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Ulrich Richental, 'Bishops debating with the pope at the Council of Constance,' c. 1460 (Rosgartenmuseum/Wikimedia Commons)

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Discussions of synodality are about the future—about charting a path forward for Catholicism, from the individual Catholic to the parish community to the universal Church. But these discussions inevitably appeal to the past: to the testimony of Scripture, the practice of the early Church, medieval triumphs and tragedies, and, most of all, to Vatican II and its contested reception. When the conversation turns to history, however, it is rarely acknowledged that the Catholic Church's own tradition of synodal governance endured into the early modern era and functioned as a powerful counter-narrative to the centralized ultramontane model we live with today. Indeed, the evolution of the papacy into its modern form—as an infallible teacher of doctrine with direct jurisdictional authority over every other bishop and the entire Church—owes at least as much to internal Catholic ecclesiastical battles at the dawn of modernity as it does to stimuli outside the Church, such as secularization and the growth of nation states.

The First Vatican Council in 1870 punctuated the ascendancy of this new view of the papacy. The dramatic ecclesiastical victory of Pius IX, a pope who did not balk at equating himself with the Church and even with Tradition itself, also marked the shipwreck of the once-mighty conciliarist tradition. That shipwreck was near-total, but the wreckage of conciliarist thought survived on firmly orthodox shores. Among this wreckage were concepts that Catholics never totally lost sight of and, throughout the twentieth century, brought back to the fore: episcopal collegiality, the baptismal priesthood of the laity, the *sensus fidelium*, and ecclesial reception. This is why Yves Congar rightly called Vatican I's defeated conciliarist minority "the vanguard of Vatican II."

Rather than handling our own past with honesty, our institutional memory as Catholics is too often retooled to fit ideological goals. Gleeful progressives can be as guilty of this as the most defensive and narrow traditionalists. We cannot learn from our past failures—or even our successes—unless we look at the Church's history with both *parrhesia* and humility. For the Church, as for any family, facing the past honestly often involves dredging up memories that were suppressed.

Our discussions of synodality suffer from historical amnesia. One important reason Pope Francis's desire to relaunch synodality for the contemporary Church has taken herculean efforts—and been met with such dogged and at times vicious resistance—is that some of this pope's predecessors were so effective in suppressing and defanging it. Of course, amnesia is not the only problem that Catholic discourse on synodality suffers from; it is also afflicted by polarization and triumphalism. Recovering suppressed memories about our own conciliarist past will not instantly solve these other problems. Still, we should face the future equipped with an honest account of how we got where we are.

American Catholics seem particularly prone to sarcasm and bewilderment when discussing Pope Francis's call for synodality. Some express (or feign?) total confusion, claiming they don't even know what the term "synodality" means. From the pages of *First Things* to numerous YouTube channels to EWTN to the peculiar derangements of Catholic Twitter, hands are thrown up in frustration at the Synod on Synodality. Some of these skeptics see this month's synod as too self-referential, and gloomily forecast that its outcome will either emerge stillborn or lead to further divisions. Less measured critics see the Synod on Synodality as the culmination of a deliberate and heretical program of subversion. An extreme but by no means insignificant group of critics think that either the pope himself is a heretic or is at least willfully blind to the widespread advance of heresy.

My own outlook about the synod is one of optimism and hope. I think Pope Francis's emphasis on synodality is a positive development, an attempt to recover an ancient ecclesiology with deep biblical and patristic roots. Nevertheless, I believe that the confusion, if not the vitriol, one finds in many pews and rectories of the American Church is understandable and should be taken seriously.

What explains it? For one thing, a rather wooden "hermeneutic of continuity" became predominant in catechesis, apologetics, and large segments of ecclesial life in our national church. This was especially the case in the twilight years of John Paul II and throughout the pontificate of Benedict XVI, even though the latter made it clear that the reforms of Vatican II were in continuity and discontinuity ^[2] with past teaching and practice, albeit "on different levels." Our seminaries emphasize a philosophical grounding for the Catholic faith but too often neglect Church history, glossing over its complexity and messiness. In U.S. ecclesial circles, Church history is frequently reduced to apologetics, or presented as a series of hagiographic tableaux and "anti-Catholic myths" to be debunked. Our seminaries emphasize a philosophical grounding for the Catholic faith but too often neglect Church history, glossing over its complexity and messiness.

It's no wonder, then, that synodality is hard for many good "orthodox" American Catholics to wrap their heads around. Converts and reverts catechized in a certain way can feel like they've been sold a bill of goods. If the Church—that is, the hierarchy or the magisterium—doesn't *already* possess "the Truth" in its fullness, or can't adequately communicate it, then why be Catholic at all, they may wonder? What use is a purportedly infallible pope and magisterium? Why not practice another type of Christianity, or even forsake the Christian faith entirely? Such a thought process would probably strike many other

Catholics as reductive. But those who work in seminaries, university chaplaincies, and many other forms of ministry in the United States are sure to come across such queries from devout and entirely sincere young people.

Pope Francis has certainly brought a number of ecclesial tensions to the surface, and the reception (or rejection) of Vatican II is relevant to them all. Nevertheless, the basic ecclesiological pressure points flaring up in discussions of synodality have much deeper histories. It is often pointed out that the documents of Vatican II—and *Lumen gentium* in particular—contain two ecclesiologies, which sit together rather awkwardly. As the Jesuit historian Klaus Schatz wrote: “The ecclesiology of *jurisdictio*, or rather that of Vatican I, and the still older and now rediscovered ecclesiology of *communio* are placed side by side [at Vatican II] but remain unconnected.”

Can we then speak of *the* ecclesiology of Vatican II? The council majority strove to overturn a neo-scholastic and ultramontane juridicism that had become stifling. The fountainheads of that ecclesiology were in the medieval and early modern periods. Inspired by *ressourcement* theology, the majority bloc tried to sketch a “communion” ecclesiology that was essentially patristic. But they were only partially successful. As young Joseph Ratzinger observed just after the council, however one interprets *Lumen gentium*’s “explanatory note”—an ultramontane appendix called the *Nota praevia*, tacked on by papal fiat at the last minute—that coda certainly did not strengthen the council’s affirmation of episcopal collegiality, much less help give it any institutional shape. It is revealing that the anxieties of the council minority, once so alarmed by the doctrine of episcopal collegiality, largely dissipated once they had seen the explanatory note. On the question of centralized Roman authority à la Vatican I, “the minority never really lost control,” wrote John O’Malley, SJ. In fact, as recent decades have “irrefutably demonstrated,” the Roman center “emerged even stronger” after the council.

The relationship between patristic *communio* and ultramontane juridicism at Vatican II was thus “oddly asymmetrical,” to quote the historian Francis Oakley. “Something, one cannot help thinking, some mediating form perhaps, is missing,” Oakley suggested. “And something, indeed, is missing.” Because of this lacuna, it is difficult to blame those Catholics who claim that to question or even oppose synodality is not to reject Vatican II. Many such people have defensible and sincerely held readings of the council documents.

These doubts notwithstanding, I read Francis’s project of synodality as both a further implementation of Vatican II and an attempt to smooth over the council’s “odd asymmetry.” The evidence of that asymmetry in Vatican II’s documents is often explained in terms of the politics of compromise, the practical limits of the possible for the reformist party, the shadow of Vatican I, or “Pope Paul’s red pen” (i.e., Paul VI swooping in with interventions like the *Nota praevia*). These are all good explanations as far as they go. But a deeper understanding of this asymmetry becomes possible if we take a close look at the centuries-old roots of the tensions, confusions, and ambiguities that plague Catholic discourse on synodality.

Some critics claim that the term “synodality” is still undefined or even meaningless. In fact, the meaning of the term is quite simple, and its proponents have adequately explained it many times over for anyone with ears to hear. Nevertheless, it is worth asking why a two-thousand-year-old Church must resort to a neologism in order to describe an ecclesiological practice that has such an ancient pedigree. I think the answer to that question hides in plain view. Technically, “synod” is a synonym for “council,” though today we almost always use “council” to denote only a general or ecumenical council (Nicaea, Trent, etc.), while “synod” typically refers to something smaller or less authoritative. The Greek “synod” has a biblical, patristic, and Eastern flavor; the Latin “council” is distinctly Western. However, until very recently, “synod” was often used interchangeably with “council”—twentieth-century theology manuals spoke of the errors of the “Council of Pistoia,” a diocesan synod, while Vatican II referred to itself many times as “this sacred synod.” While Pope Francis is clearly willing to ruffle feathers, he knows that promoting “the conciliar path,” “conciliarity,” or a “council on conciliarity” might be too messy even for him. The legacy of “conciliarism” as a purportedly heretical alternative not just to ultramontanism but to papal primacy itself is too deeply embedded in the DNA of post-Vatican I Catholicism. Very old things brought forth from the storeroom of tradition must sometimes be given new names.

This very old tradition of Catholic ecclesiology offered, among other things, a “constitutionalist” framework for Church governance. This “conciliarist constitutionalism” is Oakley’s missing link, the “mediating form,” between the papal juridic tradition, which dominated at Vatican I, and the patristic *communio* tradition, which reasserted itself at Vatican II. Both arise organically from the scriptures and the tradition of the Church. Neither tradition can or should defeat the other. What is urgently needed is to strike a balance between them that still allows for real consultation and deliberative decision-making in which all the baptized participate under their bishops, who are united in hierarchical communion with the bishop of Rome. Pope Francis clearly sees this need. But how can we Catholics “hope to erect a future capable of enduring,” to quote the haunting final line in Oakley’s study of conciliarism, if we “persist in trying to do so on the foundation of a past that never truly was?” While Pope Francis is clearly willing to ruffle feathers, he knows that promoting “the conciliar path,” “conciliarity,” or a “council on conciliarity” might be too messy even for him.

The International Theological Commission’s (ITC) 2018 document on synodality attempted to trace the history of synodality from Scripture and the early Church to the present. Though it did not smear the conciliarist tradition as heretical, as others have, the ITC document evinces an unmistakable discomfort with this legacy. It cites the medieval Catholic principle that “what affects everyone should be discussed and approved by all,” an arrangement that Yves Congar praised as “a concrete regime of association and agreement.” The ITC cautions, however, that “this axiom should not be understood in the sense of conciliarism on the ecclesiological level” (article 65).

In truth, monuments to conciliarist ecclesiology dot the landscape of the past millennium of Catholic history, but the ITC seems not quite sure what to do with them. The Council of Constance ^[3] (1414–1418), which applied conciliarist ecclesiology to the crisis brought on by three men claiming to be pope, is discussed in article 34 of the ITC document. But conciliarism itself is described as an overreaction to that crisis. The Council of Constance, we are told, solved the papal schism by applying emergency canonical measures, *not* by doing what the council itself proclaimed it was doing in the decree *Haec sancta*—that is, representing the universal Church in a general council that received its authority directly from Christ.

The ITC then equates *conciliarism* with attempts to “impose a permanent council over and above the primatial authority of the Pope.” This is presumably a reference to Constance’s decree *Frequens*, which called for convening an ecumenical council every ten years, a stipulation the papacy deeply feared, reluctantly accepted, and later ignored. The council fathers at Constance saw the regular convening of councils not *just* as a way to prevent ecclesial despotism, or as a device for dealing with exceptional situations, such as several men all claiming to be pope. No, frequent synodal consultation and deliberation was envisioned by Constance as the normal mode for healthy Church governance. But article 34 of the ITC’s 2018 document describes such conciliarism as an innovation contrary to papal primacy and therefore “not in conformity with Tradition,” rather than as a very old ecclesiological tradition that existed alongside others and was enshrined in the texts of ecumenical councils.

Some of the ecclesiological problems that arose in this troubling epoch of Church history remain unresolved. We find traces of this history of ecclesial trauma in odd and interesting places. For example, today the official list of valid popes in the *Annuario Pontificio* excludes those elected by the Council of Pisa (1409), a conciliarist attempt to solve the papal schism just prior to Constance. And yet when the notorious Rodrigo Borgia was elected pope in 1492, he took the name Alexander VI rather than V, even though Alexander V (d. 1410) was elected by the Council of Pisa in opposition to the Roman pope, Gregory XII. Consequently, the official list of popes rather suspiciously jumps from Alexander IV to Alexander VI.

As late as 1958, Giuseppe Roncalli hesitated before choosing the name John upon his election as pope. Was he the twenty-third or twenty-fourth of that name? (Alexander V’s successor in the Pisan line had taken the name John XXIII.) When Papa Roncalli finally decided he would bear the name John XXIII, he made clear he was passing no definitive judgment on any thorny questions arising from the

conciliarist era. The curial editors of the *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* suffered from no such reticence. They made sure to strike this record of Good Pope John's humility from the official published text of his speech.

The ITC document made no attempt to untangle these historical and theological knots, which may be regarded as little more than curiosities. But stranger gaps and silences show up in the ITC's historical sketch. The document moves on to the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic response to it in the Council of Trent. The post-Tridentine diocesan and provincial synods, especially those of St. Charles Borromeo in Milan, are rightly highlighted. What *isn't* mentioned is that, while the council fathers at Trent envisioned diocesan synods and regional councils as principal mechanisms for Church reform, the papal bull confirming Trent's decrees made no mention of synods. Through deft maneuvering, the pope and Curia managed to seize *deutungshoheit* ^[4] (interpretative sovereignty) over the Council. A key move to this end was the Roman creation of the Congregation for the Council. The *meaning* of Trent—what it meant to be faithful to Trent and thus to Catholic orthodoxy—came to be defined by Rome. For bishops and local churches, to quote Ulrich Lehner, “reception became equivalent with observance.”

It is thus unsurprising that in the ITC document a conspicuous silence hangs over the entire seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The story is not really picked up again until the First Vatican Council in 1870, nearly three hundred years later. By that time, Cardinal Manning could confidently claim “ultramontanism is Catholic Christianity”—an assertion that would have been laughed at in the eighteenth century. By 1870, though, the remnants of the once-mighty conciliarist tradition were certainly not laughing. At Vatican I, the ultramontane party succeeded in dogmatically defining papal jurisdictional supremacy and infallibility. The latter definition was specifically crafted to reject even the most moderate conciliarist insistence that a pope's teachings must accord with the prior or subsequent “consent of the Church” to be considered irreformable. It was with respect to this issue that Pope Pius IX infamously shouted “I, I am Tradition! I, I am the Church!”

To its credit, the ITC does acknowledge some precedents for our contemporary understanding of synodality in the nineteenth century. Article 38 of the document reads:

The need for a pertinent and consistent re-launch of Synodal practice in the Catholic Church became clear as early as the nineteenth century, thanks to prophetic writers like Johann Adam Möhler (1796–1838), Antonio Rosmini (1797–1855) and John Henry Newman (1801–1890), who returned to the normative sources of Scripture and Tradition, heralding the providential renewal that came with the biblical, liturgical and patristic movements.

These figures deserve the praise they receive as forerunners of the twentieth-century renewal movements and the Second Vatican Council. But why, one might ask, did “synodal practice in the Catholic Church” need to be *relaunched* in the nineteenth century? One could rightly infer—though the ITC does not say it—that Roman centralization had become suffocating. When and why did this happen? The ITC document praises the age of the great Tridentine reformers like St. Charles Borromeo. But what happened in the nearly three hundred years between Borromeo's provincial synods and Cardinal Manning's boast that ultramontanism is coterminous with Catholic orthodoxy? Why did “synodal practice in the Catholic Church” need to be relaunched in the nineteenth century? One could rightly infer that Roman centralization had become suffocating.

The answer is that a lot happened, but not much that could be plausibly marshalled in support of a papally led campaign for synodality. My point is not to criticize the ITC. It produced a useful document, and it was not pretending to offer a thorough historical overview. In any case, it was merely following an established trend in ecclesial historical narration. The decades between Trent and the early nineteenth century hang as something of an ecclesiological “dead period.” When this period is narrated at all, it is usually dismissed as a dull, unproductive time—a time when clerical sycophants groveled before sovereigns and sold out to the ideals of the Enlightenment or various heresies. Apart from some stalwart defenders of the papacy who were vindicated by Vatican I, this period is commonly considered notable only for the long inventory of condemned “-isms” it produced—Richerism, Jansenism, Gallicanism, Cisalpinism, Febronianism, Josephinism, etc. As Garrett Sweeney wrote, these failed

ideas were “remembered only by anathemas and definitions preserved like dead flies in the amber pages of Denzinger.”

And at least some of these dreaded “-isms” were indeed corrosive to Catholic unity, particularly when they supported undue state interference in the Church. Nevertheless, Rome’s scorched-earth policy tended to jettison the good along with the bad, especially when it came to ecclesiology. Synodal practice had to be relaunched not because it had slipped into oblivion after Borromeo, but because it was actively suppressed in a campaign to establish hegemonic Roman power in the Church.

The issues were crystallized when the struggle between Gallicanism and ultramontanism became a contest between two alternative conceptions of Church governance. In the Gallican model, which all Jansenists eventually supported, the teaching *and* the governance of the pope ought always to be exercised collegially with the bishops. The desire for a papal condemnation of Jansenism, ironically solicited by King Louis XIV, the great defender of the Gallican Liberties, forced the French Church to articulate a precise model for the reception of papal teaching. The archbishop of Toulouse, Pierre de Marca (1594–1662), provided such an ecclesiology, one based on the ancient African Church, which preserved universality and communion through a commitment to participation at all levels of Church governance. The ITC does mention this ecclesiology, but only as a patristic reality: the 2018 document beautifully describes synodal ecclesiology in a discussion of St. Cyprian, the third-century bishop of Carthage (article 25). The document fails to mention that these principles were also championed by the same early modern Catholics that ultramontanists successfully tarred as heretics in the lead-up to Vatican I.

The French Church historian Jacques Gres-Gayer has explained how early modern Catholics understood this Cyprianic, patristic model of synodal ecclesiology:

This “participant model” appears to have developed along the lines of a juridical and political conception of the Church, as it stressed two constitutive dimensions: communion at the horizontal level, and representation at the vertical. From this perspective, what constituted the Catholic Church was the unity of faith manifested by the communion of the different (local) churches, one element being necessarily their communion with the Roman Church. The common faith, however, belonged to the entire body and therefore needed not only to be expressed but “verified.” This task was eminently if ideally assumed by the General Council, “representing the Church,” but only as it reflected the culmination of a long process of representation, by way of synods, from the local community to this general assembly. In that conception, the “representatives” did not act as delegates—this was not a democratic process—but as witnesses. They represented, that is expressed, the faith of their native church, with the purpose of exposing, under the assistance of the Spirit, the faith of the Church Catholic. This is why, in order to be authenticated, their decision had to be accepted, along a reverse path, from the council to the local communities.

It becomes clear in the Vatican II *Acta* that the reformist majority bloc of council fathers dealt quite deftly with this legacy. The ultramontane and neo-scholastic minority was certainly aware of uncomfortable parallels between *ressourcement* ideals and condemned early-modern Catholic reform agendas. During the council’s debates, leaders of the minority pointed out these parallels (for example, over vernacular liturgy, religious liberty, and especially over collegiality). But to no avail: in reviving elements of conciliar, synodal, and participatory ecclesiology, the council fathers refused to be boxed in by a narrow ultramontanism.

Many of Vatican II’s ecclesiological reforms—those having to do with episcopal collegiality, a renewed theology of the laity, a more diffuse conception of infallibility, the *sensus fidelium*, religious liberty, etc.—are now rightly understood as retrievals from the early Church. And there are good reasons why the council fathers (and, later, the ITC) would present them in this way. But one certainly needn’t go all the way back to late-medieval Paris or to Constance, much less to third-century Carthage, to find precedents for these reforms. They were all promoted as late as the nineteenth century by Catholics in Lebanon, Tuscany, London, South Carolina, and Peru. These Catholics drew deeply from the old and

venerable tradition of Catholic conciliarist constitutionalism. However, if remembered at all today, they are usually mentioned only as the losers in the story. To quote a popular priest who attacked Pope Francis and the 2014–2015 Synod on the Family in a *Catholic Herald* [article](#) ^[5], such early modern Catholics were “eccentric uncles and peculiar cousins...who we all feel are best forgotten.”

In the United States, the crisis over truth-telling is not only social and political, but also ecclesial. The systematic failure of the Church to tell the truth regarding clerical sex abuse is one particularly grave example of this crisis. A person who cannot face his or her own past (or who consistently lies about it) is impeded from reaching full maturity and healthy integration. Put simply, such a person can't grow up. Likewise, the Church, if it can't or won't tell the truth about its own past, can't fully flourish and is doomed to a kind of ecclesial immaturity.

Vatican II took a number of important first steps: toward ecumenism, toward collegiality, toward more honest views of history aided by critical research, toward more meaningful integration of laypeople, toward a genuine reckoning with past failures, be they intellectual or moral. Just as importantly, the Church took a step away from a triumphalism that too often focused more on institutional power, authority, and prestige than on the poor carpenter from Nazareth and the good news he preached.

Pope Francis should be commended for taking the Council as a point of departure for the pilgrim Church and trusting that the Holy Spirit is active in the heart of every baptized person. Modern Catholicism is shot through with ironies. The extreme papalism that was ascendant in much of the Catholic world from the middle of the nineteenth century is obviously antithetical to the vision of synodality now being vigorously promoted by a *pope*, of all people. But perhaps only the Roman Pontiff, with his universal and immediate jurisdiction over every Catholic and every local church, can jolt Catholicism back to a more ancient and more biblical constitution. Pope Francis's intentional creation of a synodal “mess” may be the only way to unravel the ultramontane paradigm. A paradoxical situation to be sure, and a risky one. But one not without hope.

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