for participation. Cultural formation — professional development for educators, catechetical formation on synodality, peer mentoring for students — builds the relational soil in which participatory culture can take root. Pastoral accompaniment — attentiveness to psychosocial barriers, sensitivity to marginalized students, and sustained pastoral follow-through — ensures that participation remains an inclusive and genuinely transformative practice rather than a tokenistic gesture. These three dimensions will be examined empirically in Chapter 5.

3.6 Case Study: Monte Cassino Girls High School's Leadership Programme

Within the landscape of Zimbabwean Catholic education, Monte Cassino Girls High School (Murewa District, Archdiocese of Harare) offers an instructive case study of sustained student participatory engagement. Established in 1961, Monte Cassino operates as a Catholic boarding institution emphasizing holistic development — spiritual, moral, academic, physical, cultural, and social — while respecting the dignity of every individual irrespective of background. Its institutional ethos provides a concrete model for the synodal school community envisioned in this chapter.

The Youth Against AIDS Club, founded by Mrs Mutize and Fr Ted Rogers, illustrates how student-led health advocacy can combine pastoral care with practical community action. Club members have organized annual fundraising concerts, supported students facing financial difficulties, and engaged in outreach to the Mashambanzou Care Trust — fostering empathy and informed social responsibility.

The Interact Club, affiliated with Rotary International, embodies the motto 'Service Above Self' through projects including a Solar Panel initiative and distribution of essential supplies to the Macheke community, demonstrating how student agency translates into civic transformation. The Environmental Management Association's proactive sustainability initiatives — recycling, greening, waste management — position students as environmental stewards and change-makers. The Toastmasters Society develops leadership and communication skills through structured public speaking and charitable outreach, while the Girl Child Network addresses gender inequality through advocacy, community visits, and empowerment programs.

Taken together, these initiatives illustrate a school culture that treats student participatory engagement not as an extracurricular supplement but as a constitutive dimension of Catholic formation. Each club is oriented toward service, communal responsibility, and the development of moral agency — values directly continuous with the synodal principles articulated in Chapter 2. Monte Cassino demonstrates that when institutions invest structurally in student participation, students become not only better learners but more engaged members of Church and society. This model provides a concrete benchmark against which the participation levels at the three research schools — Minda, St Pius, and St Bernard's — can be assessed in Chapter 5.

3.7 The Primacy of Listening in Synodal Education

At the heart of synodal education is listening — not as a passive activity but as an active theological disposition that transforms classrooms into communities of discernment. Pope Francis insists that authentic listening is essential for a synodal Church,⁶⁶ enabling individuals to engage with one another in compassion and solidarity. Listening in this sense transcends auditory

⁶⁶ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 12.

processing; it is a multifaceted engagement that affirms the dignity of the individual as created in God's image, and it demands from educators both emotional intelligence and relational sensitivity.

In educational contexts, fostering a culture of listening empowers students to articulate their thoughts and feelings, reinforcing their sense of belonging and identity within the school community. When educators actively listen — receiving student input with open hearts and following through with responsive action — they create the conditions for authentic dialogue and institutional trust. Practices such as reflective listening, restorative dialogues, and regular listening circles institutionalize this disposition, ensuring that student participation is not episodic but habitual. The importance of listening thus emerges not merely as a pedagogical strategy but as the foundational virtue of synodal education: the practice through which the school becomes a community in which every voice is genuinely received as a contribution to the shared mission.

3.8 Conclusion

Chapter 3 has demonstrated that student participatory engagement is a theological and pedagogical imperative: grounded in synodality and reinforced since Vatican II, authentic participation — shaped by dialogue, inclusivity, and mutual respect — reframes students as co-responsible members of Catholic school communities rather than passive recipients of formation. The Zimbabwe Curriculum Framework and the vibrant school practices exemplified by Monte Cassino demonstrate how these principles can be translated into curriculum, governance, and community action, yielding deeper engagement, leadership development, and social responsibility.

At the same time, realising this vision requires confronting entrenched hierarchies, cultural norms, resource gaps, and deficits in educator formation. These challenges are not incidental but structural and must be addressed through simultaneous investment in institutional reform, cultural formation, and pastoral accompaniment. When schools commit to genuine listening and co-responsibility, Catholic education can more faithfully form compassionate, critical, and civically engaged learners — fulfilling both its Gospel calling and its civic mission. Chapter 4 outlines the qualitative methodology employed to investigate these dynamics in the three research schools.

CHAPTER 4

Qualitative Methodology for Investigating Synodality in Zimbabwean Catholic Schools

4.0 Introduction

This chapter outlines the methodological framework employed to investigate synodality in three Zimbabwean Catholic secondary schools: Minda High School, St Bernard's High School, and St Pius Enkanyisweni Technical College, all situated within the Archdiocese of Bulawayo. The research is grounded in a qualitative paradigm that privileges the lived experiences of students and key school stakeholders, proceeding from the conviction — established in Chapters 1 through 3 — that understanding synodality as a pedagogical and pastoral reality requires attending carefully and humbly to the voices of those it is meant to form.

Central to this methodological approach is Practical Theological Reflection (PTR) as the primary analytical lens, complemented by phenomenological principles and a multiple case study design. This combination enables the research to examine how synodality is understood, embodied, and contested in specific institutional contexts, while maintaining theological integrity and scholarly rigor. The chapter proceeds through the philosophical and methodological foundations of the approach, the research design, participant selection, data collection procedures, ethical considerations, and data analysis methods, concluding with a reflection on the study's methodological strengths and limitations.

4.1 Philosophical Framework: Practical Theological Reflection

This study employs Practical Theological Reflection (PTR) as its governing methodological framework. PTR is a qualitative approach designed to explore the intersection of faith,

experience, and context — precisely the intersection at which synodality in Catholic education is most concretely encountered. Christina Zaker defines Theological Reflection as 'a communal effort to discern God's presence in the world, to carve the space for that presence to invite us into a new vision, and to lay the groundwork for that new vision to take root in how we live our lives.'⁶⁷ This definition resonates directly with the synodal principles examined in Chapter 2: both PTR and synodality prioritize communal discernment, attentive listening, and the integration of lived experience with theological insight.

PTR frames the research process as inherently dialogical: experience is not merely a source of data but a site of theological disclosure. It emphasizes experience as a primary starting point, situating personal narratives within the interaction between sacred texts, doctrinal traditions, and contemporary social realities. For this study, PTR facilitates a critical examination of the beliefs and practices of students, educators, parents, and clergy regarding synodality and inclusive dialogue, enabling the research to move between descriptive analysis and theological interpretation without collapsing one into the other.

The research process was structured through five distinct phases within the PTR framework. First, Contextual Awareness and Narrative Gathering involved building rapport within the three school environments and gathering preliminary narratives through open-ended conversations that established a contextual baseline. Second, Thematic Reflection through Data Collection employed semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, and observational reflection to explore students' lived experiences of synodality, inclusivity, and dialogue. Third, Interpretation and Theological Reflection involved thematic analysis that explicitly linked emerging findings to the

⁶⁷ Zaker, *Surprised by God*, 22.

synodal principles established in Chapters 2 and 3, coding the data and identifying major themes aligned with synodal theology. Fourth, Practical Application generated evidence-based recommendations for Catholic educators and administrators. Fifth, Collaborative Reflection and Community Engagement involved returning findings to the school communities through workshops, allowing participants to engage with, affirm, or challenge the analysis, embodying the synodal principle that those whose experiences are studied should be involved in interpreting and acting on the findings.

4.2 Research Methods: Phenomenological and Case Study Approaches

4.2.1 Phenomenological Approach

The phenomenological approach underpins this research, drawing from the foundational philosophical work of Edmund Husserl. At its core, phenomenology seeks to understand conscious experience as it is lived — attending to the phenomena of human experience without reducing them to prior theoretical frameworks. As Husserl articulated, phenomenology is a descriptive science of consciousness that illuminates lived experience by allowing phenomena to reveal themselves as they are perceived, free from the distortions⁶⁸ of the 'natural attitude.'

Central to phenomenological methodology is the practice of *epoché* — the deliberate bracketing of the researcher's preconceptions and assumptions to enable a more open engagement with participants' experiences. The term *epoché*, derived from the Greek meaning 'to stop' or 'to hold back,' challenges the researcher to suspend habitual interpretations of reality in order to attend exclusively to the phenomena that present themselves in consciousness.⁶⁹ This methodological

⁶⁸ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), 33.

⁶⁹ Eric John Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History*, 2nd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1986), 224.

suspension does not deny the researcher's subjectivity but disciplines it, creating a reflective space in which participants' voices can be heard on their own terms.

Following *epoché*, *eidetic intuition* enables the researcher to perceive the essential structures of the phenomena under investigation — to discern not merely the surface characteristics of experiences but their fundamental meanings and patterns.⁷⁰ As Bettis observed, the phenomenologist seeks to identify not only what is present in experience but how objects, relations, and processes interact within the broader experiential tapestry.⁷¹ In this study, *eidetic intuition* enabled the identification of recurring structural patterns — such as the gap between awareness and participation, or the intersection of cultural norms and psychosocial barriers — that characterize student experience of synodality across the three schools.

4.2.2 Application of the Phenomenological Method: Step by Step

The phenomenological methodology was applied in eight sequential steps. First, *Epoché* was practised by consciously setting aside preconceptions regarding synodality and Zimbabwean educational culture, documenting assumptions before engaging participants to create a reflective reference point. Second, *Empathetic Interpolation* was cultivated through active listening and rapport-building, employing clarifying questions and reflective statements to ensure that students felt genuinely valued and safe in expressing their views. Third, Ongoing *Epoché* was maintained throughout the interviews through reflexive journaling, ensuring that the researcher's emerging interpretations did not distort the documentation of participants' experiences. Fourth, *Describing the Phenomena* involved careful analysis of interview transcripts and field notes to identify

⁷⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *What Is Phenomenology of Religion?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 1.

⁷¹ Joseph D. Bettis, *Phenomenology of Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 20.

recurring themes and significant experiences related to synodality. Fifth, *Naming the Phenomena* distilled each thematic element into concise titles that captured the essence of experiences as articulated by participants. Sixth, *Describing Relationships and Processes* mapped how various dimensions of experience — personal faith, community dynamics, institutional practices — interacted to shape students' understanding of synodality, drawing on Merleau-Ponty's analysis of experiential interconnection.⁷² Seventh, *Informed Comparison* involved juxtaposing findings across participant groups — students, administrators, teachers, parents, clergy — to reveal convergences and divergences in synodal engagement across the three schools. Eighth, *Eidetic Intuition* was applied to distil the essential structures characterizing students' lived experience of synodality, producing theoretical insights that transcend individual narratives while remaining grounded in their particularity.

4.3 Case Study Research Design

The case study methodology, as theorised by Robert Kuo-Zuir Yin, provides the overarching research design for this inquiry.⁷³ Case study research is particularly appropriate for investigations that seek to understand how complex social phenomena unfold within real-life contexts — precisely the aim of this study. A multiple case study design was employed, with each of the three schools constituting a distinct case. This design enables comparison across contexts — different school cultures, demographic profiles, and levels of synodal engagement — while maintaining attention to the particularities of each setting.

The selection of Minda Catholic High School, St Bernard's High School, and St Pius Enkanyisweni Technical College was purposeful and strategic. Minda serves as the researcher's

⁷² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *What Is Phenomenology of Religion?*, 1.

⁷³ Robert Kuo-Zuir Yin, *Case Study Research: Design and Methods* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1984), 12.

own institutional base, enabling deep contextual knowledge and established relational trust. St Bernard's and St Pius represent different institutional profiles — in terms of demographics, geographic location, and relationship to parish life — enabling the study to explore how contextual factors shape the reception and practice of synodality. Together, the three schools offer a diverse yet coherent set of cases for examining synodal engagement within Zimbabwean Catholic secondary education.

4.4 Thematic Analysis Framework

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke,⁷⁴ was employed to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns within the qualitative data. This structured approach involved six sequential steps: familiarization with the data through multiple readings of transcripts, observation notes, and relevant documents; generation of initial codes focusing on elements related to synodality, inclusivity, and student engagement; searching for themes by organizing codes into broader thematic units; reviewing themes to verify coherence within themes and distinctiveness between them; defining and naming themes in ways that captured their essential significance; and producing a narrative report integrating identified themes with supporting data extracts, connected back to the research questions and the synodal literature of Chapters 2 and 3.

The methodical application of this framework enhanced the rigor and reliability of the study while honoring the voices of participants as its central resource. The analysis explicitly connects empirical findings to the theological literature, ensuring that the study's conclusions are not merely descriptive but interpretively rich and pastorally actionable.

⁷⁴ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101

4.5 Participant Selection and Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants whose experiences and roles were most likely to illuminate the research questions. This strategy is consistent with qualitative inquiry's aim of depth rather than breadth, and with PTR's commitment to attending to the particular voices of those embedded in the contexts under investigation.

Students constituted the primary participant group. Eight to nine students from each school were selected to reflect diversity of background, academic achievement, cultural heritage, and personal experience — ensuring that the study captured a range of perspectives on synodality rather than a single dominant narrative. Students were drawn from Advanced Level classes (Forms 5 and 6), ensuring that all participants were aged 18 or above, consistent with ethical requirements for adult consent. Their narratives illuminated the complexities of synodal engagement — and disengagement — in daily school life.

School administrators (one from each school, three in total) provided institutional perspectives on how synodal principles were operationalised and what systemic barriers inhibited their realization. Their insights connected policy and practice, illuminating the gap between institutional aspiration and lived reality.

Parents (six participants, one to two from each school) enriched the study with home and community perspectives on school dynamics, offering insights into the relationship between synodal practices at school and the values and expectations of families. Their contributions added a crucial community dimension to the institutional analysis.

Teachers (six participants, one to three from each school across various subject areas) provided front-line pedagogical perspectives. As facilitators of synodal engagement in the classroom, their

reflections on methodologies, student interactions, and institutional constraints were indispensable.

Local Clergy (one priest from Minda) added a faith-based ecclesial perspective, illuminating how synodal principles were understood and enacted not only within school structures but within the broader parish and community context that supports these institutions.

This multi-voice participant pool — students, administrators, parents, teachers, and clergy — produces a holistic, dialogical account of synodality in Zimbabwean Catholic secondary schools, consistent with the synodal conviction that truth emerges through the integration of diverse perspectives.

4.6 Data Collection Methods

Multiple sources of evidence were employed to ensure the triangulation and depth of findings characteristic of rigorous qualitative inquiry.

Semi-Structured Interviews and Questionnaires: Comprehensive questionnaires were designed for each participant group — students, educators, parents, and clergy (see Appendices 1, 2, 3, and 4) — allowing for both standardized comparison across schools and space for open-ended, narrative responses. Oral interviews were conducted with some adult participants, enabling deeper exploration of complex themes. At Minda, questionnaires were administered on 4 August 2025 in a boardroom setting, with the researcher explaining each question individually to ensure comprehension. Data were collected at St Bernard's on 15 August following a meeting with the school administrator; at St Pius, initial data collection on 18 August was supplemented by a further visit on 21 August to ensure adequate participant representation.

Observational Reflection: Field notes during site visits documented contextual details, institutional dynamics, and real-time reflections on participant interactions, supplementing interview data with observational insight.

Document Analysis: Relevant school policies, diocesan guidance documents, and pastoral program materials were analyzed to understand the institutional frameworks within which synodal practices were situated, providing documentary context for participant narratives.

4.7 Permissions and Ethical Compliance

Permission to conduct this research was sought from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (MoPSE) through the Provincial Education Director. A Clearance Certificate was obtained from the Provincial Education Director of Matabeleland South Province on 22 July 2025 (see Appendix 5 and 6). School administrators at each institution granted access and facilitated logistics.

Ethical considerations were prioritized throughout the research process. Given the involvement of Advanced Level students, particular attention was given to ensuring that only participants aged 18 and above were included; students below this threshold were excluded from participation. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring transparency about the study's purpose, methods, and intended use of data. Participants were assured of confidentiality, and pseudonyms were employed in reporting to protect individual identities. The researcher maintained a reflexive research journal to monitor and mitigate personal bias throughout the data collection and analysis process.

A safe and inclusive atmosphere was cultivated throughout all data collection interactions, encouraging open and honest dialogue. Once thematic analysis was complete, results were

returned to the school communities through workshops, allowing participants to engage with findings, affirm their accuracy, and contribute additional insights — a process that embodied the synodal commitment to communal ownership of discernment and its outcomes.

4.8 Methodological Strengths and Limitations

The qualitative, multi-method approach employed in this study offers several significant strengths. The integration of PTR and phenomenology ensures that the research is simultaneously theologically rigorous and attentive to lived experience. The multiple case study design enables contextual comparison while preserving institutional particularity. The multi-voice participant pool — students, administrators, teachers, parents, clergy — produces a rich, dialogical account of synodality that resists oversimplification. The return of findings to participants through community workshops embodies the synodal ethos the research investigates.

At the same time, the study's limitations must be acknowledged with equal honesty. The research is situated in three schools within a single archdiocese, which constrains its generalisability to other institutional, diocesan, or national contexts. The purposive, relatively small sample was designed for depth rather than statistical representativeness; findings should therefore be understood as contextually grounded and hypotheses-generating rather than universally generalisable. The researcher's dual role as teacher at one of the research sites, while enabling relational depth, introduces potential bias that was mitigated through reflexive journaling, careful epoché, and participant validation workshops. These limitations do not invalidate the findings but contextualise them, pointing toward the need for future research that test and extends the study's conclusions across wider institutional and geographic contexts.

4.9 Conclusion

Chapter 4 has outlined the qualitative, theologically grounded methodology employed to investigate synodality in Zimbabwean Catholic schools. The integration of Practical Theological Reflection, phenomenological inquiry, and multiple case study design provides a coherent and rigorous framework for generating contextually rich, theologically interpreted, and pastorally actionable insights. Participant selection, data collection procedures, and ethical protocols have been described with transparency and precision, ensuring that the study honors the dignity and agency of those whose experiences constitute its primary resource. The methodological approach is itself a practical expression of the synodal values the study investigates: it is dialogical, attentive, inclusive, and committed to the communal ownership of its findings.

Chapter 5 presents the qualitative findings generated through this methodology, centering on the voices of students as primary participants while integrating the perspectives of educators, clergy, and parents to illuminate the full complexity of synodal engagement in Zimbabwean Catholic secondary schools.

CHAPTER 5

QUALITATIVE FINDINGS AND INTERPRETATION

5.0 Introduction

This chapter presents and interprets qualitative findings from three Zimbabwean Catholic secondary schools — Minda High School, St Pius Enkanyisweni Technical College, and St Bernard's High School — exploring how synodality is understood, experienced, and practiced by students and key school stakeholders. The inquiry is grounded in the theological horizon established in Chapters 1 through 4: Vatican II's vision of the Church as a pilgrim People of God (*Lumen Gentium*), Pope Francis's call for a synodal Church of communion, participation, and mission, the ecclesiology of *communio* and *sensus fidelium*, and the *Ubuntu*-informed African theological anthropology examined in Chapter 2. The research questions articulated in Chapter 1 provide the governing frame: How do students articulate their understanding of synodality? In what ways do they envision participatory governance? What barriers inhibit synodal values? And what actionable strategies can reshape policy in line with communal discernment?

The qualitative methodology described in Chapter 4 — case study, phenomenological sensitivity, and thematic analysis — yields data that are both empirically grounded and theologically interpretable. Synodality is treated here not as an abstract governance reform but as a lived way of being the Church: journeying together in listening, discernment, and shared responsibility. Students occupy the liminal space between dependency and adult agency, and their voices constitute critical data for assessing whether synodality can be inculturated in school communities as both pedagogy and pastoral practice.

The chapter organises its findings interpretively. It begins with students' awareness of and participation in synodal processes, including school-by-school variations and points of absence.

It then examines student proposals for enhancing synodal engagement, followed by in-depth analysis of how students define and experience synodality in their schools. The analysis proceeds to experiences of inclusivity and its structural barriers, proposals for integrating synodal practices in governance, barriers to effective dialogue with educators, and strategies for building a durable culture of listening. The chapter concludes by synthesizing educators', clergy's, and parents' perspectives, identifying overarching tensions, and drawing integrated conclusions.

A consistent pattern emerges across the data. Awareness of the synodal initiative is reasonably widespread, yet awareness often stops short of meaningful participation. Where participation exists, it tends to produce concrete pastoral and institutional outcomes — greater youth representation, programmatic responses to wellbeing concerns, and changes in local practices — reinforcing students' sense of agency and belonging. Where participation is limited, barriers are layered: structural (boarding logistics, restricted channels), cultural (prefectorial dominance, language divisions, teacher favoritism), and psychosocial (fear, low self-confidence). Educators, clergy, and parents largely endorse a synodal ethos but identify resource, formation, and governance constraints that inhibit consistent implementation. Throughout, the data converge on an integrated conclusion: for synodality to take root in Zimbabwean Catholic schools, it must be enacted simultaneously as structural reform, cultural formation, and pastoral accompaniment — an incarnational conversion in which listening becomes a habitual, accountable practice that forms young people as co-responsible agents in the Church's mission.

5.1 Students' Awareness and Participation in Synodal Processes

The data from the three schools present a textured picture of how the synodal process initiated by Pope Francis in October 2021 has been received among young Catholics in these school and

parish settings. Awareness of the initiative is widespread, yet active participation in diocesan or parish-level consultative sessions is unevenly distributed — a gap that carries significant theological implications.

Of twenty-six student respondents across the three schools, seventeen indicated that they had observed the synodal process within their diocese or parish, while nine had not. Roughly two-thirds of the samples were aware, and one-third remained unaware. Yet awareness did not automatically translate into participation. At Minda, six of nine students reported awareness of the synodal process, yet none reported direct participation in any sessions or surveys. St Pius indicated moderate awareness (five of eight students), with half of those aware reporting participation. St Bernard's displayed a similar awareness profile to Minda (six of nine) but a substantially higher participation rate among those aware (six reported engagement). Overall, eleven students reported active participation in synodal sessions or surveys, while fifteen either did not participate or were not applicable. Importantly, when asked whether the synodal survey had contributed positively to the development of the Church, approximately eighty percent of those who responded to that item answered affirmatively. These figures are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Student Awareness and Participation in the Synodal Process Across Three Schools

School	Aware	Participated	Affirmed Positive Impact
Minda High	6 of 9	0 of 9	~80%
St Pius	5 of 8	4 of 8	~80%
St Bernard's	6 of 9	6 of 9	~80%
Total	17 of 26	11 of 26	~80%

Source: Field research, 2025.

This disjunction between cognitive awareness and practical involvement resonates with the tension identified in Chapter 2 between the ecclesial ideal of the *sensus fidelium* and local practices that limit the participation of baptized youth. Many students described the synodal process in terms that reflect Vatican II's vision of the Church as *communio* and Pope Francis's insistence that synodality is the means and style by which the Church moves forward. Students who had taken part in sessions and surveys tended to affirm the beneficial effects of the process — testifying to a sense of empowerment, greater unity, and practical outcomes such as increased youth involvement in parish life. Even where participation was absent, students frequently judged the synodal survey positively, seeing it as a catalyst for inclusion and youth empowerment (Minda S5: 'promotes a culture of respectful dialogue'; St Pius S4: 'It empowers students').

At St Pius and St Bernard's, reports are more concrete: students named participation in surveys and sessions, involvement in choir at liturgical events, and the experience of being listened to as evidence that the synodal process was not merely theoretical but had pastoral repercussions. Students tied participation to identity and formation — remarks such as 'It prepares students for the future' and 'It helps listening to students and raising their perspectives' suggest that engagement in synodal activity is being received as part of catechesis in discipleship and civic formation within the Church.

Barriers reported by students help explain the uneven participation. Boarding school constraints, limited invitation to events outside campus, and perceived gatekeeping by adults and prefects were recurrent (Minda S1: 'boarders... are not invited'; St Pius S7: 'ordinary person's opinion is not taken into consideration'). Students also pointed to logistical obstacles — teachers' busy

schedules and inaccessible consultation channels — and affective barriers such as lack of confidence and fear of reprisal.

Interpretively, students' positive appraisal of the synodal process — even by those who did not participate — signals receptivity to a theology of accompaniment and shared responsibility. When engagement occurred, students linked it to tangible change: subject combinations, choir participation, pastoral activities. This underscores that participation is not only a rite of voice but a catalyst for institutional responsiveness. The data suggest that awareness-raising alone is insufficient; durable structures — student councils, listening circles, accessible digital platforms — are necessary to translate awareness into active co-responsibility. Theologically, this conversion from awareness to participation incarnates synodality: not merely an idea to be taught, but a pastoral practice that forms a community in mutual listening, discernment, and service.

5.1.1 Ecclesial Practice Variations Across the Three Schools

The differences among the three schools function as an ecclesiological diagnostic tool. St Pius and St Bernard's showed higher levels of concrete engagement than Minda. Several pastoral explanations are plausible. First, the linkage between school and parish life may be stronger at those schools, allowing diocesan initiatives to penetrate more readily into the student body. As Chapter 2 argued, local parish and school structures constitute the primary loci for synodal conversion — and where school is integrally connected to parish liturgy, religious education, and parish ministries, students are more readily drawn into synodal conversations. Second, pastoral leadership — catechists, parish priests, and chaplains — may have more intentionally mobilized students at those schools, recognizing the formative potential of engaging young people in

discernment processes. Third, logistical factors and communication flows play a role: announcements, invitations, and the framing of sessions matter for whether students feel included and know how to participate.

The data thus suggest an ecclesial priority consistent with the recommendations in Chapter 3: strengthening parish-school collaboration and equipping pastoral agents to bring synodality into daily catechesis and communal life. The Archdiocese of Harare's model, referenced in the broader study, provides a concrete benchmark for institutional best practice that the Archdiocese of Bulawayo might consider adapting.

5.1.2 Points of Aporia: Absence, Opacity, and Formation Gaps

Not all responses were confident or positive. Several students — especially at Minda — reported either ignorance of diocesan activities or an inability to discern tangible changes. Some said plainly, 'I didn't see it and don't understand what is happening in the diocese,' or 'I was not present.' Others judged that 'there are still no changes at other churches.' These comments signify real obstacles to the synodal project that must be acknowledged honestly.

Three specific challenges emerge. First, there is the problem of communication: the synod cannot function as a distant, bureaucratic program; it must be intelligibly translated into parish and school life. When processes are opaque, the faithful cannot exercise the *sensus fidei*. Second, there is a need for catechesis on what synodality is and why it matters — not merely conducting surveys, but teaching the faithful how listening and communal discernment are gifts that shape pastoral priorities and moral choices. Third, participation requires accompaniment: students who were not present or who felt excluded need more intentional invitation and formation from pastoral agents who can mentor them in liturgical and deliberative practices.

These lacunae are not merely procedural failings; they are theological challenges. Synodality implies conversion — from a clericalist model to a participatory ecclesial culture — and conversion happens concretely through catechesis, formation, and the patient cultivation of habits of listening and dialogue. The data thus points to a clear pastoral mandate: invest in communicative clarity, catechetical formation about synodality, and structures that lower barriers to youth participation.

5.2 Student Proposals for Enhancing Synodal Engagement

Students offered rich, concrete proposals for enhancing synodal engagement that cluster around three interrelated goals: widening access, institutionalizing listening, and contextualizing methods for youth culture. It is important to note from the outset that student participation as envisioned here is not construed in purely democratic or procedural terms. Rather, it is understood within the theological framework of co-responsibility and communal discernment — the shared responsibility of all the baptized to listen together, deliberate in the Spirit, and contribute to the Church's mission.⁷⁵ The proposals examined in this section are evaluated within this ecclesiological horizon.

5.2.1 Youth Culture as a Locus of Synodal Encounter

Minda students fore-grounded the language and culture of youth — 'social trends on social platforms like TikTok' and 'games increasing communication and inclusiveness' — as legitimate spaces for ecclesial conversation. This insistence is theologically significant: it implies that the Church's listening must extend into the digital agora where young people form identity,

⁷⁵ See Rafael Luciani, *Synodality* (2022); and Synod of Bishops, *Final Document* (2024).

conscience, and conviction. As the *Dicastery for Communication's Towards Full Presence* affirms, digital platforms are not merely communication tools but genuine places of encounter where the Spirit may speak and be heard.⁷⁶ Student voices from these cultural and digital spaces are not merely consultative data; they are contributions to the communal discernment of the whole Church.

This is not an accommodation to secular culture but an expression of the synodal principle that the *sensus fidei* is discerned through attentiveness to the lived experience of all the faithful — including the young. Synodality therefore requires pastoral imagination that meets youth in the media and aesthetic idioms of their time, recognizing these as spaces where the Spirit may speak.

5.2.2 Creating Safe Spaces for Voice: Conscience, Candour, and Confidentiality

Several students from St Pius advocated for 'free discussions,' 'regular student forums,' and 'suggestion boxes.' Such mechanisms aim to create genuinely safe spaces for voice and to offset the consequences of power differentials between learners and adult leaders. Confidentiality and the option for anonymous testimony are instruments for promoting the dignity of conscience and enabling candour, especially when young people are confronting painful or contested topics.

Theologically, the availability of such mechanisms reflects the synodal conviction that authentic discernment requires conditions in which all voices — especially those habitually marginalized — can be heard without fear. These are not merely administrative accommodations; they are expressions of the Church's commitment to receive the gifts of the young as genuine contributions to communal discernment rather than as items for adult approval. Participation

⁷⁶ Dicastery for Communication, *Towards Full Presence: A Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media*, 1–24.

grounded in co-responsibility means that student forums and feedback mechanisms carry moral weight within the life of the school community.

5.2.3 Embedded Participation: Structures of Co-Responsibility

Responses from St Bernard's emphasized structures — 'school committees,' 'student representation,' 'open workshops,' and 'school camps where we practice synodality.' These proposals reflect a desire not merely for occasional consultation but for embedded, institutionalized participation that forms part of the school's normal governance culture. From a theological perspective, institutional representation models the ecclesiology of co-responsibility: young people are not merely objects of pastoral care but subjects of the Church's mission and discernment.

A synodal school community is one in which students are invited not simply to express preferences but to engage in genuine communal deliberation — listening together, weighing proposals together, and taking shared ownership of outcomes. Such structures align with the vision articulated in the Synod on Synodality's *Final Document*, which calls for 'participatory and co-responsible' processes at every level of ecclesial life.⁷⁷ They do not reduce the authority of teachers or school leaders; rather, they enrich the community's capacity for discernment by ensuring that the voices of the young are woven into the deliberative fabric of the institution.

5.2.4 Thematic Priorities for Future Synodal Conversations

When asked what topics should be addressed in future synodal conversations, students offered an array of concrete concerns. These are summarized thematically below.

⁷⁷ Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission: Final Document*, no. 4.

Students across the three schools raised gender equality and youth roles in Church life (Minda S8; St Pius S4) as a priority issue. These questions touch the ecclesial understanding of human dignity, vocation, and participation. As Pope Francis argues in *Christus Vivit*,⁷⁸ young people — including young women — are not merely recipients of the Church's pastoral care but prophetic contributors to its mission. Synodal discussions must therefore create space for sustained theological reflection on the place of young women and men in Church life and on how structures might facilitate fuller participation.

Mental health and pastoral support emerged as a prominent theme across St Pius and St Bernard's, and was implicitly present in calls for spaces 'where learners are free to talk' and to 'make everyone confident and heard.' This signals a need for synodal attention to psycho-spiritual wellbeing — integrating pastoral care with mental health resources and destigmatising conversation about emotional suffering. The Church's pastoral responsibility includes accompaniment that is both compassionate and competent, attentive to the pressures of academic life, bullying, peer pressure, and the anxieties of vocational discernment.

Students at St Bernard's raised concerns about child abuse — including historic corporal punishment in Zimbabwean schools — as an urgent pastoral and ecclesial matter. The synodal conversation must never shy away from safeguarding, accountability, and the structural means to prevent and address abuse. This is a matter of justice and protection of the vulnerable, and it must be central to any credible synodal engagement in Catholic schools. The ZCBC's existing

⁷⁸ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, no. 47.

*Child Protection Guidelines*⁷⁹ and *Child Safeguard Policy*,⁸⁰ referenced in Chapter 3, provide a foundational framework that must be actively operationalised.

Students also raised practical issues concerning career guidance, socio-economic inequities, and the relationship between faith and material conditions. Synodality must therefore link spiritual discernment with socio-economic realities, nurturing an integrative vision of vocation that attends to both spiritual calling and material context — a concern that resonates with Gutiérrez's liberation theology⁸¹ and the Catholic Social Teaching tradition surveyed in Chapter 2.

Table 2 below summarises the key proposals from all three schools, organised according to the four pillars identified across the data.

Table 2: Student Proposals for Enhancing Synodal Engagement — Summary Across Three Schools

Pillar	Student Proposals	Theological Grounding
Widening Access	Integrate non-Catholics into selected activities; address boarding exclusion; rotating leadership opportunities; multilingual liturgies	<i>Koinonia</i> ; baptismal co-responsibility; <i>ubuntu</i> as ecclesial hermeneutic
Institutionalising Listening	Suggestion boxes; anonymous surveys; SRCs with formal charters; student representation on planning bodies; regular forums	<i>Sensus fidelium</i> ; co-responsibility; subsidiarity; Vatican II People of God ecclesiology
Youth-Contextualised Methods	Social media platforms (TikTok); drama and creative arts; games; podcasts; synodal camps and workshops	Pastoral imagination; inculturation; meeting youth in the digital agora
Accountability and Follow-Through	Publicly summarised feedback; committed action timelines; student-staff working groups; peer mentoring and public-speaking clubs	Trust as sacramental foundation; kenotic servant leadership; institutional transparency

Source: Field research, 2025.

5.3 How Students Define and Experience Synodality

⁷⁹ Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC), *Child Protection Teachers' Guidelines Handbook*, 1ff.

⁸⁰ Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC), *Child Safeguard Policy Document*, 1ff.

⁸¹ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, 1ff.

Students' definitions of synodality converge on several core elements: 'journeying together,' 'listening,' 'shared decision-making,' and 'creating safe spaces for diverse voices.' Across the sample, synodality was described not as a technical process but as a way of being: 'walking together' (St Bernard's S6); 'listening to each other and making decisions' (Minda S2, S4); 'creating a safe environment where each and every voice is heard' (Minda S6). These definitions are remarkably congruent with the theological articulations examined in Chapter 2, where synodality was defined as an ecclesial style rooted in *koinonia* (communion), *diakonia* (service), and mission — and with Pope Francis's own description of synodality as 'the way of being Church that God expects of us in the third millennium.'

Students also recounted concrete experiences of being heard — moments of vocational recognition, practical problem-solving, and platforms for public speech. At Minda, these centred on devotional and public-speaking spaces where individual contributions became collective resources: one student's peace-themed reflection opened a platform for youth-inclusive participation in church activities, while another's proposed synodal process promoted collaborative dialogue between students and teachers. Musical leadership similarly mattered: a student who introduced a song during devotions and choir practice saw it become part of the communal repertoire, illustrating how cultural contributions can shape communal life. In one practical instance, a student who reported cracked asbestos in the classroom during a guidance session prompted maintenance to respond the following day — an example of voice leading to concrete institutional action.

At St Pius, formal channels for collective representation produced structural adjustments. Class leaders who met with administrators successfully negotiated freedom to choose subject combinations and secured reorganized, more effective study time. The headboy's implemented

ideas became embedded practices, demonstrating how student leadership can translate into genuine policy shifts. At St Bernard's, voiced concerns were taken seriously across multiple domains: campaigns for a change in uniform and for more consistent electricity supply were addressed; a student's proposal that everyone share cleaning responsibilities led to a reconsideration of roles and communal duty; and concerns raised in a child protection committee about students' anxiety were met with the introduction of counseling sessions and stress-reduction workshops.

Across these narratives, the hallmarks of moments when students felt heard were immediate acknowledgement, institutional follow-through, and visible change. Voice plus action equals trust. Students described feeling seen, valued, and empowered when adults and systems validated their input by acting on it. Nevertheless, many students reported sporadic or symbolic rather than systematic listening. The data show a pattern: students feel heard when there is an explicit channel for their voice and when adults respond with concrete measures. Where such channels are absent, students equate synodality with aspiration rather than practice.

Theologically, students' experiential definitions point to synodality as both an ethical disposition and a sacramental reality. When a school community 'walks together,' it enacts a miniature ecclesiology of communion — each member's gift is recognized and the community discerns its way forward. This resonates with Pauline images of the Body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12) where every member matters. Formation in synodality in the school context is therefore at once catechetical (teaching what synodality means) and pastoral (creating habituating practices of listening, dialogue, and shared decision-making) — a point underscored by the pedagogical framework analyzed in Chapter 3.

5.4 Experiences of Inclusivity in School Activities

5.4.1 What Inclusivity Means to Students

Students across the three schools offered rich, often overlapping accounts of what inclusivity means in practice. Inclusivity is described as a lived sense of belonging and acceptance without judgement, where individuals are welcomed to participate in academic, spiritual, and social activities regardless of faith, ability, or background. It entails social cohesion — journeying together, listening to diverse viewpoints, and creating safe spaces where no one is marginalized. Practically, inclusivity means ensuring that every voice is heard and valued during lessons, clubs, and sports; that contributions shape group learning rather than being ignored or mocked; and that equal opportunity exists to join teams, choirs, and classroom discussions with mechanisms to support those who struggle.

Beyond mere numerical presence, inclusivity involves respect, empowerment, and meaningful participation: students should feel accepted for who they are, free from politics, stigma, or hindrance, and encouraged to learn from alternative perspectives. Relationships matter; peers emphasized care for others' feelings and mutual correction delivered respectfully. Inclusivity also includes structural fairness — deliberate actions that remove barriers so that learners with different abilities or beliefs can affiliate, contribute, and benefit. Students pointed to concrete spaces where inclusivity is enacted: sports teams (soccer, volleyball, netball, basketball), choirs and clubs, and classroom discussions where non-Catholics and learners with disabilities alike are welcomed.

Theologically, inclusivity in the school mirrors the Church's wider vocation to embody *koinonia* — understood as the communion or fellowship in which all believers share faith, life, and resources in Christ — and hospitality. Students' appeal for inclusivity resonates with biblical

themes of welcome to the marginalized and the preferential attention to those at the periphery.⁸² In a Zimbabwean cultural register, students invoke *Ubuntu* — 'I am because we are' — as a normative hermeneutic for inclusion (St Bernard's S9), a motif examined in the *Ubuntu* and inculturation discussion of Chapter 2. Translating theologically: synodality demands ecclesial practices that prioritize relational belonging as a sacramental sign of God's abiding presence among the young.

5.4.2 Barriers to Inclusivity

Despite students' clear aspirations, barriers to inclusivity are significant and multi-layered. They fall into four overlapping categories — structural, cultural, psychosocial, and institutional — that must be honestly acknowledged if synodality is to be more than a rhetorical aspiration. Table 3 below provides a systematic overview of these barriers.

Table 3: Barriers to Inclusivity — Categories, Specific Challenges, and Schools Affected

Category	Specific Barriers	Schools Affected
Structural	Boarding logistics; restricted off-campus access; prefectorial monopoly on voice; socio-economic exclusion from leadership positions; nepotism in extracurricular selection	All three schools (Minda, St Pius, St Bernard's)
Cultural	Language divisions (Ndebele/Shona); religious boundary exclusions (altar service, Communion); teacher favouritism; normative shaming and silencing of dissenting voices	Minda (language/liturgical), St Bernard's (tribal), St Pius (authority dynamics)
Psychosocial	Low self-confidence; fear of ridicule; anxiety about judgement; COVID-19 isolation effects; social stigma based on appearance or economic status	All three schools; most acute at St Pius and St Bernard's
Institutional	Proposals dismissed without discussion; absence of reliable feedback loops; non-Catholic staff unfamiliar with	St Pius (dismissal of proposals), Minda (staff attitudes), St Bernard's (access gaps)

⁸² Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 1ff.

	synodality; limited formal channels for student-staff dialogue	
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Source: Field research, 2025.

Structural exclusions were pervasive. Students at Minda High School reported being routinely excluded from off-campus liturgical and communal events — such as Christian Life Community (CLC) gatherings, ordination ceremonies, altar server gatherings in Bulawayo, and pilgrimages to Mount Inungu and Empaneni — because budget arrangements and boarding logistics precluded their attendance. At St Pius, governance structures concentrated decision-making authority in the hands of prefects and staff: proposals were dismissed without discussion, and ordinary students' views were sidelined, effectively creating a prefectorial monopoly on voice. At St Bernard's, socio-economic barriers restricted access to parliamentary and club positions, and female students were reported to dominate decision forums in ways that marginalised other groups. Nepotism and teacher discrimination were also raised as institutional barriers at both Minda and St Bernard's.

Cultural dynamics constituted a second cluster of barriers. Language tensions were explicitly identified at both Minda and St Bernard's: students noted that speaking in Ndebele or Shona could exclude interlocutors who did not understand, and persistent tribal divisions produced exclusionary dynamics. Religious boundary exclusions further restricted participation at Minda, where non-Catholic students reported exclusion from Holy Communion and ineligibility for altar service, and boarding logistics prevented some students from joining the Catholic Youth Association. Teacher favoritism and normative shaming surfaced as cultural impediments — students at St Bernard's described those in power silencing dissenting voices, and Minda respondents highlighted dismissive responses to student initiatives that erode mutual respect.

Individual psychosocial constraints were pervasive and often reinforced by structural and cultural factors. Low self-confidence, fear of ridicule, and anxiety about judgement were reported across all three schools: St Pius students observed that low self-esteem and stigma prevented peers from speaking up; at St Bernard's, several respondents recounted experiences of laughing, criticism, and fear of judgement during speeches or class discussions; Minda students described remaining silent when their efforts were met with indifference or criticism. The COVID-19 pandemic amplified isolation effects for some Minda students, interrupting activities and leaving lingering feelings of exclusion.

These barriers intersect and compound one another. Instances cited included exclusion from Communion and altar service (Minda), inability of boarders to join faith-based associations (Minda), dismissal of proposals by staff (St Pius), prefectorial control over discussions (St Pius), discriminatory teacher behavior and underrepresentation of perspectives (St Bernard's), and exclusionary language dynamics (Minda and St Bernard's). Addressing inclusivity therefore requires simultaneous attention to institutional rules, cultural practices, and the relational work of building confidence and trust.

Responses point to concrete remedies: multilingual liturgies and meetings to bridge language barriers, rotating leadership opportunities to dilute prefectorial dominance, logistical accommodations for boarders, explicit anti-nepotism policies in extracurricular selection, and pastoral programs to build confidence through peer mentoring and public-speaking training. Embedding such practices aligns pastoral care with ecclesial identity: inclusion is not merely social policy but an expression of the Church's sacramental solidarity with each child.

5.5 Integrating Synodal Practices in School Governance

Students articulated an array of governance reforms that would incarnate synodality within school structures. The most consistent proposal was the establishment or strengthening of representative bodies — Student Representative Councils (SRCs), Student Listening Circles, and more genuinely empowered prefect boards (Minda S4, S5; St Pius S1; St Bernard's S6). As students envisioned them, these bodies are not mere advisory panels but instruments of co-responsibility: they would meet regularly with staff, participate in policy formation regarding uniform, curriculum choices, and other matters affecting student life, and ensure follow-up on student feedback.

Practical initiatives suggested include anonymous suggestion boxes, bi-annual synodal workshops or camps where students and staff practice listening exercises together, integration of synodality into the curriculum through Catholic Doctrine classes, and digital platforms for youth-led dialogue via social media pages and podcasts (St Pius S8; Minda S1; St Bernard's S7). Several students proposed peer-led pastoral ministries and student-staff working groups for practical problem-solving — waste management, eco-initiatives, mental health clubs — as embodiments of shared mission (St Bernard's S9; Minda S4).

Emerging from these proposals is an implicit model of servant leadership: students want leaders formed by listening and accountable to those they represent. They imagine governance that reflects synodal rhythms — periods of listening, communal discernment, and coordinated action. This procedural vision is complemented by calls for formation: teaching leaders how to listen, training in active listening for staff, and creating safe spaces for dissent and debate (Minda S9; St Pius S1).

Theologically, integrating synodal practices into governance reorients authority as service — echoing Christ's kenotic leadership — and reframes schools as ecclesial communities that

practice the Church's missionary disposition. When students suggest integration into doctrine classes, they signal that synodality is not content-neutral; it demands catechesis that shapes dispositions and habits. As the analysis of Catholic Social Teaching in Chapter 2 demonstrates, subsidiarity — the principle that decisions should be made at the level closest to those affected — requires exactly this kind of structural reform. Governance reform must therefore pair institutional change with formation that nurtures virtues of humility, patience, and courage.

Implementation priorities would include drafting formal SRC charters with defined consultative powers, scheduling regular listening sessions with administrative action plans, and embedding synodal principles into leadership selection criteria. Such measures would make Catholic schools laboratories of ecclesial renewal, where shared governance is both pedagogical and sacramental.

5.6 Barriers to Effective Dialogue with Educators

Students reported a constellation of obstacles that inhibit meaningful engagement with teachers and administrators. These barriers are multi-dimensional — personal, interpersonal, and institutional — and they reflect precisely the structural and cultural impediments to synodality that Chapters 2 and 3 identified at the level of ecclesial theory. Here, those theoretical concerns are given concrete empirical texture.

A dominant theme was fear. Many learners described intimidation, anxiety about negative reactions, and anticipation of judgement that deter them from asking questions or proposing ideas. At Minda High School, pupils explicitly pointed to fear of adult responses and a preference to remain silent; at St Bernard's, students echoed this with accounts of intimidation, fear of criticism, and low intrinsic motivation to speak up. Closely linked to fear is a pervasive lack of confidence and low self-esteem. Respondents from Minda repeatedly identified limited

self-assurance as a barrier to initiating conversations. At St Bernard's, several learners described feeling misunderstood or punished for honest expression, which further undermines confidence and reinforces withdrawal.

A persistent perception of powerlessness and devaluation of youth perspectives emerged across schools. Minda students reported that teachers often do not take pupil voices seriously, promising follow-up they do not deliver; one student remarked that adults assume experience equates to better ideas, overlooking the value of fresh student perspectives. St Bernard's respondents described similar dynamics — resistance to change, being undermined, and a lack of genuine support — indicating institutional tendencies to sideline student input.

Time pressures and unapproachability among staff formed another major impediment. Across all three schools, many students noted that teachers appear too busy to engage: Minda and St Pius learners described missed opportunities when schedules conflict; St Bernard's students emphasized how instructors' limited availability makes sustained dialogue difficult. Some St Pius contributors, in contrast, reported positive experiences where their views were heard, highlighting variability in practice that points to the importance of individual pastoral dispositions alongside structural provisions.

Language and communicative differences complicated exchanges. Several Minda students cited language barriers that impede clear expression; a St Bernard's pupil mentioned difficulties speaking fluent English. Beyond language proficiency, differences in communication style produced confusion and eroded trust. Social stigma, discrimination, and hierarchical attitudes were also identified as obstacles. At St Pius, one student referenced discrimination linked to educational level, while another raised concerns about religious differences — noting that non-

Catholic teachers may struggle to appreciate the theological significance of synodality — illustrating how institutional culture can block mutual understanding.

Structural deficits — limited opportunities and weak channels for two-way communication — further constrain student voice. Responses from St Bernard's highlighted scarce formal avenues for engagement and inconsistent teacher-student interaction. Some Minda learners proposed having a designated intermediary who could communicate across the faculty, signalling a need for institutional mechanisms that translate occasional comments into sustained action. Additionally, attitudes of resistance and ignorance among some staff were cited as substantial barriers — St Bernard's respondents mentioned unwillingness to change as a factor that invalidates student contributions.

Collectively, these accounts reveal an interplay of personal, interpersonal, and institutional barriers — fear, low confidence, perceived marginalization, time constraints, linguistic and cultural mismatches, stigma, discriminatory practices, scarce formal channels, and staff resistance — that must be addressed to enable effective, reciprocal dialogue. From the theological foundation of synodality, which emphasizes active listening and mutual respect, these barriers represent a pressing need for systemic change. For dialogue to flourish, schools must cultivate a culture of trust and respect, enabling students to feel safe in sharing their ideas. Initiatives such as training programs for educators focused on active listening, paired with regular opportunities for student feedback, would significantly enhance the dialogue process and align schools with the synodal mission of a shared journey in faith where diverse perspectives are valued and welcomed.

5.7 Fostering a Culture of Listening, Dialogue, and Actionable Participation

Students across all three schools articulated a coherent and mutually reinforcing vision for building a culture in which voice is normalized and met with genuine response. Their proposals converge on four interconnected pillars: creating accessible platforms, cultivating listening skills, institutionalizing representative structures, and ensuring transparent accountability.

On accessible platforms, learners recommended a range of low-barrier mechanisms — suggestion boxes, anonymous feedback channels, digital and social-media pages, and monthly open forums. Minda students highlighted youth-centred formats such as games, arts activities, and synodal channels that make participation familiar and attractive. St Bernard's respondents stressed that safe, judgement-free spaces and anonymous feedback options are essential for those fearful of reprisal. These formats function as practical engagement strategies that lower affective barriers and invite wider participation — what Pope Francis, in *Christus Vivit*⁸³, describes as creating 'spaces of encounter' where young people's voices can genuinely be heard.

Capacity building was identified as a parallel priority. St Pius students called for training in active listening and respectful communication for both staff and student leaders. Minda recommended peer mentoring and public-speaking exercises embedded in clubs and Christian groups that include non-Catholics. St Bernard's proposed workshops and podcasts as accessible skills-development platforms. Several students also urged that synodality be embedded in the curriculum — through Catholic Doctrine lessons, ethics classes, or dedicated dialogue modules — so that the habits of discernment are learned as part of ordinary schooling rather than treated as extracurricular. This proposal resonates directly with the pedagogical arguments advanced in

⁸³ Pope Francis, *Christus Vivit*, 1ff.

Chapter 3, where the integration of synodal principles into formal curricula was identified as a prerequisite for sustainable participatory culture.

Representative structures were widely endorsed as the institutional backbone of participation. A recurring recommendation from Minda and St Pius is the establishment or formalization of Students' Representative Councils (SRCs) and class representatives supported by clear charters that define consultative powers and follow-up procedures. St Bernard's recommended including such representatives in select staff meetings or planning sessions so that student perspectives are integrated rather than merely reported. Complementing these structures, learners called for regular, predictable listening events — bi-annual synodal workshops or camps, school assemblies with rotating student speakers — to normalize public voice.

Above all, students insisted that responsiveness is as important as invitation. Across all three schools, the consistent demand was that action follow feedback: suggestions should be publicly summarized, timelines for response committed to, and outcomes of consultations published. Student-staff working groups addressing tangible problems — waste management, timetable adjustments, mental health support — translate deliberation into serviceable outcomes that reinforce trust. Taken together, these proposals map a feasible pathway toward making synodal practice ordinary in school life, enabling young people to become genuine co-responsible partners in the life of the Church.

5.8 Educators' Perspectives on Synodality, Student Voice, and Structural Barriers

5.8.1 Educators' Theological and Practical Commitments

Across the three schools, educators articulate a robust theological and practical commitment to student participation as intrinsic to synodality. Descriptions such as 'working together,'

'journeying together,' and 'engagement of all stakeholders' reveal that teachers and administrators already adopt a *communio*-oriented ecclesiology: the school as a local embodiment of the Church where laity and youth participate in mutual discernment. Several respondents explicitly linked synodality to formation — recollections, Mass attendance, and Small Christian Communities — framing student voice not merely as consultation but as participation in the Spirit-led life of the Church. This theological lens reframes student agency as vocation: students are not passive recipients of catechesis but co-journeymen whose lived experiences — concerns about drugs, early marriage, gender discrimination, and tribalism — are legitimate loci for communal discernment.

Practically, educators describe a range of strategies that instantiate synodal principles in classroom and school life. Student councils, prefect boards, role-play, Q&A sessions, guidance and counseling, and participatory planning for sports and projects are cited as regular mechanisms for enabling voice. St Pius and Minda emphasize student representation and responsibilities, while St Bernard's reports recollection days and collective practices — shared meals and sports — that foster relational trust. Pedagogically, teachers use dialogical methods, including presentations, workshops, and experiential projects such as poultry farming, gardening, and STEM activities, to scaffold students' capacity to speak theologically and ethically about their context. These practices resonate with an incarnational pedagogy: faith and reason, prayer and praxis, are integrated so that discernment happens in community and action.

Educators propose a coherent set of enhancements that marry pastoral theology with concrete policy: systematic formation on synodality, priestly leadership that models openness, creation of more student Christian communities, and institutional mechanisms that make student contributions binding in policy deliberation. Recommendations emphasize formation for both

students and staff — catechesis on Church teachings, discernment processes, and skills for public reason — so that voices are informed and theologically grounded. Importantly, educators call for structures that protect and amplify vulnerable voices through child protection committees and counseling, and for curricula that allocate time for dialogue. Theologically, this affirms a synodal ecclesiology that honors subsidiarity and co-responsibility: when schools teach listening as prayerful practice, student voice becomes a sacramental sign of the Church's ongoing conversion and life in the world.

5.8.2 Structural Implications for Synodality: Barriers in School Leadership

There is an ancient wisdom in the parable of the wineskins: new wine poured into old skins will burst both vessel and wine (Luke 5:37). So too, the vision of synodality — that sacred communal walking together in which every voice is honored — cannot survive if poured into structures built on fear, partiality, and hoarded power. Educators in the field have spoken, and their testimony reads not merely as institutional grievance but as prophetic lament — a cry from the margins of the staffroom that echoes those in Scripture who called for justice at the city gate.

i. When the Shepherd Becomes a Sentinel: Hierarchy as Threat

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus observed how the scribes loved places of honor and the best seats in the synagogues (Mark 12:38–39). He did not condemn authority itself; He condemned its weaponisation against those it was meant to serve. Educators reported experiencing precisely this inversion of pastoral logic. Seniority has hardened from a mark of generously shared wisdom into an armor of intimidation. Teachers described hierarchies in which threats of dismissal are deployed not as disciplinary last resorts but as instruments of daily governance. This is not merely a management problem; it is a theological rupture. The Council's vision, renewed in

Evangelii Gaudium, insists that authority in the Church is always diaconal — always in service. Christ, who possessed all authority in heaven and earth, took a basin and washed feet.

ii. The Parable of the Banquet Table Set for the Few

A community that feasts at an unequal table cannot call itself one body. Educators voiced profound indignation over inequitable housing: veteran members occupy full houses while several active teachers with families are compressed into a single shared dwelling, each subsisting in one room. One is reminded of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) — not to render any party wholly innocent or guilty, but because the chasm between comfort and deprivation, carved by institutional design rather than circumstance, signals a community that has forgotten to see those at its own gates. Such conditions are structurally determinative of synodality: a teacher who returns each evening to a cramped shared room does not arrive the next morning as a free agent capable of courageous participation. Synodality requires not only a theology of voice but a sociology of dignity.

iii. The Unmoving Tenants and the Suppressed Wind

In the parable of the tenants (Matthew 21:33–41), stewards who have held the vineyard long enough begin to act as though it belongs to them, resisting every messenger sent to remind them of their contingency. Educators described leadership positions held uninterrupted for more than two decades, so entrenched they have become personal possessions rather than provisional responsibilities. Younger staff are kept at the periphery, managed rather than formed. The Apostle James issued Scripture's most unambiguous prohibition: 'Do not show favoritism' (James 2:1). Yet educators report that lucrative duties and developmental opportunities are distributed not by merit or calling but by gender, tribal affiliation, and relational proximity to leadership.

The wound of tribalism cuts deep: where it reigns, *ubuntu* is crucified — that profound African relational wisdom, *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which insists that a person is a person through other persons. Where nepotism governs, the Body is dismembered.

iv. The Wind That Blows Where It Wills

The cumulative weight of these testimonies maps the precise contours of what must be dismantled if synodality is to take root. Jesus said of the Spirit: 'The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit' (John 3:8). The Spirit refuses to be channeled only from the top down. Every attempt to funnel the Spirit's movement through a narrow hierarchy of seniority, gender, or tribal origin is, in the end, a structure built against the wind. Synodality, properly understood, is the institutional form that honors the wind — designing its structures with deliberate porosity to the Spirit's movements from below, from the margins, from those who wake in cramped rooms and still carry their gifts to the learning field. These educators have not merely complained; they have diagnosed. And in their diagnosis lies the map of a conversion that, if genuinely pursued, could transform not only their institutions but the very witness of the Church in Zimbabwe.

5.9 Clergy's Insights on Synodality and Youth Engagement

Local clergy interviewed at Minda articulate synodality not merely as a procedural reform but as a theological re-anchoring of the Church's mission: an incarnational movement of communion and participation animated by the Holy Spirit. From this vantage point, students are not future members-in-waiting but present-voice bearers whose baptismal dignity warrants immediate inclusion in ecclesial discernment. The priest's reflections emphasize that synodality renews both

spiritual and structural life by opening ecclesial space for shared listening and co-responsibility; when students are heard, the Church's horizon expands and its evangelizing credibility among youth is strengthened.

Practically, clergy propose concrete pedagogical and liturgical strategies to realize synodality in schools. Retreats, recollections, and classroom dialogues are highlighted as *kairos*-moments for active listening where students narrate their faith journeys and surface concerns without fear. The priest calls for the integration of dialogue skills into curricula, platforms for student expression, and student-centred topics in school forums — measures that translate theological principles into everyday practice. Theologically, these steps resonate with an ecclesiology of vocation: formation that fosters leadership rooted in service, discernment that privileges the *sensus fidelium* of young people, and pastoral accompaniment that affirms their co-responsibility in mission.

Clergy are attentive to obstacles that mute student voices and offer pastoral remedies grounded in both charity and justice. Prejudices, stigma, bullying, and infrastructural deficits create asymmetries that contradict the synodal ideal of full inclusion. Responding to these barriers requires deliberate anti-stigma formation, accessible facilities, and teacher formation to unlearn discriminatory practices. The priest's pastoral approach insists on creating safe, non-judgmental spaces where students can voice theological doubts and social anxieties — spaces characterized by respectful listening, guided discernment, and sacramental accompaniment that together heal alienation and cultivate belonging.

To strengthen synodal processes, clergy advance a combined program of formation, structural innovation, and ongoing evaluation. Recommended initiatives include workshops on synodality for staff and students, appointing a synodal contact person in each school, embedding synodal

practices in daily school life, and instituting feedback loops for student input to reach diocesan forums. Theologically, these measures are rooted in an ecclesial imagination where intergenerational dialogue becomes a formative sacrament of mission: young people contribute prophetic insight while elders nurture continuity. In this vision, synodality becomes not an event but a sustained pedagogical and pastoral conversion that respects students as co-authors of the Church's unfolding witness in Zimbabwe.

5.10 Parents' Views on Synodality and Student Empowerment

The parents interviewed exhibited a spectrum of understandings of synodality that converge around relational and participatory motifs: synodality is variously described as 'working together,' 'walking together,' and an avenue for 'listening, dialogue, and shared decision making.' Across St Bernard's, St Pius, and Minda, parents who are practising Catholics tended to articulate a more historically rooted ecclesial vocabulary — seeing synodality not only as a process but as an expression of *communio* and the *sensus fidelium* — whereby the whole People of God, including youth, contribute to the life of the Church. Non-practicing respondents nonetheless grasped synodality in pragmatic educational terms: it fosters self-esteem, harmony, and cooperative citizenship in the school. This plurality of meanings highlights a key qualitative finding: parents read synodality both theologically and pedagogically, as a principle that can shape moral formation as much as institutional governance.

A prominent theme was the moral and pastoral significance parents attach to student voice. Several parents framed student empowerment as a means of forming conscientious agents who embody the 'fear of the Lord' as the beginning of wisdom, while others emphasized more sociological goods — mental health support, inclusion in leadership, and protection from

bullying. Parents recommended concrete practices that echo synodal theology: student representation in decision-making bodies, student-led listening sessions, and committees where young people actively gather and convey peer perspectives. These suggestions reflect an implicit theological anthropology: students are not merely recipients of catechesis but co-discerners whose lived experience constitutes legitimate ecclesial and educational insight.

Parents also surfaced structural and affective barriers that condition whether synodality in schools can flourish. Time poverty, inadequate notice, language barriers, fear of reprisal, and financial precarity inhibit both parental and pupil participation. One Minda parent emphasized formation — teaching children about rights, duties, and the roles of clergy and educators — linking catechetical clarity to functional participation. From a synodal perspective, these barriers reveal a need for conversion of structures: creating safe spaces, multilingual communication channels, and regular, advertised forums are not merely administrative fixes but sacramental acts of hospitality that make ecclesial listening tangible within the school.

Finally, parents articulated a rich interactional model for enacting synodality in Catholic schools that bridges theology and praxis. They proposed multi-modal communication (WhatsApp groups, newsletters, suggestion boxes), ritual and pedagogical integration (seminars on the Synod, joint arts/theatre projects involving clergy, learners, and parents), and institutional reforms such as student inclusion on synodal teams and regular student-led forums. Theologically, these recommendations resonate with *koinonia* and the preferential attention to the young: listening to students becomes an ecclesial sacrament of presence, forming conscience and community. Parents' voices converge on a vision where schools become micro-synods — learning communities that form disciples through mutual listening, shared responsibility, and the empowerment of youth as active participants in the Church's ongoing journey.

5.11 Summary of Limitations and Tensions

The findings presented in this chapter are rich and theologically significant, but they must be read in light of genuine limitations and unresolved tensions. Honest acknowledgement of these constraints is itself a synodal act — the willingness to hear difficult truths and hold them alongside hopeful possibilities.

The most fundamental tension is the gap between awareness and participation. Students know about synodality and find it attractive, but many do not engage meaningfully. This gap is not primarily a failure of will; it is a structural and cultural problem. Boarding school logistics, restricted channels for feedback, prefectorial dominance, language divisions, and fear of reprisal all constrain students' willingness and ability to participate. The co-existence of genuine enthusiasm for synodality with systemic barriers to its practice is a diagnostic finding that points directly to the reform agenda outlined in Chapter 6.

Resource constraints present a second significant obstacle. Schools may lack the formation, communication, and governance infrastructure needed to implement synodality effectively. Where Catholic schools in Zimbabwe operate under significant financial pressure, the risk is that synodal processes become unfunded mandates — aspirational in principle but unsupported in practice. This concern is not unique to Zimbabwe; it reflects the broader challenge of implementing ecclesial reform in under-resourced contexts, a theme that runs through the Church's encounter with the Global South.

Clericalism constitutes a third tension, one that is both structural and cultural. As the educator testimonies in Section 5.8.2 make plain, hierarchical decision-making, fear-based authority, and the monopolisation of voice by senior leaders directly contradict synodality's emphasis on shared

responsibility and the dignity of every baptized person. These dynamics are not merely managerial failures; they are ecclesiological deformations. They reproduce, at the institutional level, the very clericalism that Pope Francis has consistently identified as the greatest obstacle to synodal conversion.

The risk of tokenism must also be named. Participation can be superficial — offering students the form of voice without its substance — when feedback is solicited but not acted upon, when listening sessions are held but no structural change follows, and when student representation is symbolic rather than genuine. Several student testimonies in this chapter describe exactly this dynamic. Token consultation is arguably more damaging to trust than no consultation at all: it creates the expectation of responsiveness without delivering it.

Finally, this study has methodological limits: it is rooted in three schools and a modest sample, and its findings should be tested more widely across diocesan contexts and school types. The qualitative design generates rich, contextually grounded data but cannot support broad generalisations across Zimbabwean Catholic education as a whole. Future research ought to pilot the recommended interventions, assess their effects longitudinally on participation, wellbeing, and school climate, and explore mechanisms for connecting school-level synodality with parish and diocesan consultative processes.

These limitations do not invalidate the findings; they contextualize them and sharpen the reform agenda. Synodality is not a problem to be solved once and definitively, but a conversion to be sustained through patient, accountable pastoral practice. The tensions identified here are the growing pains of a Church learning to walk together.

5.12 Conclusion

The qualitative evidence from Minda, St Pius, and St Bernard's High Schools demonstrates that synodality is both intelligible and attractive to young Catholics in Zimbabwean Catholic schools. Students consistently describe it in terms of 'journeying together,' listening, and shared decision-making — language that resonates directly with the theological articulations examined in Chapters 1 through 4. Where synodal practices are lived — through representative bodies, listening forums, and responsive follow-up — students report tangible benefits, including greater inclusion, practical problem-solving, and a strengthened sense of belonging. These positive experiences show that when schools convert awareness into meaningful participation, synodality functions as a formative pastoral practice and cultivates young people as co-responsible agents of the Church.

At the same time, the data reveal a clear and multi-layered gap between awareness and participation. Structural constraints — boarding logistics, limited channels for input — cultural impediments — prefectorial dominance, language and tribal divides, teacher favoritism — and psychosocial barriers — fear, low self-confidence, and stigma — all undermine the routine exercise of student voice. Even in settings where formal mechanisms exist, the absence of reliable follow-through or of safe, confidential avenues for expression turns consultation into a symbolic gesture rather than a practice that builds trust and produces change. These barriers are not incidental to the synodal project; they are its primary challenge in the Zimbabwean Catholic school context.

These findings point to two mutually reinforcing priorities. First, durable institutional channels must be established and empowered: credible Student Representative Councils, regular listening forums, anonymous feedback mechanisms, and clear feedback loops that publicly record and

track actions taken in response to student input. Second, cultural and pastoral formation is indispensable: training in active listening for staff and student leaders, curricular integration of synodality and deliberative skills, confidence-building programs, and pastoral supports — especially for mental health and safeguarding — are required to make participation both possible and meaningful.

Practical, cost-sensitive measures suggested by the participants offer an implementable pathway. Schools can pilot student inclusion in selected planning meetings, adopt SRC charters with defined consultative powers, create multilingual and digital platforms to widen access for boarders and those constrained by schedules, and establish routine reporting practices so that suggestions lead to visible outcomes. Pairing these steps with low-resource capacity building — peer mentoring, public speaking clubs, synodal workshops, and student-staff working groups on tangible issues — would convert episodic voice into sustained co-responsibility.

The clergy's and parents' perspectives enrich this picture. Clergy reframe student voice as a baptismal right and a prophetic contribution to the Church's mission, and propose formation-centred, liturgically grounded strategies for making synodality habitual in school life. Parents read synodality both theologically and pedagogically, proposing multi-modal communication, ritual integration, and institutional reforms that bridge home and school in shared responsibility for the formation of the young. Together, educators, clergy, and parents converge on a vision of the Catholic school as a micro-synod — a community of discernment that is, at the same time, a community of formation.

Ultimately, reimagining synodality in Catholic schools is a task of conversion — structural, cultural, and spiritual. When communities habitually listen and reliably act, schools become the places where the *sensus fidelium* of young people contributes concretely to the Church's life and

mission. The students in this study do not merely call for voice; they offer practical pathways for enacting it. Attending to their proposals with humility, transparency, and pastoral care will help shape schools that form not only well-educated citizens but faithful disciples who know how to listen, discern, and serve together — embodying, in their very life together, the synodal Church that Pope Francis has called the whole People of God to become.

CHAPTER 6

RECOMMENDATIONS

6.0 Introduction

This chapter offers concrete recommendations to translate the theological vision and empirical findings of the study into durable practice in Zimbabwean Catholic schools. The preceding chapters demonstrated that students understand synodality, desire genuine participation, and propose feasible tools for engagement, while institutional, cultural, and pastoral obstacles prevent routine implementation. The proposals that follow aim to be practical, context-sensitive, and actionable: each subsection articulates the rationale, the recommended measures, sensible steps for implementation, and indicators that leaders can use to assess progress.

To guide school leaders effectively, this chapter is organized into a sequenced framework of early (0–6 months), mid-term (6–18 months), and long-term (18 months and beyond) actions. The five subsections—Governance and Policy; Culture and Formation; Participation Mechanisms; Pastoral Care and Safeguarding; Monitoring, Capacity-Building and Scaling—are written as integrated pathways that, when enacted together, will help schools move from episodic consultation to a durable synodal culture that forms students as co-responsible disciples and active citizens. Each recommendation is explicitly grounded in the theology of synodality—active listening, communal discernment, subsidiarity, and co-responsibility—as articulated in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, *Evangelii Gaudium*, the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the Synod on Synodality, and the African ecclesial vision of *Ubuntu* and inculturation.

Resource constraints are acknowledged throughout. Priority is given to low-cost, high-impact interventions that under-resourced schools can implement without significant additional

expenditure. Where resources are required, guidance on partnerships, diocesan support, and phased implementation is provided. Importantly, every recommendation is designed to be participatory in its design and execution: students, teachers, parents, and clergy should co-design the details, thereby modelling the very co-responsibility the synodal ideal requires.

6.1 Governance and Policy

6.1.1 Rationale and Theological Grounding

The institutionalisation of synodality begins with clear commitments articulated at the diocesan and school levels. Without formal governance structures, participatory initiatives remain dependent on individual enthusiasm and are vulnerable to discontinuation when leadership changes. The *Instrumentum Laboris of the Synod on Synodality* affirms that "synodal conversion" requires structural reforms that embed listening and co-responsibility in the ordinary rhythms of institutional life.⁸⁴ In the Zimbabwean Catholic educational context, this demands that governance frameworks be deliberately reshaped to ensure that student voices carry institutional weight.

6.1.2 Early Actions (0–6 Months)

Schools should adopt a short Synodality Charter that sets out the institution's commitments to active listening, subsidiarity, transparency, and the inclusion of student voices in policy processes. A charter functions as a public covenant: it makes expectations explicit—how student input will be sought, how decisions are taken, and how responses are communicated—and reduces the risk that consultation becomes merely symbolic. Diocesan education offices can support schools by producing a template charter, which individual schools then adapt in a

⁸⁴ Synod of Bishops, *Instrumentum Laboris for the First Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, para. 59.

consultative session that includes students, parents, teachers, and clergy. Once approved by the school board, the charter should be widely publicized in simple language accessible to the whole school community.

This early action is low-cost and achievable within the first term. The consultative drafting process itself models the synodal approach the charter is intended to institutionalize, making the process as significant as the product.

6.1.3 Mid-Term Actions (6–18 Months)

Representative student voice must be given institutional weight. Student Representative Councils (SRCs) should be formalized with clear charters specifying election procedures, term limits, standing responsibilities, and a defined relationship with school management. This means moving SRCs from ceremonial to functional status: granting student representation on pastoral or welfare committees; designating SRC members to participate in policy reviews such as those addressing discipline, timetabling, co-curricular access, and subject combinations; and guaranteeing that student submissions receive timely, documented management responses. Embedding student representation in governance also requires transparent selection and rotation systems to prevent dominance by a narrow group of prefects and to ensure that the *sensus fidelium* is genuinely representative of the whole school community.

Policy cycles should institutionalize consultation. When schools revise or adopt policies affecting school life, they should follow a simple consultation protocol: announce the review period; invite student input through accessible formats; publicly summarize the input received; document management responses; and publish an action plan with timelines. This practice both improves policy quality by incorporating lived experience and fosters trust by demonstrating that consultation leads to accountable action.

6.1.4 Long-Term Actions (18 Months and Beyond)

Strengthening parish–school–diocesan coordination complements school-level reforms. Appointing a Diocesan Synod Liaison Officer and a school-level synod contact person ensures that student inputs from schools feed into parish and diocesan syntheses, thereby connecting grassroots voices to broader church deliberations. This structural linkage embodies the theology of communal discernment articulated in *Lumen Gentium* and *Apostolicam Actuositatem* and prevents school-based synodal efforts from becoming isolated from the wider ecclesial community.⁸⁵

6.1.5 Resource Considerations

The governance reforms proposed above are primarily administrative and require no significant financial outlay. Diocesan education offices should coordinate template development to avoid duplication. Schools facing acute resource constraints should begin with the Synodality Charter and SRC formalization, both of which can be achieved through existing staff time and structures. Partnership with Catholic education networks—such as the ZCBC Education Commission—can provide templates, peer support, and modest seed funding for governance pilots.

6.1.6 Monitoring Indicators

Progress in governance and policy can be assessed against the following benchmarks:

Indicator	Baseline Measure	Target (12 months)	Verification Method
Synodality Charter adopted	None in place	100% of schools in pilot	Document review
SRC formally constituted with	% of schools	≥80% of schools	Charter inspection

⁸⁵ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (1964), para. 37; and Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), para. 10.

Indicator	Baseline Measure	Target (12 months)	Verification Method
written charter			
Student representation on pastoral/welfare committee	% of schools	≥60% of schools	Meeting minutes
Policy consultations conducted per year	Baseline count	≥2 per school per year	Consultation records
Diocesan Synod Liaison Officer appointed	Not in place	Appointed by Month 18	Diocesan record

6.2 Culture and Formation

6.2.1 Rationale and Theological Grounding

Institutional change must be matched by cultural and formation work so that listening becomes habitual rather than occasional. Pope Francis, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, warns against a Church that is "self-absorbed"⁸⁶, calling instead for communities characterized by missionary encounter, which requires the cultivation of deep listening capacities. In the Zimbabwean context, the *Ubuntu* philosophy—*umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* ("a person is a person through other persons")—provides a culturally resonant theological anchor for synodal formation. Formation programs must draw on both the African communal heritage and the Catholic tradition of discernment to cultivate the habits of mind and heart that sustain participatory culture.

6.2.2 Early Actions (0–6 Months)

Staff formation is foundational and should begin immediately. Teachers, administrators, and chaplains require training in active listening, facilitation of dialogue, restorative practice, and participatory pedagogy. Such formation can be delivered in short modular workshops—two to three hours per module, offered at the beginning of each term—and reinforced through peer-

⁸⁶ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 49.

learning circles where teachers share facilitation techniques and reflect together on their practice. To ensure sustained uptake, listening and facilitation skills should be recognized in staff appraisal frameworks so that practicing synodal habits is institutionally rewarded. When teachers model humility, patient listening, and collaborative decision-making, students are more likely to internalize the same dispositions.

At the student level, practical modules in *Catholic Ethos* (Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference,⁸⁷ and *Religious and Moral Education* (Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference,⁸⁸ should begin in the same term. These curricula provide a natural vehicle for teaching active listening, respectful disagreement, public speaking, and collaborative problem-solving through experiential exercises such as listening circles, mock councils, and service-learning reflections. Embedding these competencies in the curriculum equips students to participate deliberately and responsibly, converting occasional participation into a formation pathway that builds civic competence and theological maturity.

6.2.3 Mid-Term Actions (6–18 Months)

Co-curricular clubs and service projects are ideal laboratories for synodal formation. Drama, music, and creative arts can be harnessed to surface community issues in culturally resonant ways, inviting students to listen to and represent one another's experiences. Meeting students on platforms they use—creative arts, youth media, and appropriately moderated social media—makes participation more meaningful and reduces affective barriers to engagement.

6.2.4 Long-Term Actions (18 Months and Beyond)

⁸⁷ Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC). *Catholic Ethos* (Harare: ZCBC, 2016), 1ff.

⁸⁸ Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC). *Religious and Moral Education* (Harare: ZCBC, 2016), 1ff.

Ritualizing listening helps normalize it as a school habit. Schools should schedule recurring, protected practices—short monthly listening circles, termly synodal forums, and annual student–staff retreats—so that dialogue becomes a regular rhythm of school life rather than an exceptional event. Each session should have clear facilitation norms, rotating student facilitators, and a visible feedback loop that documents suggestions and response timelines. When formation and ritualized practice reinforce one another, listening shifts from an aspiration to an institutional culture.

6.2.5 Resource Considerations

Staff formation can be integrated into existing professional development days, minimizing additional cost. The ZCBC *Catholic Ethos and Religious and Moral Education*⁸⁹ curricula are already available in diocesan schools and require no additional procurement. Co-curricular formation programs can be facilitated by existing teachers with facilitation training. Schools with limited capacity should prioritize staff formation and curriculum integration in the first phase, deferring more elaborate retreats and media-based initiatives to the long-term phase. Partnerships with Catholic NGOs working in youth development and civic education can supplement school capacity at no cost.

6.2.6 Monitoring Indicators

Progress in culture and formation can be assessed against the following benchmarks:

Indicator	Baseline Measure	Target (12 months)	Verification Method
Staff trained in active listening/facilitation	% of staff	≥70% of teaching staff	Training records

⁸⁹ Ibid., 1ff.

Indicator	Baseline Measure	Target (12 months)	Verification Method
Synodal formation modules in curriculum	# of classes	≥1 module per Form per year	Lesson plans
Monthly listening circles held per school	# per year	≥3 per term (min. 9/year)	Attendance registers
Annual student–staff synodal retreat	0 or 1	1 per year per school	Retreat programme
Student facilitators trained per school	# trained	≥5 per school per year	Training records

6.3 Participation Mechanisms

6.3.1 Rationale and Theological Grounding

The theology of synodality, as articulated in the *Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*⁹⁰, rests on the conviction that the Holy Spirit speaks through the whole People of God. In the educational context, this means that student voices are not a courtesy but a theological necessity: authentic communal discernment requires the inclusion of all members of the school community, each contributing their unique perspective and experience. This section proposes participation mechanisms—here termed student co-responsibility platforms—that are explicitly designed to embed synodal values of co-responsibility, communal discernment, and transparency in the daily life of Zimbabwean Catholic schools.

6.3.2 Early Actions (0–6 Months)

Students must be able to choose from multiple accessible channels through which to articulate their views. A combination of physical and digital mechanisms—anonymous suggestion boxes,

⁹⁰ Synod of Bishops, *Final Document of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, para. 18.

structured online forms, designated pastoral appointments, and regular class forums—ensures that students with different preferences and constraints can participate meaningfully. Each channel requires a clearly communicated process: submissions should be acknowledged promptly, discussed within a defined timeframe (ideally within two weeks), and followed by a published action plan. This transparency is theologically significant: it converts consultation into co-responsibility because students see that their input leads to accountable responses rather than token acknowledgement.

For schools with limited digital infrastructure, anonymous physical suggestion boxes reviewed weekly by SRC members and a pastoral teacher represent a practical and immediately implementable starting point. Schools with internet access should supplement physical mechanisms with a simple online form accessible via school computers or personal devices.

6.3.3 Mid-Term Actions (6–18 Months)

Meaningful participation requires concrete responsibilities, not merely advisory roles. Student co-responsibility platforms should include task-specific portfolios—welfare, environment, co-curricular programs, or timetable consultation—that give students ownership of projects with measurable outcomes. Providing modest discretionary funds (even small amounts, such as USD 20–50 per term per portfolio) for SRC-led initiatives and requiring implementation plans and evaluations reinforces practical management skills and demonstrates that student proposals can lead to tangible improvements. Working groups that include both students and staff should be convened for these portfolios to ensure mentorship and institutional support while preserving student agency.

These student co-responsibility portfolios are explicitly grounded in the synodal principle of co-responsibility articulated in *Christus Dominus*⁹¹ and reinforced in the Synod on Synodality documents. They signal that students are not passive recipients of school decisions but active participants in the school's mission.

6.3.4 Long-Term Actions (18 Months and Beyond)

Equity must be embedded in participation mechanisms to ensure that platforms for co-responsibility are genuinely inclusive. Leadership opportunities should be rotated and selection made transparent to reduce prefectorial monopolies. Schools should consciously include underrepresented groups—boarders, non-Catholics, learners with disabilities, and students from less advantaged backgrounds. Logistical accommodations—transport solutions, on-campus versions of parish events, and multilingual communications—will enable participation by those who would otherwise be excluded. These measures prevent student co-responsibility platforms from amplifying only those already empowered and ensure that the *sensus fidelium* is genuinely representative of the whole school community. Where language barriers impede contribution, meetings and communications should be multilingual and facilitators trained to bridge linguistic divides.

6.3.5 Resource Considerations

The participation mechanisms proposed here are deliberately low-cost. Anonymous suggestion boxes require only a physical box and paper. Online forms can be created using free platforms such as Google Forms. The primary resource requirement is staff time for reviewing

⁹¹ Second Vatican Council, *Christus Dominus*: Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), para. 8.

submissions, facilitating forums, and publishing responses. Modest seed funding for student co-responsibility portfolio projects (USD 20–50 per term) can be sourced from school funds, School Development Committee (SDC) contributions, or diocesan small grants. Schools facing acute resource constraints should begin with the suggestion box system and class forums, scaling up to portfolio projects as institutional capacity grows.

6.3.6 Monitoring Indicators

Progress in participation mechanisms can be assessed against the following benchmarks:

Indicator	Baseline Measure	Target (12 months)	Verification Method
Feedback channels available per school	# of channels	≥3 distinct channels	Channel audit
Student submissions acknowledged within 2 weeks	% acknowledged	≥90% acknowledged	Log review
Published action plans per term	# per year	≥2 per term (6/year)	School records
Student co-responsibility portfolios active	# portfolios	≥2 per school by Month 12	Portfolio records
% of student population participating in forums per term	Baseline count	≥30% per term	Attendance registers
Forums per term	# per school	≥2 per term (minimum)	Minutes of forums
Diversity representation in SRC leadership	Baseline profile	Reflects school diversity	SRC membership data

6.4 Pastoral Care and Safeguarding

6.4.1 Rationale and Theological Grounding

Synodal practice must operate within robust pastoral care and safeguarding frameworks. The synodal principle of accompaniment—central to the vision of Pope Francis in *Evangelii*

*Gaudium*⁹² requires that the Church walk alongside individuals in their vulnerability, especially the young. In the school context, this means that participation structures must never expose students to harm. Every forum, feedback mechanism, and co-responsibility platform must be embedded within a culture of pastoral protection that enables students to speak freely without fear of reprisal, exploitation, or neglect.

6.4.2 Early Actions (0–6 Months)

Mental health, child protection, and pastoral support should be standing items on synodal agendas from the outset. When students raise concerns in forums, clear referral pathways to counseling and protection services must be established before the first forum is convened. Strengthening counseling provision—whether by appointing trained counselors or by designating and training pastoral teachers—and establishing peer-support networks are practical ways to respond to common student needs. Schools should offer regular psychoeducation sessions to destigmatise help-seeking and to equip peers to notice and support one another.

All facilitators of participatory forums must receive training in basic safeguarding and mandatory reporting before leading any student engagement session. Existing diocesan child protection guidelines should be reaffirmed at the beginning of every synodal activity, and simple procedures for reporting and responding to disclosures should be posted in accessible locations throughout the school.

6.4.3 Mid-Term Actions (6–18 Months)

Clear, confidential complaint channels with published response timelines and visible protective measures build the trust necessary for authentic participation. Schools should designate a named

⁹² Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 169-173.

safeguarding contact person whose role and contact details are known to all students, publish a simple complaint procedure in the student handbook, and ensure that pastoral visibility is maintained through regular, publicized drop-in hours for counseling.

6.4.4 Long-Term Actions (18 Months and Beyond)

Pastoral visibility and normalized help-seeking reduce fear and isolation over time. Campaigns that share testimonies and model vulnerability—peer mentor programs, wellbeing assemblies, and routine training for staff to recognize signs of distress—create a school culture in which wellbeing is integral to participation rather than peripheral to it. When students trust that their contributions will not expose them to harm and that pastoral care will follow where needed, their willingness to engage in synodal processes increases significantly. The safeguarding framework is not merely a risk-management mechanism but a theological expression of the Church's commitment to the dignity of every person.

6.4.5 Resource Considerations

Safeguarding training for staff can be integrated into existing professional development programs or delivered by diocesan safeguarding officers at no additional cost to individual schools. Peer-support network training can be facilitated by teachers trained in restorative practice or pastoral care. Schools with limited counseling capacity should designate a pastoral teacher with basic training as a first point of contact, while advocating to the diocese for the appointment of a trained counselor. Dioceses should explore partnerships with Catholic NGOs working in psychosocial support to supplement school capacity sustainably.

6.4.6 Monitoring Indicators

Progress in pastoral care and safeguarding can be assessed against the following benchmarks:

Indicator	Baseline Measure	Target (12 months)	Verification Method
Safeguarding training for facilitators	% trained	100% of forum facilitators	Training records
Referral pathways documented and published	Yes/No	Yes, in place by Month 3	Policy document
Confidential complaint channel established	Yes/No	Yes, by Month 6	Channel audit
Pastoral teacher/counsellor designated per school	Yes/No	Yes, by Month 6	Staff record
Psychoeducation sessions per year	# per year	≥2 per school per year	Session records

6.5 Monitoring, Capacity-Building and Scaling

6.5.1 Rationale and Theological Grounding

The synodal process, as articulated in *Instrumentum Laboris*, is not a one-time event but a continuous journey of ecclesial conversion.⁹³ Sustained institutional transformation requires intentional monitoring, iterative learning, and the sharing of good practice across communities. In the Zimbabwean Catholic educational context, this means establishing lightweight but rigorous evaluation systems that allow schools to learn from experience, demonstrate impact to stakeholders, and scale successful models across the diocesan school network. Monitoring is itself a synodal act: when communities reflect together on their practice and discern what is working, they embody the communal discernment that is at the heart of the synodal vision.

6.5.2 Early Actions (0–6 Months)

⁹³ Synod of Bishops, *Instrumentum Laboris for the First Session of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, para. 17.

Schools should adopt a lightweight monitoring framework from the outset. Simple indicators—number and diversity of consultations, proportion of student suggestions acted upon, attendance at forums, leadership diversity metrics, and student wellbeing measures—provide sufficient data for meaningful reflection without creating an administrative burden. A school synod contact person should compile a termly dashboard summarizing these indicators and present findings to the school board. Publicizing results creates accountability and helps communities learn from both successes and shortcomings.

A baseline audit should be conducted in the first month of implementation to establish baseline measures for all indicators listed in Sections 6.1–6.4. This baseline will enable meaningful assessment of progress at the 9–12 month evaluation point. Schools are encouraged to use simple spreadsheet tools for data collection to minimize administrative costs.

6.5.3 Mid-Term Actions (6–18 Months)

Peer learning and targeted capacity support will accelerate implementation across diocesan school networks. Diocesan education offices should convene regular cluster meetings—at least once per term—where schools share templates, case studies, and low-cost tools such as synodality charters, SRC constitutions, listening-circle guides, and sample surveys. Pairing better-resourced schools with schools needing support fosters mentorship and practical exchange. Where additional resources are required—counseling posts, transport for boarders, seed funds for student co-responsibility portfolio projects—dioceses and parent–teacher associations should explore modest matching funds, local fundraising, or partnerships with NGOs to secure support without creating unsustainable budgets. Diocesan education offices

should maintain a small discretionary fund (even USD 500–1,000 per year per cluster) to support pilot initiatives in under-resourced schools.

Piloting and iterative learning will identify what works in context. Schools should pilot key interventions—formal SRC integration, student co-responsibility portfolios, monthly listening circles—in a small number of contexts, document outcomes through mixed methods (simple metrics and qualitative feedback from students, staff, and parents), refine processes, and scale successful models. Pilots should include explicit baseline measures and a defined evaluation timeline of 9–12 months so that decisions about scaling are evidence-based. Low-cost options should be prioritized initially to demonstrate impact quickly: anonymous feedback boxes, peer mentoring, short training modules, and transparent feedback loops offer high impact with modest investment.

6.5.4 Long-Term Actions (18 Months and Beyond)

Successful models should be scaled systematically across the diocesan school network, with the Diocesan Synod Liaison Officer serving as the key coordinator. Annual diocesan synodal education conferences—bringing together school leaders, SRC representatives, pastoral staff, parents, and clergy—should review aggregate monitoring data, celebrate progress, identify persistent challenges, and set priorities for the following year. This annual review embodies the synodal principle of communal discernment at the diocesan level and ensures that the recommendations of this study continue to be refined in the light of lived experience.

Over time, the goal is to establish a diocesan culture of synodal education in which monitoring, formation, participation, and pastoral care are mutually reinforcing and continuously improved. When governance, formation, participation, and pastoral protection are aligned and continually

monitored, Zimbabwean Catholic schools can become living micro-synods—communities where listening and discernment form young people for faith, service, and civic responsibility.

6.5.5 Resource Considerations

The monitoring framework described here is deliberately lightweight and can be implemented using existing staff time and free digital tools (spreadsheets, Google Forms). The primary investment is the time of the school synod contact person, estimated at approximately two to three hours per term for data collection and dashboard preparation. Diocesan cluster meetings can be hosted on a rotating basis at different schools to distribute transport costs. Dioceses should budget for a modest annual synodal education fund (USD 500–1,000 per cluster) to support pilot initiatives, small grants for student co-responsibility portfolios, and transport subsidies for boarders. This investment is modest relative to the transformative potential of a genuinely synodal school culture.

6.5.6 Monitoring Indicators

The following consolidated monitoring framework provides a comprehensive summary of recommended indicators across all five recommendation areas. Schools should use this table as a termly self-assessment instrument.

Area	Indicator	Target	Timeline	Method
Governance	Synodality Charter adopted	100%	Month 6	Doc review
Governance	SRC with formal charter	≥80% schools	Month 12	Charter audit
Formation	Staff trained (active listening)	≥70% staff	Month 6	Training log
Formation	Monthly listening circles	≥3 per term	Ongoing	Registers
Participation	Student participation per term	≥30% students	Month 9	Attendance
Participation	Forums per term	≥2 per term	Ongoing	Meeting mins

Area	Indicator	Target	Timeline	Method
Participation	Suggestions acted upon	≥50% acted on	Month 12	Action log
Safeguarding	Facilitators with safeguarding training	100%	Month 3	Cert. records
Monitoring	Termly dashboard compiled	Every term	Ongoing	Board minutes
Monitoring	Annual diocesan synodal conference	1 per year	Month 18+	Conference record

6.6 CONCLUSION

This chapter has presented a sequenced, theologically grounded, and practically oriented framework for embedding synodality in Zimbabwean Catholic schools. The recommendations are organized into three temporal phases—early, mid-term, and long-term—to guide school leaders in setting clear priorities and managing the pace of institutional change realistically. They are explicitly anchored in the theology of synodality (active listening, communal discernment, subsidiarity, co-responsibility) and in the African ecclesial vision of *Ubuntu* and inculturation that characterizes the Zimbabwean Catholic context.

Three mutually reinforcing early actions merit immediate priority. First, within the first six months, schools should adopt a Synodality Charter and formalize SRC responsibilities as student co-responsibility platforms: these governance foundations signal institutional commitment and provide the structural basis for all subsequent reforms. Second, within the first term, staff formation in active listening and the establishment of monthly listening circles should begin, as formation is the cultural soil in which all other recommendations take root. Third, within the same timeframe, accessible feedback channels and at least two pilot student co-responsibility portfolios should be established to demonstrate that participation leads to tangible outcomes. These three actions are practicable, measurable, and mutually reinforcing: they build momentum,

cultivate trust, and establish the habits of listening and discernment that sustain synodal culture over time.

Resource constraints are real, particularly in under-resourced schools. Throughout this chapter, priority has been given to interventions that achieve high impact with modest investment. Where additional resources are required, guidance on diocesan partnerships, phased implementation, and low-cost alternatives has been provided. The aim is to ensure that the synodal vision is not the preserve of well-resourced schools but is accessible to every Zimbabwean Catholic school, regardless of its economic context.

Crucially, the design and implementation of every recommendation must itself be participatory. Students, teachers, parents, and clergy should co-design the details of each intervention, thereby modeling the very co-responsibility the synodal ideal requires. Monitoring is not merely administrative but is itself a synodal act: when communities reflect together on their practice and discern what is working, they embody the communal discernment that lies at the heart of the Church's self-understanding as the People of God walking together. When governance, formation, participation, and pastoral protection are aligned, continually monitored, and iteratively refined, Zimbabwean Catholic schools can become living micro-synods—communities where listening and discernment form young people for faith, service, and civic responsibility.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion: Reimagining Synodality as Ecclesial Conversion

7.1 Introduction: The Arc of the Argument

This thesis opened with a question that is simultaneously theological and pastoral: Can synodality — the ecclesial way of journeying together in listening, discernment, and shared mission — be genuinely enacted in the concrete institutional life of Zimbabwean Catholic secondary schools? The preceding six chapters have pursued this question through a sequence of mutually reinforcing inquiries. Chapter 1 situated the question in its ecclesial, biographical, and institutional context. Chapter 2 traced the theological genealogy of synodality from its scriptural roots through Vatican II and the pontificate of Pope Francis, establishing that synodality is not a procedural innovation but an ecclesiological claim about the nature of the Church as a communion of the baptised, guided by the Spirit. Chapter 3 examined student participatory engagement as both a pedagogical imperative and a theological mandate, grounding it in the vision of *Gravissimum Educationis* and aligning it with *Zimbabwe's Curriculum Framework*. Chapter 4 outlined the qualitative methodology — Practical Theological Reflection, phenomenological inquiry, and multiple case study design — by which the empirical inquiry was conducted. Chapter 5 presented and interpreted qualitative findings from three Catholic secondary schools, revealing a consistent pattern: synodality is intelligible and attractive to Zimbabwean Catholic students, yet its full enactment is constrained by structural, cultural, and psychosocial barriers that require systematic address. Chapter 6 translated these findings into a sequenced, theologically grounded framework of recommendations spanning governance, formation, participation mechanisms, pastoral safeguarding, and monitoring.

This concluding chapter does not rehearse those recommendations. Rather, it fulfils the properly conclusive functions of a doctoral thesis: it draws together the distinctive intellectual contributions of the study, situates those contributions within the broader scholarly and ecclesial conversation, reflects honestly on what the inquiry has and has not established, and charts the research directions that now press forward with genuine urgency. Above all, it offers a synthetic theological reflection on what this study ultimately means — not merely for Zimbabwean Catholic schools, but for the self-understanding of a Church that has committed itself to walking together in an age of profound institutional change.

7.2 Principal Contributions of the Study

7.2.1 Synodality as a Tripartite Educational Praxis

The first and most substantive contribution of this thesis is a reconceptualisation of synodality in the educational context as a tripartite praxis — at once structural, formational, and pastoral. Existing scholarship on synodality has tended to operate primarily at the level of ecclesiological theory or broad pastoral strategy. Education-specific literature on synodality is sparse, and its Zimbabwean application virtually unexplored. This thesis addresses that lacuna by demonstrating, through empirical inquiry, that synodality cannot be operationalised in schools through structural reform alone. The three pillars — institutional architecture (empowered Student Representative Councils, transparent consultation protocols, accountable governance structures), deliberate cultural formation (listening circles, staff professional development, curricular integration of discernment competencies), and pastoral accompaniment (safeguarding frameworks, counseling provision, confidential feedback channels) — are mutually constitutive: each dimension fails without the others. This integrated insight advances beyond existing

educational frameworks that address student voice primarily in pedagogical terms by grounding student participation in the theological category of co-responsibility rooted in baptismal dignity.

7.2.2 Ubuntu as Contextual Hermeneutic for Synodal Practice

The second contribution is a theoretically disciplined engagement with *Ubuntu* philosophy as a contextual hermeneutic for synodality in Zimbabwe. While existing scholarship acknowledges the resonance between *Ubuntu* and synodal values, this thesis introduces a critical distinction that the literature has tended to elide: *Ubuntu* is a lived communal practice organically woven into African social life, while synodality is an institutional ecclesial framework promulgated by magisterial authority. Collapsing this distinction risks two complementary errors — romanticising *Ubuntu* as straightforwardly synodal without attending to the ways in which traditional age-based deference and gender hierarchy constrain participation, and imposing synodality as a Roman program without genuine inculturation. The thesis proposes inculturation as the necessary bridge: not the superficial translation of synodal language into local idiom, but the genuine encounter in which the Gospel takes on new expression through Zimbabwean communal forms — the *dare/idade*, the *mariro*, the rhythms of communal deliberation — while those forms are themselves transformed and deepened by the evangelical demand for full participation by all the baptized, including the young, the marginalized, and women.

7.2.3 Empirical Grounding of the Awareness-Participation Gap

The third contribution is empirical: this study provides the first multi-school qualitative account of how Zimbabwean Catholic secondary students understand, experience, and propose to enhance synodal practice in their schools. The findings establish with clarity that the primary obstacle to synodality is not conceptual — students grasp synodality as journeying together,

listening, and shared decision-making in terms congruent with its theological articulations — but structural and cultural. The awareness-participation gap (only seventeen of twenty-six students were aware of the synodal process; eleven participated actively) is not primarily a catechetical failure but a governance failure: students who were aware but did not participate faced boarding logistics, restricted communication channels, prefectorial dominance, and affective barriers of fear and low confidence that no amount of catechetical explanation can dissolve on its own. This empirical diagnosis reorients the reform agenda from communication to co-responsibility: the task is not to explain synodality better but to create durable institutional conditions in which it can be lived.

7.2.4 A Prophetic-Pastoral Voice for the Zimbabwean Ecclesial Context

The fourth contribution is the thesis's prophetic-pastoral register. The educator testimonies analysed in Section 5.8.2 — surfacing hierarchical intimidation, inequitable resource distribution, and the entrenched ecclesial deformation of clericalism — were not approached merely as sociological data but as prophetic lament: a cry from the margins of institutional life that mirrors the biblical demands for justice at the city gate. This theological hermeneutic, drawing on the parabolic imagination of Luke 5:37, Mark 12:38–39, Matthew 21:33–41, and John 3:8, elevates the study's findings from institutional critique to ecclesial discernment. In so doing, the thesis models a form of Practical Theological Reflection that takes seriously both the particularity of the Zimbabwean context and the universal demands of the Gospel — demonstrating that local voices from the periphery carry genuine theological weight for the universal Church's self-understanding.

7.3 Synthesis: What the Findings Collectively Reveal

When the empirical findings of Chapter 5 are held together in their full complexity, they generate a synthesising insight that exceeds what any single section of that chapter offers in isolation. Synodality in Zimbabwean Catholic schools is simultaneously desired, practised in fragments, and systematically obstructed. Students, educators, parents, and clergy all affirm its theological logic. Where it is enacted — in listening circles, empowered student councils, responsive pastoral leadership — it produces measurable goods: greater inclusion, practical problem-solving, strengthened belonging, and the formation of young people as co-responsible agents of the Church's mission. Yet the conditions that enable synodality are fragile and contested. They depend on individual pastoral dispositions — teachers willing to listen, chaplains committed to accompaniment, administrators who translate consultation into action — rather than on durable institutional structures. When those individuals change, or when institutional pressures reassert the logic of hierarchical governance, synodal practice recedes.

This fragility reveals the deepest structural challenge facing Catholic education in Zimbabwe: synodality cannot be sustained on the goodwill of individuals. It requires institutional conversion — the reforming of governance structures, formation programmes, and pastoral protocols so that co-responsibility becomes an ordinary expectation rather than an extraordinary achievement. This is precisely the meaning of Pope Francis's repeated insistence that synodality is not an event but a way of being Church. The findings of this study give that insistence concrete empirical texture: they demonstrate what institutional conversion requires in the specific, resource-constrained, culturally complex context of Zimbabwean Catholic secondary education.

Three convergent dynamics across the data deserve particular synthetic attention. First, the relationship between voice and trust is reciprocal and fragile. When students speak and are heard — when their suggestions produce visible institutional change — trust deepens and participation

expands. When consultation produces no discernible action, trust erodes and students conclude that synodality is aspiration rather than practice. Voice plus action equals trust: this formula, which emerged inductively from the data, is not merely pragmatic but theological. It mirrors the dynamic of the covenant: God's fidelity to the divine promises creates the conditions in which the people can speak honestly of their needs and failures. An institution that invites voice without accountability betrays its own deepest commitments.

Second, the data reveal a profound pedagogical truth: students learn synodality by practicing it. The most effective formation experiences reported were not lectures about synodal theory but structured encounters — listening circles, peer-led retreats, service-learning projects, student-faculty working groups on genuine school problems — in which students exercised the habits of listening, discernment, and co-responsible action. This resonates with the Thomistic pedagogical conviction that virtue is formed by habituation: one becomes a listener by repeatedly listening, attentively and with accountability. The implication for school culture is significant: formation programs that remain in the classroom, without structural spaces in which discernment skills can be practiced in the governance of actual school life, will produce theologically articulate students who are nonetheless unprepared for the demanding discipleship that synodality requires.

Third, the data converge on a theological anthropological claim: young people in these schools do not merely want to be heard; they want to be trusted as co-authors of their school community's life and mission. Their proposals are not adolescent grievances but mature practical wisdom — rotating leadership, multilingual forums, transparent feedback loops, student portfolios with defined responsibilities, peer mentoring, anonymous channels for sensitive disclosures. This wisdom, gathered systematically and interpreted theologically, exemplifies what the Second Vatican Council called the *sensus fidelium*: the collective intuition by which the

whole People of God, including the young, participates in the Spirit's guidance of the Church. Attending to this wisdom is not a concession to student demand but an act of ecclesial fidelity.

7.4 Theological Implications: Synodality as Sacramental Education

The findings of this study invite a deeper theological reflection on what it means for a school to be genuinely Catholic. The traditional marks of Catholic education — religious instruction, sacramental life, moral formation, and institutional identity rooted in a founding religious congregation — remain essential. But the synodal vision of Vatican II and Pope Francis presses toward a further claim: that a Catholic school is most authentically itself not simply when it teaches Catholic doctrine or observes Catholic practice, but when its very institutional life embodies the communion, participation, and mission that constitute the Church's deepest self-understanding.

In this light, the school as a synodal community becomes a sacramental sign: a visible, structured expression of the invisible grace of communion that the Church is called to embody in the world. When a student council genuinely deliberates and its conclusions genuinely shape policy, when a listening circle creates a space of safety in which the Spirit can speak through diverse and marginalized voices, when a teacher receives a student's criticism with humility and responds with accountable action — these are not merely good pedagogical practices. They are signs of the kingdom: anticipations of the New Jerusalem, where every person is received in the fullness of their dignity and every voice is heard as a contribution to the community's discernment of the good.

This sacramental understanding of synodal education has important implications for Catholic identity in the Zimbabwean context. It means that Catholic schools cannot be satisfied with

institutional distinctiveness marked only by crucifixes in classrooms, mandatory Religious Education, and the performance of school Masses. Authentic Catholic identity requires that the school's governance, its pedagogical relationships, and its pastoral culture embody the synodal values that the Church has proclaimed as constitutive of its mission in the twenty-first century. As the Congregation for Catholic Education insists, the Catholic school's identity is realized not in its separateness from the world but in its capacity for transformative dialogue: with students, with families, with local communities, and with the broader human family. Synodality is not an add-on to Catholic identity; it is its most recent and most demanding articulation.

The findings further suggest that synodal Catholic schools in Zimbabwe would constitute a powerful form of public theology. In a social context marked by hierarchical governance, persistent patterns of exclusion based on gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status, and a post-colonial institutional inheritance that has often replicated colonial patterns of authority, a school that practices genuine communal discernment, empowers marginalized voices, and models transparent accountability is not merely a better school — it is a prophetic witness to an alternative social imagination. The Church's educational mission has always been a public theological act; in the Zimbabwean context, synodal education is an act of hope in a society that needs institutional models of participatory flourishing.

7.5 Situating This Study in Broader Scholarly Conversation

This thesis enters a broader scholarly conversation at several points of intersection. Within the theology of synodality, it contributes an empirical and contextually grounded complement to the predominantly theoretical literature. While that literature has established the theological warrant for synodality and its magisterial foundations, it has not adequately addressed the concrete

conditions under which synodal principles can or cannot take root in particular institutional contexts. This study provides one such account and, by doing so, invites the broader theological conversation to attend more carefully to the lived realities of communities in the Global South, whose experiences of the Church's institutional life are shaped by colonial legacies, resource constraints, and cultural frameworks that Roman-centred synodal discourse has often failed to engage adequately.

Within the literature on student voice and participatory education, this thesis offers a theologically grounded account that challenges the primarily sociological and democratic framing that dominates that field. Student voice scholarship has made crucial contributions in demonstrating the positive effects of student participation on engagement, attainment, and school climate, but it has typically operated within a framework of democratic citizenship that does not adequately engage the theological and sacramental dimensions of participation in a faith community. This thesis proposes that theological grounding — particularly in the categories of baptismal dignity, co-responsibility, and the *sensus fidelium* — offers resources not available to secular frameworks, enabling a deeper account of why student voice matters and what it means when students speak and are genuinely heard.

Within African theology and philosophy, the thesis contributes a sustained and critical engagement with *Ubuntu* as an educational hermeneutic that goes beyond the celebratory invocations of *Ubuntu* in much recent African theological writing. By maintaining the distinction between *Ubuntu* as lived communal practice and synodality as institutional ecclesial framework, and by insisting on inculturation as the bridge rather than simple analogy, this study offers a methodologically rigorous account of how African philosophical resources can enrich — without romanticizing — the Church's synodal project.

7.6 Critical Reflections on the Research Process

Intellectual integrity demands a candid appraisal not only of the study's findings and contributions but of the research process itself. Three critical reflections deserve explicit attention.

First, the researcher's dual role as educator at Minda High School — one of the three research sites — requires sustained critical attention beyond the methodological acknowledgements offered in Chapter 4. The *epoché* practised within the phenomenological framework, while disciplined and documented through reflexive journaling, cannot fully neutralize the relational and institutional dynamics that inevitably shape how data are gathered and interpreted in a setting where the researcher is known as a senior colleague and an authority figure. Participant validation workshops partially mitigated this risk by returning findings to participants for contestation, but they cannot guarantee that the power asymmetries of the research site did not shape what participants said, how they said it, and what they chose to withhold. This limitation should inform how practitioners and researchers receive the Minda-specific findings: they are valuable but should be read with awareness of their institutional proximity to the researcher.

Second, the study's exclusive focus on Advanced Level students aged eighteen years and above, while ethically appropriate and methodologically coherent, constitutes a significant substantive constraint. Adolescent formation in synodal dispositions does not begin at eighteen; the patterns of listening, deference, and participation that characterise senior students were formed in earlier years of secondary and primary schooling. Understanding how synodal culture is or is not cultivated across the full arc of a student's formation — from early secondary school through to the transition to adult civic and ecclesial life — requires longitudinal and cross-sectional research

that this study, by design, cannot provide. The recommendations advanced in Chapter 6 should therefore be read as addressing the most developmentally and institutionally accessible cohort, not as a comprehensive theory of synodal education across all stages.

Third, this study is inevitably shaped by its historical moment. The Synod on Synodality, whose *Final Document* was promulgated in October 2024, represents the most authoritative expression of synodal ecclesiology to date, but it is not the final word in an ongoing ecclesial conversation. The reception of the *Final Document* — across diverse dioceses, cultures, and institutional contexts — is itself a synodal process: one that will continue to generate new insights, tensions, and contestations that the present study could not anticipate. Researchers and practitioners who engage with this thesis should therefore read its findings and recommendations as a contribution to an ongoing conversation rather than a settled account of what synodality requires or permits in Catholic education.

7.7 Convergent Lessons for Policy and Ecclesial Leadership

While the study's generalisability is contextually bounded, its findings generate convergent lessons that carry relevance for ecclesial leadership and educational policy beyond the three research schools. These are offered not as prescriptions but as theologically and empirically informed perspectives for those who govern, form, and accompany young people in Catholic educational institutions.

For school leaders and administrators, the central lesson is that synodality requires institutional conversion, not merely pastoral goodwill. The most well-intentioned principals and pastoral staff cannot sustain synodal culture through individual effort alone. Durable change requires structural commitments — charters that make consultation obligations explicit, governance arrangements

that give student voice institutional weight, feedback loops that make accountability visible — supported by regular formation that equips all members of the school community to participate effectively. Without these structural underpinnings, synodal practice remains episodic and vulnerable to reversal when leadership changes.

For diocesan education offices and the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC), the lesson is that school-level synodal initiatives require diocesan coordination and resourcing. The cluster model proposed in Chapter 6, in which diocesan education offices convene schools for shared learning, template exchange, and peer mentoring, can multiply the impact of individual school initiatives at modest additional cost. Equally important is the coordination of school-level synodal processes with parish and diocesan consultation mechanisms, so that student voices gathered in school forums contribute to the broader ecclesial discernment that the Synod on Synodality has called the whole Church to undertake. This vertical integration — from classroom listening circle to diocesan pastoral assembly — is the institutional expression of the theological claim that the *sensus fidelium* of the young is a genuine contribution to the Church's mission, not a pedagogical exercise detached from real ecclesial consequence.

For the ZCBC specifically, the testimony of educators regarding clericalism, hierarchical intimidation, and inequitable resource distribution within Church-affiliated institutions demands explicit pastoral attention. These are not peripheral management failures; they are ecclesiological deformations that directly contradict the synodal vision the Church has publicly committed itself to enacting. Addressing them requires not only individual pastoral correction but systemic formation of clergy and religious leaders in the theology and spirituality of servant leadership: a formation that takes seriously Christ's self-description as one who came not to be served but to

serve (Matthew 20:28) and that holds leaders accountable for the institutional conditions they create for those in their charge.

For teacher-training institutions and Catholic universities in Zimbabwe, the implication is that synodal formation must become a component of initial teacher education, not merely a topic for in-service professional development. Teachers who enter Catholic schools equipped with competencies in active listening, facilitation of communal discernment, and participatory pedagogy will be better prepared to embody synodal values in their daily practice — and will require less remedial formation. Catholic faculties of education and theology are well-positioned to develop these programmes and to conduct the research that tracks their long-term impact on school culture and student formation.

7.8 Limitations of the Study

Intellectual honesty requires a careful account of the limitations that delimit the claims advanced in this thesis and distinguish what has been established from what remains prospective.

First, the research drew on purposive case studies within three Catholic secondary schools in Zimbabwe. While depth of inquiry yields rich, transferable insights, broad generalization to other school types requires caution. The findings may not apply without modification to government schools, non-denominational private schools, or schools serving very different socio-economic populations. Catholic schools in Zimbabwe operate within a specific institutional culture shaped by founding religious congregations, Church governance, and a shared sacramental identity; these contextual factors are integral to the findings and should not be assumed to be present elsewhere. Future research should explicitly test the applicability of this framework across diverse school types, including government and non-Catholic independent schools, urban and

rural settings, and schools serving different socio-economic demographics, before any claims of broad generalisability are advanced.

Second, the study focused on Advanced Level learners aged eighteen years and above. This group is developmentally and institutionally distinct from younger secondary students, primary school learners, and participants in non-formal youth catechesis or youth ministry programs. The conceptual and participatory capacities of younger students may require significantly different approaches, and the extension of this framework to primary settings or youth groups should be treated as a distinct research undertaking rather than a straightforward application of present findings.

Third, data were qualitative and cross-sectional in design. While qualitative methods are appropriate for the phenomenological and hermeneutical questions that animate this study, they cannot establish causal relationships or capture change over time. Longitudinal and mixed-methods designs would better illuminate the trajectories by which synodal reforms influence participation, wellbeing, and civic formation over extended periods. The absence of quantitative data also means that the benchmarks proposed in Chapter 6 are provisional rather than empirically validated; they should be treated as informed starting points for iterative refinement.

Fourth, resource constraints meant that the recommended interventions remained prospective rather than empirically piloted within the timeframe of this study. The framework advanced here is theoretically grounded and evidence-informed, but its implementation efficacy has not yet been tested. Implementation research is therefore a high-priority next step, and readers should exercise appropriate epistemic humility in citing these recommendations as established best practice before such research has been completed.

7.9 Future Research Directions

7.9.1 Pilot Interventions and Evaluation

The most urgent research priority is the implementation and evaluation of pilot interventions in a representative cluster of schools. Recommended pilot elements include: formal SRC charters developed through co-drafting processes; monthly listening circles facilitated by trained teacher-facilitators; and student co-responsibility platforms linked to concrete school improvement projects. These pilots should employ a rigorous mixed-methods evaluation design. Quantitative components should include pre- and post-surveys measuring student participation rates, school climate perceptions, and self-reported civic and discernment competencies. Qualitative components should include ethnographic observation of listening circles and SRC sessions, semi-structured interviews with student and staff participants, and documentary analysis of SRC records and school policy revisions. Evaluation should be conducted over a minimum of twelve to eighteen months, with an interim review at six months to allow adaptive management. Success criteria should include: measurable improvement in participation rates and demographic diversity; evidence of at least one school policy change attributable to student consultation; and student and staff reports of improved relational trust and pastoral responsiveness.

7.9.2 Longitudinal Cohort Study

A second priority is a longitudinal cohort study that follows learners from mid-secondary school through the transition to post-school life. Such a study would measure how synodal formation shapes civic engagement, vocational discernment, and ecclesial participation in the years following schooling — providing evidence of long-term formation outcomes that cross-sectional research cannot access. This study design should include regular qualitative touchpoints (annual

interviews or focus groups) alongside standardised instruments measuring civic agency and religious practice.

7.9.3 Broader Sampling and Contextual Variation

Third, future research should broaden sampling to include primary schools, urban-rural contrasts, and diverse diocesan settings across Zimbabwe and comparable contexts in the region, such as Zambia, Malawi, and South Africa. Understanding cultural moderators — including ethnic and linguistic diversity, colonial institutional legacies, and varying levels of Church authority within dioceses — is essential for assessing the scalability of the framework and identifying the conditions under which synodal practices are most likely to take root.

7.9.4 Digital Modalities and Safeguarding

Fourth, systematic evaluation of digital participation modalities is required. How do low-cost mobile platforms and moderated social media channels change the quality and diversity of student participation? What safeguarding and data protection challenges arise, and how can they be managed within the resource constraints of Zimbabwean schools? These questions require both technical and pastoral investigation, ideally in partnership with technology providers, safeguarding specialists, and regulatory bodies.

7.9.5 Teacher and Clergy Formation Research

Fifth, rigorous assessment of professional development programs in facilitation and pastoral accompaniment is needed. Which program modalities — residential workshops, in-school coaching, peer learning networks, or digital self-study — most effectively translate into sustained change in classroom culture and pastoral practice? Randomized or quasi-experimental study designs, where feasible, would provide the most credible evidence of impact.

7.9.6 Theological Anthropology and Sacramental Dimensions

Theologically, further inquiry should explore the anthropological and sacramental dimensions of synodality in formation. How does the repeated practice of communal discernment shape students' vocational imagination and moral agency over time? What liturgical and sacramental forms most effectively embody a synodal ethos in school worship and pastoral rituals? Comparative theological reflection — linking *Ubuntu* philosophy and indigenous epistemologies with the Catholic tradition of synodality — can enrich an inculturated ecclesiology that resonates authentically with Zimbabwean identities without surrendering doctrinal coherence.

7.10 Concluding Reflections: Synodality as Conversion

This thesis began with the voice of Pope Francis: "*Synodality is precisely the path that God expects of the Church of the third millennium.*" It closes with an invitation to let that vision take root not in the abstract but in the particular — in the specific classrooms, staffrooms, chapels, and courtyards of Zimbabwean Catholic schools where young people are being formed for discipleship and citizenship.

The journey of this research has confirmed what the Church's theological tradition has long maintained: that listening is never merely a communication technique but a form of love. To genuinely attend to another person — to receive their experience, their proposal, their lament — is to honor the image of God in them and to participate in the Spirit's work of building communion. When schools create the conditions for such listening to become habitual and accountable, they do something that is at once pedagogical, political, and sacramental: they form human beings capable of the kind of attentive presence to one another that the human family, so deeply divided and so urgently in need of solidarity, requires.

The students of Minda, St Pius Enkanyisweni, and St Bernard's — who opened their experiences with candor, offered their proposals with creativity, and endured the constraints of their institutional contexts with remarkable resilience — deserve schools that honor their dignity not merely in aspiration but in practice. Their voices, gathered here and interpreted through the lens of synodal theology, constitute both an empirical finding and a theological claim: that the Spirit speaks in these young people, and that the Church is called to listen.

Implementation of the reforms proposed in this thesis requires patient, dialogical leadership. Synodality is conversion before it is program: it asks school leaders, teachers, clergy, and students for humility, transparent accountability, and a genuine willingness to learn from failure. The route to durable change lies not in comprehensive top-down restructuring but in small, evidence-informed pilots, robust formation, and the persistent habit of returning to student voices as primary interlocutors.

The vision animating this thesis is of schools that function as living micro-synods: formation spaces where listening, discernment, and shared mission shape citizens and disciples capable of contributing to church and society. This vision draws on the deepest resources of the Catholic tradition — baptismal dignity, the *sensus fidelium*, communal discernment, and *Ubuntu* relationality — and grounds them in the concrete, imperfect, resource-constrained realities of Zimbabwean Catholic education.

Generalisability, as noted in Section 7.8, must be approached cautiously. This framework is offered not as a universal prescription but as a contextually grounded, theoretically coherent, and empirically informed proposal whose claims are proportionate to the evidence base from which

they emerge. Its wider applicability to other national and cultural contexts remains to be tested through the research agenda outlined in Section 7.9.

In closing, this thesis argues that reimagining synodality in Zimbabwean Catholic schools is both an urgent pastoral task and an attainable educational reform. By institutionalising voice through student co-responsibility platforms, cultivating listening as a theological habit, and safeguarding vulnerable contributors through robust pastoral structures, schools can embody a synodal ethos that forms young people for faith, service, and public life. The future work proposed here aims to translate these convictions into tested, replicable, and context-attuned practices — so that the promise of synodality becomes the lived reality of Zimbabwean Catholic education. And when it does, the Church in Zimbabwe will not merely be talking about journeying together: it will be doing so, one listening school at a time.

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APPENDIX 1: Students' Questionnaire

A P P E N D I X 1
C A T H O L I C T H E O L O G I C A L U N I O N
Chicago, Illinois

Questionnaire on Students' Perspectives Regarding Synodality in Catholic Schools

CONFIDENTIALITY STATEMENT

We want to assure you that your participation in this study is completely confidential. All information collected will be kept strictly confidential and used only for the purpose of this research. Your responses will be anonymized using pseudonyms, and no identifiable information will be shared or disclosed to anyone outside the research team.

Researcher's Name:	Martin Madzivanzira
Research Project:	Reimagining Synodality: Listening to Students' Voices in Zimbabwean Catholic Schools
School Name:	
Date:	
Pseudonym:	

SECTION A: Demographic Information

Please indicate your responses by marking the appropriate box or filling in the blank spaces provided.

1. Gender:

- Male
 Female

2. Age:

3. Category that best describes you:

- Student
- Clergy
- Administrator
- Teacher
- Parent
- Other (please specify): _____

4. Highest Level of Education Completed:

- Certificate
- Diploma
- Degree
- Master's
- Doctorate
- Other (please specify): _____

5. Are you a practicing Catholic?

- Yes No

If yes, how long have you been a member of the Catholic Church?

6. Are you currently a member of any Small Christian Community or Guild (*Umhlangano, Chita*)?

- Yes No

If yes, how long have you been involved in this Small Christian Community?

SECTION B: Experiences with Synodality

Please indicate your responses by marking the appropriate box or filling in the blank spaces provided.

1. Have you observed the synodal process initiated by Pope Francis in 2021 within your diocese or parish?

- Yes No

2. If yes, did you participate in any sessions or surveys aimed at gathering input from Catholics?

- Yes No

3. Do you believe the survey contributed positively to the development of the Church?

- Yes No

Please elaborate on your response:

4. In your opinion, how can the synodal process be enhanced to better engage the voices of students in Catholic schools?

5. What specific topics or issues do you think should be addressed in future synodal discussions to empower students' voices?

SECTION C: Synodality in Catholic Schools

Interview Questions for Students

(Please fill in the blanks)

- Participants:** Advanced Level Students (aged 18+)

1. Understanding Synodality

- a) How would you define Synodality in the context of your experience at this school?

b) Can you describe a moment when you felt that your voice was heard in the school community?

2. Experiences of Inclusivity

a) What does inclusivity mean to you, particularly regarding your participation in school activities?

b) Have you experienced any barriers that have limited your ability to participate in discussions or decisions at school? Can you share specific examples?

3. Integrating Synodal Practices in Governance

a) In what ways do you think synodality could be applied to school governance?

b) If you could start something new in your school that shows synodal values, what would it be?

4. Barriers to Effective Dialogue

a) What challenges have you encountered when trying to engage in dialogue with teachers or administrators?

b) In your opinion, what steps could be taken to foster a more effective culture of listening and dialogue at your school?

5. Actionable Strategies

a) What changes or strategies do you believe would enhance student voices in the decision-making processes at your school?

b) What would your perfect school look like if everyone worked together and listened to each other?

Thank you for your participation.

Your insights are invaluable to this research and will contribute to a better understanding of Synodality in Zimbabwean Catholic schools.

APPENDIX 2: Educators' Questionnaire

APPENDIX 2 CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL UNION *Chicago, Illinois*

Questionnaire on Educators' Perspectives Regarding Synodality in Catholic Schools

CONFIDENTIALITY STATEMENT

We want to assure you that your participation in this study is completely confidential. All information collected will be kept strictly confidential and used only for the purpose of this research. Your responses will be anonymized using pseudonyms, and no identifiable information will be shared or disclosed to anyone outside the research team.

Researcher's Name:	Martin Madzivanzira
Research Project:	Reimagining Synodality: Listening to Students' Voices in Zimbabwean Catholic Schools
School Name:	
Date:	
Pseudonym:	

SECTION A: Demographic Information

Please indicate your responses by marking the appropriate box or filling in the blank spaces provided.

1. Gender:

- Male
 Female

2. Age:

3. Category that best describes you:

- Student
 Clergy
 Administrator
 Teacher
 Parent
 Other (please specify): _____

4. Highest Level of Education Completed:

- Certificate
 Diploma
 Degree
 Master's
 Doctorate
 Other (please specify): _____

5. Are you a practicing Catholic?

- Yes No

If yes, how long have you been a member of the Catholic Church?

6. Are you currently a member of any Small Christian Community or Guild (*Umhlangano, Chita*)?

- Yes No

If yes, how long have you been involved in this Small Christian Community?

SECTION B: Experiences with Synodality

Please indicate your responses by marking the appropriate box or filling in the blank spaces provided.

1. Have you observed the synodal process initiated by Pope Francis in 2021 within your diocese or parish?

- Yes No

2. If yes, did you participate in any sessions or surveys aimed at gathering input from Catholics?

Yes No

3. Do you believe the survey contributed positively to the development of the Church?

Yes No

Please elaborate on your response:

4. In your opinion, how can the synodal process be enhanced to better engage the voices of students in Catholic schools?

5. What specific topics or issues do you think should be addressed in future synodal discussions to empower students' voices?

SECTION C: Synodality in Catholic Schools

Interview Questions for Educators

(Please fill in the blanks)

Participants: 2 Teachers from each school and 1 Administrator per school

1. Understanding Synodal Principles

a) How would you define synodality within the context of your teaching/administrative role?

b) Can you give examples of how you enact synodal principles in your daily work with students?

2. Promoting Student Engagement

a) In what ways do you currently involve students in decision-making processes at your school?

b) What strategies have you found effective in fostering student voice in educational settings?

3. Challenges in Implementing Synodality

a) What obstacles have you encountered in promoting a culture of listening and dialogue among students and staff?

b) How do institutional policies impact the ability to engage students in dialogues about their educational experiences?

4. Barriers to Inclusivity

a) What do you identify as key challenges to achieving inclusivity within the school environment?

b) How do you address disparities among students when it comes to understanding and experiencing synodality?

5. Recommendations for Improvement

a) What actionable changes do you believe are necessary to enhance synodal practices in your school?

b) How can faculty collaborate more effectively with students to ensure their voices influence school policies and practices?

Thank you for your participation.

Your insights are invaluable to this research and will contribute to a better understanding of Synodality in Zimbabwean Catholic schools.

APPENDIX 3: Parents' Questionnaire

A P P E N D I X 3
C A T H O L I C T H E O L O G I C A L U N I O N
Chicago, Illinois

Questionnaire on Parents' Perspectives Regarding Synodality in Catholic Schools

CONFIDENTIALITY STATEMENT

We want to assure you that your participation in this study is completely confidential. All information collected will be kept strictly confidential and used only for the purpose of this research. Your responses will be anonymized using pseudonyms, and no identifiable information will be shared or disclosed to anyone outside the research team.

Researcher's Name:	Martin Madzivanzira
Research Project:	Reimagining Synodality: Listening to Students' Voices in Zimbabwean Catholic Schools
School Name:	
Date:	
Pseudonym:	

SECTION A: Demographic Information

Please indicate your responses by marking the appropriate box or filling in the blank spaces provided.

1. Gender:

- Male
 Female

2. Age:

3. Category that best describes you:

- Student
- Clergy
- Administrator
- Teacher
- Parent
- Other (please specify): _____

4. Highest Level of Education Completed:

- Certificate
- Diploma
- Degree
- Master's
- Doctorate
- Other (please specify): _____

5. Are you a practicing Catholic?

- Yes No

If yes, how long have you been a member of the Catholic Church?

6. Are you currently a member of any Small Christian Community or Guild (*Umhlangano, Chita*)?

- Yes No

If yes, how long have you been involved in this Small Christian Community?

SECTION B: Experiences with Synodality

Please indicate your responses by marking the appropriate box or filling in the blank spaces provided.

1. Have you observed the synodal process initiated by Pope Francis in 2021 within your diocese or parish?

- Yes No

2. If yes, did you participate in any sessions or surveys aimed at gathering input from Catholics?
 Yes No
3. Do you believe the survey contributed positively to the development of the Church?
 Yes No

Please elaborate on your response:

4. In your opinion, how can the synodal process be enhanced to better engage the voices of students in Catholic schools?
-

5. What specific topics or issues do you think should be addressed in future synodal discussions to empower students' voices?
-

SECTION C: Synodality in Catholic Schools

Interview Questions for Parents

(Please fill in the blanks)

Participants: 2 Parents from each school

1. Perceptions of Synodality in Education

- a) How familiar are you with the concept of synodality, and what does it mean to you in the context of your child's education?
-

b) Do you feel your child's voice is valued in the school? Why or why not?

2. Experiences with School Engagement

a) Can you describe any experiences where you felt your input as a parent was welcomed in school forums or discussions?

b) How do you believe parents can contribute to a culture of listening within the school community?

3. Barriers to Participation

a) What barriers do you think exist that prevent parents from fully engaging in school activities or dialogues?

b) Have you or your child faced challenges in pursuing open communication with teachers or school administrators?

4. Inclusivity for Families

a) In your opinion, how inclusive is the school's environment for families from diverse backgrounds?

b) What initiatives or changes do you think could improve the inclusivity of the school for all families?

5. Expectations for Synodal Practices

a) What expectations do you have of the school regarding fostering dialogue and inclusivity, particularly for students?

b) In what ways could the school better communicate with parents to ensure their voices and concerns are taken into account?

Thank you for your participation.

Your insights are invaluable to this research and will contribute to a better understanding of Synodality in Zimbabwean Catholic schools.

APPENDIX 4: Clergy's Questionnaire

A P P E N D I X 4
CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL UNION
Chicago, Illinois

Questionnaire on Clergies' Perspectives Regarding Synodality in Catholic Schools

CONFIDENTIALITY STATEMENT

We want to assure you that your participation in this study is completely confidential. All information collected will be kept strictly confidential and used only for the purpose of this research. Your responses will be anonymized using pseudonyms, and no identifiable information will be shared or disclosed to anyone outside the research team.

Researcher's Name:	Martin Madzivanzira
Research Project:	Reimagining Synodality: Listening to Students' Voices in Zimbabwean Catholic Schools
School Name:	
Date:	
Pseudonym:	

SECTION A: Demographic Information

Please indicate your responses by marking the appropriate box or filling in the blank spaces provided.

1. Gender:

- Male
 Female

2. Age:

3. Category that best describes you:

- Student
 Clergy
 Administrator
 Teacher
 Parent
 Other (please specify): _____

4. Highest Level of Education Completed:

- Certificate
 Diploma
 Degree
 Master's
 Doctorate
 Other (please specify): _____

5. Are you a practicing Catholic?

- Yes No

If yes, how long have you been a member of the Catholic Church?

6. Are you currently a member of any Small Christian Community or Guild (*Umhlangano, Chita*)?

- Yes No

If yes, how long have you been involved in this Small Christian Community?

SECTION B: Experiences with Synodality

Please indicate your responses by marking the appropriate box or filling in the blank spaces provided.

1. Have you observed the synodal process initiated by Pope Francis in 2021 within your diocese or parish?

- Yes No

2. If yes, did you participate in any sessions or surveys aimed at gathering input from Catholics?
 Yes No
3. Do you believe the survey contributed positively to the development of the Church?
 Yes No

Please elaborate on your response:

4. In your opinion, how can the synodal process be enhanced to better engage the voices of students in Catholic schools?
-

5. What specific topics or issues do you think should be addressed in future synodal discussions to empower students' voices?
-

SECTION C: Synodality in Catholic Schools

Interview Questions for the Priest

(Please fill in the blanks)

Participants: Local Clergy Members

1. Theological Perspective on Synodality

- a) In your opinion, what role does synodality play in the mission of the Church?
-

b) How do you perceive synodality influencing student engagement in the faith community?

2. Engagement with Students

a) Can you share experiences where you have actively listened to students during liturgical or educational events?

b) How receptive do you find students are when discussing issues related to their education and faith?

3. Promoting Inclusivity

a) What are your thoughts on current practices of inclusivity in Catholic education? How do they align with the principles of synodality?

b) What barriers do you see, if any, that hinder inclusivity among students in your community?

4. Strengthening Parish-School Relations

a) How can collaboration between local clergy and schools enhance the implementation of synodal values?

b) What initiatives could be taken to better integrate student voices within church-related activities and discussions?

5. Advice for Educators

a) What recommendations do you have for educators in fostering a climate that prioritizes student voices and participation?

b) How can the church support the implementation of synodal practices in Catholic education settings?

Thank you for your participation.

Your insights are invaluable to this research and will contribute to a better understanding of Synodality in Zimbabwean Catholic schools.

APPENDIX 5: Research Permission Request Letter



A GRADUATE SCHOOL OF
THEOLOGY AND MINISTRY

5401 South Cornell Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60615
773.324.8000

ctu.edu

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY PROGRAM

Regional Manager
Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education
P.O. Box 100
Maphisa, Zimbabwe

2 July 2025

Honorable Sir/Madam:

I am writing to confirm that Mr. **Martin Madzivanzira** (student ID MA0014284) is a candidate for the Doctor of Ministry degree at Catholic Theological Union a graduate school of theology and ministry fully accredited by the Association of Theological Schools of North America.

Mr. Madzivanzira has completed all his coursework for the degree and received approval of his dissertation proposal for a research project tentatively entitled, "Reimagining Synodality: Listening to Students' Voices in Zimbabwean Catholic Schools."

After a thorough review of his human subject research protocols which involve interviewing Roman Catholic secondary school students of majority age (18 years and older), Mr. Madzivanzira has also received approval to proceed from our faculty Interschool Institutional Review Board (IRB) of which I am administrator and chair.

Providing his research protocols meet with MoPSE approval, I respectfully request you grant Mr. Madzivanzira permission to conduct his research in the proposed schools under your jurisdiction.

Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns about this request.

Respectfully yours,

Scott C. Alexander, Ph.D.
Professor of Islamic Studies and Christian-Muslim Relations
Director, Doctor of Ministry Program
Administrator and Chair, Interschool Institutional Review Board for Human Subject Research
scalexan@ctu.edu (email) ; +1 773.580.7239 (mobile)

APPENDIX 6: MoPSE Clearance Certificate

All communications should be addressed to
 "The Provincial Education Director
 Matabeleland Province
 Telephone: 028423009/11



Ministry of Primary and Secondary
 Education
 Matabeleland South Province
 P Bag 5824
 Gwanda

22 July 2025

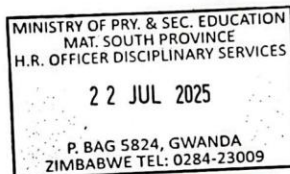
**MARTIN MADZIVANZIRA
 CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL UNION**

**RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT A RESEARCH ON THE TITLE:
 "REIMAGINING SYNODALITY: LISTENING TO STUDENTS'VOICES IN
 ZIMBABWEAN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS."**

The above mater refers:
 You have been granted authority to conduct a research on the title:

**"REIMAGINING SYNODALITY: LISTENING TO STUDENTS'VOICES IN
 ZIMBABWEAN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS."**

At the end of your research you will be requested to submit a copy of your findings to the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (Matobo District) so that it can be useful and of benefit to the Ministry.



S. Mazhale

**S. MAZHALE
 For: PROVINCIAL EDUCATION DIRECTOR- MATABELELAND SOUTH
 PROVINCE**



@MoPSEZ



<https://www.facebook.com/MoPSEducationGovZimbabwe>



<https://www.mopse.co.zw/>



<https://www.linkedin.com/company/ministry-of-primary-and-secondary-education-of-zimbabwe/>

VITA

Martin Madzivanzira was born in 1986 in Musami, Murewa, about 70km northwest of Harare, Zimbabwe, where he was raised in the Christian faith. His formative years in this region of Zimbabwe shaped his commitment to religious education and his vocation as a Christian educator.

Martin began his formal theological training at Wadzanai National Catechetical Centre in August 2008, where he pursued a Diploma in Religious Studies, completing the program in June 2010. He was subsequently admitted to the University of Zimbabwe in August 2010 to pursue a Bachelor of Arts Honours degree, graduating in July 2012. He continued his studies at the same institution, completing a Master of Arts in Religious Studies in July 2014. These graduate programs deepened his scholarly grounding in theology, interfaith relations, and religious education.

In September 2022, Martin enrolled at the Catholic Theological Union at Chicago, Illinois, where he pursued a Certificate in Pastoral Studies, which he completed in May 2023. He subsequently commenced the Ecumenical Doctor of Ministry program at the same institution in August 2023, concentrating in Educating for Witness. He successfully completed all requirements for the degree and graduated in May 2026. His doctoral research focused on synodality within the context of Zimbabwean Catholic secondary schools, examining pathways for participatory student engagement in ecclesial life.

Since 2012, Martin has served as an educator within the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education of Zimbabwe, teaching Christian Education and History of World Regions. In this capacity, he has been a consistent advocate for interfaith dialogue, participatory learning, and liturgical engagement among students. He currently serves at Minda High School, where he

brings over a decade of experience in religious education and catechesis to his professional practice.

His primary scholarly interests lie in synodality, the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, *Ubuntu* philosophy, and the inculturation of faith within African educational contexts. He is a member of the Catholic Theological Union alumni community (Class of 2026).

END