

From Synodality to a creative pastoral approach

How the Amazon Synod might have brought forth a new movement of the Spirit

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Pope Francis celebrates Mass at the end of the Synod, at the Vatican, Oct. 27. (Photo by UPDATE IMAGES PRESS/Riccardo De Luca/MaxPPP)

Journalists and commentators have been spilling a lot of ink over the recently ended "Amazon Synod." And, naturally, they are mostly focusing on these three items that emerged from the Oct. 6-27 gathering:



1. The Synod Fathers' recommendation that married men who are already permanent deacons be ordained to the presbyterate (priesthood) in certain cases.
2. The request for further study on how to formally recognize ministries carried out by women, including the possibility of allowing them to become deacons.
3. The Synod assembly's suggestion that people of the Pan-Amazon region be allowed to develop a liturgical rite that better incorporates religious elements and expressions unique to their culture.

These recommendations, which all passed by at least a 2/3 margin among the 184 voting members, have deeply alarmed certain Catholics who boast of being "orthodox" and "faithful."

Ignorance of Church history and theology or just mendacity?

The journalists among them have been saying apocalyptically that Pope Francis would fall into heresy if he were to implement the suggestions that came out of his "rigged" Synod assembly.

The pope has already indicated that he will, in some way or another, advance these three proposals (among several others).

But claims that this would be a break with Church tradition are false. And those who make them – including presbyters and even some bishops and cardinals – must be ignorant of history and theology.

Otherwise, they are doing nothing else but engaging in that unique form of Trump-like mendacity where one repeats lies often and earnestly enough until people are convinced they are true.

First of all, Francis is not moving to end the celibate priesthood. Yes, he is opening a path that many reform-minded Catholics hope will lead, eventually, to the discontinuation of *mandatory* celibacy for diocesan priests.

This is not a break with tradition, nor is it heretical. It is actually a recovery of the oldest tradition in the Church – a priesthood of both married and celibate men.

Secondly, there is a wide body of evidence that women served as deacons in the early centuries of Christianity, though how and under what conditions seems to be a matter of further research.

And there are Orthodox Churches (with a big O) that have embraced this tradition and have reintroduced the female diaconate.

And, thirdly, in regards to the possibility of creating a special Amazonian liturgy (liturgical rite), this is also solidly in continuity – and is not a break – with the oldest Christian tradition.

The Amazon Synod marks an important shift

Still, the "orthodox" Catholics (with a small o) are acting like these are novel innovations. They clearly are not.

But there is one thing these alarmists are dead right about – the Synod of Bishops' special assembly for the Pan-Amazonian Region has marked an important shift.

As [*La Croix's Isabelle de Gaulmyn*](#) noted perceptively in a recent article, this assembly "clearly signaled the end of nearly five centuries" of Tridentine Catholicism.

"We are still, consciously or unconsciously, largely dependent on this Council (of Trent)... (which) structured Catholicism around the figure of the priest," she wrote.

"The cleric, one single person, then becomes the central character. He concentrates on his person all the sacred functions, starting from the Eucharist and confession. This concept of the

ideal priest – the "holy priest" identified with Christ, placed above the faithful and condemning them to be nothing more than a simple flock of docile sheep – has deeply marked the mentality of all Catholics, and has greatly favored the prevailing 'clericalism', including among the laity."

A Church more centered on the cultic priesthood than the Eucharist

This one paragraph sums up the type of Church and model of ordained priesthood that many Catholics – and not just the so-called traditionalist – want to preserve.

Whether it is out of nostalgia or a clericalist mentality, they do not want the Church they have always known to become "protestantized," an anti-ecumenical phrase that even too many bishops carelessly use.

Catholics believe that the Eucharist is the "source and summit" (*fons et culmen*) of the Church's life and activity. Yet, as Gaulmyn points out, the Tridentine ethos has created a mentality and model of Church that, effectively, is more centered on the male cultic priest (*sacerdos*) than on the Eucharist.

She notes that even in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), this model and mentality are still solidly in place. But is she right that this latest Synod gathering marks the beginning of its end?

Married male priests: a way to block women?

Not all reform-minded Catholics are convinced. One of the most articulate, if not painful, expressions of that appeared in an article by history professor Sara McDougall in the [New York Times](#). It was titled, "Catholic Bishops Agree: Anything but a Woman."

McDougall argued that the Roman Church's all-male hierarchy will do absolutely anything – even relax the longstanding discipline of clerical celibacy and all the horrors they fear that could cause – to keep the door to a female priesthood firmly shut and bolted. And she believes that allowing married men to become presbyters would, in fact, ensure that.

But would that be the case? Let's presume that, no matter how long it takes, married priests will at some point become a normal part of Catholic life.

And let us presume that many, if not most, of these married priests will have children. Some of them will be girls. And what will happen when the daughters tell their ordained fathers that they, too, feel called to the priesthood?

Or even more significantly, what will happen when these married presbyters (and their congregations) are the ones who tell the daughters that they show signs of a vocation to the ordained priesthood?

This gets to the heart of the communal discernment of charisms or gifts of the Holy Spirit. And it would also include identifying those, among the People of God, who possess the gifts of leadership, preaching, teaching and so forth.

In the synodal Church that Pope Francis is trying to bring forth, such communal discernment would be a necessary component. And discerning who has the gifts to carry out the various ministries would be an essential task of the community.

This would be what the pope likes to call a creative pastoral approach. It does not exist right now, but it could.

Next week we will ponder what it might look like as synodality takes root in the Church.

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