Opinion



Bishops attend a Mass for the opening of a synod in St. Peter's Square, at the Vatican, on Oct. 3, 2018. (AP/Alessandra Tarantino)



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It is time to stop using the term "Catholic Church" as a synonym for "Catholic hierarchy."

We all do it. "The church teaches such and such." "The church lobbied against gay marriage." "The church failed to protect children." "The church is homophobic and sexist." "The church is authoritarian." "I hate the church."

The word "church" has multiple meanings. One theologian counted more than a dozen different ways "church" was used in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, referring to everything from a building to the Mystical Body of Christ.

"Church" is the word we use to translate the Greek word "ekklesia," which originally had the meaning of an assembly called together by a secular authority.

In the New Testament, the term is used more than 100 times — to refer to Christians assembled for the Eucharist, to a local congregation (such as the church at Corinth) or to all the people of God united as a body with Christ as its head.

The leaders of the community were not "the church," but the apostles, bishops, presbyters and elders.

Language matters.

I remember in the 1980s taking a tour of the House of Commons in London. The tour guide pointed to a plaque on the wall in honor of a minister "who was killed by the Irish Catholics." Not the IRA, not the Provos, not the terrorists, but the Irish Catholics.

Today we do the same thing when we say, "Muslims are killing Christians."

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Saying that the Catholic Church did not protect children is just as wrong. It was the bishops. It was the hierarchy.

We should not blame the the people of God for the sins of the hierarchy. In many other churches, the people have some say in selecting their leadership and therefore have some responsibility for their hierarchy's actions. Not so in the Catholic Church, where new leaders are chosen by current leaders.

If the hierarchy had been open with the laity about the sex abuse crisis, if the bishops had listened to the people, we would not be in the mess we are today.

Using the term "church" for "hierarchy" or "bishops" is sloppy writing, and I must plead guilty.

I confess that in the last few months, I have written: "everyone knows the church's position"; "The church's attitude toward LGBT members, clerical sex abuse, warfare, poverty, migration, human trafficking and corruption"; "the church's teaching on the inherent differences between men and women"; "the church's traditional approach of trying to cram its teaching and programs down the throats of the young"; "the crisis has severely undermined the church's credibility to speak to the young"; "the church needs to listen to the young and respond to their spiritual needs."

Confession is good for the soul and good for writing. I will probably fail again in the future, but we should always pause before using the word "church" to ask ourselves whether there is a better, more exact word we can use.

[Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese is a columnist for Religion News Service and author of *Inside the Vatican: The Politics and Organization of the Catholic Church*.]

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