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## Polarization and the Pontificate of Francis: Searching for Unity on the Synodal Path

Logan Liut<sup>1</sup>

“Christ summons the Church to continual reformation as she sojourns here on earth. The Church is always in need of this, in so far as she is an institution of men here on earth.”  
- *Unitatis redintegratio*<sup>2</sup>

In October 2023, the much-anticipated universal phase of the Synod on Synodality began its deliberations in the Vatican—and much like the Pope that convened it, this synodal venture looks to be yet another force of reform inside the Catholic<sup>3</sup> Church. This upcoming Synod is perhaps the most contentious event since the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, and as such, has further exposed the growing polarization between different Catholic communities in areas of morality, liturgy, and theology. This Synod, however, is not an isolated event—it is only one piece of the larger puzzle of Pope Francis’s move to push the Catholic Church in a new direction. It is not surprising, then, that there has been pushback against the Pope’s willingness to open up the Church to theological discussions previously considered taboo.<sup>4</sup> After all, Francis’s pontificate is, at its heart, one with a goal of reform,<sup>5</sup> and has, so far, been notable in its efforts to reshape the institutional face of Catholicism.<sup>6</sup>

It would be remiss to continue without briefly situating Francis’s pontificate within the greater conflicts that have grown in recent years within the Catholic Church; however, at the same time, I do not wish to speculate here about the effects of Francis’s pontificate in future, as it is not over at the time of writing—there is surely more to come from the Pontiff and the Synod. Instead, I find it much more relevant to provide a brief set of observations about increased polarization in this new chapter of the Catholic story, and how the program of this pontificate has aimed to create common ground between Catholic factions in light of the reforms of the Second Vatican Council by asserting a more aggressive, unifying hermeneutic of reform.

The most well-known example of polarization between Catholics is between those of the Latin Church who worship using different forms of the Roman Rite: the ‘traditionalists’ on one side, who use various forms of the pre-conciliar Tridentine Mass in Latin, and the ‘*novus ordo*’ (new order) on the other, using the post-conciliar Mass of Paul VI in their

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<sup>2</sup> Second Vatican Council, ‘*Unitatis redintegratio*,’ 21 November 1964, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19641121\\_unitatis-redintegratio\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html), 6.

<sup>3</sup> In this article, “Catholic” refers to the Latin Church, the largest particular church within the (Roman) Catholic Church under the Pope of Rome. It is not used with the view to stake theological claims to exclusive catholicity.

<sup>4</sup> José Antonio Ureta and Julio Loredó de Izcue, *The Synodal Process Is a Pandora’s Box: 100 Questions & Answers*, trans. José A. Schelini (Hanover, PA: The American Society for the Defense of Tradition, Family, and Property, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> “Church on the Way,” YouTube Video, vol. 8, *The Pope Video* (Vatican City: Pope’s Worldwide Prayer Network, 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eG7ceTF7is8>.

<sup>6</sup> Francis, ‘*Praedicate evangelium*,’ 19 March 2022, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_constitutions/documents/20220319-costituzione-ap-praedicate-evangelium.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/20220319-costituzione-ap-praedicate-evangelium.html).

vernacular language. While not universally antagonistic, these groups have had a storied history of tension. The heart of the polarization which is so prevalent in today's Catholic circles is in differences on how Catholics answer the following: was there a discontinuity with the previous way of 'being Church' in the reforms of the last century? If so, how does that discontinuity affect ecclesial communion? Benedict XVI illuminated best the two general modes of thought on this question:

“On the one hand, there is an interpretation that I would call ‘a hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture’; it has frequently availed itself of the sympathies of the mass media, and also one trend of modern theology. On the other, there is the ‘hermeneutic of reform’, of renewal in the continuity of the one subject-Church...”<sup>7</sup>

The polarization we are witnessing is but a deepening of these differing views of what happened at the Second Vatican Council—and it is crucial to understand here that neither hermeneutic is exclusive of one side of the debate or the other.

Benedict XVI's solution to this claim of discontinuity for those practicing the pre-conciliar use was to build on previous permissions of his predecessor, John Paul II, by allowing its use in his apostolic letter *Summorum Pontificum*.<sup>8</sup> Through liberalizing access to the pre-conciliar liturgical expression, Benedict aimed to promote an inclusive hermeneutic of reform, where the link between the pre- and post-conciliar forms of the larger tradition of the Roman Rite was emphasized, both being valid ‘extraordinary’ and ‘ordinary’ forms of the rite, respectively. Benedict did this, I believe, with the view that if license was given to both communities to practice their liturgy as they wished, any significant “division in the Church's *lex credendi* (rule of faith)”<sup>9</sup> would be avoided, as an antidote to any future schismatic events.

Unfortunately, the crisis of polarization in the Catholic Church has not ameliorated, and in recent years, this polarization has spread forth into the political sphere. Although the liturgical permissions of Benedict's pontificate provided liturgical relief, the heart of the issue—how to be the post-conciliar Church in a way that preserves continuity of tradition while remaining open to reform—remains largely unsolved. Politically, traditionalist and conservative Catholic movements are exhibiting what Caldeira and da Silveira term a ‘neo-reactionaryism,’ where traditionally-minded Catholics “participate in a contemporary reactionary horizon, that is, they are groups linked to an idealized past time and wishing to return to it.”<sup>10</sup> This neo-reactionary tendency often comes into conflict with the developing theological emphases of this pontificate on the climate crisis,<sup>11</sup> the fight against poverty, and

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<sup>7</sup> Benedict XVI, “Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Roman Curia Offering Them His Christmas Greetings,” 22 December 2005, [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf\\_ben\\_xvi\\_spe\\_20051222\\_roman-curia.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia.html).

<sup>8</sup> Benedict XVI, ‘*Summorum Pontificum*,’ 7 July 2007, [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/motu\\_proprio/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_motu-proprio\\_20070707\\_summorum-pontificum.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_ben-xvi_motu-proprio_20070707_summorum-pontificum.html).

<sup>9</sup> Benedict XVI, ‘*Summorum Pontificum*,’ art. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Rodrigo Coppe Caldeira and Emerson José Sena da Silveira, “Catholic Church and Conservative-Traditionalist Groups: The Struggle for the Monopoly of Brazilian Catholicism in Contemporary Times,” *International Journal of Latin American Religions* 5, no. 2 (1 December 2021): 407, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41603-021-00147-1>.

<sup>11</sup> Francis, ‘Laudate Deum,’ 4 October 2023, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/20231004-laudate-deum.html).

so on, coinciding instead with the rise of new right-wing populist political movements with the same general beliefs, most notably in the example of Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro.<sup>12</sup>

It is not only traditionalists who are complicit in polarization, however. A lesser-studied tendency exists among some progressive Catholics to embrace what I call a 'positive discontinuity,' in an effort to expedite reforms to provide for same-sex unions, the ordination of women, and so on in the Church.<sup>13</sup> A manifestation of this, it could be claimed, was the recently concluded Synodal Way (*Der Synodale Weg*) conferences in Germany. These conferences' self-claimed binding decisions to reform local church practices on sexual morality and the priesthood, among others, is a departure from the Catholic hierarchical structure. The Holy See considers these resolutions as an overstep of the doctrinal purview of a regional episcopal synod.<sup>14</sup> This equally represents a discontinuity with the rest of the Church's teaching, and it is not dissimilar to the discontinuity exhibited by certain traditionalist communities.

As is evident, the faces of polarization are alive in the Catholic Church. In the face of growing discord and polarization in both ecclesial and secular spheres, Pope Francis has begun a program of promoting unity, especially by more strictly enforcing the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council as a first response. As a measure to heal deep ecclesiological divides, this makes sense: "the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows."<sup>15</sup> In July of 2021, Francis released *Traditionis custodes*, an apostolic letter abrogating Benedict XVI's previous liturgical permissions in *Summorum pontificum*, and imposing severe restrictions on the celebration of Roman Rite liturgies using the pre-conciliar use. Francis's aim in the letter is twofold: the first is to restore a sense of visible common prayer for all Catholics of the Roman Rite,<sup>16</sup> and the second is to enforce the reforms of the Second Vatican Council with an aim to root out denial of the same.<sup>17</sup>

Francis's apostolic letter from just under a year later, *Desiderio desideravi*, provides a much more in-depth theological and pastoral justification for the steps taken in restricting the celebration of the pre-conciliar liturgy. In the letter, Francis elaborates that "The problematic is primarily ecclesiological. I do not see how it is possible to say that one recognizes the validity of the Council — though it amazes me that a Catholic might presume not to do so — and at the same time not accept the liturgical reform born out of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*".<sup>18</sup> Francis here links the embrace of the liturgical reform to the acceptance of the other reforms of the Second Vatican Council—and if we read this with the wider theme of

<sup>12</sup> Caldeira and da Silveira, 'Catholic Church and Conservative-Traditionalist Groups.'

<sup>13</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Catholic Does Not Equal the Vatican: A Vision for Progressive Catholicism* (New York: New Press, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Tomasz Gałkowski, "Participation in the 'Synodal Way': A Few Comments in the Light of Karol Wojtyła's Theory of Participation," *Philosophy and Canon Law* 7, no. 2 (2021): 4–7, <https://doi.org/10.31261/PaCL.2021.07.2.03>.

<sup>15</sup> Second Vatican Council, '*Sacrosanctum Concilium*,' 4 December 1963, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19631204\\_sacrosanctum-concilium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html), 10.

<sup>16</sup> Francis, '*Traditionis custodes*,' 16 July 2021, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu\\_proprio/documents/20210716-motu-proprio-traditionis-custodes.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/20210716-motu-proprio-traditionis-custodes.html), art. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Francis, '*Traditionis custodes*,' art. 3, § 1.

<sup>18</sup> Francis, '*Desiderio desideravi*,' 29 June 2022, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_letters/documents/20220629-lettera-ap-desiderio-desideravi.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/20220629-lettera-ap-desiderio-desideravi.html), 31.

Francis's pontificate, walking on a synodal path, it is easy here to uncover that Francis wishes to approach the issue of polarization through a synodal lens too. This new path—synodal, 'walking together'—is not possible if some refuse to walk at all, or if they walk on different paths.<sup>19</sup>

Both of these letters are designed to reduce polarization by enforcing the reforms of the Second Vatican Council through measures designed to phase out the use of the pre-conciliar form of the Roman Rite, but I believe that they are equally designed to push the Catholic faithful to walk together on the one synodal path. These measures are, perhaps predictably, extremely controversial—so far, for example, they have mainly focused on liturgics. There is more to be done to combat polarization in Catholic circles, which, manifesting in trends of increasing schism and political extremism, is both theologically and organizationally unsustainable in the long term.<sup>20</sup> This is best articulated in the post-conciliar Eucharistic liturgy itself:

"Strengthen the bond of unity between the faithful and the pastors of your people, together with *Francis* our Pope, *N.* our Bishop, and the whole Order of Bishops, that in a world torn by strife your people may shine forth as a prophetic sign of unity and concord."<sup>21</sup>

Combating polarization and preventing schism, however, must not and cannot be isolated from the larger need for reform, which this Pontiff is well aware of. It remains to be seen what fruit the second, and arguably larger, part of this pontificate's efforts in this regard—the Synod on Synodality—will bear.

The continued polarization of the Church is, objectively, a threat to visible ecclesial unity, a principle of great value in Catholic ecclesiology and indeed emphasized by the Council Fathers.<sup>22</sup> Francis's push to unite the Church—whether it be restrictions on the pre-conciliar use of the Roman Rite or the very idea of a synodal church—is viewed by some as genuine reform<sup>23</sup> and by others as fundamentally at odds with Catholic tradition and continuity.<sup>24</sup> What is undeniable, in view of the Second Vatican Council, is that the future of a visible, united Roman Catholic Church is inextricably tied with its expression of an equally visible, united liturgy. The wider program of synodality is coming to define the pontificate of Francis—where bishops, priests, deacons, and laity all walk together as Church, grounded in

<sup>19</sup> Rafael Luciani, "Introducing Synodality," in *Synodality: A New Way of Proceeding in the Church*, trans. Joseph Owens (New York: Paulist Press, 2022).

<sup>20</sup> Mathew Schmalz, "The Catholic Church Is Increasingly Diverse—and so Are Its Controversies," *The Conversation*, 13 September 2022, sec. The Conversation US, <http://theconversation.com/the-catholic-church-is-increasingly-diverse-and-so-are-its-controversies-189038>.

<sup>21</sup> "Eucharistic Prayer for Use in Masses for Various Needs I: The Church on the Path of Unity," in *The Roman Missal*, English Translation according to the Third Typical Edition for use in the Dioceses of the United States of America (International Commission on English in the Liturgy, 2011), 779.

<sup>22</sup> Second Vatican Council, 'Unitatis redintegratio,' 21 November 1964, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19641121\\_unitatis-redintegratio\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html), 1.

<sup>23</sup> Zac Davis, "I Once Fell in Love with the Latin Mass—Which Is Why I Understand Why Pope Francis Restricted It," *America* (New York, 16 July 2021).

<sup>24</sup> Walter Cardinal Brandmüller and Raymond Leo Cardinal Burke, Dubia, 10 July 2023, [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_risposta-dubia-2023.pdf](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_risposta-dubia-2023.pdf).

'mission, communion, and participation.'<sup>25</sup> Pope Francis's push for synodality is providing a new opportunity for a building of bridges and for a diffusion of tensions extant in the Roman Catholic Church, but, at the end of the day, it is up to all Catholics—hierarchs, laity, and everyone in between—to work to see this synodal tree bear fruit.

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<sup>25</sup> "Instrumentum Laboris for the First Session of the XVI General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops" (General Secretariat of the Synod, 20 June 2023), 26, [https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/universal-stage/il/ENG\\_INSTRUMENTUM-LABORIS.pdf](https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/common/phases/universal-stage/il/ENG_INSTRUMENTUM-LABORIS.pdf).