

A View from the Dunghill: Learning Forbearance in a Synodal Church

Christopher McMahon

Abstract: Many conservative Catholics in the US have managed to project an aura of orthodoxy and submission to the Magisterium even as they move the Catholic Church to identify more firmly with neo-conservative and free-market political movements. By outlining this “masked dissent” (portraying itself as radical fidelity to the Magisterium) and bringing the ecclesiological insights of Joseph Komonchak to bear on the assessment of this new form of dissent, this article outlines the limits of reception and dissent in the life of the church and suggest that a shift to a more collaborative and consultative polity, such as the exploration of a “synodal way” currently explored at the Synod of Bishops, supplies a way forward in keeping with the very nature of the church which nevertheless requires a dramatic shift in the popular understanding of authority and teaching. This shift in polity holds the promise of promoting an authentically catholic unity, providing space for the “forbearance” of certain kinds of dissent as the Pilgrim Church waits on God’s voice, even if the latter provides no clear resolution, as in the case of the biblical story of Job.

ONE OF THE MOST COMPELLING AND, TO ME, ENJOYABLE themes from medieval art is that of Job on the dung heap. One particular illustration has always struck me, the image found in the Theodore Psalter of the British Library.¹ In this rendition, Job’s wife Sitis delivers some of the bread she had been forced into slavery to obtain (*TJob* 40), and Job just sits in the sewage. He sits there awaiting God’s reply to his complaints, waiting for some account of God’s mercy amid the chaos of his trials. In the canonical text, Job famously gets what he asks for, God speaks to him from the whirlwind, but he does not receive the answers he wanted. Yet, as Chrysostom notes, “From the sight of Job’s dunghill, one may derive every kind of benefit, yea, much divine wisdom and consolation, in order to patience.”²

¹ Add MS 19352; 1066 f. 154r.

² John Chrysostom, *Homily 5 on Statues*, 1; PG 49.69: “κοπρίαν ἰδεῖν τοῦ Ἰὼβ πᾶσαν τις δέξεται ὠφέλειαν, καὶ φιλοσοφίαν πολλήν, καὶ παράκλησιν εἰς ὑπομονῆς λόγον.”

This image of Job, and the story it evokes, strikes me as particularly poignant, instructive, and even hopeful as delegates depart the Synod on Synodality amidst very real tensions threatening to pull the church apart. Alongside the perennial frustration so many believers face about the slow pace of church reform, adequate resource allocation, and overall accountability that alienates wide swaths of the faithful, there is also the powerful threat of a new kind of dissent in the church, one that masquerades as authentic fidelity to the church's tradition. The combination of these forces marks the present moment as tenuous, combustible, and unpleasant—much like Job's dung heap.

Many voices in the media have documented the rise of a disgruntled and powerful Catholic right in US politics and their influence within the church.³ A significant portion of this group has studiously managed to project the aura of orthodoxy and submission to the Magisterium even as they move the Catholic Church to identify more firmly with neo-conservative and free-market political movements. By outlining this "masked dissent" of the Catholic right (that is, a dissent that portrays itself as radical fidelity to the Magisterium) and bringing the ecclesiological insights of Joseph Komonchak to bear in the assessment of this new form of dissent, this essay will suggest a path forward derived from recent ecclesial challenges in—of all places—Mennonite Church USA. This path forward will highlight the need for a shift to a more collaborative and consultative polity within the Catholic Church, such as the "synodal way" currently being explored at the Synod of Bishops. Moreover, this new polity is in keeping with the very nature of the church but will nevertheless require a significant shift in the Catholic understanding of authority and teaching at the popular and pastoral levels. This shift in polity holds the promise of promoting an authentically catholic unity, one that provides healthy and appropriate space for the "forbearance" of certain kinds of dissent as the Pilgrim Church waits on God's voice, even if the latter provides no clear resolution in the near term, as in the case of Job.

THE NEW DYNAMICS OF DISSENT

Among many contemporary Catholics, the common narrative of dissent in the church usually centers on the progressive theological

³ For an overview of these developments from the point of view of political science, see M. Gayte, B. Chelini-Pont, and M. Rozell, *Catholics and US Politics after the 2016 Election: Understanding the Swing Vote* (New York: Palgrave, 2018). For ecclesiological perspectives on the rise of the neoconservative and partisan movements in the church see Massimo Faggioli, *Catholicism and Citizenship: Political Cultures of the Church in the Twenty-First Century* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2017) and Todd Scribner, *A Partisan Church: American Catholicism and the Rise of Neoconservative Catholics* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2015).

movement and begins with the rejection of *Humanae Vitae* and then moves on to embrace other “hot-button” issues such as the ordination of women, abortion rights, same-sex marriage, gender/identity, and a host of other topics. This form of what might be called “progressive” dissent led some people to move away from the church, either leaving for other church communities or simply becoming “ex-Catholics.” Until recently, dissent from this side of the aisle seldom if ever led dissenters to challenge directly the legitimacy of ecclesial structures such as the Second Vatican Council or the papacy.⁴

Yet, the last three decades have witnessed a growing movement of dissent within the Catholic Church in the United States from the conservative direction, one enabled by the concentration of wealth and influence within the hands of smaller segments of the population and whose reach moves well into the Catholic mainstream and even large segments of the hierarchy and is amplified by using new media technologies. This new dynamic of dissent does not focus on particular teachings of the church; rather, this movement sees cardinals and bishops attack the Council and the validity of the Pope and even hint at schism.⁵ These developments have not been confined to the United States, but the unquestioned political and cultural hegemony of liberal market-driven economies and the political systems that feed on them uniquely marks the situation in the US context.

⁴ The subject of “dissent” in the Catholic Church is vast with much of it stemming from discussions of *Humane Vitae* and Charles Curran and the controversies around Edward Schillebeeckx’s work on Christology and Holy Orders. See, e.g., Charles Curran and Richard McCormick, *Readings in Moral Theology No. 6: Dissent in the Church* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1988). For a more general overview of dissent and reform see, e.g., Christopher Bellitto, *Renewing Christianity: A History of Church Reform from Day One to Vatican II* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2001). For an overview of contemporary conservative dissent in the US see, e.g., Michael Cuneo, *The Smoke of Satan: Conservative and Traditionalist Dissent in Contemporary American Catholicism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). The subtle contours of the dissent presented in this essay seem to be uniquely distinctive in comparison to the forms of dissent explored in these works.

⁵ Of course, conservative dissent from church authority is not new. Sedevacantist groups came into existence as early as 1967, but most of these (e.g., Society of Pope Pius V, Institute of Our Mother of Good Counsel) tended to emerge later. For the emergence and growth of some of these conservative trends in the years following the Council see, e.g., Michael W. Cuneo, “Soldiers of Orthodoxy: Revivalist Catholicism in North America,” *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 17, no. 3 (1988): 347–363, and William Dinges, “Catholic Traditionalism,” in *Alternatives to American Mainline Churches*, ed. Joseph Fichter (New York: Rose of Sharon, 1983), 137–158. Further, the rejection of the Second Vatican Council by some Catholics, most prominently by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre and his allies, has been noteworthy, and many efforts have been undertaken by two successive papacies to reconcile these believers.

The novelty of this new form of dissent is anchored in the economic and political machinations of the United States in recent decades. Massimo Borghesi has recently provided an invaluable analysis and critique of the rise of Neoconservatism in US Catholic circles, in particular the influence of the trio of Catholic political neoconservatives—Michael Novak, Richard John Neuhaus, and George Weigel.⁶ These three figures went through a period of transformation, moving from liberal to neoconservative crusaders, in the wake of the Second Vatican Council and the tumult over the reception of the Council’s vision of the church. Michael Novak’s quasi-Hegelian reading of history in *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* definitively signaled a decisive abandonment of Catholic social teaching, especially that of Paul VI and the USCC/NCCB in the 1970s and 80s.⁷ The clear intersection between Reagan administration policies and these think tank theologians produced selective interpretations of Catholic social teaching, including the social encyclicals of John Paul II and even Benedict XVI. Novak, Neuhaus, and Weigel achieved celebrity status among conservatives for their presentation of a fundamental harmony between Catholic social teaching and capitalism. In the context of the United States, where Catholics make up the largest single religious demographic, their works became effective tools of political persuasion. Novak and his fellow neoconservatives presented themselves as the proponents of a good, “ethical” capitalism (embracing the thought of Austrian School economists Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich von Hayek). With the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellites, the magisterial suspicion of capitalism was forgotten, and a selective reading of John Paul II’s *Centesimus Annus* was leveraged to reinterpret the entire tradition of Catholic social teaching, making “ethical capitalism” an identifying marker of conservative Catholics at the dawn of the second millennium.

The alliance between investment groups, conservative Catholic causes, and right-leaning political affiliations has been well-documented by journalists such as Mary McConahay, Heidi Schlumpf,

⁶ Massimo Borghesi, *Catholic Discordance: Neoconservatism vs. the Field Hospital Church of Pope Francis*, trans. Barry Hudock (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021). See also Faggioli, *Catholicism and Citizenship*; John Sniegocki, “The Social Ethics of Pope John Paul II: A Critique of Neoconservative Interpretations,” *Horizons* 33, no. 1 (2006): 17–32; John Sniegocki, “Neoliberal Globalization: Critiques and Alternatives,” *Theological Studies* 69, no. 2 (2008): 321–339; Scribner, *A Partisan Church*.

⁷ Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982). See also Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism Thirty Years Later* (McLean, VA: Institute for Faith, Works, and Economics, 2015).

Brian Fraga, and Michael Sean Winters, among others.⁸ Organizations such as The Acton Institute (1990), The Napa Institute (2002), Catholic Vote (2008), Legatus (1988), and the Catholic media network EWTN have all been founded or bolstered over the last two decades to leverage influence through new forms of media and communication. The work of these organizations is often framed in terms of educational, philanthropic, and civic engagement for the benefit of the church and its work in the broader community.⁹ Perhaps one of the most obvious and telling examples of issues raised by these alliances and the leverage they exert on the church in the US is the Busch Foundation's (Tim Busch is the founder of The Napa Institute) partnership with Koch Industries (the Koch brothers are legendary for their libertarian free-market principles and general disinterest in religion)¹⁰ to form the Center for Human Ecology at The Catholic University of America, the nation's flagship pontifical university. It should be noted that this center is not housed in the School of Theology, but rather in the business school.¹¹

The present ecclesial and political situation in the US has introduced this novel form of dissent, able to effectively "mask" itself as in continuity with the faith and practice of the Catholic tradition, "properly understood."¹² The new dissent of these "masked dissenters"

⁸ See Mary McConahay, *Playing God: American Catholic Bishops and the Far Right* (New York: Melville House, 2023). The work of Schlumpf, Fraga, and Winters can be found in the pages of *National Catholic Reporter* over the course of 2020–2023. See, e.g., Heidi Schlumpf, "Why Following Conservative Catholic Money Is More Critical Than Ever," *National Catholic Reporter*, January 14, 2022, www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/ncr-connections/why-following-conservative-catholic-money-more-critical-ever; Brian Fraga, "Right-Wing Catholic Causes Got Millions from Group That Funded Some Capitol Rioters," *National Catholic Reporter*, January 6, 2022, www.ncronline.org/news/people/right-wing-catholic-causes-got-millions-group-funded-some-capitol-rioters; Michael Sean Winters, "How Dark Money Prostitutes US Church and Distorts Catholicism," *National Catholic Reporter*, January 10, 2022, www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/how-dark-money-prostitutes-us-church-and-distorts-catholicism.

⁹ For example, The Acton Institute's mission statement identifies the latter's primary purpose as "to familiarize the religious community, especially students and seminarians, with the moral dimensions of the free market." See Borghesi, *Catholic Discordance*, 73.

¹⁰ See charleskochfoundation.org/.

¹¹ Nick Anderson, "With Record \$15 Million Gift, Catholic University Renames Business School," *Washington Post*, April 19, 2016, www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2016/04/19/with-record-15-million-gift-catholic-university-renames-business-school/.

¹² The case of Archbishop Marcel Lefevre would be a recent example of dissent "masked" as obedience (see, e.g., Daniele Menozzi, "Opposition to the Council (1966–1984)," in *The Reception of Vatican II*, ed. Giuseppe Alberigo, Jean-Pierre Jossua, and Joseph A. Komonchak, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell [Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1987], 325–348).

makes good use of “new media”¹³ and the availability of secular economic-political funding sources with leveraged interests. Vincent Miller, among others, has provided trenchant analysis of the marketplace of religion and its intersection with the church as it seeks to engage and legitimate itself within the digitalized marketplace of ideas.¹⁴ While mid-twentieth-century mass media granted a limited number of voices a large, homogenized audience, the twenty-first century has witnessed the rise of new media and accompanying technological changes that have altered the structure and mechanics of societies.¹⁵ In these societies, no one is deprived of access to what is essentially the “press.” Miller notes, however, that the contemporary audience is no longer the homogenized audience of the last century; rather, these audiences are highly fragmented, joined by individuals based on curated identities and affiliations supplemented and enhanced by marketing algorithms. These new media no longer function as a unifying space for conducting debates. Even once mighty media outlets now function like social media where there is no gatekeeper or media establishment to exercise editorial control of who will “cut the mic” when commentary and analysis goes off the rails. Societies created by this new media remain as bigoted and biased as ever, but the new media now consigns their members to dwell, in micro-worlds informed only by that which these media help them to independently curate.

While divisions in the US Catholic Church are perennial, with new media technologies and the pervasive influence of economic and political groups, recent decades have witnessed a distinctive incarnation of this divide, one that brings to the fore important issues of ecclesiology and church polity for Roman Catholics in the US. What the current iteration of the electoral/political cycle signals for Catholics and neoconservative ideology is yet to be determined, but many recognize that the Catholic populism that has emerged in recent years is a threat to the neoconservative movement that spawned it, with tensions around the Synod pushing the situation to the brink of ecclesial chaos. Within this context, conservative “think tanks” and other advocacy organizations centered on market-centered economic platforms have embraced social wedge issues in US politics,

¹³ Sinan Aral, *The Hype Machine: How Social Media Disrupts Our Elections, Our Economy, and Our Health—and How We Must Adapt* (New York: Currency, 2020). Evangelical churches are at the forefront of utilizing social media (see, e.g., Phil Cooke, *Maximize Your Influence: How to Make Digital Media Work for Your Church, Your Ministry, and You* [Tulsa, OK: Insight, 2020]), but Catholic parish development programs are not far behind.

¹⁴ See especially *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

¹⁵ Vincent J. Miller, “Public Theology: An Ever-Changing Task,” *Horizons* 43, no. 2 (2016): 361–367.

especially issues of race, gender, and sexuality as a way of signaling a very particular form of “Catholic identity” in both political and ecclesial spaces.¹⁶

The narrative that church unity was primarily threatened by a progressive “vertical schism”¹⁷ between the hierarchy and the laity has now given way to a new narrative envisioning the very real possibility of a schism that involves economic/social class as well as political affiliation. The scenario in this case sets a significant portion of the US Catholic hierarchy, apparently beholden to ideological and financial interests mediated through the leverage exercised by several powerful lay groups, against both the Holy Father and large elements of the Catholic population. These conservative lay organizations have effectively created an alliance with the US Catholic hierarchy, and this alliance gives a “mask” of orthodoxy to their dissent from the social teaching of the church, the teachings of Vatican II, and the authority of Pope Francis. These dynamics seem especially troublesome given the way the opponents of the recent Synod of Bishops launch attacks with a feigned befuddlement as to the meaning of the word “synodality,”¹⁸ and an apocalyptic rhetoric common in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.¹⁹ Along with this rhetoric, contemporary Catholic theology has witnessed an increasing and disturbing demonization of secular democracy and corresponding demand for a new integralism in some quarters. This integralism is the logical outcome of a theology so leveraged by political interests that it is simply reduced to the god it serves.²⁰ These trends in Catholic

¹⁶ *Remnant* magazine (remnantnewspaper.com/web/index.php), a conservative Catholic publication founded in 1967, continues to sponsor “Catholic Identity Conferences” to the dismay of many.

¹⁷ Hervé Legrand, “Réception, *sensus fidelium*, et synodalité,” in *La recepción y la comunión entre las iglesias*; Actas del coloquio internacional de Salamanca, ed. H. Legrand, M. Julio, G. Antonio (Salamanca: Departamento de Publicaciones de la Universidad Pontificia, 1997), 501–530.

¹⁸ The synodal character of the church itself grounds the discussion of the relationship between the authority of the college of bishops and papal authority in *Lumen Gentium*, no. 22, and throughout *Christus Dominus*. See the commentary from Karl Rahner in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, vol. 1 (New York: Herder, 1967), 202–203. The synod might have been better titled “synod on ecclesial polity,” but Rome’s doubling down on the word “synod” likely seemed to be a play on the obvious and essential character of the church. For a synthesis of conservative “confusion” and concern about the Synod see, e.g., José Antonio Ureta and Julio Loredó de Izcue, *The Synodal Process Is a Pandora’s Box: 100 Questions and Answers* (Hanover, PA: The American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family, and Property, 2023).

¹⁹ See Joseph A. Komonchak, “Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholicism,” *Cristianesimo nella storia* 18, no. 2 (1997): 353–385, esp. 357–361.

²⁰ See, e.g., Jason Blakely, “The Integralism of Adrian Vermeule: Not Catholic Enough,” *Commonweal* (October 5, 2020), www.commonwealmagazine.org/not-catholic-enough. Vermeule and Chad Pecknold are two high-profile academic “influencers” who make

theology in the US have significantly eroded the authority of the church in general, precisely through a fundamental misunderstanding of the dynamics operative in the actualization of its authority, namely, reception.

RECEPTION, AUTHORITY, AND DISCERNMENT

The disjuncture within the church and its own crisis of authority (both *ad intra* and *ad extra*) speak directly to the motivations behind Pope Francis's call for an exploration of church polity with an inclusive synod on synodality. Pope Francis seems to recognize well that the reception of church authority, which grounds both its evangelization efforts and its pastoral care, is often ignored or manhandled as a matter of course by some pastors and theologians. "Synodality" (not democracy) places an emphasis on the *mutuality* of reception—or the necessary "hearing" of the sense of the faithful in the exercise of church authority—and it is precisely this dynamic in its concrete historical and sociological dimensions that anchors so much of Joseph Komonchak's writings on ecclesiology. For Komonchak, mutual "reception" is in fact constitutive of the church as "believing community" (*congregatio fidelium*), and no ontology of the church—no ecclesiology—can look beyond this reality, especially as one explores the life of the church as it is incarnated in history.²¹ An adequate and nuanced account of ecclesiology makes discernment and the actualization of authority so central to the ongoing task of the church as forces threaten to tear it asunder.

As a divinely instituted social reality the church is nevertheless the product of human intentionality. The reality of the church in the world, its "objectivity," is constituted by subjectivity.²² Ecclesiology, then, is deeply social, performative, and concrete. These aspects are not a retreat from a full ontology of the church; rather, the deep Christocentrism of Komonchak's ecclesiology is also richly triune. Since the church is "performed," it is the enacted perichoretic life of

appeals to integralism through their work on social media platforms rather than in academic journals. See, e.g., Vermeule at thejosias.com/2018/03/16/ralliement-two-distinctions/ and Pecknold at postliberalorder.substack.com/p/errors-of-will. Thanks to Jason King for directing me to these references.

²¹ For a robust exploration of historical ecclesiology indebted to Komonchak and Bernard Lonergan, see Neil Ormerod, *Re-Visioning the Church: An Experiment in Systematic-Historical Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2014).

²² Joseph A. Komonchak, "The Epistemology of Reception," *The Jurist* 57, no. 2 (1997): 190, citing John Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 9–12. See also Derek Sakowski, *The Ecclesiological Reality of Reception Considered as a Solution to the Debate over the Ontological Priority of the Universal Church*, *Tesi Gregoriana, Serie Teologia* 204 (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 2014), 65–69.

the triune God in the world (referencing Congar).²³ The enactment of the church as believing community, and a (realistically) “perfect society” requires attentiveness to the dynamics of authority, a topic within Catholic discourse defined by centuries of Catholic teaching in purely objective terms, eschewing any sociological definition as lacking an “ontology” of the church. Building to some extent on Weber’s definition of authority, saying that its power is “based on some grounds other than force, threat, or promised reward,” Komonchak argues that all authority is co-constituted by the trust of those who acknowledge it.²⁴ This approach to authority centers on trustworthiness and the authentic functioning of authority. For this reason, Komonchak sets out the necessity of conversion in both the subjects and the bearers of authority, thus making the subjectivity and intersubjectivity of Christian conversion the condition for effective and proper exercise of authority in the church.²⁵ It is precisely this aspect of authority as a constitutive dimension of the church that the neoconservatives in the US spurn in favor of the hegemony and control of the “masked” dissenters.

The result of this flouting of the subtle dynamics of conversion and authority is the marginalization of the church’s voice in society and the alienation of large segments of the faithful vilified and even feared by the masked dissenters. It is the cultivation of an almost apocalyptic fear that often seems to be an operative factor in the rhetoric around the synod. As Paul Virilio notes, “Fear has become a foundation. All of our confidence in reason and in the perfectibility of the human species has progressively given way to a principle of fear that replaces faith with fear as the cornerstone of our attitudes towards existence.”²⁶ Jean-Pierre Dupuy, for his part, presents a new way of thinking about the future by building on apocalyptic thinking to construct a general theory of catastrophes. The ethical dimension of this fear-mongering is that by dwelling on this fear we might thereby evade or at least forestall the arrival of catastrophes.²⁷

²³ Joseph A. Komonchak, “Performative Ecclesiology,” *Cristianesimo nella storia* 39, no. 2 (2018): 427–441.

²⁴ Joseph Komonchak, “Authority and Magisterium,” in *Vatican Authority and American Catholic Dissent*, ed. W. May (New York: Crossroad, 1987), 103–114. See Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, trans. Ephraim Fischhoff et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978 [orig. 1921]).

²⁵ Joseph Komonchak, “Authority and Conversion or the Limits of Authority,” *Cristianesimo nella storia* 21 (2000): 207–229.

²⁶ Paul Virilio, *The Administration of Fear*, trans. A. Hodges (Cambridge, MA/Pasadena, CA: MIT Press/Semiotext[e]; 2012), 9.

²⁷ Jean-Pierre Dupuy, *How to Think about Catastrophe: Toward a Theory of Enlightened Doomsaying*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise and M. R. Anspach, Studies in Violence, Mimesis, and Culture Series (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2022).

While the extent to which the cultivation of fear might be an effective and even appropriate tool for staving off the climate crisis or thermonuclear war, it is another matter altogether to leverage fear in the context of ecclesiology. Catastrophic apocalyptic rhetoric and accusations of satanic infidelity have become all too customary in both social and legacy media, forcing binary choices, eschewing nuance and empathy. In the context of the synodal process the weaponization of fear on any side of a given issue seems destined to forestall any sense of communion, fidelity, and discernment.

The call for a “synodal process” of discernment and listening, a process Pope Francis clearly hopes will reengage the disaffected and reinvigorate the ecclesiology boldly articulated at the Second Vatican Council, has been met with skepticism, derision, and silence from many quarters in the US.²⁸ The fear of dialogue and unwillingness to listen to or empower marginalized and even certain dissenting voices in the church was evident even three decades ago with the founding of the Common Ground Initiative by the late Cardinal Bernardin.²⁹ But synodality, along with the dialogue and the tensions it seems to presuppose, is not an optional feature of ecclesiology; rather, according to Komonchak, these processes define a constitutive dimension of the church. “Synodality,” he notes, is one of the many names that designate the fellowship of believers and therefore the church itself.³⁰ An adequate and concretely focused ecclesiology will not neglect that fact, and as Pope Francis recently reminded us, “The vast majority of those of whom and in whom statements about the church must be verified are lay people (see *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 102). No ecclesiology should ever overlook this most obvious of all facts about the church: ninety-nine percent of these Christian *synodoi*

²⁸ Part of the disaffection of more conservative elements with the synodal process is the misunderstanding of what is often mischaracterized as divinely instituted ecclesial structures and the confusion of the *ius divinum* and what Bernard Lonergan termed “classicism.” See Komonchak, *Foundations of Ecclesiology*, 44, n. 155. See also Bernard Lonergan, “The Transition from a Classicist Worldview to Historical Mindedness,” in *A Second Collection*, ed. Robert Doran and John Dadosky, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 13 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 3–10.

²⁹ See Avery Dulles, “The Limits of Dialogue,” *Crisis* (February 1997): 16–19, and David L. Schindler, “On the Catholic Common Ground Project: The Christological Foundations of Dialogue,” *Communio* 23 (1996): 823–825. For a response that supports the importance of dialogue, see Joseph A. Komonchak, “On the People of God as a Theological and Sociological Reality: The Case for Dialogue,” *National Catholic Register* (June 8, 1997), 5 and Joseph A. Komonchak, “Dealing with Diversity and Disagreement: Vatican II and Beyond,” Fifth Annual Catholic Common Ground Lecture (2003), available at catholiccommonground.org/fifth-annual-lecture-of-the-catholic-common-ground-initiative/.

³⁰ Joseph A. Komonchak, “Theological Perspectives on the Exercise of Synodality,” in *A cinquant’anni dall’Apostolica sollicitudo: Il Sinodo dei Vescovi al servizio di una Chiesa sinodale*, ed. L. Baldisseri (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2016), 349–368.

are lay people,” and Komonchak asks, “What does synodality mean and require if we keep this [fact] constantly in mind?”³¹

For one, it means that the church’s magisterial authority must become more attentive to cultivating a culture of listening and discernment in communion with a lay population far more diverse in its background and interests than the episcopacy.³² In this process, the laity cannot be reduced to a group of children diminished to silent obedience by the directives of a domineering parent. Rather, authority in the church can only be actualized in conjunction with authentic discernment—a practice that, as Patrick Byrne notes, is “a refined form of attentiveness guided by exceptional knowledge of value and by knowledge, even transformation, of oneself as a discernor.”³³ Discernment asks us to pay attention to “what is deepest and best within us—and about learning to act ever more consistently in fidelity with what is deepest and best.”³⁴ Drawing on the thought of Bernard Lonergan, Byrne observes that this attentiveness presupposes an orientation to self-appropriation, the success of which depends on a community of conversation that includes at least some members who are more advanced, and it is only with the assistance of genuine friends who are patient that the genuine self-appropriation necessary for authentic discernment and the exercise of authority can take place. But it will do so in a spirit of caution, circumspection, and humility, always attentive to the voices that seem to be out of tune, but always asking, in patience, “Is it so?”³⁵

On the question of ongoing dissent and the role of authority in a process of discernment, a certain “forbearance” becomes necessary to make authentic community function. It is the absence of condemnation and exclusion that marks or signals the enacted, discerning, and listening community of Christ—a sign that our times will certainly contradict—a community waiting for one another in the discomfort and stench of a hope that transcends the false certitude of triumphalist

³¹ Komonchak, “Theological Perspectives on Synodality,” 353.

³² Ladislav Orsy, *Discernment: Theology and Practice, Communal and Personal* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2020).

³³ Patrick H. Byrne, *The Ethics of Discernment: Lonergan’s Foundation for Ethics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 16.

³⁴ Byrne, *The Ethics of Discernment*, 16.

³⁵ The great jazz musician Herbie Hancock tells a story from his time as a young pianist with The Miles Davis Quintet where he had played the wrong chord on his piano during one of Miles’s solos. Drawing on a musical genius Hancock rightly venerated, Miles took a moment and played a new note that made Herbie’s chord “work.” According to Hancock, “He made something that was wrong into something that was right . . . [Miles] didn’t see it as a mistake.” See Eric Alper, “Herbie Hancock Remembers the Time He Played the Wrong Chord during a Miles Davis Performance,” *That Eric Alper*, March 18, 2018, www.thatericalper.com/2018/03/18/herbie-hancock-remembers-time-played-wrong-chord-miles-davis-performance/.

or militant images of the church. And this leads us back to the dunghill and the patience of Job.

MENNONITES AND THE PRACTICE OF “FORBEARANCE”

The view from the dunghill of conflict, fear, and discomfort is not new to the church. Historical theologians have been pointing this out for some time, and the complexities and opportunities afforded the church to become more faithful to its identity and mission in and to the world has often been enhanced in the process.³⁶ But perhaps the patient endurance (ὕπομονή) and patient forbearance (μακροθυμία)³⁷ required of discernment in the synodal process can also be further grounded by some important work done on the topic of “gradualism” in Catholic theology and by looking outside the Catholic tradition to, perhaps, our Mennonite sisters and brothers. By being attentive both to this theological insight and the struggles of the Mennonites, a path through the current crisis in the Catholic Church in the United States might be grounded appropriately not just as a practical strategy, but a practice robustly grounded in theology.

Catholic theologian Jason King has advocated for a form of gradualism as uniquely productive in the face of emerging tensions around sexual practices and morality within the church.³⁸ King derives a particular form of gradualism from *Nostra Aetate* and the inclusivism that define the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council,³⁹ an ecclesiology that built bridges between the church and other religions, bridges rooted in the eschatological proviso inherent in the ecclesiology of a church viewed as a pilgrim in history. The ecclesiology of the council robustly affirmed the historical character of divine revelation, the historicity of the church’s appropriation and understanding of that revelation, and the need for patience in the face of the struggles the church, as pilgrim, must not only endure but embrace in order to be purified for consummation of history. “By the power of the risen Lord it is given strength that it might, in patience and in love, overcome its sorrows and its challenges, both within itself and from without, and that it might reveal to the world, faithfully

³⁶ See, e.g., Ulrich Lehner, “Toward a Listening and Empathetic Church? A Synodal Hermeneutic for Theology in Three Historical Vignettes,” *Church Life Journal*, August 18, 2023, churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/toward-a-listening-and-empathetic-church-a-synodal-hermeneutic-for-theology-in-three-historical-vignettes/.

³⁷ At the root of μακροθυμία is the word, θυμός, which has a semantic range in the ancient world that includes “burning,” “passion,” and “spirit.” Thus, μακροθυμία carries with it the sense of a kind of pain amidst restraint.

³⁸ Jason E. King, “Which Gradualism? Whose Relationships?,” *Horizons* 43, no. 1 (2016): 86–105, www.doi.org/10.1017/hor.2016.4

³⁹ This gradualism permeates the ecclesiology of the Council as seen in both *Lumen Gentium* (especially chapters 2 and 6) and *Ad Gentes*.

though darkly, the mystery of its Lord until, in the end, it will be manifested in full light” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 8).

Though centered on the gradualism associated with sexual ethics and a theology of marriage, King’s proposal is nevertheless instructive for grounding synodal patience in the present era. Gradualism as inclusivism has the best possibility of responding to the needs and hopes of people precisely because it can engage and affirm people’s experiences, draw upon the teachings of the church, and develop its understanding to support ecclesial communion rather than centering on doctrinal absolutism. It might be little wonder that so much of the energy and passion for what might be characterized as doctrinal fundamentalism comes from a notable number of Catholic converts for whom the draw of the Catholic faith was in fact a propositional approach to doctrine and a *prima facie* commitment to a clear ecclesial order. But whether one is talking about cradle or convert members of the church, there can and should be no distinction within an authentically synodal and listening church.

Gradualism leads to a question about the elephant sitting in the middle of the Synod: the status of LGBTQ and divorced/remarried Catholics. The general fear voiced by many is that the Synod will provide an opportunity for these groups to find a voice and even support among the delegates so that their exclusion from the sacraments will be formally lifted, thus granting some form of endorsement to practices at odds with church teaching. Similar fears abounded several years ago within the governing bodies of many Christian denominations, but one episode may be instructive for the church as the results of the synod begin to take shape. In 2015, the Allegheny Mennonite Conference (AMC), a small regional conference of thirty-seven Mennonite congregations from Maryland, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Delaware, was confronted with the following issue: one of the congregations in the conference had become open and accepting of LGBTQ couples.⁴⁰ The question that began to emerge among congregations affiliated with the conference was whether this particular congregation could remain in the conference given its practice (the congregation had actually been disciplined a decade earlier by the conference and was seeking to fully re-establish its membership). The conference readmitted the congregation by a margin of one vote and, with that vote, almost half the delegates walked out, and the AMC was eventually reduced to a dozen congregations.

⁴⁰ See the account in Emma Green, “Gay and Mennonite: They Vote on Everything. They’re Committed to Peace. Can a Church that Defines Itself by Harmony Survive Dissonance over Homosexuality?,” *The Atlantic*, March 18, 2015, www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2015/03/gay-and-mennonite/388060/.

This democratic drama and the dissolution or restructuring of the larger church body, Mennonite Church USA (MCUSA), has gone on apace over the last decade, but amid all this change, the denomination has reflected on the extent to which they, as the church of Christ, have embraced the violence of democracy in order to attain a form of peace that voting procedures cannot really produce. In fact, at the MCUSA convention in 2015, a commitment to embrace the discipline of “forbearance” was adopted by most voting delegates as a way forward during these trying times.⁴¹ This practice would hold the status quo, with no decisions on church teaching; rather, congregations would keep fellowship with one another and sit in the difficult ambiguity of the disagreement. Although the resolution did not prevent departures from the conference, it does provide some important insights for the ongoing synodal process.

Dave Mishler, a Mennonite pastor and the conference minister for AMC in the immediate aftermath of this drama, has been a staunch proponent of forbearance as a mark of the peace church tradition.⁴² The point of departure for the practice of forbearance is Romans 14 and 15, where Paul encourages the church to exercise patient endurance (ὕπομονή) of one another, not to put stumbling blocks in one another’s way, and to bear one another (βαστάζειν) for the sake of the church’s peace and unity in Christ. Mishler sees this practice not only as a tool of discernment, a means to an end; rather, he sees it as a permanent mark of Christian fellowship or communion, especially a communion defined by peace. Those who see the church as the bulwark of propositional truth will, no doubt, find such a position frustrating and compromising. Baptist theologian Elizabeth Newman cautions against embracing an ecclesial “pluralism that really masks violence.” Taking an “agnostic position towards truth foists the human will (to power) over and against the true, good, and beautiful revealed and given in creation. It enshrines politics of self-interest, competition, and proceduralism that rests on an ‘ontology of violence.’”⁴³ What is called for is an authentically ecclesial and even eschatological practice of ecclesiology. What Mishler and MCUSA seem to call for is a renunciation of violence and the fear upon which it is based in favor

⁴¹ “Resolution Forbearance in the Midst of Differences Passed by the Mennonite Church USA Delegate Assembly at Kansas City, Missouri, July 2, 2015,” www.mennoniteusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/ForbearanceResolution_2015Jul02.pdf.

⁴² David E. Mishler, “Forbearance is Forever: Reflections on Allegheny Mennonite Conference,” *Anabaptist World/The Mennonite*, January 5, 2018, anabaptistworld.org/forbearance-forever-reflections-allegheny-mennonite-conference/.

⁴³ Elizabeth Newman, *Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers*, The Christian Practice of Everyday Life (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2007), 131; commenting on John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990), chap. 10.

of a position in which the church waits on God. In *The Stature of Waiting*, W. H. Vanstone argues persuasively that such waiting on God is no capitulation or abandonment of God's power and revelation in the world.⁴⁴ Waiting is never a degraded condition, a condition of diminished human dignity. When we wait upon the world, even for mundane things, the image of God is made profoundly present, because God too waits. And in waiting on the world, on one another, and on God, the possibility and power of meaning emerge.

GRACE COMES TO THE DUNGHILL

Apropos is a lesson from Jean-Luc Marion's recent essay on the "Catholic moment" in which he calls for the truly "catholic" (that is, universal) to be embraced in love over and against the partisan divides inherently violent and desperately in need of proceduralism to delay the violence which haunts secular democracy at every turn.⁴⁵ The common admonition to those who look for change in the church, "the church thinks and moves in centuries," is quite often employed as a crutch to delay and deflect the urgency of change or dismiss those frustrated with the present ecclesial situation. Yet, what I am suggesting here is that the violence of leveraged voices, especially those of the "masked dissenters," necessitates a strong commitment not to the proceduralism of democratic pluralism—the church, after all, is not a democracy—but to the essentially communal (*Lumen Gentium*, chapter 1), hierarchical (*Lumen Gentium*, chapter 3), and synodal (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 22 and *Christus Dominus*) character of the church. As such, the ecclesiology of synodality centers on the authority of the listening church, realized in reception, and mediated through decades and even centuries of forbearance for the patient realization of God's truth in our world. In other words, what is called for is the primacy of living in the sewage with Job, in love, without blasphemy. The eschatological patience of the Pilgrim Church, imaged so poignantly in the figure of Job on the dunghill and enacted in an ecclesiology of forbearance and listening, will bring the church through the present crisis. Pope Francis has articulated this need in varied ways in the ecclesiological vision he has announced throughout his papacy (e.g., through numerous informal statements and subtle messages, but also encyclicals like *Fratelli Tutti*) culminating in the Synod. Failure to attend to the demands of this ecclesiology of listening, patience, and forbearance threatens to deepen existing divides and move the church into a violent purge of itself from history,

⁴⁴ W. H. Vanstone, *The Stature of Waiting* (New York: Morehouse, 2006). Thanks to Luke Briola for this reference.

⁴⁵ Jean-Luc Marion, *A Brief Apology for a Catholic Moment*, trans. S. E. Lewis (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021).

consigned to the periphery as an antiquated curiosity rather than the ever-present and indefatigable servant and light to the nations. **M**

Christopher McMahon, PhD, is Professor of Theology at Saint Vincent College in Latrobe, PA. Author of *Understanding Jesus: Christology from Emmaus to Today* (Anselm Academic, 2013), his scholarship explores the intersection of Christology and ecclesiology and the mediation of redemption in history.