Opinion
Guest Voices



Bishops applaud during the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops meeting June 15 in Orlando, Florida. (RNS photo/Jack Jenkins)



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The optics of the latest meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Orlando this past week (June 14-16) tell the story.

It is not about us.

OK, it is a conference of bishops. And of course, Catholicism does not ordain women as bishops, or as anything else for that matter. But the view from the pews is of men talking about men.

Obviously, they had to consider internal matters, but two bright points were two talks, by Archbishop Christophe Pierre, Pope Francis' representative in the United States, and by Brownsville Bishop Daniel Flores, who is managing U.S. participation in the worldwide synod on synodality.

Related: US bishops vote to revise health care directives on transgender patients

Pierre took gentle aim at the conference's $14 million National Eucharistic Revival, planned for July 2024 in Indianapolis. The five-day gathering of some 80,000 persons in the city's Lucas Oil Stadium has eight full-time staffers and several contractors, funded so far by various conservative donors, such as Relevant Radio, Our Sunday Visitor and the Knights of Columbus.

Pierre reminded the bishops that the Eucharist is "a sacrament for mission."

Pierre was more interested in the synod, which began in October 2021 with parishes and local groups meeting to talk about church. Dioceses gathered the responses for national episcopal conferences to synthesize and send on to Rome. The resulting 112 national reports were synthesized in the Document for the Continental Stage. Seven continental groupings responded. Another synthesis created the working document for the Oct. 4-19 Rome synod meeting.

From the start, the synod's themes of communion, participation and mission beckoned to the greater church — the members of the laity who are more routinely asked to pray, pay and obey.



Archbishop Christophe Pierre, apostolic nuncio to the United States, delivers remarks at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' annual fall meeting Nov. 13, 2017, in Baltimore. (AP photo/Patrick Semansky)

Pierre's opening talk to the bishops was a diplomatic reminder that the pope — his boss and theirs — was interested in what the people of God wanted and needed. He

asked: "Where are we?", "Where are we going?" and, more pointedly, "Do we know what are the needs of our people?"

The synod is Pope Francis' effort to get everyone involved in moving the church forward, but few speakers mentioned it.

Instead, the conference's new president spoke about objective truth and decried the Los Angeles Dodgers honoring the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, an LGBTQ group that mocks Catholic rituals.

There was a canonization petition for five French missionary priests and a vote on a document about priestly formation. An update on translations of liturgical texts indicated they might be printed by 2026. There was a report about Hispanic ministry and a detailed presentation of plans for the eucharistic revival. They decided to revise ethical directives on transgender questions for Catholic hospitals. They heard about World Youth Day and a document on lay ministry.

By majority vote, they approved a document on priestly formation that called priests "spiritual fathers," even after one bishop complained the phrase encouraged narcissistic tendencies.

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The synod was not on their original schedule, but after it was added Flores gave the most eloquent presentation of the meeting. He did not emphasize the fact of his shoestring staff — a handful of individuals with full-time jobs doing double duty and one part-time consultant. Nor did he emphasize that too many bishops sitting before him ignored the synod or only went through the motions. He spoke about the synod, where it was and where it was going.

That too many U.S. bishops have not supported the synod is painfully obvious. That the cash flowing from the right will pay for a mass gathering to listen to speeches in a city where the average July temperatures reach above 85 degrees demonstrates the problem.

It is no secret that too many U.S. bishops are not on board with Francis. Beyond not cooperating with the synod, some are squeamish about his welcoming gay people. Many decry his pastoral response to divorced folks who have remarried. A few are climate-change deniers. Some even spoke out against the COVID-19 vaccine.

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All this is not to say the anti-Francis bishops are not good men. It is to point out that the clericalist mentality, centered on events like the eucharistic revival, festers in its own words. Clericalism blocks out anything laypeople say.

Pierre asked where the church was going. Flores recommended the group read the North American response to the Document for the Continental Stage, as well as those from the six other continental gatherings.

Neither gave the name of that document: "Enlarge the space of your tent."

This story appears in the **USCCB Spring Assembly 2023** feature series. View the full series.