

Fr. Perozich comments —

In the diocese of San Diego's previous synod while I still was an active pastor, the two representatives that I sent as well as one other from another parish, complained to me after the synod was over, that their comments were rejected by the synod leaders because "it was too late to include their reflections".

Why was it too late? Could it be that the synod results were written before the synod closed or even opened?

Synods might have some value, but not for directing the action of the church..

I fear they are processes used to manipulate and to change the church's teachings to be in conformity with worldly ideas rather than with the message of God and His holy gospel.

ALWAYS beware of slogans and euphemisms. "The voice of the people is the voice of God." Really?

The voice of God should be voiced by His people.

The authors are clear in these 3 articles, so that the average pew Catholic need not have formal theological education to understand the cautions presented here.

**- The Catholic Thing - <https://www.thecatholicthing.org> -
The Promise and Peril of Synods**

Francis X. Maier

Thursday, December 9, 2021

Steven Covey, the late, great effectiveness guru, liked to remind his readers to "begin with the end in mind." I suspect he purloined the idea from Ignatius Loyola. But it's still good advice. So I'll start by asking, candidly and upfront, whether the forthcoming 2023 synod on synodality might be a really *bad* idea. Not bad as in "wicked." The intent of Pope Francis is clearly admirable: listening to and walking with each other; broadening the faithful's consultation and involvement in the life of the Church; and (presumably) sharing more authority with local and regional bishops' synods closer to the specific needs of their people.

Yet such a synod may still, arguably, be unwise. I'll explain. And I'll do it by borrowing from people with direct experience.

Local diocesan synods, like the ones designed to prepare for the 2023 synod in Rome, can be healthy exercises in dialogue and discernment. But in practice, they're often a very mixed bag. They demand a serious involvement of time, personnel, and financial resources. They're prone to bureaucratic manipulation and dominant personalities. And their outcomes are often ambiguous or dead on arrival.

When Charles Chaput took over as archbishop of Philadelphia in 2011, virtually *none* of the recommendations from Philadelphia's diocesan synod of 2000 had been pursued. In the words of one senior pastor and veteran of the process, the synod experience had been a "dud." And its outcomes began to molder as soon as the synod closed.

According to another veteran local pastor,

I found the 2000 synod to be more of an administrative process rather than one that tried to discern better ways or best practices to proclaim the Gospel and strengthen the life of the Church in Philadelphia. The synod articulated six or eight "goals" that were broad and not really attainable. For example, you could read the goal for Catholic education and water it down to "saving Catholic schools." That's a bit of an exaggeration, but it has a kernel of truth. I did some reading at the time about the previous archdiocesan synod convened by Cardinal Dougherty in 1934. The goals and results of that synod I found to be pastorally concrete and doable . . . [In contrast,] nothing was done to implement the goals of the 2000 synod.

And from another senior pastor involved in the process:

[The 2000 Philadelphia] synod could have done a great deal of good, but a lot of manipulation went on. There are many good fruits that can come from a general consultation with the Church's members, but it needs to be wisely guided. I've read extensively about the proposed 2023 synod on synodality. If handled right, the Church could identify a number of areas which need the light of the Gospel. But it seems to me that the current synod plans seem to invest all truth in the corporate "People of God." There's rarely any mention of Tradition, Magisterium, Canon Law. . .and the proper role of the hierarchy. In dioceses where saner heads reign, I think that their local phase of the synod will be quite good. Elsewhere, I predict that the outcomes will be like a lot of recent, and unhappy, chapters of religious orders.

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Of course, most places are not like Philadelphia, and other bishops can point to successful diocesan synods in the past. But the potential for manipulation is not an imaginary problem. Nor is it limited to random local dioceses.

Archbishop Charles Chaput served a term on the permanent council of the Synod of Bishops, and attended three different synods as a delegate over a 21-year period. He described the experience in his 2021 book, *Things Worth Dying For: Thoughts on a Life Worth Living* ^[1],

The first synod I attended, back in 1997, focused on the Americas. I was one of the delegates directly appointed by Pope John Paul II. It was a great experience, my first real participation internationally in service to the universal Church. It was there that I met then-Archbishop Jorge Bergoglio from Buenos Aires. He was an impressive man and made good contributions to the discussion. We sat near each other because we'd been appointed archbishops at about the same time. The synod led me to seek out a much closer relationship with the churches in Mexico and Latin America, and Latino Catholics in the United States.

The other two synods – in 2015 on the family, and 2018 on young people and the faith – were very different. I was a delegate from the U.S. Catholic bishops' conference and much more experienced, so I probably sensed the political dynamics of a synod more clearly.

I was very disappointed by what I saw as manipulation of the synods and their agendas by elements within and outside the Church. Instead of being occasions for an honest exchange of ideas, both synods were dominated by efforts to re-engineer the direction of the Church. Synods should be places where people speak freely and are anxious to listen to others. But both were exercises of power rather than efforts to arrive honestly at a common position through listening and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Neither of those synods encouraged or gratified me. In fact, I was deeply scandalized by the political maneuvering that took place in both.

So much for the potential of synodal manipulation. It needn't happen. . .but it too often can.

The other and more fundamental reason to question the prudence of a 2023 “synod on synodality” is simply a matter of common sense. In a time of confusion and fragmentation – the German Church is its poster child, but hardly the only example – the very last thing Catholics need is more of the same, inadvertently confirmed by the Holy See.

The Petrine ministry carries with it a duty to foster unity and clarity of belief. Pope Francis surely understands this. Whether the theme and architecture of the 2023 synod serve that ministry is still to be seen.

***Image:** *The Council of Florence* by Michael Wolgemut and Wilhelm Pleydenwurff, c. 1490 [The illustration appears in the *Nuremberg Chronicle*, an illustrated world history written by Hartmann Schedel]

You may also enjoy:

Fr. Gerald E. Murray's *Wither the Synod on Synods?* ^[2]

Robert Royal's *Seriously Synodal?* ^[3]

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Whither the Synod on Synods?

Fr. Gerald E. Murray

Wednesday, October 20, 2021

The two-year Synod on Synodality began last weekend. A Preparatory Document ^[1] (PD) and a Handbook ^[2] (H) have been issued by the office of the Synod of Bishops. The three guiding themes of the Synod are Communion, Mission, and Participation. And the predominant image of this whole experience is the Church on a “journey.”

The general reaction, so far, by Catholics who have heard about it is confusion and even headshaking. Synodality is a word with no clear meaning to most people – even to those who know that the Synod of Bishops is:

a group of Bishops selected from different parts of the world, who meet together at specified times to promote the close relationship between the Roman Pontiff and the Bishops. These bishops, by their counsel, assist the Roman Pontiff in the defense and development of faith and morals and in

the preservation and strengthening of ecclesiastical discipline. They also consider questions concerning the mission of the Church in the world. (canon 342)

Synodality would thus be the experience of bishops meeting together to offer the pope advice on how to better safeguard and faithfully transmit the Church's doctrine on faith and morals in the hope of advancing the Church's mission to proclaim the truth of the Gospel to the world. To do this effectively, ecclesiastical discipline needs to be maintained and fostered. Where necessary, disobedience and willful flouting of that discipline must be called out and corrected.

A proper synodality thus describes a hierarchical consultative process for assisting the pope in his role as the chief shepherd of the Church. Bishops are the primary, but not the sole, actors. They should consult with the faithful to identify doctrinal, moral, and disciplinary concerns that are hindering the Church's mission, which is the salvation of souls. They are to bring those concerns to the pope's attention and suggest appropriate remedies.

Every diocese, the Preparatory Document (PD) specifies, should conduct broad consultations with the diocesan faithful: "The synthesis that each particular Church will elaborate at the end of this work of listening and discernment will constitute its contribution to the journey of the universal Church." (PD 32)

It's noteworthy that these diocesan contributions must be quite limited in length and thus necessarily restricted in offering any developed Biblical or doctrinal reflection: "To make the subsequent phases of the journey easier and more sustainable, it is important to condense the fruits of prayer and reflection into a maximum of ten pages. If necessary to contextualize and explain them better, other texts can be attached to support or integrate them." (PD 32)

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Considering all the effort, it's surprising that the Handbook itself calls into question the importance of these diocesan documents, the documents produced in a later phase by the national Bishops Conferences and, still later, by regional international Bishops Conferences for submission to the Synod Office in Rome: "We recall that the purpose of the Synod, and

therefore of this consultation, is not to produce documents, but [quoting Pope Francis at the 2018 Youth Synod] ‘to plant dreams, draw forth prophecies and visions, allow hope to flourish, inspire trust, bind up wounds, weave together relationships, awaken a dawn of hope, learn from one another and create a bright resourcefulness that will enlighten minds, warm hearts, give strength to our hands.’”(PD 32)

The Synod on Synodality is thus more focused on process, not product. In this scenario, it is not clear why documents need to be produced at all, if the purpose is simply to share various experiences.

Despite the denials, it’s clear that the purpose of the Synod on Synodality is to produce a final document that will give suggestions to the pope about how to deal with serious questions in the life of the Church. And this is where the peril lies in launching a two-year process that is heavy in vague, undefined and emotive categories that highlight people’s lived experience, and rather light in the Scriptural and doctrinal treasures of the Church, which are under tremendous threat from determined opponents outside of the Church, and reckless innovators within the Church.

Those who want to subject the Catholic Faith to a radically new interpretation that essentially resembles secularized liberal Protestantism will seize upon this process. They will claim that their dreams and hopes and visions are the pathways the Church should journey down in search of a Church that will be relevant to the modern world, claiming that this is the only way to respond to the signs of the times.

They will no doubt cite the Synod Handbook’s worrying indication: “This journey together will call on us to renew our mentalities and our ecclesial structures in order to live out God’s call for the Church amid the present signs of the times. Listening to the entire People of God will help the Church to make pastoral decisions that correspond as closely as possible to God’s will.”

Vox populi, vox Dei (“The voice of the people is the voice of God), a mass of material as interpreted by the Synod Committee?

Isn’t the mission of the Church’s hierarchy to teach God’s people the truths of the Faith, especially in times such as ours when religious ignorance and doctrinal confusion have produced a situation in which a Pew survey

revealed that 70 percent of Catholics do not believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist? Is it the job of the hierarchy to change ecclesial structures, whatever that means? Which mentalities need renewal, and what new mentalities need to be adopted?

It will be a disaster for the Church if the next two years consist largely in a prolonged questioning of the Church's doctrines by dissident Catholics who have ceased to believe in many of the truths taught in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. That is what is happening in Germany right now. May the universal Church be spared such a fate.

***Image:** *Pilgrims arriving in Rome for the first Jubilee in 1300*, from Giovanni Sercambi's "Chronicles," around 1400 [Archivio di Stato, Lucca, Italy]

You may also enjoy:

Robert Royal's *Who Needs Synodality?* ^[3]

Russell Shaw's *Concerning "Synodality"* ^[4]

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**- The Catholic Thing - <https://www.thecatholicthing.org> -
Seriously, Synodal?**

Robert Royal

Thursday, October 14, 2021

One of the reasons the current push for synodality worries many people is that it doesn't seem to have any clear goal – or limits. The official documents and pronouncements seem to hope that the synodal process itself, in its stated ambition to consult widely with people from all over the world (with what success or authenticity remains to be seen), will somehow, against the odds, come up with the program of what the Church now needs globally.

It's not cynical, merely realistic, to believe that a process like this cannot possibly speak to the different situations of the Church in Europe and America, Africa and Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. And therefore, that if you wanted to bet on the outcome, you'd probably do best to place your money on the Synod Committee ultimately resolving things largely in the direction that Germany is currently going, though not quite so radically. Meanwhile, serious members of the Church who are open to helpful changes – of which more below – find the vague but massive “restructuring” now being proposed as quite far distant from their daily needs.

The lack of clear direction has plagued the recent run of synods. The two on the family were supposed to deal with *The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and Contemporary World* ^[1] but wound up embroiled in things like the value of gay relationships and Communion for the divorced and remarried. The Synod on Youth – take it from someone who was there for the plodding whole of it – did engage some young people by bringing them to Rome, but never really found its footing. Young Catholics, obviously, are in much the same position today as they were before the event. And the Amazon Synod, which would have been better if it had been held in or near the Amazon and dealt with regional problems regionally, looked like it was meant to be a stalking horse for more general changes in the Church. But besides the outrages of Pachamama, any honest observer would have to say that the Church in Rome and in the Amazon have not been much changed by the synodal *agons* of those embattled weeks.

Which is why this deliberately open process also may not change very much, though it will be good to keep an eye on all sorts of actors aiming to do considerable mischief.

Striking a very different synodal note, a trustworthy and thoughtful friend remarked earlier this week that, like Fran Maier in his column today, he's finding it easy to be angry these days, much harder to look for something else to say and do while Rome fiddles. As he put it:

When I think of my day-to-day responsibilities as the father of a large family, I find that I cannot get an inexpensive Catholic education for my children that is sound in doctrine. I cannot find a parish where the liturgy is celebrated with reverence and the preaching is edifying. I cannot find good examples among the bishops of the kind of person I want my children to be.

The hierarchy itself seems completely captured by secular trends and authorities. What we need are steadiness and the patient application of John Paul II's plan for the new millennium, not an ever-shifting agenda and the revival of the absolute worst constructions of the "spirit of Vatican II."

Reliable observers in Rome say that the last week or so has been a kind of whirlwind, a whole year's activity in a single week as one put it. But it would be difficult to say that this flurry of activity speaks to the kind of down-to-earth, everyday concerns my friend expressed. The Church is a vast entity, bigger even in a variety of ways than China or India. It addresses all sorts of people and many of the world's problems of necessity. But its main mission is evangelizing. And when it evangelizes, it does so best in concrete circumstance like affordable and authentic Catholic education, beautiful and inspiring worship, ongoing formation at the diocesan and parish level. In how many places within the Church's global presence can Catholics say that these fundamental, indispensable things are going on?

The formal name of the Synod on Synodality is *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission*. The Holy Father warned about the abstractions of intellectuals in his opening address to the synod this week. It's hard not to peruse the synod's own texts and not come to the conclusion that "communion, participation, and mission" are precisely the kind of airy abstractions that will not lead to the more personally engaged Church that the pope has elsewhere expressed a desire to promote.

Our constant friends "listening" and "dialogue" are prominent in the discussions at this stage as well. But this has been a constant drumbeat in the previous synods, which involved a far smaller and more manageable number of people. And the results of those sessions, usually quite divided, were then shaped by the synod committee in ways that could have been predicted before the process even started.

You can read the whole “Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality” here ^[2]. And if you’re a glutton for punishment you can give the more extensive “Preparatory Document” ^[3] a try. They both display the familiar mix of weak social science and vague ecclesiology that has lately marked deliberations in the Church. But you can’t help also noticing the artwork, which gives the whole the feel of a children’s book or the kind of “art” prevalent after Vatican II. For such a serious and ambitious initiative, and in a world vastly changed from the world of the mid-1960s, such painful throwbacks to a less than high point in recent Church history do not bode well for a renewed Church.

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[1] *The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and Contemporary World*: https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20141209_lineamenta-xiv-assembly_en.html

[2] whole “Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality” here: <https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/document/common/vademecum/Vademecum-EN-A4.pdf>

[3] Preparatory Document: <https://www.synod.va/en/news/preparatory-document.html>