

Radical Inclusion Requires Radical Love

The Church needs the courage, and love, to be clear in inviting people to leave their sin. What Jesus offers is better than what the world offers the person in sin, and his grace and power is sufficient to free anyone from the slavery to sin.

[February 1, 2023 Archbishop Samuel J. Aquila](#)
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Detail from "Christ and the Rich Young Ruler" (1889) by Heinrich Hofmann (WikiCommons)

I have written of my concerns in the past with the German Synodal Process, as well as concerns with other bishops and cardinals and their take on the process. They essentially ignore the oft repeated words of Pope Francis, that in the synodal process there must be a deep listening to the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth and charity that keeps us firmly attached to Jesus Christ. **Pope Francis has made it clear that the synod on**

synodality is not about changing long standing Church teaching and is not a democratic or parliamentary process.

In a recent [article](#), my brother bishop, Cardinal Robert McElroy, laid out a vision of the church in the context of synodality calling for “radical inclusion”. According to His Eminence, the Church “contains structures and cultures of exclusion.” He then goes on to speak about categories of people who are systematically excluded from the life of the Church. He speaks about a need for “radical inclusion” that invites all the baptized to participate fully in the life of the Church regardless of his or her relationship with the Church and Jesus Christ.

There is much that could be addressed, but I would like to focus on **putting Jesus Christ first and the joy that flows from adhering to the Gospel**. Staying attached to Jesus Christ the “vine” is essential, for the Lord tells us, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5). Similarly, the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us, “Let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith. **For the sake of the joy that lay before him Jesus endured the cross...**” (Hb 12:1b–2 emphasis mine).

Cardinal McElroy’s reflection paints the Church as an institution that harms due to its incapacity to welcome everyone into full participation in the life of the Church. According to His Eminence, the Church categorically discriminates, but did not Jesus himself put demands on his disciples which distinguished them from those who did not respond to the radical and costly call of the Gospel?

Indeed, in the encounter with the rich young man (cf. Mk 10:17–22), Jesus demands radical discipleship from the young man, and he lets him refuse and walk away. Furthermore, **Jesus lays out the cost of discipleship as denying oneself, and even family, for the sake of the Gospel (cf. Lk 9:23–26; Mt 16:24–25; Lk 14:25–27)**. And, just as he was not received by everyone, he reminded his disciples as he sent them out if people did not receive the message of the Gospel to simply “shake the dust from your feet” (Mt 10:14), not wishing them ill but turning them over to the Lord.

Finally, many disciples left Jesus because of his teaching on the Bread of Life, (cf. Jn 6:66) and he goes even so far as to ask the apostles if they want to leave (cf. Jn 6:67). **Jesus never waters down his teaching, nor does he appeal to conscience; he gives testimony to the truth**

(cf. Jn 18:37). The call Jesus gives is radical, and it goes out to everyone, but is not received by everyone because of the cost of discipleship.

The presentation given by some bishops and cardinals sadly fails to preach the radicality of the Gospel and obscures the true eternal love of the Father for the sinner. Faith in Jesus Christ means a conversion of life that leads to internal peace and everlasting joy—a joy and peace no one can take away from the disciple. We must ponder in our hearts if the real reason for our empty pews is that we have not stayed attached to the vine. **Our dropping attendance may be a fulfillment of the promise of Jesus that if we do not stay attached to him, we will wither (cf. Jn 15:1–6).** Those Christian communities who have tried inclusion to the exclusion of sin only divide more and their pews are still empty.

I must admit that if I thought the way some of my brothers think, I would have left the Church long ago and joined another Christian community. As a college student I strayed away from the Church. The Catholic faith did not draw me, as my experience was that of confessors yelling at me or trying to talk me out of my sins. The truths of the faith, even the difficult ones, were not presented with charity.

It was only when I read the book in the late 1960's by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, titled *The Cost of Discipleship*, that I started my journey back to Christ and eventually the Catholic Church. I began to understand what the Eucharist is and what I had left behind. I wanted the true Body and Blood of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist and his mercy and forgiveness in Confession, and that brought me back to the living out of my faith. It was a call to leave the values of the world behind and **to have my heart and mind formed by Jesus** (cf. Rm 12:2). Bonhoeffer's distinction between "cheap grace" and "costly grace" is timely for us today.

Thankfully, **the Church I know does radically include the call to every human being in all cultures. Every walk of life—every person in every condition and situation—is invited into the loving embrace of Jesus and the Father, and holy mother Church. Our faith community invites all, no matter what label they've chosen, into our community of faith.**

But the Church doesn't stop there. She invites because she loves; and to love is to will the true good of the other. Only God's love can move us from all the confusing identities of the world, to see that we are not the ones who decide our identity. Rather the Gospel shows that through the Father's loving plan, each of us can become a beloved daughter or son of the Father, with our identity firmly rooted in Jesus'. **Through conversion, a**

disciple discovers that he or she is not god. God alone determines what is good and evil and, like Christ, the disciple seeks only the will of the Father.

The Church recognizes that someone who lives a particular way, whether it be in willing violation of natural law or some other moral category, is not in communion with the Church. As Pope Francis said so simply during an in-flight interview September 15, 2021: “This is not a penalty: you are outside. Communion is to unite the community.” This is not to condemn the person, but to recognize the truth of their situation and call their immortal soul to something greater.

One of the privileges I have experienced from the very beginning of my priesthood is the invitation to accompany men, women, and children through the pangs of conversion to the wonderful life of grace that is fed by the Eucharist. Yes, **the Eucharist is not for the perfect, but it is for those who are in communion. And it is not just spiritual food for all of us who have the need for regular confession, but it is also a sign of unity that belongs to those who are in a state of grace.**

The call of Christ to the woman caught in adultery (cf. John 8:11) is the same call Jesus makes to each of us. **We are included in his company, but we are also called to turn from sin. Inclusiveness does not and cannot mean that we remain in our sins.** This is because Jesus wants us to be happy.

The Holy Father during his weekly Angelus on January 22nd said that “our vices and our sins” are like “anchors that hold us at the shore and prevent us from setting sail...to stay with Jesus, therefore, requires the courage to leave, to set out...to leave what? Our vices and sins.” Yes, **we are to invite and include, but not at the expense of leaving others and ourselves mired in sin that separates us from God. The laws of God are laws of a loving Father so his children may live in his joy.** The Church needs the courage, and love, to be clear in inviting people to leave their sin. What Jesus offers is better than what the world offers the person in sin, and his grace and power is sufficient to free anyone from the slavery to sin.

Finally, His Eminence makes the frequent claim that **our conscience is our ultimate guide. In a certain sense this is true if, as the Catechism teaches very clearly, we first have a well-formed conscience.** Conscience is an act of the intellect in judging the morality of past, present, or future actions. The appeal to conscience is not

a “get out of jail” card, and it is very dangerous to imply as much. Rather, it is a judgment measured by reality.

Our ultimate guide is not conscience. It is truth! And as we know, Christ is the Truth (cf. Jn 14:6).

While Cardinal McElroy and I have very different visions of the state of the Church, no doubt we both desire happiness for all. His article is a reminder to me that **the Church must do more to preach Jesus Christ and the joy of the Gospel—the joy that awaits us after we turn from sin and conform our hearts and minds to Christ.** It is a joy under the weight of the cross, no doubt, but it is a joy the world cannot give. It comes from knowing we have become beloved daughters and sons of the Father, and that we are made in the image and likeness of the God who is love (cf. 1 John 4:8).

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