Opinion
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Bishop David Malloy of Rockford, Illinois, center, votes alongside other prelates June 14, 2018

Bishop David Malloy of Rockford, Illinois, center, votes alongside other prelates June 14, 2018, during the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' spring assembly in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. The 2023 spring assembly will be held in Orlando, Florida, June 14-16. (OSV News/CNS file/ Bob Roller)



by Michael Sean Winters

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May 31, 2023
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In two weeks, the U.S. bishops' conference will hold its spring plenary in Orlando, Florida. One never knows what to expect from these June meetings. Many bishops do not attend the spring meeting, and the schedule is much less intense than the schedule for the November plenary. Orlando has many distractions. I doubt some bishops would visit Disney World, but more than a few would be right at home on Space Mountain.

The press release announcing the meeting lists several updates the bishops will receive, including the Eucharistic Congress and World Youth Day in Portugal this August. The most controversial item is likely a revision of the Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services, but I worry more about the plan for the

ongoing formation of priests, which I am told is a disaster.

The bishops will discuss a "National Pastoral Plan for Hispanic/Latino Ministry," which is a topic of great urgency given the recent Pew Research Center survey that showed a continued decline in the number of Latinos who identify as Catholic. And the press release says the bishops will discuss "the priorities that will shape the USCCB's Strategic Plan for 2025-2028." The current strategic plan is remarkable for its lack of engagement with the pontificate of Pope Francis: There is nothing about care for creation nor about the urgency of the worldwide migrant crisis. There is the continued confusion between evangelization and apologetics that is the hallmark of a kind of U.S. bishop epitomized by Bishop Robert Barron of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota. The Catholic Campaign for Human Development is mentioned, but they have been forced to cut back on their grants even while outside money funds the Eucharistic Congress.

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Notice anything missing from the press release announcing next month's meeting? There is not a single mention of the ongoing synod. Not one mention. The most consequential development in ecclesiology since the close of Vatican II, and no one who looked at the press release said to themselves: "Hey, wait a minute. What about synodality?"

In March, synodality was the focus of a gathering of bishops, theologians and other church leaders held at Boston College. Full disclosure: I was one of the organizers of the gathering. There was no shortage of questions about the process, no lack of interest in the topic. The most common refrain I heard from bishops at the conference's conclusion was that they thought they had a better understanding of synodality as a result of the discussions. What is more, I believe that this synodal process is the only avenue that promises a possibility of addressing and eventually overcoming the polarizations that afflict the Catholic Church in this country.

To be fair, the bishops' conference is not the only church group pursuing an agenda that has little to do with synodality. The program for June's annual meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America will feature talks on many and varied topics. Parts of the program read like a ChatGPT caricature of wokeness, such as this description of one session: "there is a pressing need to explore the theological and

pastoral insights that arise from attending to the interlocking layers of oppression and life-threatening experiences that queer persons of color (QPOC) face, especially with respect to issues of racism, hetero/sexism, and immigration status." Or this: "Given racist, antisemitic mass shootings, and the January 6 insurrection, it is clear that political violence is a demonstrable reality disproportionately effecting [sic] minoritized communities in the U.S., negatively impacting the freedom of vulnerable people, and degrading democratic values and institutions."

There is one selected session that deals with synodality, and it looks interesting. There is also a paper that deals with synodality in a session on ecumenism. So, the theologians are doing better than the U.S. bishops. Still, it is remarkable how distant the Catholic Theological Society of America program is from the life of the actual church: You would not know, for example, this year is the 10th anniversary of Pope Francis' election and of his programmatic apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. How is that possible? This most exhilarating and fascinating of pontificates is not worthy of consideration?

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Many, many people this past year have emailed me or spoken with me at an event about the synodal process. Not one, not a single one, has said they found it disappointing or depressing. Not one has said they did not want the synodal process to continue. Some have expressed impatience and others have expressed different varieties of uncertainty about it, to be sure, but none has said they found it to be a dead end.

Dear bishops: As you gather in Orlando, please convince your own organization to refocus its attention on synodality and how the synodal process can continue the process of receiving Vatican II. The extant alternatives are the inward-looking focus of the current strategic plan, or the culture of grievance the theological community produces. Synodality is the only path forward for the church. It is time to take it.

A version of this story appeared in the **June 9-22, 2023** print issue under the headline: The US bishops are meeting in June. Synodality is not on the agenda..