Opinion
Vatican



Bishop Robert McElroy of San Diego celebrates a Mass in this 2018 file photo. (CNS/David Maung)



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It was the best of our church. It was the worst of our church. It was a time for evangelization and a time for churlish retrenchment. It was a time for looking out. It was a time for looking in. It was the spirit of the Gospel and it was the demon of self-pity. It was the age of Francis. It was the age of Pio Nono.

It was last Thursday.

About midday, I was pleased that NCR published the text of a speech given by San Diego Bishop Robert McElroy at St. Mary's University in San Antonio. Asked to address how the church in this country should move forward after the bitter return of the sexual abuse issue, McElroy began by recalling his participation in the synod of the Amazon last month. Turning to the situation of the church in this country, he said, "My suggestion would be to embrace the type of synodal pathway that the church in the Amazon has been undergoing — one filled with deep and broad consultation, the willingness to accept arduous choices, the search for renewal and reform at every level, and unswerving faith in the constancy of God's presence in the community."

McElroy identified four ecclesial characteristics that emerged from the Amazon synodal process that could serve as a template for the renewal of the church in this country: a missionary church; a co-responsible and participatory church; a welcoming church; and, a church of harmony and dialogue. He developed each of these four hallmarks in turn.

People praise McElroy for his intellect, and this speech showed why he is indeed one of the intellectual leaders of the U.S. hierarchy. But, I am continually struck by the deep spirituality that informs his pastoral awareness, as displayed in these sentences, discussing the need to be a welcoming church:

> "*If we are to build a more welcoming church in the United States, the searing issue of judgmentalism must be faced. There is no sin that Jesus condemns in the gospels more often than that of judgmentalism. Probably, this results from Jesus' recognition that this is a sin that virtually all of us*

> *fall into easily and frequently. It is a mystery of the human soul why men so often find satisfaction in pointing to the sins, rather than the goodness in others. It is a mystery of the human soul why we feel better about ourselves because someone else has failed.*"

Often, the call to be a welcoming church is quickly drowned in banal, sentimental bromides. But, McElroy's treatment has an Augustinian flare for exploring and sharing spiritual insights as well as intellectual ones.

His indictment of clericalism is one of the finest I have read:

> "*The issue of clericalism stands as a rupture within the life of the church in the United States today. It is a poison that protects abusers of children from detection and justice. It is a cultural pattern in parish life that permits the mistreatment of lay men and women and excuses words and actions that have no place within a Christian community. It distorts effective patterns of decision making in ecclesial communities at all levels. It warps the souls of priests and bishops, and alienates them from Christ.*"

Comprehensive and searing. His discussion of the need to better recognize the gifts of that half of the world's population who are women is similarly forthright. If I had a criticism, it is that his hope that synodality might heal the divisions within the church in the U.S. is unduly optimistic. I agree that it is worth trying and that it is a better approach than any other, but I fear the divisions within the church are too great and we likely will witness a schism in the years ahead, the only question being its scope.

Thursday afternoon, journalists received a different kind of text in their email inbox, a statement issued by James Rogers, the chief communications officer at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. It was a four paragraph rebuttal of a section of Austen Ivereigh's recently published book in which he details the opposition to Pope Francis among the leadership of the conference and, specifically, their effort last year to force the Vatican into adopting policies that the conference leaders knew, or should have known, the Vatican would not approve. The statement as a whole epitomized the "bunker mentality" McElroy had decried in his talk. It was worthy of Pope Pius IX.

The statement also betrayed the petulance of the culture warrior class of bishops and staff who run the conference currently.

> "Austen Ivereigh's new book, Wounded Shepherd, perpetuates an unfortunate and inaccurate myth that the Holy Father finds resistance among the leadership and staff of the U.S. Bishops Conference," the statement opens. "The author disparages the General Secretary and a consultant to the Committee on Canonical Affairs particularly by suggesting they drew up documents in October that were then deliberately excluded from Rome. This is false and misleading."

Poor Msgr. Brian Bransfield, the general secretary, and Msgr. Ronny Jenkins, the consultant and former general secretary. Their feelings were hurt. It took this crowd weeks to issue a statement condemning the separation of immigrant children from their parents by the Trump administration, but disparage the general secretary and they post a statement the same day. Pathetic.

Setting aside the thin-skinned tone and content of the statement, the decision to issue it was, simply put, bone-headed. What did it achieve except to sell a couple more thousand books for Ivereigh? Why recall the humiliation of last year's meeting when the conference president, Cardinal Daniel DiNardo, had to inform the body of bishops that the Holy See had demanded they not proceed to vote on their proposals for confronting clergy sex abuse? It was obvious last year that in the conference leadership's discussions with Rome in advance of that November plenary, Vatican officials had been flashing yellow lights, and the leadership either did not see them or chose to ignore them. Incompetent or truculent, you be the judge.

One of the principal tasks of leading the conference is to conduct the bishops' business with Rome. The leadership of the conference failed miserably last year in doing that effectively, and ended up with egg on their face. Now, a year later, their incompetence shines through again, calling attention to the book that indicts their failures, attention the book had not yet received on its own. Good job. I hope Ivereigh sends Bransfield and Jenkins flowers for the increase in book sales, and his publisher should post the statement at Amazon.

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This week, the conference will elect a new president and vice president. It is all but certain that the bishops will elect Archbishop José Gomez as the new president of the U.S. bishops' conference. He should begin the search for new staff leadership at once. Bransfield must go. Rogers, the communications officer whose job it was to throw his body in front of this trainwreck, should go. I could name others. Like Ko-Ko in Gilbert and Sullivan's "The Mikado," "I've got a little list. … I'm sure they'll not be missed."

The good and the bad. It is the human condition. We hope that in the life of the church, the good might shine a little more and the bad a little less, but that is a hope that has been dashed throughout history. Rarely, however, do you encounter the best of the church and the worst on the same day as we did last Thursday. What a day. What a church!

[Michael Sean Winters covers the nexus of religion and politics for NCR.]

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