

CHURCH/ECUMENISM – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Synodality
 Convener: Jakob Karl Rinderknecht, University of the Incarnate Word
 Moderator: Kathryn L. Reinhard, Gwynedd Mercy University
 Presenters: Brian P. Flanagan, Marymount University
 Patrick Hornbeck, Fordham University
 Phyllis Zagano, Hofstra University

The panel began with twenty-minute presentations, followed by conversation among panelists and the attendees.

Brian Flanagan’s presentation, “Synodality Beyond Collegiality,” argued that synodality is generally conceived as a form or a development of episcopal collegiality. Conceiving of it in this way, however, strongly limits the practice of synodality, which must attend not only to the collaboration of bishops with each other but involve bishops in conversation and discernment with lay Catholics, and indeed all people of good will. Arguing that the Eucharistic assembly is the primary analogue for considering a synod (which as a kind of liturgy is “celebrated” not “held”), we can see how Vatican II’s ecclesologies rooted in baptism lead to synodality. If the church is analyzed in terms of “One; Some; All,” there are various necessary roles in the assembly that match up with primacy, collegiality, and synodality. As in the liturgy, all of these roles are necessary for a full celebration, and therefore, there is both a right and a duty for all the baptized to participate according to their various roles. When we consider synodality in this fashion, both papal primacy and episcopal collegiality find their meanings not primarily in relationship to each other, but in the context of the whole people of God celebrating the mystery of the church.

Patrick Hornbeck’s paper was titled “Synodality and/with Disaffiliated Catholics” and argued that when those within the church see disaffiliated Catholics (or other Catholics with liminal relationships with the institutional church) as a problem to be understood and solved, true synodality is impossible. Although empirical studies of the causes and dynamics of disaffiliation have not been as comprehensive or reflective of racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity as one might hope, the extent of disaffiliation from the Roman Catholic Church is clear. A recent Pew Forum study indicated that nationwide, only 59 percent of U.S. adults who were raised Catholic continue to affiliate with the church.

Existing synodal processes at the diocesan, national, and global levels are not likely to reach disaffiliated Catholics for reasons both intentional and inadvertent. At the same time, Catholic theologies and canonical regimes concerning membership and belonging in the church do not leave adequate room for the judgments of conscience that many disaffiliated individuals have made. Therefore, synodal processes should focus on developing new categories and pastorally sensitive language for those whose relationships with the church do not cohere with the expectations of the magisterium. Room should be made for people to name their journeys, struggles, and joys; representatives of the church should not presume that the “right” outcome is that a person who has disaffiliated rejoins the church in a normative way; and the experiences of disaffiliated Catholics should inform theological, canonical, and pastoral work.

Phyllis Zagano presented a paper titled “The Problem with Synodality,” in which she argued that the problem of synodality is synodality. The messy engagement beyond habitual patterns of consultation have been halting and even sometimes begrudging. Looking at recent synodal processes, especially the Synod on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment (2018), and the early data from the present synod, Zagano noted the strong emphasis on the linked questions of clericalism and the place of women in the church whenever the laity are asked to discern a way forward. She noted that in the 2018 synod, the paragraph which appeared to receive the most negative feedback from voting members, all bishops, was called “the synodal form of the church,” and focused on the idea that all the people of God participate in the life and mission of the church. Taken together with the spotty participation on behalf of dioceses and parishes in synodal processes, it is not difficult to discern a clerical distrust of a process that listens to and discerns with outsiders, lay persons, and specifically women. And yet this is precisely what practicing synodality attempts to do. In order to become synodal, the ministerial church will have to trust the whole people of God to be travelling companions on the way.

After the three papers, lively conversation began, centered on the various experiences of how synodality was beginning to be practiced in various local churches. One repeated emphasis was the difficulty of synodal processes, but analogy was made to a church, having once been a marathoner, now getting off the couch and going for a bad first run in the name of making a start. There was also extensive discussion of the category of “membership” and how it limits what Vatican II describes as “communion,” capable of wide varieties of kinds of participation, to a single binary category.

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