

Rome “synodals” while the world burns

The inattention to the obvious elephant in the living room has led to the almost comical spectacle of a self-referential Church spending time and treasure on the completely irrelevant topic of ecclesial structures.

September 4, 2024 Larry Chapp



Infographic from the Continental Stage of the Synod. (Image: https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/infographic_continental/EN-Infographic-Continental-Stage-Synod-2023.png)

In March 2013, Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio gave a **short speech** to the assembled Cardinals before the conclave wherein he described his vision for a Church that was far less “self-referential”. He instead sought a Church serious about reading the signs of the times and responding to them with pastoral creativity and fervor.

But what has become of this vision over eleven years later?

The Synod on Synodality, one of the capstone projects of this papacy, is a very self-referential set of processes now three years in the making. Furthermore, this exercise is not only an exercise in self-referentiality, but it is also a distraction from the true pastoral needs of our time. It is a wasted moment when there are so few moments that can afford to be so wasted in the current cultural crisis.

And what is that crisis? In a word, it is the crisis of unbelief, which is the proprietary watermark of all modern, Western cultures.

One of the most obvious aspects of modern disbelief is that it is, shockingly, real disbelief. In other words, we need to take seriously the reason why more and more of our contemporaries in Western culture do not accept the Christian Gospel is because they do not intellectually agree with its fundamental narrative about reality. Which is really important because it should be the most obvious of facts—that disbelief is actually disbelief—but apparently isn’t.

Whether in an explicit intellectual manner or more unthematic and implied ways, **modern people have developed a sense of what constitutes the “really real” that runs directly counter to the intellectual content of the Christian description of the really real.** The brute fact is that **most modern people in our culture do not think the Christian narrative of existence is true**, and that its thought world seems antiquated insofar as it is a set of answers to

questions that nobody is even asking anymore. Categories fundamental to even a rudimentary understanding of Christianity now seem to most of our Western contemporaries as the faint radio echoes of a long-dead star. **Sin and redemption, vicarious atonement, salvation and damnation, and the necessity of a highly particular set of sacraments for “proper” reconciliation with an aggrieved God, all run counter to the therapeutic deism and religious egalitarianism of our era.**

It just all seems so foreign and alien, if not utterly alienating.

But **at its root**, what is fundamentally incommensurate with the Christian Faith **is our culture’s reductionistic, mechanistic, and naturalistic materialism, which stands in direct opposition to the Christian message of the reality and importance of the supernatural.** As a dear priest friend of mine (a highly intelligent pastor of 35 years) recently told me: **“Nobody seems to really believe anything anymore. And that includes the clergy.”**

This inattention to the obvious elephant in the living room has led to the almost comical spectacle of a self-referential Church spending time and treasure on the completely irrelevant topic of ecclesial structures. Our culture is in the midst of reorganizing the social ordo around the downstream effects of two centuries of an atheistic and nihilistic “death of God” set of principles—once merely implicit and now increasingly explicit—and **the Catholic Church has decided that the most pressing issue is her internal bureaucratic apparatus.** Apparently, if we can reform the curia, establish new “ministries” housed in ersatz diocesan “offices of accompaniment”, and “listen” better to the secular, liberal wing of the Church (those poor neglected “peripheries” who have endured such horrible oppression) then we can reverse our cultural descent into the abyss of meaninglessness. That we can staunch

the ecclesial bleeding from the severed artery of belief with the external compress called “synodality”.

In reality, I am giving the current ecclesial leaders who are responsible for this turn to the ecclesial navel too much credit. Because, in order to be able to appreciate the true nature of the cultural crisis at hand, one has to first be an intellectually serious person who actually thinks about such things on a deep level. **But these folks are not intellectually serious people, as evidenced by the fact that they never get around to asking truly foundational questions about the constitutive cultural nature of modern disbelief. They never get around to wondering as well if this same cultural crisis has infected the Church and whether, therefore, if our “synodal listening” is sufficiently equipped to adjudicate between tissue and tumor.**

For example, look no further for evidence of such **incredible superficiality than the head of the German bishop’s conference, Bishop Georg Bätzing**, who, in response to statistics showing that 1.7 million German Catholics have officially left the Church since 2019, **stated** this only proves the answer to this crisis is to double down on the liberal reforms of the “synodal way”. Never mind that the **Protestant denominations in Germany—all of which have already had all of these “reforms” for decades now—are also hemorrhaging members by the hundreds of thousands every year.** Never mind any of this. For Bishop Bätzing, the reason why people are leaving the Church is that the Church is not sufficiently conformed to the dominant values of modern German secularity.

But it isn’t just the German Church as **we see this same intellectual obtuseness among the loudest cheerleaders for the Synod on Synodality. We have spent years now on this self-referential ecclesial Edsel which, when over, will go down as one of the most historically paradigmatic**

examples of fiddling while Rome burns. Very few ordinary Catholics care about it, if they even know about it, and even fewer understand what it is in the first place. Even the leading liberal Catholics who are its biggest champions would walk away from it in a heartbeat if the Pope simply ruled via papal fiat tomorrow morning that we will now ordain women, bless gay marriages, and add the rainbow flag officially as a new liturgical color.

Therefore, **all the linguistic legerdemain surrounding the various synodal publications put out over the past few years is simply a smokescreen to mask the fact that what is at stake is a clash of incommensurate worldviews. This explosion of vacuous ecclesial verbiage about “listening” and “inclusion” and “dialogue” is another sign of a putrefied and stupefied Church incapable of truly understanding the ocean of disbelief and practical atheism that is the true environment in which we are swimming, both inside of and outside of the Church.**

Nor is this something new that has caught us somehow unawares. As early as the 1830s, a still Anglican John Henry Newman was warning how modernity represents an entirely new challenge since it presents a constitutively different symbology of the really real, which has created **a fundamental change in human consciousness as such away from belief in the supernatural and toward reductive materialism.** Even a literary figure such as George Bernanos, in 1936, could place on the lips of the young Cure of Abricourt in *The Diary of a Country Priest* the following statement: “My parish is bored stiff; no other word for it. ... We can see them eaten up by boredom, and we can’t do anything about it.”

No less a light than **a young Joseph Ratzinger wrote, in a 1958 bombshell article, that the modern Church is a Church made up of pagans who still think themselves Christian.** Henri de Lubac, in *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*

(1944), made the claim that the modern world and the Church are in a **clash of anthropologies leading to a clash of competing forms of humanism—one secular and nihilistic, and the other Christocentric and Catholic—which the Church needs to recognize as the true “sign of our times” and to respond with a strong prophetic voice.**

This is the only proper hermeneutic for understanding the prophetic purposes behind Vatican II and the deeply Christocentric theological anthropology guiding its most important deliberations. Not without reason did one of the Council’s bishops, the young Karol Wojtyla, once he became pope, devote his first encyclical (**Redemptor Hominis**) to this very challenge of proposing **the Church’s Christocentric theological anthropology as the sign of contradiction to the world’s anthropology of materialistic unbelief.**

Something is fundamentally wrong and contrary to Vatican II about a “synodal process” that is self-referentially focused on the bureaucratic and external apparatus of the Church as, apparently, the most pressing and important issue of our time. There is something fundamentally out of focus about a set of meetings the main point of which is about how to have even more meetings, or about committees designed to show how to design proper committees, or flowcharts showing us how to make flowcharts, and about listening sessions that are about how to organize even more listening sessions.

Anyone who has ever worked at a real job in the real world knows such **“processes” are the stuff of office nightmares.** Moreover, **they are deceptively totalitarian, with little bearing on real conversation.** They are, in fact, a simulacrum of a real dialogue **designed to create the illusion of**

discourse, with curated chatter while sitting at round tables with a “facilitator” commissar.

Yet, we are now told that all of this self-referential synodal chatter is the true meaning of Vatican II. People ask why I am writing so much on this topic of late. This is why. Because **there is an attempt afoot, analogous to what happened in the years 1965-78, to take control of the ecclesial narrative and to propose a revisionist account of the past 60 years, wherein Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI were the enemies of Vatican II and Pope Francis is (finally!) implementing the Council in his synodal way.**

But the reality is the opposite and that, it seems to me, should matter. **The previous two popes understood the crisis of unbelief that has the Western world in its grips.** They understood this **de facto atheism had invaded the marrow of the Church as well.** They understood that what is at stake is not arcane theological points of interest only to specialists, but the deep truth about God, reality, history, and what it means to be a human being. They understood that we live in a cultural hegemony of meaninglessness that teeters over the abyss of anomic randomness that sees only power and the pleasure principle in play.

And they understood (since they were there) what it was that Vatican II was proposing, as an antidote, in its theological anthropology. Along these lines, the many travels of John Paul were not exercises, as his critics claim, of a celebrity papacy basking in the glow of ultramontane adulation. They were the missionary efforts of an evangelizing pope who sought to use his office to further the message that, **“In reality, it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear” (Gaudium et Spes 22).**

Pope Benedict XVI, though traveling less, left us with a **body of theological writings** making the same claim. **A Church that has lost sight of the fact of who Christ is—and that only**

he can save us—is a Church that has lost her nerve and its purpose. The Church exists to make saints and to thereby breathe fire into her sacramental equations. **Only such a Church—a Christologically grounded missionary Church of evangelical fire—can reignite the passion of the prophets, who alone can “see” what others do not and who alone therefore re-propose the Christ once again into our unbelieving world.**

Indeed, even to those in the Church who are unbelieving. **And such an enterprise is the exact opposite of the self-referential Church of an alleged synodal listening, which is a listening apparently geared toward a hearing that does not hear and a seeing that does not see.**

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