Opinion
NCR Voices



Cardinal Robert W. McElroy of San Diego departs The Immaculata Catholic Church after Mass Sept. 8, 2022, on the campus of the University of San Diego. The liturgy, dedicated to students, faculty and staff of the university, was McElroy's first public Mass in San Diego since being appointed a cardinal Aug. 27. (CNS/David Maung)



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Cardinal Robert McElroy delivered a major address at Sacred Heart University Feb. 22. In his talk, McElroy expanded upon some themes he had discussed in an America magazine essay published in January. That piece ignited a firestorm of criticism, including from some of McElroy's episcopal colleagues. His Sacred Heart talk, "Enlarging Our Tent: The Synodal Imperative Toward a Church of Inclusion and Shared Belonging," answered some of those criticisms and set forth a more comprehensive argument for pastoral and doctrinal development regarding our eucharistic practice.

McElroy made clear that his observations grow out of the synodal process and the reports that have come both from the U.S. synthesis and from the worldwide Working Document for the Continental Stage, drafted at Frascati, Italy. And he pinpointed a pastoral need many bishops have expressed to me: how to keep the energy the synodal listening sessions unleashed going while the process itself continues to unfold.

"The finalization of our national report on the synod must not be seen as a time to pause meaningful listening, discernment and encounter on these questions, but as a signal that our continued willingness to confront them is a sign of our trust in God and the life of the church," he said.

The synodal process "must always point to the missionary nature of the church which looks outward rather than becoming preoccupied with internal division," McElroy said. "At the same time, we must continually recognize that this missionary nature proceeds from unity in the church."

This point can't be emphasized too much: The issues at stake in the discussion about inclusiveness are ecclesiological, not just moral. Our Catholic understanding of what is just is determined not only by some abstract consideration of the strength of the arguments but by patiently engaging the tradition, consulting the sensus fidei and discerning the call of the Holy Spirit.

> 'The effect of the tradition that all sexual sins constitute objectively grave sins has been to distort the Catholic moral universe and the life of discipleship.'
> —Cardinal Robert McElroy
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McElroy continued this focus on the relationship between synodal dialogue and ecclesiological unity. "Part of building such a consensus lies in understanding that the pathway toward greater inclusion and shared belonging is a gradual one, not a revolutionary one in which one side wins and one side loses," he said. "Reform must nourish the unity of the church, not weaken it."

These passages are not mere throat-clearing nor an attempt to soften the provoking part of McElroy's argument for radical inclusion. These insights emerged from the issues raised in the synodal process itself and from his own reflection on that synodal process.

The most controversial issue McElroy has raised is his call to reform our pastoral practice regarding the Eucharist. In this talk, more clearly than in the America article, he explained why he, and many millions of our contemporaries, think a singular focus on the objective gravity of sexual sins, and not other kinds of sinfulness, is a distortion of our moral tradition.

"It is automatically an objective mortal sin for a husband and wife to engage in a single act of sexual intercourse utilizing artificial contraception. This means the level of evil present in such an act is objectively sufficient to sever one's relationship with God," he said of the current teaching.

"It is not automatically an objective mortal sin to physically or psychologically abuse your spouse," he pointed out. "It is not automatically an objective mortal sin to exploit your employees. It is not automatically an objective mortal sin to discriminate against a person because of her gender or ethnicity or religion. It is not automatically an objective mortal sin to abandon your children."

The contrast was clear.

"The effect of the tradition that all sexual sins constitute objectively grave sins has been to distort the Catholic moral universe and the life of discipleship," McElroy said.

Later in his talk, McElroy said something that, had it been included in the America essay, might have mollified his critics. "This means recognizing sin where it lurks in our lives and seeking to root it out," the cardinal said. "And it means recognizing that each of us in our lives commits profound sins of omission or commission. At such moments, it is appropriate to seek the grace of the sacrament of penance before resuming Communion."

Pope leads meeting in auditorium

Pope Francis leads a meeting with representatives of bishops' conferences from around the world at the Vatican Oct. 9, 2021, before launching the process that will lead up to the first assembly of the world Synod of Bishops in 2023. (CNS/Paul Haring)

To be clear, nowhere in the original America article did McElroy argue that the Catholic Church should ignore its moral teachings. He did not argue for same-sex marriage. He did not disparage any particular teaching of the moral law. He did not argue that those conscious of grave sin should take the sacrament willy-nilly.

I did not agree with everything McElroy wrote, nor in his talk, but I find in both an echo of something my theological mentor, Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete, once said to me: "When St. Augustine tells us that even the conjugal act between a married man and woman, open to procreation, even that act is stained by the sin of concupiscence, he is actually telling us something very liberating." Albacete had a Communio theology sensibility and McElroy has a more decidedly liberal one, but they made the same conclusion: Overemphasizing sexual sinfulness diminishes a more robust sense of moral responsibility and attentiveness to God's grace.

McElroy's critics, however, seem to think he is trying to throw the moral baby out with the inclusiveness baptismal water. "I agree 100% that we are all deeply wounded, and we are equally in need of healing. We are all recovering sinners, and this is the reason why we are in desperate need of a savior," wrote Bishop James Conley of Lincoln, Nebraska. "But if I am reading the cardinal correctly, he is saying that full participation in the life of the Church, including the Eucharist, seems to mean full participation without consideration of one’s relationship with the Church."

Conley missed a step. McElroy never said there should be no consideration of one's relationship with the church. He argued that a singular focus on sexual sins distorted our ecclesial self-understanding in ways that effectively excludes some people.

Bishop Robert Barron addressed the issues of inclusivity and love in a posting at his website Word on Fire. He wrote:

> By the same token, this inclusivity of the Lord was unambiguously and consistently accompanied by his summons to conversion. Indeed, the first word out of Jesus' mouth in his inaugural address in the Gospel of Mark is not "Welcome!" but rather "Repent!" To the woman caught in adultery, he said, "Go and sin no more"; after meeting the Lord, Zacchaeus promised to change his sinful ways and compensate lavishly for his misdeeds; in the presence of Jesus, the good thief acknowledged his own guilt; and the risen Christ compelled the chief of the Apostles, who had three times denied him, three times to affirm his love.

I am not sure this contradicts anything McElroy said. The dynamic in each of the Gospel passages Barron cites is the same: Encounter Jesus first and let him call you to conversion.

Archbishop Samuel Aquila of Denver got especially nasty in his diocesan newspaper. "According to His Eminence, the Church categorically discriminates, but did not Jesus himself put demands on his disciples which distinguished them from those who did not respond to the radical and costly call of the Gospel?" Aquila asks. He goes on to cite the Gospel of the rich young man who walks away sad when Jesus tells him to sell all he has. The citation is a tad ironic seeing as Aquila is on the Ecclesiastical Advisory Board of the Napa Institute, the place where prelates and rich folk gather for wine tastings, cigars, fancy foods and right-wing agitprop at a glitzy hotel owned by conservative Catholic activist Tim Busch.

Later in his little essay, Aquila really breaks the bond of affective collegiality one expects from bishops. "I must admit that if I thought the way some of my brothers think I would have left the Church long ago and joined another Christian community," he writes.

Now, not wanting to look a gift horse in the mouth, but really, did he just imply McElroy is a hypocrite?

For the record, I asked McElroy at Sacred Heart University if any brother bishops had called him before publishing their criticisms. There is a biblical passage that is, as lawyers say, "on point," Matthew 18:15: "If your brother sins [against you], go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over a brother."

McElroy said none of the critics had shown him the courtesy of giving him a call before publishing their criticisms. That fact is shocking.

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Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago reminded readers of his column that Pope Francis and also Pope Benedict had pointed to the "completely gratuitous manner" of God's love.

> Benedict cites the prophet Hosea in making this point. "Israel has committed 'adultery' and has broken the covenant; God should judge and repudiate her. It is precisely at this point that God is revealed to be God and not man: 'How can I give you up, O Ephraim! How can I hand you over, O Israel!... My heart recoils within me, my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and not man, the Holy One in your midst’(Hos 11:8-9).'
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> Notice that God forgives before anything else and before what justice would demand. Then, Benedict seems to double down on this and writes something quite astonishing to the point that he was criticized by some theologians at the time: "God’s passionate love for his people … a forgiving love … is so great that it turns God against himself, his love against his justice."

To be clear, I have some reservations about McElroy's original article, reservations I shall share in a subsequent column. But this public criticism from bishops who either do not grasp, or choose not to grasp, McElroy's argument is both unseemly and clarifying. There is a whiff of Jansenistic fascination with sexual impurity in their arguments, and an abstraction of doctrinal from pastoral theology that goes a long way toward explaining why so many feel alienated from the Catholic faith.

There is a deeper worry, however, in these criticisms. McElroy, in both his article and in his talk, proposed his ideas in the context of the synodal process. The criticisms strike me as an attempt to shut down the conversation before it gets going. They do not want to entertain the possibility that the Holy Spirit might be calling the church in a new direction, by reason of a deeper understanding, on some of these issues related to inclusion. They like the barricades. It is not a lack of understanding, but a want of faith, that worries me. Did not the Lord promise us his spirit would be with his church until the end of time?