News
Guest Voices
A priest kneels in front of the altar of an empty Holy Apostles Catholic Church in London Nov.

A priest kneels in front of the altar of an empty Holy Apostles Catholic Church in London Nov. 18, 2020. (CNS/Courtesy of Conference of Catholic Bishops of England & Wales/Marcin Mazur)

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With the culmination of the Root and Branch Inclusive Synod in Bristol less than a month away, Sept. 5-12, there are early indications that the so-called "Bristol Text" will be both deeply reflective and challenging to the current bishops' position.

The text will include brief, accessible statements on liturgical ministry, diversity, moral theology, and authority, backed by papers giving it historical and theological depth.

Four international teams of distinguished theologians, jurists and thinkers, both lay and religious, have been meeting to consider the results of the synod's year-long "journey of discernment."

Sources close to the process suggest that the Bristol Text will propose a radical shift away from a church that enshrines its teaching in inflexible laws, towards one that guides and enables the people of God to reflect for itself.

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Rather than maintaining the laity in a state of spiritual and moral infancy, the text will advocate a church that educates and assists all the people of God to grow in spiritual maturity, able to resolve moral issues in the light of their own prayerful and informed experience, following the example of Christ.

If these suggestions prove accurate, the Bristol Text will encourage a new relationship between clergy and laity.

It will restate the accepted theological fact that the magisterium belongs not to the few but to all, and that a clerical hierarchy that claims a monopoly of judgment is not only counter to the teaching of the Gospels but in fact of very recent origin.

The importance of such a text would be that it could be put into action straightaway. It would immediately liberate ordinary parishioners from fearful subservience to bishops and parish clergy and at once support direct lay action and education.

Above all, such a text would offer the church a resolution to its most pressing current conundrum: how to make its teaching useful in widely differing periods and contexts.

Instead of sclerotic inflexibility and the resulting casuistry, that can discover a loophole for a lapsed prime minister but not a practicing parishioner to remarry, the church will have the opportunity to guide and advise thoughtfully in the light of the love of Christ.

A worshiper is pictured in a file photo holding a rosary during Mass at St. Mary's Cathedral in

A worshiper is pictured in a file photo holding a rosary during Mass at St. Mary's Cathedral in Edinburgh, Scotland. (CNS/Reuters/David Moir)

Contradictory responses

The church would no longer have to ban loving same-sex relationships in country A simply because it would be misunderstood in the entirely different circumstances of country B.

The days would be over when the church finds itself shockingly obliged for (recent) historical reasons to rule that it is more serious a sin to ordain a woman than sexually to abuse a child.

Insiders within the Root and Branch synod suggest that private approaches to a number of English bishops and Vatican figures have produced contradictory responses.

On the one hand, certain of the bishops have expressed their private support but also the "fear" that prevents them speaking out.

On the other, several bishops have made it in practice impossible for information about the synod to reach the parishes. It has left ordinary parish clergy to make uninformed decisions about whether or not the synod falls within the teachings of the church.

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Meanwhile, every one of the bishops who has replied to their invitation to the synod's culminating weekend has said that he is "on holiday" during that particular week in September.

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However, vulnerable bishops, parish priests and Catholic theologians may be to censorship, the voices of prominent individuals associated with the synod, such as ex-president of Ireland Mary McAleese, Dame Helena Kennedy, and best-selling American author James Carroll, will not be so easily silenced.

It will make the apparently narrow agenda of the bishops' own synodal consultation of the laity all too starkly clear.

[Jon Rosebank was an accredited Methodist lay preacher before becoming a Catholic. For a number of years, he wrote homilies for the American Catholic homily magazine Good News. A former fellow of New College, Oxford and BBC executive producer, his book *Partisan Politics, Looking for Consensus in 18th Century Towns*, was recently published by the University of Exeter Press.]