Bishops attend a Nov. 15 session of the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catho

Bishops attend a Nov. 15 session of the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore. (CNS/Bob Roller)



by Jim Purcell

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The National Catholic Reporter's coverage of the recent U.S. bishops' meeting understandably focused on the election of new leadership and how these new episcopal leaders represent a continuation of the "culture war" strategies the conference has pursued for a number of years.

NCR also pointed out how the elections represent, at best, a lack of enthusiasm for support for Pope Francis and his agenda and, at worst, continued opposition to this agenda. One striking example of this was the "discussion" that followed Brownsville, Texas, Bishop Daniel Flores' presentation on the synod on synodality. In his comments, Kansas City, Kansas, Archbishop Joseph Naumann referenced what he called "the elephant in the room." He expressed a concern (presumably shared by many of his bishop colleagues) that the synodal process was in serious danger of being "manipulated" (his word) by nefarious forces. As an example, he referred to "what has happened in Europe." I assume he was referring to the work of the Synodal Path in Germany.

Naumann's "conspiracy theory" (my words) is an insult, not only to Francis but also to Flores and the Committee on Doctrine, the U.S. bishops' synod staff and the thousands of people across the U.S. (mostly lay women and men) who have answered the call to "journey together" in a spirit of prayer and deep dialogue so that the Holy Spirit can continue her work in filling the hearts of the faithful to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ.

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Contrasting Naumann's intervention were the comments of Newark, New Jersey, Cardinal Joseph Tobin, who clearly embraces the pope's agenda for a synodal church. Tobin expressed concern and regret that the continental stage of the synod that will include Canada and the United States will rely on virtual gatherings of delegates rather than the in-person dialogues that have marked so much of the synodal journey in the U.S. and other places up to this point. He trusts the synodal process and the emerging *sensus fidelium* that is animated by the Holy Spirit.

As one who has participated in synodal listening sessions at the parish, diocesan, regional and national levels, I have seen no evidence of manipulation. Rather, I have witnessed again and again the animating power of the Holy Spirit that is at the heart of a synodal church.

Underlying Naumann's perspective and the apparent continuation of a very conservative "culture war" strategy that drives the U.S. bishops' agenda is an ecclesiology grounded in clericalism or, as James Keenan describes more accurately as "hierarchicalism."

Writing in Theological Studies, Kenan says:

> By leaving the problematic culture of the episcopacy out of the picture, these authors lead us to think that the seeds of clericalism are sown in the seminary and that, therefore, we need to reform admissions processes as

> well as seminaries. They tend to think the roots of dominance, abuses of power, and general law of impunity for clergy derive from the seminaries. I believe that seminaries are, to some extent, sources of clericalism's growth. But the real generativity of clericalism derives from its father, hierarchicalism. Bishops shape their clergy more than seminaries do. We can design any seminary we want, but the seminarians take their marching orders from those hierarchs who give them. Until we look at their culture, we are not going to accomplish significant reform, because what anyone who looks at the state of the church today recognizes is that our episcopal leadership is the primary cause of its problems. Hierarchicalism hides behind clericalism and scapegoats it as well. Until we identify it as such, we are pawns of its own power games. And until we face this problem, we will not see the reform we need to pursue.

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NCR's former executive editor, Tom Roberts, referred to Keenan's writing on hierarchicalism after the June 2021 bishops' meeting, when he opined about the conference's proposal to deny Communion to pro-choice politicians:

> The move to produce a document designed to render a severe and public judgment of President Joe Biden was engineered by men who, ensconced in a culture capable of stunning depravity and cover-up, have been searching for any means to reestablish their authority.

I believe that this problem of hierarchicalism is one of the most important issues that needs to be addressed at the universal synod scheduled for 2023 and 2024. Francis, in further developing a Second Vatican Council understanding of church, insists that synodality is a way of being church. So unlike theologian Massimo Faggioli and Jesuit Fr. Hans Zollner, I don't think the clerical sex abuse scandal should be at the heart of the synod on synodality. But since hierarchicalism contributed to the scandal of the clerical sex abuse crisis, I suggested that the synod address this as one of the greatest obstacles to being a synodal church.

As Vatican II so clearly taught in *Lumen Gentium*, the church is the people of God. It doesn't "belong" to the bishops or even the pope. If it belongs to anyone, that would be the Holy Spirit! It was/is the Holy Spirit that birthed the church at Pentecost, and it is the Holy Spirit — working through the baptized disciples of Jesus Christ and all people of good will — that will continue the creative work of God to the end of time.