

The Vatican synod was about the meaning of church

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Amid conflicting and confusing headlines about the Vatican synod in October, a major issue was lost. What's happening within Roman Catholicism is a fundamental discussion of ecclesiology. Despite the fact that Catholic theology itself cannot be reduced to progressive or conservative labels, there are indeed progressive and conservative Catholics disagreeing on what it means to be church. That foundational disagreement underlies every debate about sexuality, family life, and divorce and remarriage.

Progressive Catholics (full disclosure: here I stand) tend to have a decentralized, collegial notion of church. Allegiance is to a community expressed imperfectly in a church that, many Catholics forget, is a human institution of divine origin designed to disappear when the kingdom comes. This conception is key to Pope Francis—a Jesuit imbued with the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola and his deeply-insightful psychological sense that incremental discernment both individually and as a group produces good decisions. He asked the synod participants to speak openly and freely (“Let no one say: ‘This you cannot say’”), and to journey together as a community of faith.

The church as the people of God is a heritage Catholics lost in the 16th century. Ancient and medieval Christians had a sense of themselves as part of Christ's mystical body, but Reformation Catholicism restricted the “body of Christ” to sacramental theology. The Council of Trent emphasized transubstantiation—the lasting and real presence of Christ in the Eucharist—against Protestant conceptions of consubstantiation or memorial instead of sacrifice. A casualty of that emphasis was the ecclesiology of God's people as the body of Christ, which was recovered in the 20th-century renewing theologies of *ressourcement* and *nouvelle théologie* that bore fruit in Vatican II's *aggiornamento*.

Conservative Catholics have an allegiance to a more fixed, institutional, and even authoritarian ecclesiology. Theirs is a faith expressed in submission of will and obedience, but one wonders if it is also based in a lack of faith that God's people can

handle a church that is messy and bumpy precisely because it is collaborative and acknowledges the grayness of real life. Certainly some cardinals, archbishops, and bishops seem nervous and even offended at being challenged by their fellow prelates as well as laypeople—some of whom have an understanding of doctrinal and certainly pastoral theology more sophisticated than the bishops' and who refuse to be treated like children. One American bishop described the Vatican synod as "rather Protestant" for voting on doctrinal and pastoral matters. But these are complex matters, many ordained and unordained Catholics are saying, and they will not stand for edicts brooking no discussion that reveal themselves to be heartless or no deeper than a puddle.

And this is where Catholic chutzpah comes in: having enjoyed a Roman echo chamber for nearly 40 years that supported an authoritarian ecclesiology, conservatives are balking now that an inclusive ecclesiology is regaining traction. Progressives declare themselves at least bemused and sometimes outraged: when they made statements challenging the hierarchical ecclesiology of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, conservatives labeled them dissenters. When conservatives speak out against Francis in similar or even harsher language—some call for outright resistance and threaten schism as a true remnant—progressives are surprised to find that dissent is now permitted, even a duty. The very amnesty enabling conservatives to disagree now was denied to progressives then. One Catholic's dissent has become another Catholic's defense of the faith.

As Francis said at the synod's conclusion, all Catholics will find a shared truth if they seek a middle way. He warned against the "hostile inflexibility" of letter-of-the-law rigorists professing certitude—"the so-called . . . traditionalists and . . . intellectuals," as he put it. In the next breath, he also warned against a laxism of "deceptive mercy [that] binds the wounds without first curing them and treating them" emanating from "the so-called progressives and liberals." Finding common ground is a lesson that Catholics still need to learn if they are to remain a church with room for everyone in the family.

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