

Father Richard P. McBrien

Essays in Theology



The synod on the laity

Although there will be a synod on the laity this fall, one doesn't find widespread interest in the event.

To be sure, some Church professionals are looking forward to it and enjoy speculating about its likely outcome. But the rank and file, for the most part, still aren't even aware of it, much less excited about it.

One reason for this general lack of curiosity is that many lay and ordained ministers at the parish level have come to expect little from such synods. Consequently, they don't see any reason why they should try to get their parishioners excited about them.

These Church professionals are convinced that synods don't accomplish very much, because these congresses are so much under the control of the incumbent pope. To such Church workers, a successful synod is one that doesn't do something bad.

Thus, the Extraordinary Synod Pope John Paul II called in late 1985 might have thrown in its lot with the restorationist faction in the Catholic Church. Many feared the synod would support the effort to turn the clock back to pre-Vatican II days. Instead, it strongly reaffirmed the council, declaring it to have been the work of the Holy Spirit.

But even if certain pre-synodal fears have not been realized, hopes are occasionally dashed. Many priests, for example, looked forward to the 1971 synod with the expectation of some change in the Church's law regarding obligatory celibacy. They were bitterly disappointed.

A second reason for the general lack of interest in the forthcoming synod is the uneven manner in which Catholics have been prepared for it.

Some dioceses, like Portland, Maine, have taken effective steps to solicit the opinions of parishioners. For many Catholics this is the first time they've ever formally been asked for their views on matters pertaining to the life and mission of the Church.

But in other dioceses the effort has been perfunctory at best. A single two-hour informational meeting dominated by the bishop and his aides is no substitute for a diocesan-wide process of consultation.

Thirdly, the Vatican itself hasn't helped very much. Imposing its usual lid of secrecy on the preliminary reports submitted by the various national bishops' conferences, the Vatican has suppressed the very material that could have stimulated general discussion and debate and thereby heightened interest in the synod.

In the hope of stimulating interest where little or none has developed, we might focus here for a moment on the synod's central topic, the laity.

Using the somewhat cynical principle that a successful synod is a synod that doesn't do anything really bad, this synod will be a success if it doesn't:

1) Urge the laity to become more involved in the life and work of the Church as a way of helping the pope, the bishop and the clergy fulfill their ministries. This would be nothing more than a resurrection of the old Catholic Action model that defined the lay apostolate as a participation in the work of the hierarchy.

2) Draw a sharp line between the ecclesiastical and temporal realms, assigning the temporal to the laity and reserving the ecclesiastical for the hierarchy, clergy and other church professionals.

It is surprising, and not just a little disturbing, to hear some Catholic lay persons — almost all of whom are male — arguing for a restoration of this missionary arrangement.

In some instances, the concern is politically motivated. Neo-conservative Catholics are unhappy with the U.S. Catholic bishops' pastoral letters on peace and the economy.

In other instances, the concern is sincerely religious, although theologically misguided. Old-line Catholic laymen, known as progressives in the 1940s and 1950s, simply don't like to see their territory invaded by well-meaning but intrusive clergy. They've spent a lifetime struggling for official recognition of their lay movements and organizations, but in spite of their efforts, most of the leading figures on the U.S. Catholic scene today are still clergy and religious.

This will surely change if the current leadership generations of priests and nuns are not replaced. Given the state of vocations to the priesthood and religious life, the odds favor a shift to lay leadership. In the meantime, however, it would be a serious mistake to push for the old separation of the temporal from the spiritual. That's a two-edged sword, because excluding the clergy from meaningful involvement in the temporal also implies the exclusion of the laity from meaningful involvement in the ecclesiastical.

Such an arrangement would ensure the permanent exclusion of women from any significant pastoral influence in the Church. Only men can become priests and bishops, and in a bifurcated universe, they would continue to hold all the power in the Church.

Father Paul J. Cuddy

On the Right Side



Opposition to the pope?

Q: What do you think of all the opposition to Pope John Paul, as his trip to the States nears?

A: Who are these "all?" The Courier-Journal of July 30 carried an article with a Washington dateline, which said: "Representatives of abortion, lesbian, women's ordination and equal-rights organizations pledged July 23 to schedule protests both before and during Pope John Paul's visit to the States." It continued: "The National Assembly of Religious Women, a Chicago-based Catholic women's organization, issued a statement it has joined the coalition and will organize and participate in such events as demonstrations, pickets, vigils and women's eucharistic liturgies in each of the cities where the pope is visiting."

If birds of a feather flock together, that's an interesting covey, but hardly representative of normalcy. An earthy nurse friend described the coalitions as "a kinky rash that won't kill the body of the Church, but which is a mean irritant." She suggested certain ecclesiastical "ointments," but I think the pope would not allow them.

Consider the conglomerate: agitated lesbians, with agitated homosexual men joining in the rhubarb. Visualize that cheerful group. However, let's be fair. It is an injustice to assume that all people who are homosexually oriented are actively practicing, any more than to assume that all heterosexuals are catting around. Many homosexuals are people of heroic virtue, but these will not be stalking in the anti-Pope picket lines.

Then we have the free-choice folk, who attack the pope for defending the unborn. Add the NOW people, obsessed more for power than for equality. Poet Phyllis McGinley wisely said: "Men and women are equal, but different." Sameness in everything is unnatural. Equal pay for equal work, fine. Equal opportunity in many things, fine. But I would not include women in the front lines of battle among the advantages. Have you ever seen the old movie classic "The Sinking of the Lusitania?" I have seen it five times. Each time, as I watch the women and children being loaded into the too few boats and the men remaining to lose their lives in the sinking ship, I wonder: Would those who advocate equality in everything also advocate no special preference for these women and children? I have never met a man who thought any such thing. In such cases, women are not equal, but special.

Father P.J. Ryan has accused me of being anti-nun, which of course is sheer bunk. I am indebted to, grateful and admiring of so many dedicated, hard-working women religious who take seriously their vows of poverty, chastity, obedience and service. But I do not consider the pope-bashing outfit called The National Assembly of Religious Women as truly religious. They are women who use the guise of religious life, which infers respectability and reverence, to promote a noxious feminism and thrust for power. Their theology is askew. Their religious concepts are secular. Their attitude toward men is paranoid.

Q: With all this opposition, do you think the pope's visit will do much good?

A: Well, when you have a mean rash, that seems the only part of the body being given most attention. I am confident the great body of the Catholic faithful will welcome the pope enthusiastically. Our bishops will welcome him. The civic representatives will be cordial. The UN has always been respectful when a pope addresses its assembly. The media often selects pope-bashers as commentators, so we can only hope for the best.

In October, 1982, I escorted a group from the diocese to Japan, and find recorded in my journal: "Father Dominic, an American Capuchin from Boston, joined us for dinner. He is about 50-years-old and knows our Capuchins at Interlaken. He has been in Japan 21 years and is now a Japanese citizen. I was still puzzling that the Japanese do not physically touch one another. On the flight over, we watched a Japanese movie, and not one person in the movie touched another. They politely bowed — no hugs, no kisses, not even a handshake. And such seemed to be the case as we observed the people in Kyoto.

"Father Dominic explained: 'They communicate through a kind of sixth sense, studying the eyes. When Pope John Paul came to Japan recently, the TV networks were full of him for a whole week. He celebrated Mass in Japanese five times. He was taught by a nun before coming to Japan. The people were fascinated by his face and eyes: full of goodness and love and sincerity. The Japanese say that words can deceive, but eyes do not!'"

If you were a betting person, what odds would you place on the beauty and goodness of the eyes of Pope John Paul, against the mean anger of the dissidents?

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