Opinion
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Pope Francis speaks to members of the International Theological Commission during a meetir

Pope Francis speaks to members of the International Theological Commission during a meeting Nov. 24 in the Apostolic Palace of the Vatican. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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Pope Francis' critics are at it again, not only misrepresenting what he says, but fanning the flames of alarm when no alarm is warranted, assuming the worst about the synodal process, and crossing the line between criticism and defamation.

Fr. Gerald Murray, a priest of the New York Archdiocese and regular on EWTN's "The World Over with Raymond Arroyo," has a semi-hysterical column posted at The Catholic Thing. He starts by criticizing the Holy Father's address to the International Theological Commission in which the pope commended a healthy dependence on tradition with traditionalism. The pope warned against "backward-ism," which he characterized, quoting theologian Jaroslav Pelikan, "the dead faith of the living."

Murray does not care for Pelikan's characterization. "Is a faith that remains steadfast in upholding what has always been taught from the beginning a backward faith?" he asks. "Is it somehow backward to respond to erroneous innovations that deny Catholic teaching with the simple statement: 'What you deny, the Church has always believed'?"

What is disingenuous here is that Murray fails to acknowledge that the pope differentiated between theology and catechesis, and insisted that theology push the limits of understanding while a catechist should never present material "with new doctrines that are not sure." Catechists should only present doctrinal teachings that are "solid," the pope said. If Murray had his way, the Catholic Church would still ban interest on loans as a violation of the moral injunction against usury, and still deny the value of religion liberty, two areas of moral teaching that have changed over time.

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Turning his attention to the German synodal process, Murray makes a connection that the pope has not made. He cites some statements on homosexuality (why does this issue so obsess both the left and the right?) that were approved by the German Synodal Forum, and links them to the pope's address to the ITC.

"These erroneous and heretical statements are proffered by the German bishops as progressive changes that rectify the Church's earlier misunderstanding of the Gospel and the natural law," he states. "Those who oppose them would be dismissed as 'the backward-ists' who believe that the truth cannot change over time."

If conservatives were not so busy complaining about the synodal process, they might engage it and raise their concerns with those German Catholics who recognize that the church's teaching on homosexuality is manifestly inadequate.

Instead, Murray frets about the universal synod and defames the German bishops. "The Synod on Synodality, too, is on a trajectory to put Catholic sexual morality on public trial, with the goal of getting rid of what are scorned as backward doctrines," he writes. "The fact that the German bishops have enjoyed effective immunity from

the Holy See in their pursuit of heresy and immorality is a plain disaster that must be stopped before it leads to even greater confusion and error."

To predict how the synod will address these issues is anyone's guess, but to say the German bishops are pursuing heresy and immorality is to defame their intentions. Is that necessary? Can't he just say they are wrong?

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Murray is not alone. Francis Maier, longtime amanuensis to former Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput, also continues his attacks on Francis. After describing these "disruptive times" he writes in First Things, "the last thing Christians need is what this pontificate seems to encourage: more ambiguity in matters of faith. Christians need reasons for confidence in the Word of God, the teachings of their Church, and the meaning of their lives. They need a recovery of zeal. They need clarity of mission. And they need leaders who can convincingly deliver on all of the above. They're not getting it."

What planet does he live on? On Planet Earth, the people of God need confidence that the church will not look the other way when priests abuse their children.

Nor is Maier a fan of the synodal process. "A global listening process, with modest grassroots participation, to prepare for a 2023–24 'synod on synodality' is unlikely to produce any of that," he continues. "It may have value, but it's hard to see how it serves the words of Matthew 28:19-20," referencing the great commission.

I want an evangelizing church as much as Maier, but his idea that it is wrong to listen to and accompany people for whom the teachings of the church present hurdles, not certainty, is bizarre. His is an evangelization of the converted, more likely the children of the converted and conservative.

The common theme here is not Christian but Kantian, with a dollop from Victor Hugo. Murray and Maier want a church in which norms are, as Kant thought they need be, universal and abstract, imperative and impersonal. They must be clear and, when grasped as clear and binding, it is the grasp that governs the application of the norm to concrete situations.

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This approach has two major problems. First, it is only a very recent part of our Catholic moral tradition: Kant lived from 1724-1804. Second, when the intellectual qualities of certitude and clarity become most important, the significance of moral gravity is lost and the need to apply the norm with prudence, the "charioteer of the virtues," is erased.

Our actual tradition, from the church fathers through Augustine and Aquinas, teaches us that norms are important, and they should be clear, but they are always applied. In the application, the norm is not diminished but other moral issues are confronted, the relative weight of competing moral claims are evaluated, a look to foreseeable consequences is entertained. The moral agent is not applying a personal quirk or an eccentric theory to the moral conundrum. She is applying a moral norm, but she is applying it, not merely repeating it, as if application was always a self-evident thing.

If this Kantian bias was not enough of a problem, Murray and Maier both add to it a moral posture akin to that shown by Monsieur Javert, the fictional anti-hero of Hugo's *Les Misérables*, a posture that first emerged at the Synods on the Family in 2014 and 2015. In the musical version, Javert sings, "Those who falter and those who fail, must pay the price." This was the stance on the divorced and remarried at those synods, and it is the stance of Murray and Maier to all those who falter and fail

today. Anything in the way of solicitude is, to them, a watering down of divinely ordained norms.

In fact, it is Murray and Maier who misunderstand the tradition and do so badly. In their rush to establish norms that are unchanging, certain and self-applying, they gut the Gospel. As Francis wrote in *Amoris Laetitia*, #319: "At times we find it hard to make room for God's unconditional love in our pastoral activity. We put so many conditions on mercy that we empty it of its concrete meaning and real significance. That is the worst way of watering down the Gospel."

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