

The Sins of the Synod

A recent document from the Vatican outlines a penitential celebration that will be part of the opening of the latest stage in the now exhausting exercise of the Synod on Synodality.

September 26, 2024 Jayd Henricks



Synod on Synodality delegates in small groups listen to Pope Francis' guidance on October 4, 2023. / Credit: Daniel Ibañez/CNA

A friend recently sent me a [document](#) from the Vatican that at first I thought was a parody of the Synod on Synodality. It was too silly to be serious, so I thought. By now, however, I should know better. It was not a parody. The letterhead from the General Secretary of the Synod and the Diocese of Rome is official, and the document is hosted on a Vatican URL.

The document outlines a penitential celebration that will be part of the opening of the latest stage in the now exhausting exercise of the Synod on Synodality. **The celebration, presided over by Pope Francis, “is intended to direct the work of the Synod towards the beginning of a new way of being Church.”** A goal of the celebration is that there might be the experience of “feeling pain and even shame” for our sins and perhaps the sins of others. It closes with the admonition that **“the request for forgiveness is the first step of a faith-filled and missionary credibility that must be re-established.” (One wonders when the missionary credibility was lost.)**

Others have written about the theme frequently present in the Synodal efforts, and included again in this Synodal document, of **“a new way of being Church.” This theme is a headscratcher. What exactly is “a new way of being Church”? Is it something other than what the Holy Spirit established 2,000 years ago?** If so, what are we to do with the traditional way of “being Church”? And what is “being Church” in the first place? It sounds like a slogan from a focus group designed to include everyone’s input while not really providing a definition of anything. **The synodal leaders would do well to define what “a new way of being Church” means. If they can’t, then it seems they should remove that language from future documents.**

And as for “feeling pain and even shame” for our sins, that seems to be something more appropriate for the sanctuary of a confessional, spiritual direction, or even counseling than for a liturgical celebration. What if we don’t feel pain or shame for our sin, but we know we have sinned and seek reconciliation? What if the response to the sin of others is anger? Should the goal be shame rather than anger? I’m genuinely curious what the synodal leaders mean by all of this.

These ideas, which you should read for yourself, lead up to the announcement that the penitential celebration will name sins

which are to be confessed, implying that these are the greatest sins of our day and keep us from “a new way of being Church.” It is a list of seven sins, all of which are very general in their description (which is not how sins are properly confessed, or so I was catechized). Among those named:

- Sin of using doctrine as stones to be hurled
- Sin against synodality / lack of listening, communion, and participation of all

This is where the document becomes a parody of itself. “**Sin of using doctrine as stones to be hurled**”? **What in the names of Saints Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure is that?** Who is using doctrine as stones to be hurled? It seems they have people in mind. Is it the catechist who assigns The Catechism of the Catholic Church for reading? Is it the continent of bishops that rejected a Vatican document, which by popular reading sanctions sin? Is it a bishop who, for the good of souls under his authority, denies Communion to a public official who is creating grave scandal? Is it the parent who teaches his or her children the Ten Commandments?

I, for one, have examined my conscience on this and do not have to confess this sin, and I suspect there are not any synodal delegates (who will partake in this penitential celebration), who need to confess such a sin. **Perhaps there is a need to confess the failure to uphold Church teaching (which is another description of Church doctrine). By almost any standard, that seems to be the much more serious problem today. Doctrine is not a bad thing. In fact, it is a great gift of the Church for the faithful.** Sure, it can be pastorally misused, but how often does that happen? What is exponentially more common is dismissing or being ambiguous about Church teaching in a way that is spiritually dangerous; one might even say eternally dangerous. That seems worth confessing.

A recurring theme that comes from this Vatican is the implication that Church teaching is not in itself pastoral, as if the truth is not for the good of the human person. Yes, of course, Church teaching can be used in a way that is pastorally insensitive or ineffective, but that is a critique of the method not the teaching. **All truth, to borrow a line from Scripture, is “profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16).** Church teaching is not something to be minimized or dismissed, but affirmed so we may live in the truth of Christ, so that we might be happy. **This is a fundamental tenant [tenet] of our faith that is being lost these days.**

And then there is the “Sin against synodality / lack of listening, communion, and participation of all.” Again, the parody is thick.

We still are not clear what “synodality” is, so how can we repent of sinning against it? Maybe they mean the lack of synod delegates and synod leadership properly listening to the faithful when, for example, the Vatican’s communications office deletes a [Vatican online poll](#) where **88% respond in the negative to the question: “Do you believe that synodality as a path of conversion and reform can enhance the mission and participation of all the baptized?”** I am not sure it needs to be confessed, but I leave that to the conscience of whoever deleted the poll.

And, of course, there is the obvious way in which **the Holy See fails to listen to those who are critical of the Synodal Way, or who prefer the traditional Mass, or who express concerns about the confusion emanating from the Vatican these days.** If we want to be a “listening” Church, then it would be good if that were modeled by those who

support a model of “a Church that wants to walk together,” as the letter opens.

Following this list of sins, the letter notes that “the Holy Father will address, on behalf of all the faithful, the request for forgiveness to God and to the sisters and brothers of all humanity.” Here the General Secretary for the Synod moves from silliness to, well, incorrect theology. In the Catholic sacramental economy, we cannot seek forgiveness for another person. We can pray that the other might repent, but asking for forgiveness is something different and not incidental. Maybe the letter intended something else, but words mean things, and the Vatican, of all entities, should be very careful about its use of words.

I call all of this a parody of the synodal way but, while it is amusing, it is also very serious. This sort of thing makes the Church look silly. **It distracts from the real good of teaching the faith with a clarity and a gravitas with which it deserves. It undermines the authority of the Holy Father and Bishops, under whose mantle this is all happening, by making the work of the Church an unserious affair.** It also fails to reveal the beauty of the faith through the saints and other holy men and women who witness to the indescribable beauty of the Catholic tradition, the Scriptures, and the eschatological vision to which Christ gave himself for the Church and the faithful.

What we need now is not jargon that is unclear and open to ridicule, but a clarity of teaching and a seriousness that is fitting for the Gospel. It is possible.

A penitential rite prior to the start of the synodal meetings seems like a good thing. We all need the grace of clean hearts to better hear the Holy Spirit. **What we don’t need is a quasi-sacramental celebration that uses the rites of the Church to advance an agenda that has ideological undertones to it.**

We are not a Church that needs to be reformed with a new identity fueled by a process that invites confusion. What we need now and always is to be renewed by the life of Christ, who calls us to live in his truth. When we take this call seriously, the world will take the faith seriously.

(Editor's note: This essay was [published originally](#) on the "What We Need Now" site and is republished here with kind permission of the author.)

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