

“FLIRTING WITH SCHISM:” PLAYING A DANGEROUS GAME IN GERMANY

“Kids say the darndest things.” True enough, but they also “do the darndest things.” I will neither defend nor explain why we played the game of “Chicken” on our bicycles. Its object was to ride your bicycle at full speed towards another and see who was the first to “chicken out,” turning to avoid a collision. Sound fun? Due to how quickly I “abandoned ship,” I have no recollection of a crash ever occurring! I preferred the “stare down” game to see **who blinked first**; perhaps your eyes stung a little, but that was it. But as I survey the ecclesiological landscape, I am **increasingly concerned** about what is transpiring in **Germany**. It’s a battle of wills, a stare down, a game of ecclesiastical Chicken. Terms are liberally bandied around: council, synod, consultation, binding synodality, discernment. These terms are precise (synodality still confuses me) and it is unreasonable to expect the lay faithful to delineate the shades of difference among them. Even smaller **local councils** have produced texts with far reaching effects. Consider the **Eleventh Council of Toledo** in 675 A.D.

Though a **mere 17 bishops** assembled, they produced a **Symbol of Faith** so well-crafted in fact, that it played a significant role in the development of the Church’s Trinitarian doctrine. In **Neuner** and **Dupris’** magisterial summary of Catholic Doctrine entitled *The Christian Faith*, (5th ed. 1992), the authors heaped praise upon this “Symbol of Faith.” It is said to reflect, “the deepest insights and the clearest affirmations ever proposed by any document of the West, as regards these two mysteries.” (i.e. Trinity and Incarnation) That’s quite a compliment for a local council whose entire membership could fit comfortably into our Ryan Room. Click [here online](#) to view it; but I warn you, it is dense and you may well scratch your head a few times! Here is an excerpt: “He Himself is the Father of His own essence, who in an ineffable way has begotten the Son from His ineffable substance. Yet He did not beget something different (*aliud*) from what He Himself is: God has begotten God, light has begotten light.” Does your head hurt yet? Still, these deliberations had a **far greater reach** than any could have thought possible.

Bingo—so too with Germany. Cardinal Marx speaks of a two-year “synodal pathway” and is intent upon discussing four key themes: (1) “authority, participation and separation of powers,” (2) “sexual morality,” (3) “the form of priestly life” and (4) “women in Church ministries and offices.” Clearly, they are not discussing practical pastoral matters (e.g. the age of Confirmation for youth across Germany, or the establishment of regional seminaries, etc.) Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet, Prefect for the Congregation of Bishops, has stated that such plans for a binding synod are “**not ecclesologically valid**.” In Church parlance, “them’s fightin’ words” and Cardinal Marx is **not taking it well**. Ouellet explained that these themes “do not only affect the Church in Germany but the universal Church and—with few exceptions—cannot be the object of the deliberations or decisions of a particular Church without contravening what is expressed by the Holy Father in his letter.”

Ouellet wrote: “It is clear from the articles of the draft of the statutes that the [German] Episcopal Conference has in mind to make a Particular Council pursuant to canons 439-446 but without using this term.” Canon 439 §1 of the Code reads: “A plenary council, that is, one for all the particular churches of the same conference of bishops, is to be celebrated whenever it seems necessary or useful to the conference of bishops, **with the approval** of the Apostolic See.” No national gathering of Catholic bishops and laity is authorized to make pronouncements of a doctrinal nature, if that doctrine contradicts binding universal Catholic doctrine. A Synod is never binding—certainly not a national one. It is consultative and when the **entire country** is involved, it is typically called a “**Plenary Council**,” as we held here with the Plenary Councils of Baltimore. While they set national policy, they do not craft new doctrine; rather, they apply it.

According to the teaching of Vatican II, the local bishop receives his office of teaching and ruling (the *munus docendi* and the *munus regendi*) directly from Christ through the sacramental ordination to the episcopacy. In other words, the local bishop is **not** a mere “**branch manager**,” of the “Catholic Church, Inc.” corporation. Nor is he a branch manager in his own national episcopal conference. Each bishop who receives a mission to teach, sanctify and rule does so only after first being given a particular canonical mission **and remains in hierarchical communion** with the college of bishops and its head, the Bishop of Rome. This is not merely academic jargon. This is crucial. Neither an **individual bishop**, nor any national Episcopal (Bishops) Conference may be

understood without a reference to the **universal** Church of which it is a part.

So, where does the rubber hit the road? In his latest interview while returning from Africa, the Holy Father was asked about his critics, and whether a **schism is possible** in the Church. “There always is the schismatic option in the Church,” the Pope said. “It’s a choice that the Lord leaves to human freedom. I am not afraid of schism. . . I pray for them not to happen, as the spiritual health of many people is at stake.” Indeed, it is. This ecclesiastical version of “who blinks first” among the Curia, the Pope and bishops in Germany is no kid’s game. Cardinal Marx appears resolute to proceed. Much is at stake; this is serious stuff and I have no clue where it will end.

- Are we alone? I am the most reluctant “conspiracy theory” guy on the planet. But even I did a double take when the Navy admitted that video footage of “phenomena” making its way across the internet is properly categorized as coming from “unidentified” objects. It makes no claims about their origin, only that they are not balloons or drones. I still believe we are alone in the universe– can’t prove it and won’t try. That’s my story and I’m sticking to it!
- As our summer “wedding season” winds down, I am pleased to share that I have celebrated nuptials for some of the most committed Catholic couples I have seen in my thirty years as a priest. While we have fewer weddings than in past, it has been thoroughly enjoyable to work with these couples. Marriage in and through the Church is a great gift– I hope our young couples see the value in the sacramental union of man and woman.
- Yes, I erred last week in misnaming the player who just signed with New England Patriots after essentially trying to get fired from his less preferred team. I meant Antonio Brown, not Davis. It is both humbling to acknowledge one’s error and mildly encouraging that multiple people pointed it out! At least someone read it!
- Last week’s funeral for Javier Sanmiguel was as faith-filled as it was heart wrenching. Special thanks to the Saint Agnes School Choir (the Sanmiguel’s oldest child is in Kindergarten there) for their participation. And a shout out both to Lawrence Lawyer (it was a stunning liturgy guide) and Chris Ganza (Saint Agnes and Cathedral choir director) for collaborating so seamlessly on the music. And thank you for all your prayers for this beautiful family.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel

Rector