

OCTOBER 18, 2019

THE CHURCH IS NOT A DEMOCRACY

CHILTON WILLIAMSON, JR.



https://3m7ajlsrzj92lfd1hu16hu7vc-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/amazon_polly_89464.mp3?version=1571373859

The Amazon synod touches directly or indirectly on many issues that will have repercussions far beyond the river basin. Among them is democracy and its relationship to the Church of Rome.

The current Vatican regime claims that the principle of “synodality” in ecclesiastical government is both legitimate and valuable. Bishops are in closer contact with the laity than the Eternal City is; they are therefore better able to represent the man in the pew. Or so the argument goes.

I don’t know whether there is evidence for this position or not. What’s certain is that the Church was founded by Christ as a *spiritual* institution, not a political one. Naturally, every major institution must engage in a political relationship

with the powers and principalities of this world. And, having grown so vast in her 2000-year history, she has inevitably been compelled to develop a bureaucracy of her own.

Yet, during all those centuries, it occurred to no one—not the ecclesiastical dignitaries, nor the parish priests, nor the parishes themselves—that laymen should have a share in the political life of the Church. No one, that is, until the Protestants rebelled against Rome.

Then it occurred again, about five centuries later, to a few Catholics at the Second Vatican Council. It was they who pursued the agenda of *aggiornamento*, or reconciling the Church with modernity—particularly the democratic ideal.

George Weigel, in his new book *The Irony of Modern Catholic History*, makes as good a case for this “updating” as I think can be made. I’m very far from having his grasp on the history of the Church and on Catholic theology, so I will neither argue with his conclusions nor attempt to develop them further. All I will say, as a convert and a layman, is that I believe the Council is guilty of a grave error: it introduced into the life of the Church certain principles adopted from secular, democratic politics and aesthetic preferences reflecting popular culture. The aesthetic accommodation is what the *Novus Ordo* is all about; the political one gave us extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, lay lectors, and parish councils—and now, as we’ve seen, Pope Francis’s promotion of ecclesiastical government by synod. Little wonder, perhaps, that the modern synod of bishops was designed by Pope St. Paul VI.

The Roman Catholic Church never was, nor is she, nor will she ever be a democratic institution. The Magisterium cannot be entrusted to democratic procedures. Christ was not elected the Church’s head: he is her founder and master.

Attempts by liberal clerics to apply a democratic patina to her workings will never satisfy the radical aspirations of those vulgarians and know-nothings who seek to refashion our Holy Mother in the image of democratic government and democratic culture. Doing so will only encourage their destructive efforts while grievously offending traditional Catholics, who understand the Church’s hierarchical nature

and embrace her glorious aesthetic heritage. Further democratization, such as Francis hints at, risks what the theologian Fr. Thomas Weinandy (as quoted in *Crisis* last week by Julia Meloni) calls “internal papal schism.”

For 200 years, historians and political philosophers have emphasized the danger of extending democratic principles and political models to non-political institutions. This natural limitation distresses many democratically-minded people, though it’s not really obvious why. Self-government, as the American founders and Alexis de Tocqueville knew, is a wearisome and often painful responsibility.

Why should we carry such temporal burdens with us into church? Set them down awhile. At Mass and in prayer, we’re free from time’s laws and the world’s impositions. Allow yourself to kneel and give thanks to God and his Holy Family for so great a blessing.



By [Chilton Williamson, Jr.](#)

Chilton Williamson, Jr. is a senior contributor at Crisis. He is the former editor of Chronicles magazine, and his column "Prejudices" appears in The Spectator USA. He is the author of After Tocqueville (ISI, 2012) and the novel Jerusalem, Jerusalem! (Chronicles Press, 2017). For over a decade he served as literary editor, then senior editor, at National Review.