

Archbishop Chaput on the Synod: ‘The Only Worthy Agenda Is the One Given to Us by Jesus in the Gospels’

In a wide-ranging interview, the archbishop emeritus reacts to some of the latest news revolving around the ongoing synod reminding Catholics: ‘Church gatherings should be about proclaiming the Gospel and not about advancing a particular ideology or sociological analysis.’



Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia speaks to members of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Region III who gathered at Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls on Nov. 27, 2019, during their “ad Limina Apostolorum” visit. (photo: CNA / EWTN)

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*ACI Prensa interviewed **Archbishop Charles J. Chaput**, archbishop emeritus of Philadelphia, about the confusion and controversies that have arisen around the German bishops' Synodal Way. The North American archbishop, who has participated in numerous synods during three pontificates, including as one of the representatives of America at the 2015 Synod of Bishops on the Family, is a widely recognized authority on the matter.*

What's your reaction to recent pronouncements of the synod organizers who told continental assemblies not to "impose an agenda" on discussions?

The only worthy agenda for the synod is the one given to us by Jesus in the Gospels. The Church right now is a divided house, both the ecclesial left and right have agendas. **Church gatherings should be about proclaiming the Gospel and not about advancing a particular ideology or sociological analysis.**

The president of the German bishops' conference, Bishop Georg Bätzing, has said that his task is to bring "a worldwide process that is meant to renew the Church" and that "We [the Church] need convincing answers about how we can rediscover and proclaim the Gospel." This has been combined with a majority of German bishops and a German synodal path that advocate for the blessing of same-sex unions, reshaping the priesthood and diaconate, including the ordination of women, allowing open Communion with Protestants and those in irregular marriages, and other doctrinal changes. What is your reaction to these proposals as "convincing answers and proclamations of the Gospel?"

The Church has *always* given convincing answers. They're convincing because they're true; not always easy or welcome, but life-giving and

true. That's what explains the success of Christianity through time. Getting back to fundamentals is what will renew the Church — not answers that are convenient for the times, but violate Catholic belief.

Recently, U.S. Cardinal Robert McElroy echoed many of the same [German] ideas in the media, prompting a response from American Archbishop Samuel Aquila and African Cardinal Wilfred Napier, both of whom believed Cardinal McElroy missed Jesus' call to "Repent and believe in the Gospel." What's your reaction to the global criticism of these views?

Cardinal McElroy clearly and courageously wrote about his convictions. Unfortunately, many of his convictions are wrong and contrary to the faith of the Church. I'm surprised — and what's worse, many good people are confused and scandalized — that he hasn't been publicly corrected by the Holy See.

Latin America is currently 40% of the world's Catholic population, but has said very little on the topic of synodality. What do you make of the relative silence from Latin America regarding the Synod on Synodality?

It wouldn't be appropriate for me to comment; they know their pastoral circumstances much better than I do.

What encouragement would you give to your Latin American brother bishops during this synodal process?

I'd remind all bishops, not just my brothers in Latin America, that **our one unique responsibility as bishops is to proclaim and protect the apostolic tradition of the Church. We may or may not need to do that in new and creative ways; but on a foundational level, we need to protect the faith from distortion and pass it on to others, fully and effectively, as we received it.**

The sociological and political dimensions of the upcoming synod are strikingly similar to those found within liberation theology. The late Cardinal George Pell recently called the Synod on Synodality "neo-Marxist." What can the battles within Latin America about liberation theology teach the rest of the Church about the dangers of rejecting the paradox that Christians must seek first the kingdom of heaven?

It's important to separate the good from the bad in liberation theology, just as Benedict XVI did in the 1980s when he led the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger. The Church has a deep, preferential concern for the poor. The best of liberation theology captures that concern very powerfully. But as a school of thought, as well as in its practical application, it's been vulnerable to Marxist ideas and methods that feed on class hatred and focus on power. **Cardinal Pell saw a similar spirit of manipulation in certain aspects of the current synodal process.** But he'd been uneasy about such things earlier. We met together several times

during the 2015 Synod on the Family, for example. And even then he was **concerned about the synod's unusual degree of agenda manipulation — something I also saw firsthand.**

Secularization is a common theme in Latin America, Europe, and the U.S. Is secularism the Church's greatest challenge? What are other major dangers the Church faces, especially vis-a-vis the synodal process?

Secularization is one of those magic words that implies an inevitable social process. There's nothing inevitable about it. People choose it because it's the easy and materially rewarding path. We all struggle with a desire to imitate "the world." It's been a temptation since the devil offered to give the world to Jesus. It's especially tempting for leaders like bishops and priests in the Church, and politicians in the secular order. Catholic political leaders ignore or betray the faith all the time to please their constituencies and stay in power. Here in our own country we saw it just recently in the annual State of the Union speech, where a "Catholic" President Biden promised to support full access to abortion at any time. In the synodal process, the temptation will show up — and in some ways, has already shown up — in our trying to make peace with worldly behaviors and beliefs that directly contradict the teachings of Jesus and his Church.

In your opinion, what are the greatest areas of reform needed to renew the Church?

Us; all of us. We're the problem. Structures and policies are important, but people are decisive. In a sense, the focus of real Church reform is always the same: you and me. It's that simple, and also that difficult. No one really likes to change, because it's hard. And the essence of conversion is a sea change in the way we think and live. In its Hebrew root, "holy" doesn't mean "good," although holy people are always good. Holy means "different from" and "other than." Christians are meant to be different from and other than the ways of the world. So if we want to reform the Church, we first need to reform ourselves.

Throughout this process, many confusing proclamations are being made about the authentic way in which a Catholic follows Jesus. The Holy Father has at times stepped in and warned others not to follow the German way and chided that Germany "already has a great Protestant Church, but I don't want another one." How does an ordinary Catholic know they are living in the Truth and following the Way Jesus commanded them?

If you pray every day, read a little every day from the Word of God, and stay close to the sacraments, you're definitely on the Way. We need to learn how to ignore the noise and conflict in the world, at least for a few hours. They're distractions; invitations to confusion and anger. We're responsible for our own actions and the people we love. If we focus on doing those things well, we're living in the Truth.

Many of the questions raised by Cardinal McElroy and the German bishops revolve around what constitutes worthy reception of the Eucharist. Can you clarify the role of conscience in determining the reception of the Holy Eucharist? Can you clarify the importance of a worthy reception for the spiritual life and health of the Church?

None of us is ever worthy to receive the Eucharist but Jesus makes us worthy through baptism and confession. **Receiving Holy Communion demands that we first be in communion with Jesus, his Church and Catholic teaching. It's a lie to receive Holy Communion if we reject or ignore the teachings of Jesus and his Church.** The first role of our conscience is to keep us honest. And we're required — **if we're serious about our faith — to form our consciences according to the wisdom of the Church.** If we can't do that, then we should be honest enough to admit it, and not receive Holy Communion.

U.S. Cardinal Joseph Tobin has stated that this is about the process of “how we walk together” more than doctrinal outcomes. What is your reaction to this statement?

The central “process” in Christian life is the process of allowing ourselves to be formed by Jesus Christ and his Church. A process always has a purpose and content. Just “walking together” is not enough. Accompaniment is not enough. **We need to walk in the right direction, and arrive at the right destination.** A priest friend recently shared with me that the only time the Greek root-word for synodality appears in the New Testament comes in the passage where Mary and Joseph are in the caravan (*syn + hodos* = “together, journeying”) of Luke 2:41-45. Going home from Jerusalem, they can’t find Jesus among their traveling companions. So they reverse course until they find him. Likewise, **we need to ensure that Jesus is with us at the lead and center of our synodal walking together, and not some alien agenda that uses the Church for its own purposes, and leads us in the wrong direction.**