

What Is a “Welcoming” Church?

A church which confuses diagnosis with cure, dissembling about the latter so as not to address the former, shouldn't “welcome” anybody. It should close its doors to avoid spiritual malpractice.

[April 13, 2023 John M. Grondelski, Ph.D.](#)

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Going to and from work, I pass a number of Protestant churches whose street-side signage declares—usually in bright colors and in various size fonts—“all are welcome here.” I **recently wrote about** how three on my path home outdo each other to proclaim their woke welcomes. I contrasted it to the signboard outside my parish, which simply lists times for Mass and confessions.

All those signs have been around for a while, though they proliferated during the previous presidential administration (as if national politics should have anything to do with a church's openness). They've remained, although their faithful's counterpart—lawn signs declaring the residents' profession of faith, “in this house, we believe ...”—seem to be on the wane.

While it is tempting to dismiss all this as so much secular virtue signaling we shouldn't, for two reasons: this secular virtue signaling is being proclaimed by religious institutions and there's no lack of people who want to bring it to the Catholic Church. Each of those phenomena deserves comment.

What is the point of “church”?

First, however, let's ask ourselves: what is the *raison d'être* of a Christian church?

A Christian church is an institution there to proclaim the Good News of redemption in Jesus Christ. That is its purpose, its sole reason for existence. That purpose is unique: its mission is its own and not institutionally transferrable.

One senses that the current obsession with “welcoming” is a bad reincarnation of Thomas Anthony Harris’s 1967 book, *I’m OK, You’re OK*. Churches seem to be tripping over themselves to send that OK message. The only problem is: **it’s not the Christian message.**

***Pace* Dr. Harris, I’m *not* OK, and neither are you. We are both flawed as a result of original sin, whose baneful effects are compounded by our own personal sins. Because neither of us is OK, both of us need redemption.**

“I’m OK, You’re OK” thinking leeches from one school of psychoanalysis to a jejune view of life at-large. A year after Harris’s book hit *The New York Times*’ best sellers list, Karl Menninger published in his 1973 book, *Whatever Became of Sin?* It was hardly coincidence: I’m OK-ism as a worldview minimized not the problem but rather the discussion of what makes us *not* OK, i.e., sin. **Counselors replaced confessors as the new Lambs of God taking away the sin of the world**, with many clergymen—particularly on the Protestant side of the aisle—shifting their ministerial focus from the latter to the former.

Such cheap grace dovetailed well with secular Enlightenment thought which, from Rousseau forward, sought to convince people that they were basically OK but for the baleful consequences of social “repression,” particularly in the sexual area. Such thinking obviously leads in a straight line to isolated individualism and letting a thousand libertine lifestyles bloom.

(Mary Eberstadt documents the human tragedy that followed in her 2013 book [*Adam and Eve, after the Pill*](#) and her new [*Adam*](#)

and Eve after the Pill, Revisited, but those are separate stories from ours. Suffice it to say that Jean-Jacques shed his repression by using his lover and leaving from one to five of his children—it's not clear how many he had—in a foundling home.)

Distinguishing sinners from sin

What followed was the eclipse of speaking about sin and redemption, particularly in the Protestant mainline, though it echoed in Catholic circles, too. **In its place, the church was to be a place of “welcome.”**

Now, if by “welcome,” that meant a church was supposed to welcome sinners without judging *them*, that's true. That's also what churches were always supposed to do and generally did. After all, sinners are the only kind of potential congregants any church has, at least in the roughly 2,000 years since the Assumption of the Virgin.

But welcoming sinners without judging *them* is distinct from welcome sin without judging *it*. That critical conceptual distinction came wrongly to be conflated, the upshot being that the church became impotent to perform its mission, i.e., to judge sin so as to offer redemption (see John 16:8).

Jesus's first command at the beginning of His public ministry is **“repent”** (Mk 1:15). *μετανοείτε*—“repent.” *Metanoiēte* literally means “to change one's mind” or “to change one's way of thinking.” Jesus's public ministry was preceded by John the Baptist's, who likewise preached repentance. It followed His baptism, which is a sign of His solidarity with sinners and by His temptations in the desert. Even in John's Gospel, Jesus's first welcome to John's two inquiring disciples—“come and see!” (John 1:39)—**cannot be abstracted from that call to repentance**, because the two disciples are *John's* disciples and Jesus had just praised John for testifying to His sin-forgiving mission.

There will be critics who undoubtedly brand this line-of-thought as all too “negative” and “unwelcoming.” Who wants to inquire about, much less join, a group whose message is such a downer?

Let’s be honest. ***A church is not just another “group” and, religious illiteracy notwithstanding, people who poke their head into a church are generally not unaware of the Christian message about sin and redemption, at least in its broad strokes. And make no mistake about it: that message is Gospel, εὐαγγέλιον, “good news.” A diagnosis of illness is not good news. The possibility of its cure is.***

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Likewise, despite the external bravado about “well-formed individual conscience” that insists two thousand years of Christian tradition might be wrong but it right, it’s likely that **most of those inquirers poking their head into the church’s door viscerally do so because they recognize “I’m not OK.”** A true church would offer diagnosis and cure—of whatever sin, sexual and/or otherwise—that ails the inquirer.

When, however, a church displaces the primacy of that mission with the “welcome” of affiliation to a social community, it has become an ersatz church, trading a counterfeit εὐαγγέλιον for the Lord’s own word to “change your way of thinking.” What is especially paradoxical is when Protestants participate in this Gospel bait-and-switch, because it essentially renders them Pelagian: if “I’m OK” as I am and the Church’s mission is instead to “welcome me,” then I hardly need Jesus Christ as my “personal Lord and Savior.” There’s nothing I need saving from. In a sense, it’s all my good works: I just need to keep on doing and being what I do and am.

Which is why I recognized the eloquence of my parish's signboard. A special "welcome" is redundant. **This is a Catholic church, meaning it is for all peoples of all times. It is specifically for all sinners, because there's nobody else signing up, at least in the Church Militant. And it tells inquirers when this church does the things that are necessary to redemption: forgiving sins and offering Communion based on that shared forgiveness of sins.**

Authentic inclusion and real discipleship

It is this insight that Cardinal Robert McElroy in his various appeals for greater "inclusion" in the Catholic Church misses. McElroy repeatedly attacks the vision just sketched out as too "sin-centric" (opining that he especially thinks it is fixated on sexual sins). Instead, he argues for a "wider tent" that starts from inclusive participation derived from Baptism, and that this suffices for admission to the Eucharist.

Let's follow McElroy's logic. Baptism is the sacrament of inclusion in the Church. It entitles one to participation in the Church's sacramental life.

Christ Himself instructed His apostles to proclaim his Gospel to the ends of the earth. He enjoined them in His pre-Ascension mandate to them to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And, behold, I am with you always, until the end of the world" (Mt 28:19-20).

Baptism itself is, however, the primordial sacrament of conversion: its purpose is to turn a man from sin and to God. Paul is clear that baptism is a death to the old man and the putting on of a new man in Christ (Rom 6:6-7), a crucifixion of the old man (Gal 2:20). Paul's is hardly the message of "take me as I am" or even "take me as you made me," aware

that all creation has since Eden until the Parousia groans under sinful bondage (Rm 8:21).

But let's also consider the baptismal mandate in Matthew carefully.

Jesus commands the making of "disciples" by baptism. Disciples necessarily live by a discipline: there are no autonomous "disciples." **Discipleship implies submission to a discipline which, in the case of baptism as sacrament of conversion, requires "changing one's mind" about one's "way, the truth, and the life" to adopt Him who is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (J 14:6), i.e., renouncing a worldly vision of living in favor of Christ's.**

But Matthew's Christ does not make that "Christ life" one of one's own design or of alleged inspiration by some "spirit." **Christ's criterion is to teach "them to observe all that I have commanded you," a teaching presence that did not cease a few minutes later when "a cloud hid Him from their sight" (Acts 1:9).** The same sentence makes clear Christ's teaching presence in the Church remains uninterrupted: "I am with you always, until the end of the world."

Synodal secularism?

This vision is profoundly at variance with the theological caricature promoted by various synodal participants, who imagine some inchoate "Christ life" among a particular swath of uniquely Spirit-enlightened "disciples," from whose illumination the teaching Church has somehow apparently been consistently shielded or – more contemptuously because of its underlying prideful temerity – she has consistently denied. This is the ecclesiology that must flow from this vision. That it is alien to any the Church has ever recognized should be apparent.

Indeed, one must ask, given this ecclesiastical version of the baptized's right (ostensibly under the "Spirit's" tutelage) to "define one's own concept of existence, of meaning ... and of the mystery of human life" while calling it Catholic, why anybody should join the Church. If, after all, their "Spirit"-inspired vision of Catholicism is so utterly at odds with the teaching Church's, why be or want to be part of an institution so completely mistaken and perhaps contumaciously resistant to the "Spirit"?

Against this (at least German) synodal parody, baptism as the Church understands it makes a disciple who has "changed his mind" about his former way of life, renouncing it in favor of a different one which the ecclesial community has taught and continues to teach. Only on the basis of that fundamental "life swap" does baptism entitle one to participation in ecclesial life.

But because, as the Church has always taught, Christians *can lose their baptismal innocence* by postbaptismal grave sin—sexual or otherwise—the sacrament of Penance is as necessary to salvation in such circumstances after baptism as Baptism had been prior to its reception.

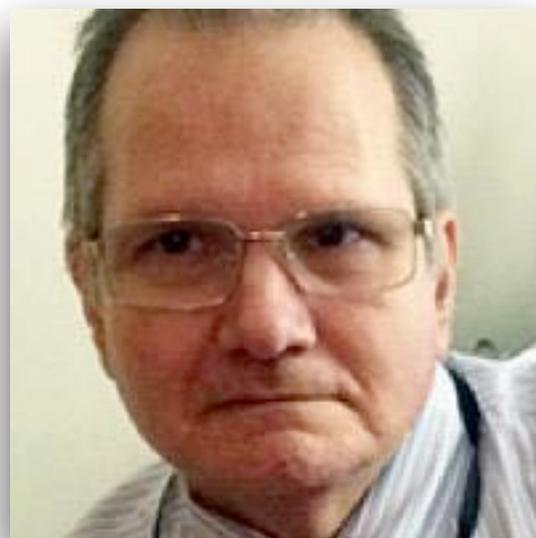
McElroy's radical Eucharistic access, therefore, is unrooted in Catholic tradition. **The primary purpose of the Eucharist is *not* healing. That is the work of Baptism and Penance. The Eucharist presupposes the common graced life of discipleship those two other sacraments establish or restore.** The same principle is true, *congruo congruis referendo*, of ecclesial participation and inclusion.

A final observation: one who looks at the vision of "inclusive discipleship" being pushed in various synodal circles might note not just its dissimilarities with preceding visions of Christian discipleship but its uncanny resemblance to contemporary secular nostrums. **A distinguishing feature of Catholic spirituality**

has always been its prophetic, counter-cultural witness, qualities lacking in “inclusive discipleship’s” rather flat succumbing to immanence, arguably of the secular kind.

In the run up to this fall’s Synod, “welcoming inclusion” is likely to sound like a drumbeat to silence criticism and bludgeon ecclesial dogma and discipline, i.e., discipleship. Refuting such forged Catholicism requires going back clearly to the Church’s true mission of welcome, based on the truth of the post-lapsarian human condition, for which a welcoming Church offers, as her Good News, authentic diagnosis and cure.

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