

THE COMPASS CONFERENCE

The sheep in place of the shepherds, the Synod subverts the Church

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I am grateful for the opportunity this evening to share with you my serious concerns about the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops soon to open at the Vatican. My remarks will include first a discussion of the changes to the nature of the Synod of

Bishops made by Pope Francis. I will then examine the *Instrumentum Laboris* (working document).

I will conclude with a reflection on what I consider to be the animating principles that have inspired the efforts currently underway to re-create the Catholic Church into a Synodal Church, in which Church the hierarchy submits itself and the whole body of the faithful to an ongoing process of determining a new understanding of the meaning of Catholic doctrine and practice. This new understanding will emerge, supposedly, from listening to the Holy Spirit speaking through a selected group of the faithful gathered in Rome for that purpose now, and in October 2024.

The Synod of Bishops and the changes made by Pope Francis

The Synod of Bishops was established by Pope St. Paul VI on September 15, 1965 by the Motu Proprio *Apostolica Sollicitudo*. The Synod of Bishops is grounded in the common mission of ruling the Church of God that the Holy Spirit has given to both the Roman Pontiff and to the bishops in communion with him. The Synod of Bishops is a means for furthering that divinely conferred governing mission of the hierarchy.

Paul VI described the creation for this new hierarchical assembly of representative chosen bishops as being prompted by “our esteem and regard for all the Catholic bishops and with the aim of providing them with abundantly means for greater and more effective participation in Our concern for the universal Church”

Canon 342 of the Code of Canon Law summarizes the nature of the synod. This canon identifies the eminently episcopal duties that pertain to the synodal meetings: fostering hierarchical union with the Pope, promoting faith and morals, strengthening ecclesiastical discipline, and reflecting on the Church’s activities in the current situation. These are all part of the ordinary concerns of the shepherds of the Church.

Canon 346 §1 is clear on who makes up the membership of this ecclesial institution: “A synod of bishops assembled in an ordinary general session consists of members of whom the greater part are bishops elected for each session by the conferences of bishops according to the method determined by the special law of the synod; others are designated by virtue of the same law; others are appointed directly by the Roman Pontiff; to these are added some members of clerical religious institutes

elected according to the norm of the same special law.” [Note: “others” means “other bishops”]. The only non-bishops who can become members of the synod are clerics who are members of religious orders. This exception is based upon the close relationship between the episcopate and the priesthood, and upon the exercise of governing authority by religious superiors who are priests.

Pope Francis, in his 2014 Letter to Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri, described the importance of the Synod of Bishops: “the Successor of Peter must proclaim to all who ‘Christ, the Son of the Living God’ is, and at the same time he must pay attention to what the Holy Spirit inspires on the lips of those who – accepting the word of Jesus who declares: ‘you are Peter’ (cf. Mt 16:16-18) – fully participate in the Apostolic College.” It is this “affective and effective communion which constitutes the Synod of Bishops’ primary purpose.”

Thus, the “affective and effective communion” of bishops from the various regions of the world with the Roman Pontiff, the Chief Shepherd, is strengthened and given new expression in an institution that allows the Pope to “pay attention to what the Holy Spirit inspires on the lips of those who... fully participate in the Apostolic College.” This is an episcopal gathering that promotes the common concern of all bishops to teach, govern and sanctify the People of God amidst the pastoral challenges presented by the current state of the world.

The episcopal and hierarchical nature of the Synod of Bishops effectively came to an end with the publication on April 26, 2023 of an unsigned document from the Press Office of the General Secretariat of the Synod that announced the extension of participation in the Synodal Assembly to non-bishop member.

The document states that “[o]n 17 April 2023, the Holy Father approved the extension of participation in the Synodal Assembly to “non-bishops.” There is no citation of a papal decree dated 17 April 2023 enacting this change of law, and I am not aware that such a decree has been published. Canon 51 states: “A decree is to be issued in writing.” The reference in the document to a papal approval of a change to existing canonical provisions is not sufficient to establish legal certainty in this matter.

I note also that the Press Office of General Secretariat of the Synod does not possess the canonical authority to derogate from either the canons of the Code of Canon Law nor from the Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis Communio*, which regulates the Synod of Bishops. The document nowhere states that Pope Francis approved of the contents of the Press Office document and ordered its publication.

Thus, the document cannot be said to issue from the hand of Pope Francis. Thus, the General Assembly of the Synod and all its acts would be subject to a technical complaint of canonical nullity, absent the publication of a papal decree giving legal force to the extension of membership in the Synodal Assembly to non-bishops.

Incredibly, the document states that “[t]hese modifications which are warranted within the context of the synodal process will not, however, change the episcopal nature of the Assembly.” This would only be true if baptized Catholics who are not bishops were also placed by the Holy Spirit... “to rule the Church of God.” (Acts 20:28) This, of course, is not the case. What we now have is a Synod of Bishops and Non-Bishops; we no longer have a Synod of Bishops.

The document also assures us that “the episcopal nature of the Synodal Assembly is not affected, but rather is confirmed” because non-bishops will be “less than 25 percent of the total number of Assembly members.” (I wonder what percentage of non-bishops the Secretariat believes it would take to vitiate the episcopal nature of the Synodal Assembly).

When non-bishop members with voting rights are introduced into an assembly of bishops with voting rights, the assembly ceases to be episcopal in nature. Those who are not shepherds in the Church are being given a role that pertains by the nature only to the shepherds. The Assembly is not a Synod of Bishops any longer. By analogy, would we say that the election of a pope at a conclave made up of cardinals and also of non-cardinals would still be an act of the College of Cardinals? Clearly, we could not say that.

The document describes the reason for this revolutionary change: “This decision reinforces the solidity of the process as a whole, by incorporating into the Assembly the living memory of the preparatory phase, through the presence of some of those who were its protagonists, thus restoring the image of a Church-People of God, founded on the constitutive relationship between common priesthood and ministerial priesthood, and giving visibility to the circular relationship between the prophetic function of the People of God and the discernment function of the Pastors.”

I note that that the attribution of a prophetic role to the People of God in contradistinction to “the discernment function of the Pastors” ignores the fact the bishops exercise Christ’s threefold role (*munera*) of priest, prophet and king in exercising pastoral care for the flock. Restricting their role to simply discerning what the prophetic People of God as a whole might somehow determine to be according to God’s will is a mistaken appreciation of the nature of the episcopate.

The document further states: “It is therefore in the role/function of memory that the presence of non-bishops is included, and not in that of representation. In this way, the specifically episcopal nature of the Synodal Assembly is not affected, but rather is confirmed”.

The denial of a “representative” function to the 70 non-bishop members is contradicted by document itself which earlier states that the 70 non-bishop members “have been added who represent various groupings of the faithful of the People of God.”

The Synod of Bishops had been a meeting in which selected shepherds of the Church gathered together with the chief shepherd to discuss and explore what best needs to be done to fulfill their divinely given mission to teach, sanctify and govern Christ’s flock. Now, we have a totally different assembly in which lay people who are not sacramentally conformed by holy orders to Christ the High Priest will be treated in law as equal to bishops.

The changes implemented in the Synod of Bishops ignore the essential distinction between the ordained and the non-ordained in the Church. Christ’s establishment of a hierarchical Church means that certain roles pertain to the shepherds that do not pertain to the sheep.

To create confusion in this matter by making non-bishops equal in law to bishops at the General Assembly of the Synod does harm to the Church by obscuring the roles of shepherd and sheep, creating the false impression that the hierarchical authority of the

bishops can be legitimately exercised by the non-ordained. Such an understanding would violate the divinely established nature of the Church.

2. The Working Document

The *Instrumentum Laboris* for the October Synod on Synodality, released June 20, embodies the now familiar pattern seen in the various stages of the synodal process. Certain questions are asked, others are ignored, predictable answers are given, and expectations are raised that a new Church, the Holy Spirit-inspired Synodal Church, will emerge in which everyone will feel seen, recognized, welcomed, accepted, accompanied, cared for, listened to, valued, not judged, and so on.

This emotion-centered focus is the template for the hoped-for “soft” revolution in the Church in which Catholic doctrines that contradict decadent Western sexual mores and radical feminist claims of oppression in the Church are framed as obsolete, regrettable, and needless sources of discord and alienation, as holdovers from a cruel past. These doctrines, of course, need to be jettisoned, lest anyone feel unwelcome.

At the press conference presenting the *Instrumentum Laboris*, Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich, General Rapporteur for the October General Assembly, responded to this question from Diane Montagna: “[In the *Instrumentum Laboris*] two questions are asked: How can we create spaces where those who feel hurt and unwelcomed by the community feel recognized, received, free to ask questions and not judged? In the light of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, [...] Isn’t the only possible answer to these questions that, for these people to feel accepted, the Church must change her teaching on the inherent immorality of any use of the sexual faculty outside of a lifelong and exclusive monogamous union of one man and one woman?”

Hollerich’s response reveals why this Synodal process is a disaster that is bringing great damage and sorrow to the Church: “We do not speak about the Church’s teaching. That is not our task and not our mission. We just speak to welcome everybody who wants to walk with us. That is something different.”

Different indeed. Proclaiming Catholic doctrine is not the Synod’s task or mission? What is the mission then? The *Instrumentum Laboris* states that the Synod “represents an opportunity to walk together as a Church capable of welcoming and

accompanying, accepting the necessary changes in rules, structures and procedures. The same applies to many other issues that emerge in the discussion threads.”

Among the “issues that emerge,” contested Catholic doctrines will undoubtedly be unfavorably scrutinized and found wanting by those in favor of “accepting the necessary changes.”

The Bishop of San Francisco de Macoris in the Dominican Republic, Alfredo de la Cruz, on September 18th previewed what the expression “necessary changes” might mean at the Synodal Assembly: “We must first distance ourselves from everything that fundamentalism signifies, from believing that doctrine can’t be touched. That would be the first temptation we would have, to believe that doctrine can’t be touched. Doctrine is there in order to reflect, to see.”

The *Instrumentum Laboris* observes that: “[s]ome of the questions that emerged from the consultation of the People of God concern issues on which there is already magisterial and theological teaching to be considered... The fact that questions continue to emerge on issues like these should not be hastily dismissed, rather, it calls for discernment, and the Synodal Assembly is a privileged forum for so doing.

In particular, the obstacles, real or perceived, that have prevented the steps indicated by previous documents from being realized should be considered and reflections offered on how they can be removed... If, on the other hand, the problem stems from the difficulty of grasping the implications of the documents in ordinary situations or an inability of persons to recognize themselves in what is proposed, a synodal journey of effective reception by the People of God could be the appropriate response... This requires further reflection on the Deposit of Faith and the living Tradition of the Church.”

Is the judgment of the truth of Catholic teaching dependent upon everyone’s ability “to recognize themselves in what is proposed”? What does the concept of “effective reception by the people of God” mean? Who decides that there is a “changed reality or situations” that “requires” what is euphemistically called “further reflection on the Deposit of Faith and the living Tradition of the Church?”

In the new synodal Church it is the people who instruct the bishops on the meaning of the Faith: “Since consulting the local Churches is an effective way to listen to the People of God, the Pastors’ discernment takes on the character of a collegial act that can authoritatively confirm what the Spirit has spoken to the Church through the People

of God's sense of faith."

Indeed, the Synodal Assembly's "task will be to open the whole Church to welcome the voice of the Holy Spirit." What if a bishop does not go along with a supposed manifestation of the Holy Spirit's will, expressed through the voice of the people?

The *Instrumentum Laboris* does not want such uncooperative behavior on the part of bishops to happen: "in order not to remain merely a paper exercise or to be wholly dependent on the goodwill of individuals [*read here*: bishops], co-responsibility in the mission deriving from Baptism must take on concrete structural forms. Adequate institutional frameworks are therefore necessary, along with spaces in which community discernment can be practiced on a regular basis. This should not be read as a demand for a redistribution of power, but the need for the effective exercise of co-responsibility that flows from Baptism."

Really? It is blatantly such a demand.

The *Instrumentum Laboris* lists topics that have come up in the various stages of synodal consultations. Included are the following: war, climate change, "an economic system that produces exploitation, inequality and a throwaway culture," cultural colonialism, religious persecution, "aggressive secularization," sexual abuse and "the abuse of power, conscience and money."

It is striking and troubling that abortion, euthanasia, physician-assisted suicide, the spread of atheism, relativism, subjectivism, religious indifference, gender ideology, the redefinition of marriage in the laws of many Western states, coercive programs to impose contraception in the global south are not listed. Neither are the crises regarding sacramental practice in the Church today: the steep decline in Mass attendance, the practical disappearance of sacramental confession in many places, the decline in baptisms, confirmations and marriages, and the serious decline in the number of priestly ordinations in the Western world.

Nowhere do we find any mention of the Church's paramount mission: the salvation of souls. There is not a hint that what is most important in the life of the Church is the preaching of God's gift of eternal life, Christ's call to conversion and repentance.

The *Instrumentum Laboris* asks: "How can we create spaces where those who feel hurt by the Church and unwelcomed by the community feel recognized, received, free to

ask questions and not judged? In the light of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, what concrete steps are needed to welcome those who feel excluded from the Church because of their status or sexuality (for example, remarried divorcees, people in polygamous marriages, LGBTQ+ people, etc.)?”

The use of the acronym LGBTQ+ is wrong; it gives the mistaken impression that the Church teaches that God created distinct categories of human beings with the intention that they would engage in sexual acts that are non-procreative, or would be trapped in the wrong body, or whatever + stands for.

The trendy conceit of “creating spaces” for people who reject various teachings of the Church gives the impression that they are not “safe” whenever they are reminded that their behavior is immoral according to God’s law. Is being hurt by the truth a problem? Is not such pain a purifying moment, a grace from God, who challenges us to examine ourselves according to the demands of his law, and not according to our own often mistaken choices? People who reject the Church’s teaching may claim to be unwelcomed by fellow believers. It is not they who are rejected, but rather it is their immoral behavior that is rightly stigmatized.

Why should the Church create a “space” where *polygamists* may feel “not judged?” The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches this about polygamy: “polygamy is not in accord with the moral law. [Conjugal] communion is radically contradicted by polygamy; this, in fact, directly negates the plan of God” (#2387). What more is there to discuss?

The *Instrumentum Laboris* endorses the discontent of those women who want to be ordained to the diaconate. The Church has already studied this proposal, and rejected it as not being possible.

There is a call for a discussion to end mandatory celibacy for priests in the Latin Church. This persistent agitation for married priests seeks a result that would do grave damage to the mission of the Church as Pope Emeritus Benedict and Cardinal Robert Sarah demonstrated in their book *From the Depths of Our Hearts*.

The *Instrumentum Laboris* does ask this important question: “How can the Churches remain in dialogue with the world without becoming worldly?” The clear answer is: remain faithful to Christ and his doctrine, especially when it is opposed by those who want to change various teachings of the Church in the name of making people feel welcomed and accepted.

The Church of “Me, Myself and I,” where each person recognizes himself in his personally curated set of beliefs, may promise satisfaction. In fact, it’s a make-believe, delusional religion of self-worship in which God is relegated to the role of the Divine Affirmer of whatever each one decides to believe. God spare us from such an outcome.

3. Roots of the current crisis in the Church

Without waiting for the Synodal Assembly to take up the discussion of how to take “concrete steps are needed to welcome those who feel excluded from the Church because of their status or sexuality,” the Archbishop of Berlin, Heiner Koch, recently authorized priests in his archdiocese to confer ceremonial blessings upon homosexual couples.

Strangely, he also announced that he himself would not impart such blessings until he receives explicit permission from Pope Francis. He seems to be confident that such permission will someday be given, yet he’s certainly not unaware that Pope Francis personally approved in 2021 the publication of a teaching document of the *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith* forbidding such blessings.

Koch knows this practice plainly contradicts Church doctrine and has thus never been authorized, yet he thinks that pastoral governance includes the right to disregard his sworn obligation to uphold the teachings of the Faith and to obey the law of the Church. Instead, he wants his priests to engage in the blasphemous practice of conducting a religious ceremony in which they ask God to pour out his grace upon gravely sinful unions publicly entered into for the purpose of engaging in unnatural sexual acts that are unequivocally condemned in the revealed word of God.

How did we arrive at such a point in the Church? Koch and those who applaud his infidelity clearly no longer believe in Church teaching on the right use of the sexual faculty, but also the Church’s claim to teach God’s saving truth without error. They assert

that the Church has, in fact, been mistaken all along, and that 180-degree changes in doctrine are normal and nothing to worry about.

So far Pope Francis has not instructed Archbishop Koch to reverse course, nor has he reaffirmed, despite the very public rejection of Catholic teaching by various churchmen, about the inherent immorality of homosexual acts and the consequent impossibility of blessing homosexual unions. In fact, various churchmen guilty of such infidelity have been promoted by Pope Francis to positions of authority and influence.

The phenomenon of dissent from Church teaching is fairly described as the liberal Catholic project, in the sense proposed by John Henry Newman in his 1879 Biglietto Speech: "Liberalism in religion is the doctrine that there is no positive truth in religion, but that one creed is as good as another, and this is the teaching which is gaining substance and force daily. It is inconsistent with any recognition of any religion, as true. It teaches that all are to be tolerated, for all are matters of opinion. Revealed religion is not a truth, but a sentiment and a taste; not an objective fact, not miraculous; and it is the right of each individual to make it say just what strikes his fancy."

The liberal project further consists of the effort to do away with Catholicism as a dogmatic revealed religion centered upon the eternal salvation of souls and remake it into a religion of human benevolence promoting personal fulfillment, social harmony, and material well-being.

Eternal salvation for everyone is now assumed. God is too good and loving to condemn anyone to Hell. Jesus should not be taken literally when he speaks about souls being punished eternally. This is obviously a bracing, if puzzling, type of hyperbole to get people's attention, not something we should take literally.

Belief in unchangeable doctrines that must be believed in order to be saved is an artifact of a forgettable past in which believers were naively fixated upon the mistaken notion that Christ's teaching is the only divinely revealed, and hence normative, way to live in union with God. God would never be so exclusive. He is the inclusive God who loves everyone just as they are. Any Church doctrine or law that creates barriers and separates people from each other must be cast aside.

The present crisis in the Church is the result of this liberal project gaining the upper hand due to the decision of Pope Francis not to treat it as the mortal threat that it is. Rather, he grants the proponents of the liberal project great freedom to sow doubt and confusion among the faithful, all the while condemning those who resist this project

as “reactionaries,” stigmatizing them as nostalgic, if not unbalanced, “backwardists” who suffer from an unhealthy attachment to an ideology.

The Synod on Synodality promises to be the long-awaited opportunity to attempt once and for all to bury Catholicism centered upon the eternal salvation of souls in Christ, and replace it with the new and improved Catholicism of judgment-free human coexistence in which the paramount goal is to make everyone feel included, appreciated and affirmed in whatever personal choices they make in life, unless one chooses to embrace Catholicism centered upon the eternal salvation of souls in Christ.

In conclusion, the Synodal Assembly has the potential to cause immense harm to the life and mission of the Church. It is our duty in obedience to God’s revelation and in charity for souls to resist steadfastly any attempts to change the teaching of the Church that may emerge from this Synodal Assembly.