

French Catholics and Synodality: Spiritual Sensibilities and the Will to Participate or Abstain

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Abstract: Using the situation of French Catholicism as a starting point, this article shows how sociologists of Catholicism have continued to refine the methods and categories used to construct the representation of Catholicism and understand the expectations of Catholics. The most recent surveys are based on an in-depth analysis of how Catholics think about “their church,” and identify what is causing the crisis within it. They are of particular interest in understanding why some practicing Catholics, especially younger ones, have shown little interest in the Synod on Synodality scheduled by Pope Francis. In fact, sociological surveys help us understand how the synodal process, through its procedure and legitimization, encourages the participation of certain sensibilities and discourages others. Sociological analysis also enables us to identify resources for overcoming this resistance, developing listening among Catholics and working towards the authentically ecclesial character of synodality. In conclusion, the article argues that the contribution of the social sciences should be taken into account in the development of consultation techniques and ecclesial governance.

THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS ON SYNODALITY launched by Pope Francis in 2021 requires tackling five delicate questions:

1. How do you develop a participatory process in an institution that has long encouraged docility among its members? It is not enough to create participatory procedures for Catholics to take them up. In the same way that universal suffrage is not enough to make every citizen a voter, not every Catholic will necessarily take part in synod consultations.
2. Trends in the political sociology of contemporary democracies show that there is nothing random about people’s willingness to take part in politics. Social elites and activists readily consider

- themselves competent and participate more than the working classes.¹ Why should the church escape this oligarchic trend?
3. Given these potential biases, how can we guarantee the authority of synod consultations or decisions without checking that they are representative?
 4. How can this representativeness be created without agreement on the criteria for relevant representation of Catholics?
 5. How can this representation be made legitimate and fruitful without valuing pluralism and developing a culture of listening among Catholics?

The social sciences are essential to thinking about these issues of participation and representation.² In France, for example, sociology has played an important role in the understanding Catholics have developed of their diversity of opinion and place in society. In the absence of representative institutions, sociology has taken on, almost single-handedly, the task of objectifying the reality of Catholic practices and opinions, particularly the cleavages and power relations that bring them together or divide them.

Sociological controversy has been a privileged forum for describing and raising awareness of intra-ecclesial power relations. The way in which Catholics identify and distinguish themselves depends in part on the categories of sociological description. The typologies developed by sociologists to describe Catholics therefore have as much a descriptive role as an ecclesiological one. Indeed, their influence can be decisive in the visibility or invisibility of Catholic practices and opinions and the problematisation of the attitude ecclesial authorities should adopt towards them.

In this article, I will first show how the thinking of sociologists of Catholicism has continued to shape the methods and categories intended to construct the representation of Catholicism and understand the ways in which Catholics participate in or abstain from ecclesial arrangements. I will then take a closer look at the results of a multi-year survey, designed to listen to French Catholics and the resulting representation of Catholicism. I will then show how this survey approach helps us understand differing attitudes to synodal participation among Catholics in France, particularly attitudes of resistance. Finally, based on the survey data, I will suggest ways of developing a culture of listening conducive to synodal mobilisation.

¹ A classic text on this point: Daniel Gaxie, *Le Cens caché. Inégalités culturelles et ségrégation politique* (Paris: Seuil, 1978).

² Loïc Blondiaux and Jean-Michel Fourniau, “Un bilan des recherches sur la participation du public en démocratie : beaucoup de bruit pour rien ?,” *Participations* 1 (2011): 8–35, doi.org/10.3917/parti.001.0008.

REPRESENTING AND ANALYSING THE PARTICIPATION OF CATHOLICS: SOCIOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

The category of layperson is hardly ever used in the sociology of Catholicism. The relationship of lay people with the church is analysed using other descriptive categories. In the Catholic Church, Sunday worship is a canonical obligation (Can. 1246–1247), and for this reason Gabriel Le Bras and Fernand Boulard, the founders of the sociology of Catholicism in France, used it as a criterion of integration into Catholicism. Le Bras and Boulard distinguish between the zealous (Mass attendance several times a week), the *messalisants* (Mass attendance every Sunday), the seasonal conformists (Mass attendance for major seasonal festivals), and the detached (Mass attendance for individual rites of passage).³ In Fernand Boulard's famous map of religious practice in France, the "lands of Christianity" are those where practice is unanimous and the "lands of mission" where practice is in the minority.⁴ The frequency of Mass attendance is thus a measure of both Christianisation and de-Christianisation.

This sociological description has contributed to pastoral discussions and action being structured by the opposition between practising and non-practising Catholics, identified as a problem to be resolved. The parish was at the heart of this debate and, in order to mobilise non-practising Catholics, new churches had to be built in the new districts or the priest had to be freed from existing tasks to enable him to better reach the people where they were, in the factories in particular.⁵ This first system of representation was based on a close link between sociological and pastoral approaches. Priests often conducted sociological surveys and then interpreted them.⁶ From their viewpoint, observing the rhythm of Mass attendance was the relevant indicator of the intensity of faith. This did not make it easier to listen to Catholics, and sociologists gradually began to break away from pastoral work by challenging clergy's prejudices about "working-class" people, whom it was argued, were less de-Christianised than they appear.⁷

³ Gabriel Le Bras, *Etudes de sociologie religieuse*, tome 2 : De la morphologie à la typologie (Paris: PUF, 1956).

⁴ Fernand Boulard, *Premiers itinéraires en sociologie religieuse* (Paris: Les éditions ouvrières—économie et humanisme, 1954).

⁵ Olivier Chatelan, *L'Église et la ville : le diocèse de Lyon à l'épreuve de l'urbanisation 1954–1975* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2012).

⁶ Alain Chenu, "Les enquêteurs du dimanche. Revisiter les statistiques françaises de pratique du catholicisme (1930–1980)," *Histoire & mesure* 26, no. 2 (2011): 177–221, doi.org/10.4000/histoiresmesure.4261.

⁷ François-André Isambert, *Christianisme et classe ouvrière. Jalons pour une étude de sociologie historique* (Tournai: Casterman, 1961), 17.

From the 1960s onwards, the criterion of Mass attendance was called into question because it was suspected of confusing faith with religion. Gabriel Le Bras himself came to condemn this founding presupposition of the analysis of dechristianisation.⁸ The high rate of Sunday observance in the past was suspected of masking the superficiality of faith and only testifying to the strength of social conformism. The figure of the Catholic Action activist, not only a practising Catholic but also a Catholic committed to transforming society, has become the model for authentic participation in the church's mission. After May 1968, despite the fact that many activists distanced themselves from Sunday observance, they retained their aura of exemplarity. In this period, Michel de Certeau observed that "more and more Christians are less practising the more they believe."⁹ The Mass as a norm of participation was seen as disqualified. Émile Poulat suggested updating the methods used in the sociology of Catholicism, because while the frequency of religious practice is a measure of religious integration, the same cannot be said for faith.¹⁰ Danièle Hervieu-Léger confirms that "a whole population of very committed Catholics" might be missed by a census based on Mass attendance.¹¹ Sociology therefore helps us listen to Catholics who feel the Mass does not nourish authentic Christian life.

This new stage of sociological questioning has contributed to pastoral debates being structured around the issue of reducing the distance between intermittent consumers of Catholic ritual and Catholic activists. But the promotion of activists as role models is extremely elitist. As Michel Brion showed in 1972, while 97% of French people are baptised, only 0.6% can be identified as catholic activists.¹² As a result, when priests cast suspicion on parents who ask their babies to be baptised or children who make their solemn communion, accusing them of conformism, they are acting as if all French people could adhere to an extremely elitist way of being Catholic. The sociologist Henri Mendras considers this pastoral approach to be perilous: "Wanting to transform the *credentes* into *perfecti* and, if we don't succeed, abandoning them to their fate, to look after only the latter, inevitably leads to transforming the Church

⁸ Gabriel Le Bras, "Déchristianisation : mot fallacieux," *Cahiers d'histoire publiés par les universités de Clermont-Lyon-Grenoble*, tome IX (Grenoble: Imprimerie Allier, 1964), 92.

⁹ Michel de Certeau and Jean-Marie Domenach, *Le christianisme éclaté* (Paris: Seuil, 1974), 11.

¹⁰ Emile Poulat, "Trois problèmes pour la sociologie du catholicisme," *Social Compass* 16, no. 4 (1969): 471–483, doi.org/10.1177/003776866901600404.

¹¹ Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Vers un nouveau christianisme ? Introduction à la sociologie du christianisme occidental* (Paris: Cerf, 1986), 24.

¹² Michel Brion, *La religion vécue des Français* (Paris: Cerf, 1972), 89.

into a sect.”¹³ The Dominican friar and sociologist Serge Bonnet denounced the contempt for the ritualism of the working classes that lay behind the elitist apology of the activists of the Catholic Action movements.¹⁴ In *Prières secrètes des Français d'aujourd'hui* (1976), Bonnet describes the prayers of Catholics from modest backgrounds whose religious needs are still expressed through ritual devotions, whose aim is to banish misfortune (illness, unemployment, divorce, etc.) from everyday life.¹⁵ For Bonnet, the contempt and ignorance of what can be authentically spiritual in popular devotions shows that the clergy is more interested in restoring its legitimacy with the new avant-garde cultural elites than with the people.

During the 1970s, the internal divisions within Catholicism were reflected in the growing use of adjectives to describe the various antagonistic currents: progressive, traditionalist, and so forth. To analyse the dimensions of this Catholic civil society, asserting itself by demanding or rejecting reforms, sociologists of Catholicism constructed typologies based on the paradigm that had replaced de-Christianisation: modernisation. For Émile Poulat, the observation of representations of modernity in the church made it possible to identify three positions that structure the divisions between Catholics: liberalism, intransigence, and integralism.¹⁶ Jean-Marie Donegani and Guy Lescanne took their analysis of Catholic divisions of modernity a step further, distinguishing four attitudes: integralism, stability, innovation, and secularity.¹⁷ Then, in *La liberté de choisir* (1993), Jean-Marie Donegani refined this system of representation and replaced integralism with *christianitude*.¹⁸ This typology, based on numerous interviews, helps pacify the expression of differences between Catholics by showing that this pluralism is irreversible because it is the translation of the process of modernisation of society within Catholicism. But there is a limit to this analysis, insofar as it classifies Catholics according to their acceptance or rejection of the “sense of history” modernity appears to represent. The different forms of participation that result from these positions are implicitly classified on a time scale as more or less promising for the future. This tends to

¹³ Henri Mendras, *La seconde révolution française 1965–1984* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), 119.

¹⁴ Serge Bonnet, *À hue et à dia. Les avatars du cléricalisme sous la Ve République* (Paris: Cerf, 1973).

¹⁵ Serge Bonnet, *Prières secrètes des Français d'aujourd'hui* (Paris: Cerf, 1976).

¹⁶ Émile Poulat, *Modernistica, horizons, physionomies, débats* (Paris: Nouvelles éditions latines, 1982).

¹⁷ Jean-Marie Donegani and Guy Lescanne, *Catholicismes de France* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1986).

¹⁸ Jean-Marie Donegani, *La liberté de choisir. Pluralisme religieux et pluralisme politique dans le catholicisme contemporain* (Paris: Presses de la FNSP, 1993).

present the more “intransigent” currents as remnants of the past doomed in the long term; and yet they are organised for persistence, had the support of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI, and have an alternative vision of the future.¹⁹

Modernity as a global macro-sociological process is also becoming the main key to analysing religious detachment, because of the individualism of which it is the matrix. Danièle Hervieu-Léger’s research explores the various effects of this deregulation of the frameworks of religious subjectivation: “In modernity, to be religious is not so much to know that one is engendered as to want to be engendered.”²⁰ Her typology of the “pilgrim” and the “convert” sums up the issues at stake in a religious demand now rooted in the logic of self-construction and emancipated from the constraints of inherited belonging and hierarchically imposed disciplines.²¹ This insistence has led to “God-seekers” being seen as former or future Catholics whose expectations must be listened to, and surveys have been undertaken to this end.²²

In the early 2000s, a new turning point in the sociology of French Catholicism began with renewed attention on the Catholic institution, no doubt due to the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. The reshaping of the exercise of authority and the relationship with established rules and roles are now back at the heart of the analysis of religious change.²³ Renewed interest in the priesthood, liturgy, parishes, and the relationship between Catholics and social issues is leading to new conceptualisations of internal conflict independent of the question of modernity.²⁴ Clergy and Catholic activists in parishes and dioceses are once again the focus of attention. Philippe Portier has suggested interpreting the polarities of their confrontation as an opposition between “identity” and “openness.”²⁵ Jacques Lagroye’s approach to these polarities is based on the concept of regimes of truth developed by Michel Foucault. This concept refers to the set of procedures and devices an individual must comply with in order to be

¹⁹ Laurent Frölich, *Les catholiques intransigeants en France* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2002).

²⁰ Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *La religion pour mémoire* (Paris: Cerf, 1993), 245.

²¹ Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Le pèlerin et converti. La religion en mouvement* (Paris: Flammarion, 1999).

²² Jean-François Barbier-Bouvet, *Les nouveaux aventuriers de la spiritualité : enquête sur une soif d’aujourd’hui* (Montreal: Mediaspaul, 2015).

²³ Céline Beraud, *Prêtres, diacres, laïcs. Révolution silencieuse dans le catholicisme français* (Paris: PUF, 2007).

²⁴ Céline Beraud, Frédéric Gugelot, and Isabelle Saint-Martin, eds., *Catholicismes en tension* (Paris: EHESS, 2012).

²⁵ Philippe Portier, “Pluralité et unité dans le catholicisme français,” in *Catholicismes en tension*, 19–36.

“true,” to be “in the truth.”²⁶ Lagroye describes the confrontation between Catholics on the basis of their competing conceptions of the institutional form the expression of faith should take, distinguishing between a “system of certainties” and a “system of testimonies.”²⁷ On the one hand, there is a relationship with God which, through the mediation of natural law, theological knowledge, and religious and natural authorities (the role of the “fathers”), is imposed and must be accepted with confidence and self-surrender. On the other hand, the relationship with God is experienced in the horizontality of an exchange, the risk of equality of speech, and a welcoming of differences. The divine absolute then emerges from the shared recognition of the value of personal witness as a method of identifying what is emancipating in life.

This analysis draws attention back to what happens in liturgies, discussion groups, parishes, and Catholic movements. However, these two conceptual approaches, which illustrate the institutionalist turn in the sociology of Catholicism, have little empirical basis and are not based on any methodical listening to Catholics. The spokespersons of the various Catholic movements and communities are too often taken as the only references, to the detriment of the Catholic “base.” Yet the rare ethnological approaches to the ordinary reality of Catholicism have shown the fruitful nature of the researcher’s involvement in the field.²⁸ A return to this kind of listening was becoming necessary in order to properly update the representation of Catholics and the understanding of the driving forces behind their relationship with the church.

In 1980, François-André Isambert proposed an approach to the crisis of Catholicism free of any reference to the paradigm of modernity. In his view, this crisis can be identified with a “conflict of interpretation, even schism, over the origin and nature of the crisis itself.”²⁹ Jacques Lagroye updated this position when he wrote that, for the sociologist, the crisis is above all a collective representation of reality that objectifies the truth system of those who share it.³⁰ Following this orientation, the description of the internal divisions within Catholicism can no longer be derived from a contextualisation or scholarly paradigm; we need to listen to Catholics to discover what

²⁶ Michel Foucault, *Le gouvernement des vivants*, Cours au collège de France, 1979–1980 (Paris: EHESS-Gallimard-Seuil, 2012), 91–110.

²⁷ Jacques Lagroye, *La vérité dans l’Église catholique. Restauration et contestation d’un régime de vérité* (Paris: Belin, 2006).

²⁸ Albert Piette, *La religion de près. L’activité religieuse en train de se faire* (Paris: Métailié, 1999).

²⁹ François-André Isambert, “Le sociologue, le prêtre, et le fidèle,” in *La sagesse et le désordre*, ed. H. Mendras (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), 219.

³⁰ Lagroye, *La vérité*, 25.

their representation of the context in which “their Church” operates is, how they identify with it and rank what is in crisis or imagine solutions. Then, based on what they have to say, we need to reconstruct the concepts necessary for a more general understanding of Catholicism. To this end, a vast qualitative survey of Catholics was undertaken, presented in more detail in the following section.

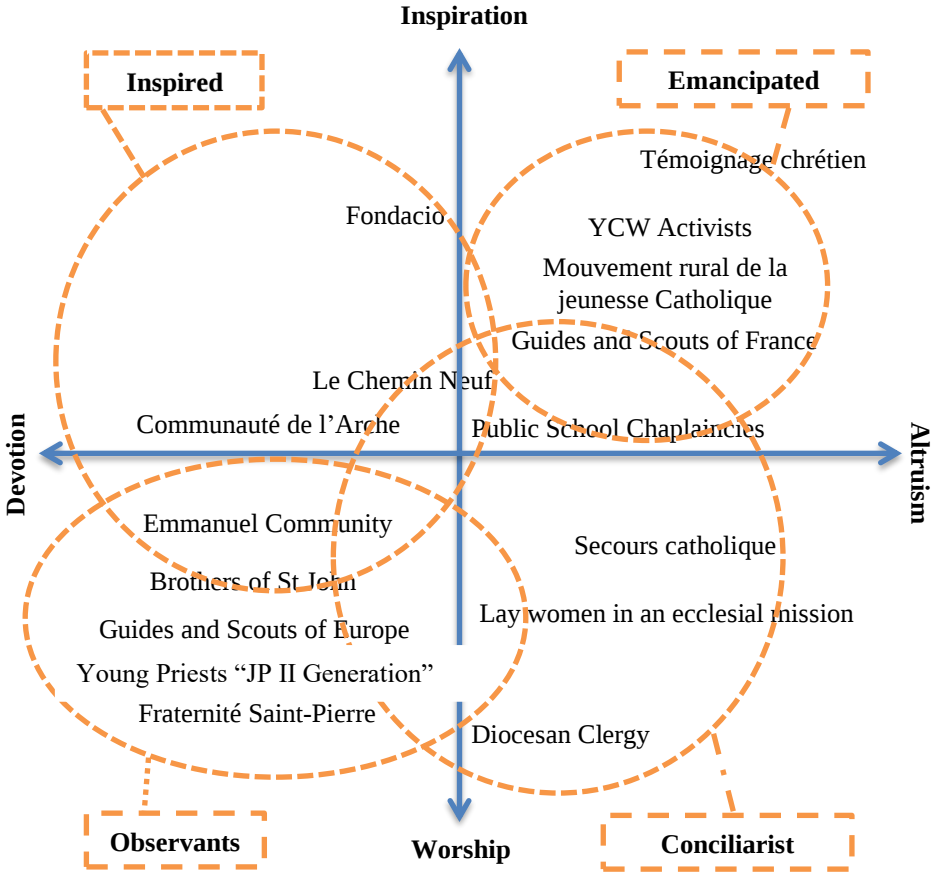
QUALITATIVE SURVEY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMMITTED CATHOLICS AND “THEIR” CHURCH

Starting in 2009, the organization Confrontations—association d’intellectuels chrétiens undertook a major survey to make the voice of Catholics heard.³¹ I took part in drawing up the survey, collecting the data and analysing it. It is based on 177 semi-structured interviews conducted between 2010 and 2013. The targeted respondents are committed Catholics, i.e., people who have precise opinions on the vocation of their church, the definition of legitimate Catholic practices, and who undertake to a greater or lesser extent to disseminate them. Committed Catholics are divided because they defend various and sometimes antagonistic definitions of the faith and practices on which Catholic membership is based. While they all consider themselves faithful, the foundations to which their loyalty refers are multiple. To understand the tensions and dynamics that run through Catholicism, we need to look at the different foundations of faith invoked.

In analyzing the results of the survey, a certain number of patterns could be identified in the respondents’ comments: relatively standardised and therefore predictable arguments about Jesus, the relationship with the ecclesiastical institution, and its future. Most of the time, these comments were made by respondents with similar religious backgrounds. This plurality of paths and expectations can be interpreted on the basis of two major variables. The first is the relationship with God. This can be either more or less informal (reading the Gospels; meeting “witnesses”; feeling God in front of a landscape; fraternal experience) or more or less cultic, and therefore

³¹ Confrontations was founded in 1979 by leading figures such as René Rémond, Marcel Merle, and Renaud Sainsaulieu, following the dissolution of the Centre catholique des intellectuels français, to provide a forum for research based on the Christian faith but independent of the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Interviews and survey conducted by a team comprising Françoise Parmentier, Catherine Grémion, Christian Manuel, Geneviève Dahan-Selzer, Hervé Legrand, and Yann Raison du Cleuziou. The survey was published in Yann Raison du Cleuziou, *Qui sont les cathos aujourd’hui* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2014). For more information on Confrontations, see www.confrontations.fr/.

**Positioning of Catholics in Relation to
Dimensions of Religious Practice**



involving codified forms (participating in the Mass, receiving the sacraments). The second is putting faith into action. This can take the form of altruism (donations, mutual aid, street outreach, visits to lonely people, political or charitable involvement) or devotions (rosaries, fasting, prayers, Eucharistic adoration). Of course, these four dimensions are not mutually exclusive. Devotion does not exclude altruism, and the spiritual experience of looking at a landscape is not antagonistic to the feeling of intimacy experienced with Jesus during the Eucharist. But when you listen to and observe Catholics, it quickly becomes apparent that they will emphasise one of these dimensions to a greater or lesser extent, and this is what enables them to be distinguished.

On the basis of these two variables, it is therefore possible to construct a typology of four Catholic cultures.³² There are, of course, many intermediate positions, and these families of sensibility overlap and are not mutually exclusive. A typology does not exhaust the complexity of the facts studied; it offers a synthetic representation of collective trends in order to make reality thinkable through comparison.

The right-hand side of the graph shows the altruism pole. It is subdivided into two types. The first nebula, most represented in the sample, is that of the self-professed conciliarists. I call them thus not because they are the only ones to respect the Second Vatican Council, but unlike other Catholics, they make it a central part of their identity. There is a generation effect here. This group was enthusiastic about the Council when it occurred, and it has left a lasting impression on them. When they talk about their faith, they invoke a certain figure of Christ. For them, Jesus is the one who includes the excluded, who transgresses the social order of his time to show God's mercy: he heals lepers, forgives the adulterous woman, talks to a Samaritan woman. Following this example, being Catholic means taking care to include those excluded from the social order: adopting a posture of welcome and compassion towards them; fighting against discrimination. The reference to Matthew 25 is recurrent: we must see the face of God in the stranger.

The conciliarists are faithful to Sunday Mass. They like this moment to be a time of welcome and communion where everyone can find their place: adults and children, men and women, remarried divorcees and homosexuals, French and foreigners. They do their utmost to ensure that the liturgy manifests this horizontal communion. Their attitudes show this attention. They like to greet their neighbour in the pew at the start of Mass; they appreciate the gesture of the rite of peace; they recommend joining hands to say the Our Father. They like priests who are like them: fraternal and who do not hesitate to deviate from certain rules to welcome those who have difficulty finding their place in the church. They identify well with Pope Francis's image of the church as "field hospital." They are also very committed to altruism and are active in *Secours catholique* (Caritas), etc. They are also very involved in diocesan and parish structures. They regret that the church can appear so intransigent and believe many French people would renew their ties with the church if it focused less on questions of sexual morality. For them, Catholics are not a minority in French society. Rather, they are a suffering majority. If the French are to reconnect with the church of their childhood and family traditions, Catholics must adopt a stance of compassion and

³² See Yann Raison du Cleuziou, *Qui sont les cathos aujourd'hui*.

fraternisation towards them. Pope Francis is setting an example through his words and actions. In their view, he has already broken down many of the prejudices that previously kept French people away from the church.

In the altruistic pole, there are also Catholics much less attached to forms of worship than the conciliarists: these are the emancipated. At the heart of the faith, they claim is Christ the Liberator. For them, Jesus is the one who frees human persons from that which makes them lose their dignity. Jesus fights against injustice and invites people to assume their freedom in service to their neighbour. To be faithful to him is to be fully responsible for one's life, be aware of the collective consequences of one's actions, and be involved in social and political struggles against injustice. These emancipated people have no taste for Sunday Mass, which they find obsolete in relation to contemporary culture. They prefer Masses within their movement when they are the culmination of a collective process, during high points at Lourdes or the *Frat*.³³ Moreover, for them, what is at stake during these major celebrations is often less about their relationship with God than living together, their relationship with the group of which they are members. You can see this in their attitudes. Their bodies are restless, they comment, chat, and move about. The pleasure of being together comes first. Their relationship with God is more likely to involve reflective activities: sharing workshops, Bible groups, team life reviews, Taizé retreats, or personal reading of a Gospel. They expect the priest to be a big brother, an elder in the faith or companion on the road who can stimulate their reflection and sharpen their critical thinking about their commitments and way of life. Following the example of Jesus, they seek a word that liberates and want to be actors in the emancipation of their contemporaries.

Receptive to the institutional framework of the church, emancipated Catholics are critical of all aspects of the magisterium that play into the hands of conservatism. They regret that the church is too often confused with a certain bourgeois class and focuses on sexual morality to the detriment of social and environmental issues. Highly committed, they favour militancy in non-confessional organisations: environmental or third-world NGOs; associations for popular education or socio-cultural development. However, they also join conciliarists among the volunteers of *Secours catholique*. Like the

³³ The *Frat* is a pilgrimage organised for the Pentecost in Jambville or Lourdes for young Christians aged 13 to 18 from the Ile-de-France region. It brings together young people from parishes, chaplaincies, schools, movements, and communities for three to five days. This major gathering, both spiritual and festive, is an ideal way for the church in France to improve its image and reach out to young people who rarely attend Mass.

conciliarists, they believe that the decline in religious practice is mainly the consequence of the conservative evolution of the church encouraged by Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI. They are much more in line with Pope Francis. In their view, Catholics will regain a grip on society when they position themselves as selfless servants of human progress. They believe personal responsibility and commitment to social transformation must be the two fundamental attitudes of Catholics in society.

The second pole is made up of Catholics who favour devotions as a way of putting their faith into practice. Of course, this is not exclusive of altruism, but in the interviews, they emphasise this first dimension more than the second. The largest group in this cluster is made up of observant Catholics. They mobilise a figure of Christ quite distinct from the conciliarists and the emancipated, although of course there is always some overlap between profiles. For them, Jesus is the Son of God, who died on the cross and rose from the dead to offer salvation to humanity. To be faithful to him is to seek to be worthy of this salvation through personal and ascetic effort of rectification; it is always better to conform to the path of holiness recommended by the church. They see observance of the rules as a way of emptying oneself in order to be filled with God. Mass and the sacraments are central for them. They are very assiduous and make weekly Mass attendance the essential criterion for identifying Catholics. They like solemn Masses where divine transcendence is manifested through a certain hieraticism: incense, deep silence after communion, Latin hymns, or prayers. They like priests who take great care with the liturgy and preach Catholic doctrine with rigour. Their respect for God and deference to the forms of worship are shown by their bodies: disciplined, kneeling at the moment of consecration and possibly just before communion, on the lips for many. They love devotions, especially those that require them to put ordinary social life at a distance in order to have better access to God: adoration, retreats, pilgrimages, personal silent prayer time, and the rosary.

These Catholics form a family environment and often come together in parishes of affinity, where Masses are celebrated by priests of their own persuasion. They frequent the new congregations that emerged in the 1970s, whether in the charismatic (Emmanuel, Beatitudes), neo-classical (Brothers of St. John, Saint Martin's Community) or traditionalist (Fraternité Saint-Pierre, Christ the King Sovereign Priest) movements. Despite the differences in liturgical sensibility, the milieu of observants creates a continuum between these movements. It is not uncommon for traditionalists, neo-classicalists, and charismatics to come together at various festivals in Paray-le-Monial. They can also be found in scouting movements (Scouts d'Europe; Scouts unitaires de France), in movements for the

defence of the family (AFC, Alliance Vita), and are very involved in educational issues (Fondation pour l'école).

Observant Catholics see society as decadent, and they expect the church to affirm the truth of which it is the bearer in and out of season, without fear or half-heartedness, especially the defence of human life from conception to natural death. Concerned about the collapse of religious practice and the decline in vocations, they see this as the consequence of the church's slackening of doctrine and liturgy in the 1960s and 1970s. Many of those interviewed spoke of the perverse effects of the *spiritualité de l'enfouissement* (a term suggesting a spirituality both embedded and concealed) and of a humanist drift on the part of Catholic activists, who had substituted service of neighbour for a relationship with God. They feel Catholics are now in the minority, that they must unabashedly assert their identity in society and take back control of the transmission of faith. Many of the people surveyed said they had received a "soft" catechism centred on generosity but lacking theological consistency.

The second nebula of the devotional pole is made up of the inspired. This group is made up of Catholics usually described as "charismatic." The figure of Christ they use to explain their faith is very personal. For them, Jesus is a person they met in a moment of conversion. Someone they know intimately and with whom they maintain an almost perpetual dialogue. To be faithful to him is to be ever more fully converted, to let Jesus into every aspect of their lives. Their faith is a love story, a path to happiness. Most of the time, the inspired have grown up in a Catholic family, even practised; but one day they had an experience, an "encounter with Jesus" after which their previous life of faith seemed artificial to them. So they are often reaffiliated.

They form communities of converts. They are not to be found everywhere, but mainly within their communities or the parishes entrusted to them. They appreciate community Masses (more than parish or Sunday Masses) where times of collective worship alternate with moments of solitary meditation. This is reflected in their bodily attitude, which is very mobile: their bodies sway collectively in rhythm during hymns; at other times, they are individually prostrate face down in meditation. They like priests in their image, converts who bear witness to an encounter. If they are on the side of devotions, it is because they appreciate vigils of praise, adoration, and pilgrimages like the observant. Some groups, such as the Emmanuel Community,³⁴ are at the intersection of these two sensibilities.

³⁴ The Emmanuel community is an international public association of the faithful of pontifical right, born from a prayer group founded in 1972. The spirituality offered to members is based in particular on Eucharistic adoration, compassion, and evangelisation.

The inspired interpret the decline of the church as a consequence of the superficiality of the faith of Catholics. They expect the church to have a more spiritual face, for Catholics to be genuine converts inhabited by the presence of God. The crisis in Catholicism is therefore an opportunity for them. It is a timely opportunity for Catholics to break out of the habits they have inherited, convert, and live up to their faith by bearing public witness to their encounter with Christ.

These different Catholic sensibilities translate into spiritual and institutional expectations. They structure specific modes of participation and commitment, and therefore also of abstention and disengagement. As we have shown elsewhere, detachment from the practice of Mass can be observed in all Catholic sensibilities, albeit in different proportions. Religious abstention as much as commitment depends on the spiritual, cultural, and social factors specific to each sensibility.³⁵ The same Mass will satisfy the observant and exasperate the conciliar, stimulating the practice of the former and abstention of the latter. The opportunities for participation in the life of the ecclesial institution, depending on the way they are offered, will also be more or less congruent with the sensibilities of Catholics and more or less welcomed for this reason. Thus, it is not surprising to find that some are more involved in the charity sector and others in the school sector. The successes and failures of the synodal consultations can also be interpreted in light of the different motivations behind the commitment of Catholics.

Through community life, it associates lay people, consecrated persons, and priests with the mission of the church while remaining at the heart of society. See emmanuel.info/.

³⁵ Yann Raison du Cleuziou, "Décrire les formes de l'engagement catholique : une typologie et une cartographie à partir de données qualitatives et quantitatives," in *Appartenances et ruptures. Le rapport des baptisés à l'institution ecclésiale catholique aujourd'hui. Perspectives comparatives*, ed. A. Ky-Zerbo (Paris: Cerf, 2020), 305–334.

Summary of Catholic Sensibility Cultures³⁶

	Observants	Inspired	Emancipated	Conciliars
Faith Matrix	Jesus the Savior	Jesus love	Jesus the Liberator	Jesus the Brother
Form of Loyalty	Rectification	Conversion	Accountability	Compassion
Expectation of Mass	Sacred	Celebration	Reflection	Communion
Disappointment with the Mass	Secularization	Superficiality	Nerdiness	Clericalism
Reference Group	A “milieu of families”	Community	Movement	Territorial parish
Methods of Evangelization	Family transmission and self-assertion	Personal conversion and public testimony	Solidarity with the poor and fight for social transformation	Compassion and brotherhood with all men
Conception of the Church	Beacon of light in the darkness	Community of converts	Counterweight denouncing the injustices of established order	“Field hospital”

THE DIFFICULTIES OF PARTICIPATION IN A DIVIDED ECCLESIAL CONTEXT

Questioned on the occasion of the first session of the synod on synodality, the French cardinal Jean-Marc Aveline expressed his enthusiasm but also “apprehension”: “Because I saw in my country that not everyone had embarked on the synodal process.”³⁷ This observation is not isolated among the bishops. In France, participation by 25–40 year-olds was very low, and many parishes did not participate, with parish priests scorning the organisation of the consultation. In some diocesan summaries, there is a potential distortion between the results of the consultation and the opinion of practising Catholics.³⁸ The preamble to the national summary of the local phase of the synod makes a statement that puts the value of the results into perspective:

The synodal process has given rise to generous participation in many places, with the feeling that we are living through a promising experience, a communal process of listening and discernment. This

³⁶ These are described in Raison de Cleuziou, *Qui sont les cathos aujourd’hui*.

³⁷ See www.rcf.fr/articles/actualite/ce-synode-qui-ne-fait-pas-lunanimite.

³⁸ Synod 2021–2023, Summary of the diocese of Vannes, www.vannes.catholique.fr/.

consultation has also met with resistance of various kinds. Firstly, the difficulty of hearing the voices of the most vulnerable; secondly, the difficulty of reaching out to and mobilising young people and young adults; thirdly, the fear among some Catholics that this process would be used to impose changes on the Church to which they are attached; and finally, the difficulty for many priests in recognising the value of this synod.³⁹

In a context of profound decline in religious practice, the fact that the voice of young people and young adults is being neglected is worrying insofar as the future of the church depends, in part, on the perpetuation of their membership. While the French bishops questioned possible methodological problems, sociology can also contribute hypotheses.⁴⁰ The qualitative survey of committed Catholics conducted by Confrontations has been followed up by three quantitative surveys. Without presenting all the results, they provide useful information for understanding resistance to the synodal process.

Firstly, the Bayard-Ipsos survey of June 2016, based on a panel of 1,007 respondents representative of committed Catholics, aimed to quantify the universes of sensibility and assess the dynamics of their perpetuation.⁴¹ The survey shows that while the trend towards religious detachment cuts across the observant, conciliar, inspired, and emancipated, the proportions are not the same. The general trend is that the more Mass attendance is seen as a duty based on an ascetic logic, with submission to this discipline allowing people to empty themselves in order to be filled with God, the more robust and lasting is the integration into Catholicism. Conversely, if weekly attendance at Mass is not valued, practising Catholic grandparents tend to have non-practising Catholic children, who in turn have non-Christian children. Within three generations, the family is dechristianised. Of course, this summarises a more complex process, but the trend in the balance of power within Catholicism depends on this central dynamic.

From one generation to the next, observant and inspired Catholics gain in importance and influence within French Catholicism. On the other hand, conciliar and emancipated Catholics, while dominant among older Catholics, are becoming increasingly rare among younger Catholics. Elsewhere, we have described this dynamic as

³⁹ See eglise.catholique.fr/synode-des-eveques-2024-sur-la-synodalite/quest-ce-que-le-synode-des-eveques-sur-la-synodalite-2021-2024/527445-collecte-nationale-des-syntheses-locales-sur-le-synode-2023-sur-la-synodalite/.

⁴⁰ Interview with Msgr. Laurent Ulrich by Philippe de Saint-Pierre, KTO, July 1, 2022, dioceseparis.fr/interview-de-mgr-laurent-ulrich-58659.html.

⁴¹ *La Croix*, “Le vrai visage des catholiques,” January 12, 2017, 2–5; *Pèlerin*, “Qui sont vraiment les catholiques,” January 12, 2017, 18–32. For an in-depth presentation, see Yann Raison du Cleuziou, “Décrire les formes de l’engagement catholique.”

counter-revolutionary insofar as change in Catholicism today depends on currents whose religious and political value system is more conservative: paradoxically, they are changing the church by resisting change.⁴²

In May 2023, the survey carried out in partnership with *La Croix* using the database of those registered for the World Youth Day in Lisbon confirms this.⁴³ Of course, WYD registrants should not be confused with young Catholics as a whole, but they tend to represent those who are best integrated religiously, both because they are in contact with the church and their families are prepared to allocate a budget for their religious education. This integration is also measured, of course, by the impact of Mass on their religious socialisation. Eighty per cent of them come from regular church-going families, 12% from irregular families, and 3% from non-Catholic families. In terms of attendance, 24% go to Mass several times a week, 51% every Sunday, 16% several times a month, 6% for the main seasonal festivals and 2% for large gatherings.

Their expectations about Mass are marked by observant and inspired sensibilities: for 47% it is a moment of intimate encounter with Jesus and spiritual renewal; for 24% the celebration of a sacred mystery; for 15% a moment of collective celebration and reflection; for 14% a moment of communion between all participants that builds the church. The same trend can be seen in the positive attitude towards Latin Masses: 8% say it is their favourite Mass; 11% like it as much as the French Mass; 19% find it an occasional source of inspiration; 40% do not think it meets their expectations but have nothing against it; 12% think it is an unnecessary step backwards; 10% do not know about it.

Lastly, the fact that they are rooted in observant and inspired sensibilities is reflected in the way they see their relationship with society: 58% see the church as a beacon that shows the way in darkness; 22% as a community of converts that must bear witness to their encounter with Jesus; 12% as an emancipation movement fighting against injustice; 7% as a “field hospital” open to those wounded by life. These young Catholics already have experience of militant commitment, mainly on issues relating to the “defence of life” and bioethics (67%), with social and ecological issues attracting less

⁴² Yann Raison du Cleuziou, *Une contre-révolution catholique. Aux origines de La Manif pour tous* (Paris: Seuil, 2019).

⁴³ Online questionnaire sent by the Conférence des évêques de France, the Emmanuel, Chemin Neuf, and Saint Martin communities to their subscribers (30,164) from May 7 to 11, 2023. 4,028 respondents with complete validated answers. 3,111 respondents processed, after applying quotas based on gender and region (Paris/Province). I would like to take this opportunity to thank Yvonne Herbin for her very efficient processing of the survey data.

support (17%). While young people's distrust of societal developments is quite clear, they are confident in church authorities despite the sexual abuse crisis: 81% have confidence in bishops, although only 23% have "a great deal" of confidence. 35% believe sexual abuse is the result of deviant personalities, and only 8% believe it is the result of clericalism. Only a minority of these young people are in favour of changes in the church: 14% are in favour of opening up the priesthood to women, 12% are in favour of their access to the diaconate, 63% are opposed to these reforms.

A survey of French seminarians in December 2024 confirms these analyses.⁴⁴ Among them, 72% come from families where Mass is attended on a weekly basis. Their religious socialisation is marked by the family as the main vehicle for transmitting the faith, followed by parishes. They have a militant profile and 46% have taken part in actions to defend life. Nearly 68% attended a charismatic community and 47% a traditionalist community during their religious training. They have a classical understanding of the priesthood, with the *Curé d'Ars* being the most frequently cited figure of reference. For 72%, the celebration of the sacraments is at the heart of their mission. Their conception of Mass is in line with that of observant and inspired people: 52% see it as a sacred mystery and experience of transcendence, and 39% see it as a moment of intimate encounter with Jesus. Only 14% consider the Latin Mass to be an unnecessary step backwards, and although only 7% consider it to be their favourite form of liturgy, most seminarians consider its continuation to be legitimate and are open to it. Clothing style also reflects this orientation: 48% of seminarians are in favour of wearing the cassock on a regular basis and 25% on an occasional basis. Finally, their vision of the church once again reflects the process of internal desecularisation described earlier: 48% see the church as a lighthouse that must show the way in darkness; 33% as a community of converts who bear witness to their encounter with Jesus; 22% as a "field hospital" that takes in those wounded by life; 1% as an emancipation movement that must fight against inequality. Quite logically, these seminarians are not particularly keen on reform, and their views on the place of women in the church illustrate this: 34% consider that women have enough recognition in the church; 38% think they could obtain more recognition and exercise roles of authority, but without changing access to the diaconate or priesthood; only 3% are in favour of changes of this kind. As can be imagined, their reception of synodality is very cautious: 46% see it as an apprenticeship in collective listening, whose

⁴⁴ *La Croix*, Cemoleme, Conférence des évêques de France survey of French seminarians subject to the ratio, 434 respondents, a response rate of 64%, December 2024.

benefits and limits will have to be assessed; 16% see it as a method that risks opening the way to alignment with societal demands; 7% see it as a complicated and uncertain decision-making process; 22% see it as the most appropriate form of church governance, towards which we should be moving.

These surveys show the extent to which the church is caught up in a dynamic of internal de-secularisation: as society becomes more secularised, Catholicism recomposes itself around those who remain. However, they are more often than not the bearers of a conservative and fundamentalist conception of the faith and see themselves as a counter-culture challenging the dominant social values.⁴⁵ For older generations of Catholics, this development is often seen as a “step backwards,” whereas it is fully a manifestation of contemporary culture. The context between the younger and older generations is very different, which increases the gap between their mentalities and the theological orientation of their aspirations.

Older people are both in the majority in a Catholicism where the age pyramid is reversed, and marked by the Catholicism in which they have lived, still the social majority. They find it hard to understand young Catholics who live in a world very different from their own. This is because they are both a minority as young people in Catholicism and a minority as Catholics in society. The 2018 EVS survey shows that only 15% of 18–29 year-olds are now declared Catholics, compared with 13% who are declared Muslims.⁴⁶ The majority experience leads to a search for the perpetuation of a consensus with society, while the minority experience leads to resistance to erasure. The internal transformations of Catholicism, like the overall religious changes in French society, are widening the gap of incomprehension between generations.

This generational tension is directly relevant to resistance to synodal consultation. In fact, my experience of Catholics in the field leads me to hypothesise that the synodal consultation is not experienced by the younger generation of observant Catholics as an ecclesial process that commits them, but as a particular process attached to the reform agenda of conciliar Catholics. This is because the synodal consultation is supported first and foremost by diocesan structures dominated by older Catholics often inspired by conciliar views. Secondly, the synod process itself is underpinned by a media or militant narrative about the changes needed in the church, at odds

⁴⁵ Yann Raison du Cleuziou, “Les droites, le changement, et le sacré,” in *À la droite du Père. Les catholiques et les droites de 1945 à nos jours*, ed. Y. Raison du Cleuziou and F. Michel (Paris: Seuil, 2022), 613–650.

⁴⁶ Pierre Bréchon, Frédéric Gonthier, and Sandrine Astor, eds., *La France des valeurs. Quarante ans d'évolutions* (Grenoble: PUG, 2019).

with the more conservative young people, whose obsession is rather with the perpetuation of a church that seems to them to be threatened by the advanced secularisation of society. Furthermore, as classic political science research has shown, participation always depends on a feeling of competence and collective dynamic. By analogy, the spiritual value system and religious socialisation have a direct impact on ecclesial participation. The observant matrix is based on a more vertical representation of the church, so knowledge belongs to priests and lay people are more in a position of waiting, whereas in the conciliar matrix, the conviction of belonging to the “People of God” gives a feeling of competence and encourages participation. As for the effects of socialisation, it would be enough to compare education in decision-making among the Guides and Scouts of France with what is practised among the Guides and Scouts of Europe to give an example of the strong differences between these worlds. On the one hand, collective deliberation in the service of the collective project; on the other, the hierarchical authority of the leader and trusting dedication of each individual within the limits of the competence they have been delegated. It is not surprising, moreover, that the Guides and Scouts of France, or the Catholic Action movements trained in the practice of enquiry, are over-represented in the synodal consultations.

Finally, over and above this organisational ethos, we need to understand that reticence can run very deep because it sometimes touches on the inner workings of the experience of God. The very method that emphasises the horizontal nature of exchanges as an experience of the Holy Spirit is in line with the sensibilities of the conciliar and emancipated movements. On the contrary, it offends the hieratic dimension of the relationship with God, which corresponds better to the experience of the observant and inspired. While for some, the synod is the culmination of a spiritual experience, for others, it is more of a distraction from what is essential: the appropriation of the church’s teaching and personal conversion.

HISTORICAL CONDITIONS AND RIVALRY BETWEEN CATHOLICS

The sociological approach is not only useful for mapping potential resistance to synodal consultation, it can also provide resources for overcoming these obstacles and fostering a culture of listening among Catholics.

All too often, Catholic pluralism is interpreted as a mechanical effect of the individualism that characterises modern societies. Religious convictions are then seen as opinions that can be amended and brought together through collective deliberation. Discussion would then suffice to resolve conflict. Based on my investigations, it seems to me that this interpretation is not heuristic.

The diversification of forms of belonging to the church is a reflection of the acceleration of social change over the last two centuries or so. Put to the test by social, technical, and political transformations, the church has multiplied its doctrinal, organisational, and spiritual responses in order to keep a grip on customs that no longer offer anything more than a shifting and fragile foundation. The pastoral reorientations required to constantly adapt have created cultural strata among Catholics. The variations in sensibility among Catholics are not random, but correspond to social, generational, or organisational anchors that find their coherence in a moment of diagnosis and ecclesial tactics in the face of change. These moments of mobilisation become *habitus* and are then transmitted from one generation to the next in the form of a regime of truth in which the relationships to the world, God, and personal experience are closely intertwined in an unsurpassable figure of “truth.”

The qualitative survey, based on life stories told in the course of interviews, makes it possible to guess approximately the moment when the structuring background of imaginations and *habitus* is created.

Among observants, the system of truth that structures the evaluation of manifestations of authentic Catholic fidelity tends to be rooted in the Catholic intransigence developed in the nineteenth century in reaction to the consequences of the French Revolution on morals. They were attached to a conception of the social order embedded in a natural order itself dependent on a divine order. Hierarchy, vocation, duty of state, obedience, and observance make acceptance of the limited nature of each person’s place and role a condition for participation in the divine order. Observants take from the Gospels elements that legitimise a certain stance of opposition to dominant social values. The norms of worship marginalised by post-conciliar pastoral practice retain an ascetic value in their eyes, because conforming to them remains the condition for access to God. While they welcomed the Second Vatican Council, they moderated its implementation by maintaining the framework that had previously structured Catholic mentalities.

The emancipated inherited the culture of Catholic Action and the spirituality of the laity, which began to assert itself in the 1930s and enjoyed the support of Pius XI. This spirituality had a puritanical dimension. Forms of worship were devalued because of the dualism between ordinary life and the life of faith they seemed to organise. For these Catholics, faith is true when integral, i.e., when it reconfigures the relationship with work and, more generally, the whole of ordinary life. Its translation must be a commitment to the fight against injustice. Religious forms that detract from the transformation of society would only be the mask of a compromise with the established order.

The conciliar regime of truth is rooted in the 1950s and 1960s. At its heart is the enthusiasm for the future that runs through this period. Humanity was progressing and with confidence had to take the risk of abandoning certain heritages. The deepening of individual autonomy, listening to deep individual desires, is being reclassified as a way of restoring authenticity in our relationship with ourselves, the world, and God. This enthusiasm for change is based on the experience of a time when the hopes of the church and social expectations seem to converge. The Second Vatican Council and the theology of the “signs of the times” make meeting the “other” and listening to the “calls of the world” an actualised theophany of the “All Other.” The reconciliation between church and world was perceived in a time so close that there remains a strong nostalgia for this aborted possibility.

The inspired inherit an evangelical matrix structured by conversion and rebirth. For them, a life of faith is only true when founded on the experience of a “personal encounter with Jesus.” They are the heirs of the 1970s when, on the fringes of the church, interest in charismatic evangelism as experienced in the Pentecostal currents of Protestantism intersected with initiation experiences that brought esoteric currents into the circle of the awakened, and techniques of the body that spread with Asian spirituality. They found in individual virtuosity, stimulated within the collective framework of community utopias, a lever for transforming church and world.

Like the nave of a church, which often bears the mark of different architectural styles and successive devotions, the “People of God” has a historical dimension. The internal divisions within Catholicism can therefore be thought of as sedimentations of regimes of truth linked to periods and militant segments of Catholicism. They reflect varying ways of problematising the use of faith in the construction of the self and in relations between church and society. The divisions within Catholicism are frozen conflicts, legacies of a forgotten history.

If these moments, which have become regimes of truth and habitus, are juxtaposed rather than succeeding one another, it is because of the crisis of history which, from the 1970s onwards, manifested itself with the end of the great teleologies.⁴⁷ The present is now less tense between past and future than fragmented between so many rival conceptions of the past and future. We must not forget that these Catholic cultures are all evolving and interacting with contemporary culture, even those most resistant to secular culture. They are all expressions of a past and a possible future. We need to get away from the dichotomy between traditionalism and progressivism, because all

⁴⁷ François Hartog, “Towards a New Historical Condition,” *Le Débat* 188 (2016), 169–180, doi.org/10.1007/978-3-476-05460-9_18; François Hartog, *Régimes d'historicité. Présentisme et expériences du temps* (Paris: Seuil, 2003).

these worlds of sensibility are rooted in tradition, carry their vision of the conditions for authentic progress in the faith, and produce contemporary experience.

The importance of systems of truth that structure oppositions between Catholics can be measured by the difficulty they have in admitting pluralism in their midst. They all use their conception of truth to evaluate the practice of others. The consequence of this reasoning is always the same: they can find no better model than themselves. The form they seek and respect is never anything other than that which objectifies their conception of the truth of religious practices.

This parameter is all the more powerful because anchored in the body through the learning and repetition that build the habitus of Catholics. Through this incorporated sensibility, the feeling of sacramentality is imposed as a dimension of reality itself and not as the imprint of their own history.⁴⁸ Catholics find it difficult to measure the historicity of their relationship with and the forms that allow access to God. As a result, they tend to confuse their sense of sacramentality with the very object of their faith. Their convictions and the relativity of their historical conditioning are made sacred, which makes debate all the more difficult.

These historical and cultural influences make it difficult to regulate Catholicism. The experience of a fragmented time explains the hesitant nature of recourse to the authority of the Second Vatican Council to regulate the Catholic body and reorient it in a unitary manner. Caught up in the accelerating pace of Western society, the Council's doctrinal concretion has lost its capacity to be authoritative over time, becoming just another moment in time. The authority of the priest is undergoing the same historicization, i.e., relativisation. Priests need to realise that their sensibilities, just like those of their parishioners, are conditioned by the truth of the moment. The man of God is not immune to history, and ignoring this condemns him to imposing his sensibility and roots as the only legitimate ones, or even, through the sacramental significance of his actions, to having them identified as ahistorical norms. This can only exacerbate the faithful's frustrated or wounded feelings of sacramentality.⁴⁹ The same applies

⁴⁸ Yann Raison du Cleuziou, "L'attente et la règle. Quelques éléments de réflexion sur le lien entre le sentiment de sacramentalité et les régimes de vérité dans le catholicisme contemporain," in *Du bon usage des normes en liturgie. Approche théologique et spirituelle après Vatican II*, ed. H. Bricout (Paris: Cerf, 2020), 35–49.

⁴⁹ To appreciate this, we need only look back at the controversies that arose from the refusal to baptise young children or the abolition of solemn communion in the 1970s. See Serge Bonnet, *Défense du catholicisme populaire* (Paris: Cerf, 2015).

to the synodal process. Its style and expectations will mobilise some and repel others.

Awareness of the long-term effects of sedimentation should lead ecclesiastical authorities to exercise caution. Learning to be authentically aware of historicity, and therefore of the relativity of forms of faith or affiliation, is the condition for real and sincere listening between Catholics. Furthermore, within liturgical or synodal arrangements, it is reasonable to articulate as far as possible, and not to oppose, the different existing expectations and resulting feelings of sacramentality. The communion, transcendence, conversion, and commitment to justice that differentiate Catholic sensibilities can be combined and restore to the tradition actualised in each liturgy the depth and breadth of what Catholicism really is as a complex historical dynamic. Catholics will be better disposed to listen to each other when they accept each other as different moments in the same history, heirs to pastoral responses that at one time the church gave to social change, sedimented experiences also summoned by the need to provide a new response in a new moment.

CONCLUSION

Sociological research practices and conceptualisations have made it possible to construct a representation of the “People of God.” Sociology has helped this faceless, voiceless reality, which has no established representation within the church, to become representable and audible. Sociology has also enabled this representation to be adjusted to the changes sociologists were able to record when clergy still only saw “deviance” in relation to canonical norms.

The synodal construction of a representation of expectations in the church can prove problematic and encourage the domination of one sensibility or generation over another. Sociology remains an indispensable complement for objectivising and analysing the structuring of cleavages that run through the church. This contextualisation provides a healthy relativisation that pacifies oppositions by defusing some of their emotional or even religious charge, as the experience of God merges with historically situated practices and frameworks of thought.

I think it would be useful not to make the synodal process too sacred. Ritualised recourse to the Holy Spirit can give a strong charge to what is going on and create fears because God is put in the balance of the exchanges.⁵⁰ The social sciences can be useful in secularising

⁵⁰ See Francis, “Address at the Opening Session of the XVI^e Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops,” October 4, 2023,

the process. It may seem shocking, but understanding the historical or cultural relativity of each person's Christianity can encourage people to move towards a more "distanced" interpretation of their experience of the Gospel message, and contribute to a common move towards bringing it up to date. This process will be all the easier if its horizon—adapting the church's governance and ministries to contemporary issues—is assumed to be exclusively historical: the need of the moment. Desacralising the process helps to play down the stakes, because other synods and councils will one day be necessary. It is simply a question of assuming the present condition of the church by deploying this presence with all the relevance necessary to respond to the needs of our contemporaries.

On the other hand, sacralising the outcome of a synod, identifying its result with the expression of the Holy Spirit, without having worked upstream to develop a culture of participation or reflected on how to guarantee representativeness, can only contribute to sacralising the particular opinion of those predisposed to participate to the detriment of others. The sacralisation of the synod, its often quasi-sacramental presentation, the visible process conditioning a relationship with the invisible, can exert a double exclusion: those not represented are now religiously deviant if they do not accept the conclusions of the synod. The reference to the Holy Spirit is then simply a means of legitimising an exercise of domination. **M**

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