

[Opinion](#)
[NCR Voices](#)



(Unsplash/Jason Leung)



by Michael Sean Winters

[View Author Profile](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@michaelswinters](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

September 25, 2023

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

The [synod](#) begins next week in Rome. In assessing its work, we need to identify and isolate the challenges to synodality coming from both the extreme right-wing and left-wing bleachers. The culture warrior mode — attack your opponent, never give in, seek victory at all costs — is the antithesis of synodality. That culture warrior approach may dominate some of the conversations outside the synod hall, but it will be deadly if it gets inside.

I have already noted that some conservative culture warriors have decided to simply dismiss the synod, [or even to undermine it](#). In addition to the most virulent [anti-Francis crowd](#), conservative commentators like George Weigel [have fretted](#) that the synod process has been a "colossal exercise in self-referentiality" and Franciscan University professor Scott Hahn [endorsed](#) a pastoral letter from Tyler, Texas, Bishop Joseph [Strickland](#) worrying that the synod would undermine the faith.

This is a shame because something like half the human race is born with a conservative heart and their voices need to be heard at a universal synod. If the intellectual and pastoral leaders of conservative Catholics have decided to undermine the synodal process rather than engage it, how can the synod move forward? Who will get past the divisive culture war instincts and speak to the concerns and hopes of those Catholics who have a conservative disposition?

There are some signs of hope. Brownsville, Texas, Bishop Daniel Flores is not only attending the synod next month, he also serves on the preparatory committee. Flores is not an ideologue; I think of him as a conservative in the best sense, someone who knows the tradition and relishes it, but who understands tradition is not a museum piece, that it has to be applied to new and different situations. About the synodal process, [he recently said](#), "We can't respond with the Gospel if we don't know what the reality they're facing is. We can't respond to the air."

Clinging to a particular understanding of how the Catholic Church should organize betrays a lack of humility that will kill the synod before it starts.

[Tweet this](#)

Another conservative voice that I wish was listened to more is that of Stephen White, who leads the Catholic Project at Catholic University of America. He [wrote a column](#)

in which he pushed back against the idea that the synod is a smokescreen for a predetermined agenda, but he said something more, too.

"It's important to acknowledge that the Synod, if undertaken faithfully and with the proper disposition, could prove a great boon to the Church," he wrote.

In fact, everywhere the Church is thriving and missionary, "synodality" is already to be found — even if few people think to call it that.

Where can we see synodality already at work? Anywhere the Church listens carefully and evaluates what it hears in light of what has been revealed through Scripture and Tradition. Anywhere the baptized genuinely understand that right thinking is not the same as spiritual discernment and that both are needed.

Not all the misunderstandings and undermining of synodality come from the ideological right. As I [wrote 18 months ago](#): "Agendas misunderstand what synodality is about," and "There is a time and a place for religiously motivated activism to be sure, but the synod is not that time and place. The synod requires us Americans to set aside our activist, goal-oriented, project-centered sensibilities." And it is not only Americans.

In the United Kingdom, John Wijngaards of the Wijngaards Institute for Catholic Research sent an email that began:

The Wijngaards Institute is — in the context of the Synodal Process — conducting a survey on the view of Catholics on 'Seven Pillars of Church Reform.' Do you believe that women should be ordained? That pastoral councils should be more than just consultative? That theologians should enjoy freedom of research and expression? That, in case of need, any member of the community should be able to preside at the Eucharist? And so on.

Record your views here: <https://www.churchauthority.org/questionnaire/>. After filling in the form, the latest findings of the survey will be printed on your screen. It is an indication of what lives among the faithful as their "sense of faith." A final overview will be delivered to the Synodal Office in Rome. Please, publicise this survey. Invite also your friends and contacts

to take part in this project. (Emphasis in original.)

I do not encourage you to "record your views." Obviously, this kind of self-selected survey has zero empirical value. The reduction of complex ecclesiological issues to a handful of hot-button "church reform" items is absurd, even offensive. And, if you do click on the questionnaire, the options you get are "yes," "no" or "I don't know" to complex questions such as, "On institutional matters, ministers should be held accountable to their communities and secular law. Do you agree?" This is not only unhelpful. It is childish.

Advertisement

Miriam Duignan, a member of the leadership team at Women's Ordination Worldwide, [recently told NCR](#), "the synodal dialogue will be painfully incomplete and dishonest if it does not adequately address the widespread calls to open all ordained ministries to women." Dishonest?

How is that any less undermining of the principal need of the synod — to surrender and listen to the Holy Spirit — than the rantings of Bishop Strickland? Clinging to a particular understanding of how the Catholic Church should organize itself to fulfill the mission entrusted to it by its head and founder, Jesus Christ, and insisting all other understanding are wrong or counterfeit, betrays a lack of humility that will kill the synod before it starts.

Part of the problem is the media. As my colleague Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese [recently observed](#),

According to the media, the most important issues facing the Synod on Synodality are the possibility of married priests, women deacons and the blessing of gay couples. ... For the *instrumentum laboris* and Pope Francis, the priority issues are communion, participation and mission.

In this fast-paced, social media-driven, acquisitive commercial culture of ours, lessons in surrendering to the Holy Spirit are not so easy to find. Pope Francis, however, seems to be a master of discernment and allergic to the kind of politicizations that could also kill the synodal spirit. And unlike the whiners on the right or the activists on the left, the pope will be in the room the entire time. I'm betting the other synod participants will follow his lead rather than listen to the

outside groups. I'm betting this synod will be a success, no matter what it decides on any particular issue.