

Pope Francis and the Synod: Recovering our history to reform the Church

If Church history is forgotten or overlooked then it will be impossible to reform the Church, argues Massimo Faggioli

[Massimo Faggioli](#)



Pope Francis during the opening ceremony for the Synod of Bishops' special assembly for the Pan-Amazon Region, St. Peter Basilica, Vatican City. (Photo by PHOTOSHOT/MAXPPP)

Pope Leo XIII opened the doors of the [Vatican Secret Archives](#) in 1881 to give scholars access to – but also to defend – the historical records of the papacy, one of the longest serving religious-political institutions in the world.

Access is carefully regulated. And it often takes a certain amount time for some particular truths to emerge.

This is what happened a few years ago with Fr. José Oscar Beozzo of Brazil, one of the most eminent historians of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

Vatican II and the *virī probati*

With the help of Vatican archivists, he discovered important material in the Secret Archives that is especially pertinent to the discussion on priestly celibacy currently taking place in Rome at the Synod of Bishops' special assembly for the Pan-Amazon Region (Oct. 6-27).

It is well known that Pope Paul VI prohibited the bishops attending Vatican II from debating mandatory celibacy and the possibility of married priests. What is lesser known is that the pope invited the council fathers to send him their suggestions and ideas if they wished.

The details are documented in the archives' section on Vatican II in a box (No. 529) that is labeled, *De coelibatu ecclesiastico* (on ecclesiastical celibacy).

It consists of more than 200 pages. And among these papers, there are studies on the difference between the Eastern and Western (Latin) Churches regarding mandatory priestly celibacy, with a special emphasis on the rights of communities deprived of the Eucharistic celebration because of the scarcity of priests. One of the proposals raised during Vatican II to remedy the situation was the ordination of *virī probati* (married men of proven virtue).

Although it was well known that Paul VI had taken the discussion of clerical celibacy off the table at the council, very few people were aware of the existence of these archived papers. No one began to study them until 2013.

In other words, there was a collective memory still functioning concerning Vatican II and the history of mandatory priestly celibacy in the Catholic Church. But this memory seems to have dissolved, at least that's the sense one gets by reading statements that some churchmen – and in particular certain cardinals – have issued regarding the current Synod assembly.

Take Cardinal Gerhard Müller, for example. The former prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in an interview published Oct. 10 in the Italian daily *La Repubblica*, put priestly celibacy on the same level of dogma and divine law.

Historical amnesia and the longstanding tradition of married priests

This lapse of memory at the highest levels in the Catholic Church (fortunately not in Pope Francis) is one of the obstacles on the path towards reform.

It is a willful amnesia that takes the form of denial or silence regarding the fact that recent popes – from Pius XII to Benedict XVI – have welcomed married priests from non-Catholic Churches and created special provisions for them.

Such arrangements have shown that clerical celibacy is a human law, rather than a divine one, and it can be changed.

But the most shocking and deliberate erasure from our collective and institutional memory is the fact that there are Catholic Churches – of the Eastern tradition – that never had – and still do not have – mandatory priestly celibacy.

This kind of memory lapse concerning celibacy and the priesthood is part of a more general problem with memory in the Catholic Church today. And it has become particularly evident each time Pope Francis calls into session the Synod of Bishops.

First of all, there is a vacuum of historical and theological scholarship about the Synod itself; i.e. what a Synod of the Catholic Church is. A simple search in a database or an online catalogue of booksellers confirms the lack of interest on this subject by experts in the English-speaking world.

Giving lip service to collegiality and ignoring synodality

But there is also a larger institutional obliviousness about synods and synodality in the Catholic Church. In the last 60 years, thanks to Vatican Council II, Catholic ecclesiology has been quite consumed with *episcopal collegiality* – the idea that the Bishop of Rome governs the universal Church in collaboration with all the bishops.

The laws that the popes have promulgated in the post-conciliar period, and especially the 1983 code of canon law, have strengthened episcopal collegiality, at least rhetorically. But the popes of the post-Vatican II era have really not delivered on the council's promise for a more collegial Church.

Moreover, while the 1983 code deals with episcopal collegiality, it gives no attention to synodality at all. It does not afford any active role for the faithful in the decision-making processes of the Church, other than their right to express opinions and be heard.

The current code of canon law is an example of the institutional amnesia of *ecclesial synodality*, which is not less traditional than episcopal collegiality or a recent innovation.

Actually, synodality – the principle of involving the whole People of God in important decision-making moments for the life of the Church – is at least as old as the idea and practice of episcopal collegiality.

For example, in the fifth century Pope Celestine I decreed that no bishop could be given to a local Church that does not want him. That is, no bishop could be imposed without the consensus of the local diocese.

A bureaucratic Church and clericalism

Many laws in the first millennium embodied a fundamental synodal element in the way the Church governed itself. These were included in the *Decretum Gratiani* (12th century), the most important collection of laws and practices for medieval Catholicism.

But this was the Church in the Middle Ages, where – paradoxically – the hierarchical structure was less clerical than today.

Beginning with the early modern period, this synodal element was gradually expunged from the life of the Church. As Catholicism began to organize itself along the model of bureaucracies it required a special kind of Church bureaucrats. These were the bishops. Thus, episcopalism replaced synodality.

Vatican II offered implicit resources for a renewed understanding of the ancient models of synodality. But in practice it boosted episcopal collegiality; and with it episcopalism, which is part of the problem of clericalism.

Pope Francis, synodality and Church reform

Things began to change with the election of Pope Francis. His focus on synodality is not just about a spirituality of dialogue and discernment typical of the Jesuits. It is also inseparable from his refusal to be the pope of a Catholic Church known only for its statements on sexual morality.

Francis' recovery of synodality is also a recovery of an idea of the Church as a people "together on a path" (*syn-odos*). This life of the Church as a people journeying together cannot be reduced to a syllabus of ethical or esthetical values.

In the life of a synodal Catholic Church the liturgical dimension is central, and decision-making processes are never just legal or bureaucratic procedures. They are always liturgical moments, as well.

That is why the Synod assembly for the Pan-Amazon Region is not just about what kind of ministry is possible and who can exercise it – men or women, married or celibate, clerical or lay. It is also about what the Catholic Church would become in the absence of sacramental life; that is, if such a thing were even possible.

The recent attempts to erase synodality from the institutional memory of the Catholic Church are a consequence of the attempts to reduce Christianity to a moral code for the Western world. This moralization of Catholicism entails a certain kind of individualism in Catholicism.

The institutional forgetfulness of Church history as the history of a people is one of the symptoms of this trend. By denying that something can and must change in the Church is also a way of denying that the Church has a history as a people, a collective history.

If Church history is forgotten or overlooked then it will be impossible to reform the Church. Reform is never only about the individual. It is also a call to the Church as a people with a history. This is why the Synod assemblies under Pope Francis are the most important and telling moments in his pontificate.

They are reconnecting the Church with the wide variety of Catholic experiences throughout the world of today. And they are also delving into the Church's history where synodality has deep roots.