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Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet attends a Mass inside St. Peter’s Basilica, at the Vatican, on March 12, 2013. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

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Considered to be among the most influential prelates during the last three pontificates, Cardinal Marc Ouellet has taken a step back from the limelight after reaching the mandatory retirement age of 80.

While the Canadian cardinal won’t get to vote in the next conclave shaping the future of the Catholic Church, Ouellet still has a lot to say about how the institution should face the challenges ahead. In his new book, "Word, Sacrament, Charism: Risks and Opportunities of a Synodal Church," Ouellet challenges the church to worry less about creating something new, and more about treasuring what is already there.

"The church is experiencing a moment of listening to the Holy Spirit," Ouellet told journalists during a presentation of the book, soon to be translated into English, near the Vatican on Tuesday (Sept. 24) The cardinal was referring to the synod on the theme of synodality, a three-year-long project that has involved all members of the church, from faithful to pastors and bishops.

When Pope Francis called for the synod in 2021, faithful gathered to discuss some of the most hotly debated issues in the church, including the promotion of women in the church and the inclusion of LGBTQ Catholics. But when bishops and lay delegates meet at the Vatican next month for the final synod gathering, the discussions will be limited to the question of "how to become a synodal church in mission."

Hopes for radical change in the Catholic institution seem to have been swept away, but the synod still promises to rethink and challenge church structures and hierarchies. "Some are confused, others are already disappointed by the few tangible results that were achieved in the past three years," Ouellet said, adding that "many are concerned and worried about division in the church."

Ouellet’s new book hopes to offer a new perspective for synodal discussions by suggesting that the church should promote and enable charisms, intended as gifts by the Holy Spirit that are given to every baptized Catholic.

"My book would like to reawaken the interest in charisms in the church," Ouellet said, "but they often don’t find the space to develop because they are not valued and recognized."

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A wave of charismatic groups took over the Catholic Church after the Second Vatican Council, when the church launched a comprehensive reform to better evangelize to the changing society of the 1960s. Charismatic leaders were able to once again draw massive crowds to church and vigils, some claiming to be visionaries and prophets.

Today, many of the charismatic leaders are aging and, in many cases, reports of abuse of power or sexual abuse cast a shadow on these grassroots Catholic movements.

"A clerical culture doesn’t leave much space for charisms," said Ouellet, adding that there is a "generalized mentality by faithful who don’t see the work of the Holy Spirit among all the people of God."

The Vatican’s Code of Canon Law isn’t equipped to address the needs of charismatic movements, the cardinal said, adding that if the law "is applied rigidly there is a risk that charisms will be extinguished."

Loosening the grip on charismatic movements would allow these groups to thrive and evangelize, the cardinal said. "Not just the visible and spectacular ones," he said, "but also humble and discreet charisms of service: listening, welcoming, compassion, visiting the sick and the poor, catechists and reconciliation operators."

Pope Francis has shown the way to do this in the church, Ouellet said, by allowing lay men and women to hold positions of power and influence in the church. In his 13 years at the head of the Vatican congregation overseeing bishops, Ouellet said he saw firsthand how the contributions of everyday faithful and their charism could be easily discarded. He also praised the Synod on Synodality’s inclusion of laity and lower-level clergy — one-quarter of the participants were not bishops — which he said teaches the bishops how to work closely with other faithful in the church.

Ouellet, once considered eligible to become pope, has been praised for his ability to offer a Catholic conservative perspective under Francis’ pontificate while welcoming and accepting his reforms. The cardinal offered theological support for the pope’s decision to allow nonclergy to head Vatican departments but also issued a strong defense of priestly celibacy as it was being discussed at the 2019 synod on the Pan-

Amazonian region.

The upcoming synod has already drawn both criticism and praise, but Ouellet underlined that the work has only just begun in reforming the Catholic Church. "We still have a lot more listening to the people of God to do," he said.

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series.