

Fr. Perozich comments —

When someone is trying to fool me, often I get that sense, yet sometimes do not have the language and debate skills to counter their nonsense.

When a bishop told me that my teaching was not Catholic, I was dumbfounded that someone elevated to be a Pastor for priests and laity would place his personal opinion over the truth of the church.

Among the techniques of converting people to falsehoods are constant repetition of the lie, attacking those who will not go along so as to silence and to convert them to the lie.

Multiplying words, word salads that make no sense, is another.

Introducing language that does not belong to a discipline, such as secular corporate terminology into theology to undermine the truth, is another.

Studied ambiguity is another, that is purposeful presentation of language that allows for multiple interpretations different from the established truth, particularly the interpretation (hermeneutic) by the one speaking in ambiguities.

“My” feelings and “my” experience are used to undermine universal truth delivered to us by God. Adam and Eve, you tried that. How did that work out for ya?

As I read more ambiguous statements based on feelings and experience, from those in the church who have been elevated to positions of authority to protect and promote the deposit of faith revealed by God and passed on in the Tradition of the church, I see how they are abandoning not only these, but me and other faithful Catholics as well.

John Grondelski offers CLARITY to their ambiguity in particular where he says that the “hermeneutic”, that is the interpretation, of experience needs cannot be experience itself, rather the truth given by God.

- Experience needs to be interpreted. It needs a “hermeneutic” to ascertain whether that experience is leading in the direction of weal or woe. To make experience the hermeneutic of experience is something like a puppy chasing its tail: it gets wound up in circles but it’s a very closed system.*

So, what is going to be your “hermeneutic”?

Catholics should answer: the received teaching of the Church. That’s because of what the Church is: the continued presence of God in Christ through the Holy Spirit with man until

the end of time. The Church is not just (or even first of all) an institution. She is first and foremost the vehicle of making God's saving work present here and now.

Appeals to “experience” obscure the ambiguity of “experience”

Clarity on this matter is vital if the Synod is to accomplish a theological task and not just be a pressure group to advance an agenda.

April 21, 2023 [John M. Grondelski, Ph.D.](#)

Print



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Back when I was an undergraduate student, my introduction to systematic theology was taught by a nun who was big on “experience.” I was hoping for an introduction to basic dogmatic theology but wound up with a methodology that constantly kept coming back to “experience” as the way to assess “good” theology.

I mention it because something of that mentality seems to lurk in the background of key advocates of the Synod on Synodality. Even when proposals advanced in the “synodal process” appear to clash with received Catholic teaching, they appear inclined to prolong the “dialogue” in the name of examining “lived experience.” The bolder among them even suggest that this “lived experience” may be revealing the Holy Spirit’s will for our times, a new kind of ecclesiology whose harmonization with received Catholic teaching is, again, disputable.

Experience, nevertheless, has a certain following. In times when reason is dismissed as “power” and “privilege,” the concreteness of experience appeals over “head trips” of intellectual cogitation, particularly when such thinking may be abstract and involved.

That said, appeals to “experience” struck me 40 years ago as wrongheaded, a position I maintain today. I think that those appeals get the problem exactly backwards. The problem lies in the ambiguity of experience.

Experience is neither good nor bad: it *is*. It provides us raw data for analysis. **But it is a logical fallacy to smuggle in the assumption that experience has anything to say about its value or its truth. It doesn’t.**

Take, for example, the experience of sin. It’s a common experience, practically universal. With the exception of two people in all of human history, it’s the story of every man and woman who’s walked this planet.

With that kind of commonality and frequency, one might be tempted to assume that experience tells us something of its normality. Statistically, it’s very normal. But, as the Church repeats, morality—rightness or wrongness—is not based on statistics. **Morally, the experience of sin is not normal at all. Despite its incidence, it violates who the human being is and should become.** So the Church has to preach against something that is a practically universal human experience.

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That is not something new, a task begun in the run up to the Synod on Synodality, or even Vatican II. It has been the Church’s mission since the Apostles burst out of the Upper Room the first Pentecost to teach all nations and baptize them. And since Baptism is first and foremost a sacrament of conversion, that message has been one of questioning the norms of this world in the light of Christ’s teaching carried forward in His Church (see Mt 28:19-20).

Because the Church’s mission has been ongoing, her teaching needs to be interpreted in continuity because, otherwise, one would have to say the Spirit lied in the past but now corrects the Church’s path—a plainly heretical (and blasphemous) assertion. This is precisely what Benedict XVI was getting at in discussing **the “hermeneutic of continuity”** (and contrasting it to the “hermeneutic of discontinuity”), a notion hardly his invention. Continuity of doctrinal and moral development is to be found in St. John Henry Newman, St. Vincent of Lérins, and even St. Paul. Already in I Corinthians, Paul makes clear that his affirmation of the Resurrection comes not first from his “experience” on the Road to Damascus but from the testimonies, in rank order, of Peter, the Twelve, and other disciples (15:3-8).

There is your hermeneutic for evaluating experience: “what I have received.” That hermeneutic allows the Christian to sift the wheat from the chaff, identifying which experience illumines the Christian message and which does not.

That hermeneutic does not allow, for example, for the selective dismantling of received Catholic moral teaching as evidenced in some of the documents of the German *Synodaler Weg*.

Proponents of experience, however, are likely at this point to advance the claim that not all teaching enjoys the same status, that some matters are more “central” to the faith than others and that—of course—**those they are willing to jettison are on the sidelines.**

I’ve **previously addressed this subterfuge**, which I’ve argued is a misunderstanding of the “hierarchy of truths” as regards Catholic teaching. Rather than imagining Catholic teaching as a basket of discrete items

positioned at different places on a football field, **a true understanding of the “hierarchy of truths” recognizes the interdependence and interwovenness of those teachings, notes in a whole that together constitute a unified symphony and not loose threads one can pull at.**

That one needs to engage in such separation and parsing of Catholic theology in order to extract certain elements without pretending the entire edifice will collapse is alien to how previous generations of theologians did their work. From whence have their moderns “received” their deconstructionist hermeneutic?

One could suggest that this approach to experience is arrayed in support of a certain agenda, particularly in the area of sex. Human experience also shows that people regularly take short cuts to maximize a profit, make money, or gain advantages over competitors. Yet it is doubtful that the advocates of experience would tell us that the company that dumps its waste in the river, as many have done before, is acting according to experience. No, they would demand that the experience be evaluated through a moral lens, which includes the received moral teaching about stewardship for the earth and developed in contemporary concerns for our “common home.” The point is: raw experience doesn’t count.

Except, perhaps, when it comes to sex.

Suddenly, in matters related to the Sixth Commandment, we have a new hermeneutic. Suddenly, the “experience” of contemporaries at least “calls into question” what the Church has taught, even though the variations on a sexual theme have been far less differentiated over history than, say, economic choices. No, in the area of sex—where the immediacy of sensory experience and erotic pleasure are particularly intense—we are to believe that “experience” can somehow norm the Church’s teaching. And the principle that *nemo est iudex in causa sua* (“**nobody’s a judge of his own case**”) **is now atypically suspended in the same of “sexual minorities” and others with vested interests in the moral judgment’s outcome.** That this special hermeneutic is the work of the Holy Spirit enlightening our age, rather than the appeal of the flesh (in its pejorative sense) against which Scripture repeatedly counsels.

Again, this appeal to experience appears in some novel interpretation of ecclesial teaching, though it originally showed itself in the effort to sideline post-*Humanae vitae* sexual ethics: appeals to the “*sensus fidelium*.” According to this argument, the “sense of the faithful” cannot err, so that their “experience” and “intuitions” should serve as ecclesial correctives.

Where to start?

The *sensus fidelium* [sense of the faithful], as St. Pope John Paul II was wont to observe, presupposes the *sensus fidei* [sense of the faith]. So, again, **what is claimed as the “insight” of the “faithful” must be tested against what is the “faith.” The faithful—even bishops—can be wrong:** consider the size of the Arian party after Nicaea, or the saints (Hilary of Poitiers, Athanasius) who suffered because of it. So, once again, what is claimed to be the “sense of the faithful” needs a hermeneutical key to interpret it.

And, in appealing to received teaching, we are reminded that the *sensus fidelium* is not 400 Catholics gathered in a Frankfurt hall or 40 in a San Diego church basement. **The “faithful” are not just here and now: we are part of a Church that extends through time and space, so that what today’s “faithful” claim as their “sensus” needs to be assessed against what the faithful of all times and places have said is *and isn’t* Catholic faith and morals.**

In any event, we come back to where we started: experience provides us with a *datum* of what is that is in no way morally (or truthfully) normative. **That *datum* requires a key—a hermeneutic—to interpret and assess it. What should be clear is that this *datum* is judged by and not the judge of what the Church “has received.”**

Clarity on this matter is vital if the Synod is to accomplish a theological task and not just be a pressure group to advance an agenda. And that clarity should not be expected just to dawn in Rome this fall while pretending that the “listenings” and the “dialogues” and the “syntheses” are somehow privileged perspectives rather than mere *data* that already needs to be critically sifted and, indeed, sometimes rejected.

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