Opinion
NCR Voices
Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich of Luxembourg, relator general of the Synod of Bishops, speak

Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich of Luxembourg, relator general of the Synod of Bishops, speaks at a news conference to present an update on the synod process, at the Vatican in this Aug. 26, 2022, file photo. Looking on is Cardinal Mario Grech, secretary-general of the synod. (CNS/Paul Haring)



by Michael Sean Winters

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Cardinal Mario Grech, the secretary general of the synod, and Cardinal Jean Claude Hollerich, the general relator of the synod, released a letter to the world's bishops dated Jan. 26, 2023, sharing their assessment of the synodal process. "[W]e feel the urgency to share a few considerations for a common understanding of the synodal process, its progress and the meaning of the current Continental stage," the prelates wrote.

The essence of the letter was to place the synodal process squarely within the context of the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council so that the world's bishops could first grasp their own role in the process and, further, provide the leadership and guidance the process will require. The synod officials are realizing it was time

for a little Ecclesiology 101.

First, the letter reminds the bishops "there is no exercise of ecclesial synodality without exercise of episcopal collegiality." Episcopal collegiality was one of the principal ecclesiological doctrines to emerge from Vatican II, retrieved from the early church, a corrective to the ultramontanist excesses of the 19th century. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, states:

> The individual bishops, who are placed in charge of particular churches, exercise their pastoral government over the portion of the People of God committed to their care, and not over other churches nor over the universal Church. But each of them, as a member of the episcopal college and legitimate successor of the apostles, is obliged by Christ's institution and command to be solicitous for the whole Church, and this solicitude, though it is not exercised by an act of jurisdiction, contributes greatly to the advantage of the universal Church. (#23)

The synodal process is not intended to obstruct this solicitude, but in fact depends upon it. Regrettably, some episcopal hierarchies have become polarized and no longer effectively exercise collegiality as the council intended, and it is not yet clear how the synodal process will address this fact.

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The two cardinals go on to issue a warning that has greatly concerned me, the presumption by some that they know already the results they think the synodal process must achieve. This encroaches on the Holy Spirit's right to direct and lead the church.

"There are in fact some who presume to already know what the conclusions of the Synodal Assembly will be," the letter states. "Others would like to impose an agenda on the Synod, with the intention of steering the discussion and determining its outcome." Amen.

The problem is not just presumption, but the way these "agendas" can distort the life of the church. As Massimo Faggioli stated in his 2019 address to the Catholic Theological Society of America:

> Extremization is an identification of one particular, and secondary, set of allegedly 'traditional' or 'progressive' teachings on social issues with the very essence of Catholicism and, then, the elevation of these issues in extreme ways as a supposedly existential threat against the church, ignoring the vast historical and geographical complexities of global Catholicism.

This point about the complexities of global Catholicism is well taken, especially for Americans who tend to the myopic. The two cardinals remind the bishops, "The expectations for Synod 2021-2024 are many and varied, but it is not the task of the Assembly to address all the issues being debated in the Church."

That last observation, however, begs the question: What, then, is the task of the assembly? The letter states:

> The more we grow in a synodal style of Church, the more all of us as members of the People of God — faithful and Pastors — will learn to feel *cum Ecclesia*, in fidelity to the Word of God and Tradition. Besides, how could we address pointed questions, often divisive, without first answering the great question that has been challenging the Church since the Second Vatican Council: 'Church, what do you say of yourself?'. The Council's long journey of reception leads us to affirm that the answer is in the Church that is 'constitutively synodal', where all are called to exercise their ecclesial charism in view of carrying out the common mission of evangelisation.

Of course, in the early 1960s, when the council met, all of the assembled bishops and theologians had lived through the horrors of World War II and the Shoah. The question "Church, what do you say of yourself?" was a vital question, as adherence to the Roman or the Reformed churches did not seem to make a whit of difference for most people as to whether they joined, or resisted, the evil in their midst.

> The synodal process requires something everyone can aim at if we are to move forward together.
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A key difference between now and then, however, is that there was widespread agreement among the world's bishops at Vatican II about what constituted right and wrong, and about the place of moral teaching in the life of the church. Now, 60 years on, with religion reduced to ethics in large parts of the West, it is the lack of such agreement, including among the bishops, that must be overcome by the synodal process.

That will be harder than it appears. Overcoming polarization requires coming at the issue from a 45-degree angle. If you come at it head-on, people may behave nicely, but they are digging in intellectually and affectively. I have been to two conferences on overcoming polarization within the church and it is apparent they did not exactly succeed. "*Si monumentum requires, circumspice*," ("If you seek his memorial, look around you") reads the otherwise unadorned monument to Christopher Wren in the center of St. Paul's Cathedral. The synodal process requires something everyone can aim at if we are to move forward together.

The cardinals propose this kind of common focal point: evangelization. That is the raison d'etre of the church after all, to propose the Gospel and bring people to Jesus Christ. (Then, and only then, should we start discussing sexuality!)

The problem with the approach exemplified by Bishop Robert Barron of the Winona-Rochester Diocese, is that it confuses apologetics and evangelization, as witnessed in his recent criticism of the working document for the continental phase of the synodal process. Where, then, do we look for a model for effective evangelization?

This is the challenge facing the bishops as they lead the synodal process and the whole people of God as they participate in it. How do we preach the Gospel in 2023? Where is the Areopagus of our time? And, how do we maintain confidence in our wounded church's ability to bring people to Christ?

Editor's note: *Due to a technical glitch, some readers who signed up for Michael Sean Winters' newsletter did not receive it. If you would like to sign up again, please click this link. And be sure to forward the link to friends or family who might also be interested in signing up.*