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With a new Synod of Bishops comes a new chance to do things right

by Joan Chittister

From *Where I Stand*
Synod on the Family

I remembered an ancient saying attributed to Buddha not long ago that smacked far too much of the present than it did of the past: "There are only two mistakes on the way to truth. One is not going far enough and the other is not starting."

I knew right away that we're either on the verge of another mistake -- or not. It all depends.

Very few ever get a second chance to get the really big things of life right. Really right.

On the personal level, recovery from error is always a slow and tenuous process. We fail at marriage and plod through life for years while all our other dreams shrivel with it. We get stuck in dead-end jobs, and there goes the kind of life for which we'd hoped.

But if mid-course corrections are difficult for individuals, they are even more difficult for major institutions.

Governments can be marked for decades by their major debacles. Wars stumbled into without cause, like the invasion of Iraq, can damage a country's place in the community of nations for years. Few megacorps, like Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, completely recover from public disaffection. They lose credibility. They barter years of goodwill. They watch the public turn away like sunflowers following the light.

Worse, plunge a public institution into public ignominy, and the ones that don't disappear immediately are often doomed to fade slowly and painfully into barely recognizable profiles of their former selves.

Once upon a time, churches were exempt from such problems. Not anymore. These days, churches are little better off than the average organization when it comes to the wages of sin and attempts to defraud. "The faith" does not compensate in an educated public for a loss of confidence in the integrity of the church itself.

Which is where we are right now, whether anyone wants to consider that possibility or not. All of our major institutions are being viewed with wary eyes -- the government and its outrageous dysfunction, the global financial structures and their pecuniary sleight of hand, and even the church and its insistence on rules for everyone else while it seems to have skirted the important ones.

And into the middle of a church clouded by scandal as well as by rigidity comes a pope with a call for reform and for understanding. What's not to love?

The problem is that the church has been in this position before.

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The first time the church found itself in major public discredit, the reformers of the 16th century were crying out for serious review of both the theology and practices of the church. They railed against clericalism, the wealth of the church, the use of arcane language that distanced the laity from its inner operations and made them second-class citizens, the sale of relics, the conferral of indulgences in exchange for alms, and a theology that left laypeople to be docile and unthinking consumers of a faith long bereft of either witness or spiritual energy.

The answer of the church at the Council of Trent (1545-1563) to these concerns was 150 anathemas at the very thought of change.

Or, in other words, Trent's answer to the pressure for renewal of the church was more of the same. Only this time, they went even further and added an index of forbidden books to dampen any more of that kind of thinking in the future; the total rejection of the vernacular to make general discussion of just about anything ecclesiastical impossible for laypeople; greater episcopal control; and more and better rules for everything else.

But the need for change and real renewal never went away.

Now, since the Second Vatican Council in 1962, the church itself has opened the question of reform again.

This time, the call comes from a pope with specific questions. Questions for which he wanted the input of the Catholic laity before his opening of the Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to discuss "pastoral challenges to the family in the context of evangelization" in October. So they sent the questions to bishops for the purpose of gathering input from the laity in each diocese.

But with the exception of a few bishops in the United States, that was the last we heard of it. And that's the real problem.

There are three dangers implicit in the process of asking questions.

First, when you ask people to respond to a series of questions, it gives them the idea that you are going to take their answers seriously. It raises expectations.

Second, to ask questions is to imply that you are open to considering someone else's way of looking at the possible answers to them.

Third, as any good lawyer knows, asking a question to which you don't want an answer different from your own threatens to expose the fissure of differences that underlie it. The old game of "one answer fits all" ends and people really begin to believe that they have a right to think and rethink and think again.

Thinking may be the sign of a healthy group, but it is not the sign of a complacent, tractable or acquiescent group. Once people begin to think together, community sets in, energy sets in, possibility sets in, and new life sets in. For them all.

Trent's 150 anathemas were a mistake that lost half of Europe to the church, that divided the Christian community for 400 years, that plunged Catholicism into the Dark Ages of thought, and that left the Christian witness adrift in "the scandal of division."

From where I stand, it looks as if we have been given another opportunity to do it right this time. The only question is whether or not the bishops who were entrusted with gathering the answers of the laity to these questions will start at all. Let alone go all the way.

[Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister is a frequent *NCR* contributor.]

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