

# *Liquid Catholicism* and the German Synodal Path

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February 16, 2022 George Weigel

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**Irme Stetter-Karp, president of the Central Committee of German Catholics and co-chair of the Synodal Path, and Bishop Franz-Josef Bode of Osnabrück, vice president of the German bishops' conference, attend a news conference at the start of the third Synodal Assembly in Frankfurt Feb. 3, 2022. (CNS photo/Julia Steinbrecht, KNA)**

Twenty years ago, during the Long Lent of 2002, I began using the term “**Catholic Lite**” to describe a project that

detached the Church from its foundations in Scripture and Tradition: a Catholicism that could not tell you with certainty what it believes or what makes for righteous living; a Church of open borders, unable or unwilling to define those ideas and actions by which full communion with the Mystical Body of Christ is broken.

The **Catholic Lite** project was typically promoted as a pastoral response to the cultural challenges of late modernity and postmodernity; late modernity and postmodernity responded, not with enthusiasm for dialogue, but with a barely stifled yawn.

I know of no instance in which the Catholic Lite project has led to a vibrant Catholicism, doing the work that Pope St. John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council set before the Church: the conversion and sanctification of the world. On the contrary, **Catholic Lite** has always led to ecclesiastical sclerosis. The Catholicism that is alive and vital today is a Catholicism that embraces the symphony of Catholic truth as the answer to the world's yearning for genuine human liberation and authentic human community: a Church of sinners that strives for Christian perfection.

The Catholicism that is dying, everywhere, is the Church of **Catholic Lite**.

I've learned the hard way, however, that the term "Catholic Lite" really doesn't translate well into other languages. For years, I imagined that the global ubiquity of Coca-Cola products would make the untranslated phrase "Catholic Lite" intelligible; ditto for the follow-on image I began to use, "Catholic Zero," as in "Catholic Lite inevitably leads to Catholic Zero." More fool I. I'll spare you the gory details, but some recent translations of my

work have been so cringe-inducing that I've changed images and now refer to "Liquid Catholicism:" a content-light Church that takes its cues from the surrounding culture and imagines itself primarily in the business of doing good works, in the world's understanding of "good works."

The aforementioned death throes of the **Catholic Lite** or **Liquid Catholicism** project are now on full display in the German "Synodal Path:" a multi-year process, dominated by Church bureaucrats and academics, that seems determined to reinvent the Catholic Church as a form of liberal Protestantism. Most recently, the Synodal Path decided to weaponize the Church's clerical sexual abuse crisis as one rationale for a wholesale surrender to the spirit of the age in matters of gender ideology and the ethics of human love.

It's important to grasp, however, that the Synodal Path's predictable cave-in on these "hot button" issues reflects a deeper apostasy that is expressed in two evangelically lethal notions.

The **first apostasy** holds, tacitly but unmistakably, that divine revelation in Scripture and Tradition is not binding over time. The Lord Jesus says that marriage is forever; the Synodal Path can change that. St. Paul and the entire biblical tradition teach that same-sex activity violates the divine plan for human love inscribed in our being created male and female; the Synodal Path can change that, because we postmoderns know better. Two thousand years of Catholic tradition, confirmed definitively by Pope St. John Paul II in 1994, teach that the Church is not authorized to ordain women to the diaconate, the priesthood, or the episcopate, because doing so would falsify Christ the High priest's spousal relationship to his Bride, the Church; the spirit of the age says that that's nonsense and the German Synodal Path

agrees with the Zeitgeist. Thus the first apostasy: history judges revelation; there are no stable reference points for Catholic self-understanding; we are in charge, not Christ the Lord.

The **second apostasy** teaches a false notion of freedom as “autonomy.” Authentic freedom is not “autonomy,” however. “Autonomy” is a three-year old willfully banging on a piano, which is not music, but noise (Mozart excepted). Authentic freedom is a musician who has mastered the disciplines of piano-playing (often through the drudgery of boring exercises), reading and performing a musical score (another form of rules), thereby creating beautiful music. As the Catholic Church understands it, **authentic freedom is doing the right thing for the right reason as a matter of moral habit (also known as “virtue”)**. Authentic freedom is not “choice,” or any other mindless mantra of the age. Freedom as willfulness is self-induced slavery. Authentic freedom is liberation through moral truth for goodness and beauty.

**Liquid Catholicism reigns supreme in the deliberations of the German Synodal Path. The result will not be evangelical renewal but a further abandonment of the Gospel.**

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George Weigel is Distinguished Senior Fellow of Washington's Ethics and Public Policy Center, where he holds the William E. Simon Chair in Catholic Studies. He is the author of over twenty books, including *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (1999), *The End and the Beginning: Pope John Paul II—The Victory of Freedom, the Last Years, the Legacy* (2010), and *The Irony of Modern Catholic History: How the Church Rediscovered Itself and Challenged the Modern World to Reform*. His most recent books are *The Next Pope: The Office of Peter and a Church in Mission* (2020), and *Not Forgotten: Elegies for, and Reminiscences of, a Diverse Cast of Characters, Most of Them Admirable* (Ignatius, 2021).