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Reflections on Impediments to Synodality

Polarization and the Escalation of Conflict

Pope Francis has made synodality the leitmotif of his papacy. Synodality is most fundamentally about Christians “journeying together.” It requires the ecclesial habit of careful listening to one another and a willingness to address inevitable conflict in a spirit of charity—confident that in doing so the church can best discern the impulse of the Spirit. Yet we continue to face substantial obstacles to the realization of synodality in the life of the church. In my last contribution to “The Amen Corner,” I addressed some structural impediments to synodality and reflected on concrete proposals for structural church reform that were offered in two recent documents, one coming from France and the other from Australia. In this contribution I would like to consider broader cultural forces that can also impede the realization of synodality: the prominence of identitarian polarization and the dangerous temptation to artificially escalate conflict to the realm of abuse.

IDENTITARIAN POLARIZATION

At the 2016 consistory Pope Francis warned of the “virus of polarization” and called for the church to be a force for healing the deep divisions in our society. Yet the church, too, carries the virus. Polarization results from forces that create a clustering around two opposed poles. When applied to the cultural realm, polarization is not simply about disagreement; it is about the inability to address disagreements constructively within a larger framework of mutual respect. Differences are accentuated and coalesce around two extreme poles, with the inevitable thinning out of the middle of the spectrum where common

ground can most often be found. Polarization precludes meaningful conversation, solidarity, and the prospect of constructive action in the face of shared problems.

Although polarization is generally discussed with respect to ideology, in his book, *Why We're Polarized*, Ezra Klein describes the growing role of *identity* in contemporary polarization. In complicated ways we become attached to groups that possess strong, distinctive identities. It is our deep affective attachment to these identities that guides our judgments more than we may wish to admit. We may initially identify with these groups, including political parties, Klein notes, “because they share our values and our goals.”¹ But our attachment to the group, and what belonging to that group represents for us, can exert a profound influence as well. Our basis for group alignment can shift from a commitment to the intellectual and moral integrity of the position to the question, “what does support for this policy position *say about me*?”² Before we know it, we find ourselves engaged, not in careful inquiry into complex issues and concerns, but in protracted battles to demonstrate the moral and intellectual superiority of our group identity.

Once we identify ourselves with a particular group, there is an extraordinary pull to make common cause with those in our group and to defend our group against the attacks of others. Rational argumentation becomes compromised because, in a given conflict, argument is governed less by the pursuit of truth than by “confirmation bias,” or what Yale Law Professor Dan Kahan refers to as “identity-protective cognition.”³ This cognitional habit is highly resistant to factual information or counterarguments that would challenge our group identity; we have a deep-felt need for “our people” to be right. Indeed, “getting it right,” as an expression of a rigorous commitment to getting at the truth of things, regardless of the consequences, becomes less important than protecting our tribal identities. Under the sway of identity-protective cognition, as Jonathan Haidt points out, we all function more like press secretaries

¹ Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020), 68.

² Klein, 48.

³ Cited in Klein, 96.

charged with “spin.” We set out to marshal facts and arguments in support of a pre-determined position, one attached to our group or party.⁴

Some social commentators indebted to René Girard’s mimetic theory describe the dynamics of identitarian polarization in the language of “out-group contrarianism.” Identitarian polarization cements a tribal sense of belonging by dismissing the views of one’s opponents and keeping them at a distance, outside one’s group. Strident opposition to the out-group serves to further cement one’s in-group identity. James Alison writes: “Give people a common enemy, and you will give them a common identity. Deprive them of an enemy and you deprive them of the crutch by which they know who they are.”⁵

This social dynamic has always been a part of human society, but its cultural potency has been dramatically enhanced with the rise of social media. Many social media platforms employ sophisticated algorithms that efficiently facilitate the clustering of like-minded persons whose media presence reinforces our “rightness” and “righteousness.” As Geoff Shullenberger observes, “Retweeting, liking, and reusing hashtags is easier than composing an original post, and the posts you’re most likely to retweet and like are ones that have already been retweeted and liked by many people. Whenever a tweet is widely shared, we see the ‘mimetic snowballing’ Girard described.”⁶

It is not difficult to recognize identity-protective cognition at work in the church. Progressive “social justice” Catholics who advocate for racial justice will be inclined to dismiss out of hand challenges to elements of critical race theory, for example, because acknowledging the legitimacy of even the most modest concerns might call into question their social justice bona fides. Conservative “pro-life” Catholics similarly engage in identity-protective cognition when they advocate for the appointment of jurists committed to overthrow

⁴ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Random House, 2012), 91–95.

⁵ James Alison, “Love Your Enemies,” in *Broken Hearts and New Creations: Intimations of a Great Reversal* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 160–75, at 165.

⁶ Geoff Shullenberger, “Preliminary Theory of the In-Group Contrarian,” *Outsider Theory* (June 15, 2020), <https://outsidetheory.com/preliminary-theory-of-the-in-group-contrarian/>.

Roe v. Wade while ignoring whether the reversal of that court ruling would lead to the actual reduction of abortions.

THE ESCALATION OF CONFLICT

Identitarian polarization vitiates our ability to deal with conflict constructively. Pope Francis writes:

When conflict arises, some people simply look at it and go their way as if nothing happened; they wash their hands of it and get on with their lives. Others embrace it in such a way that they become its prisoners; they lose their bearings, project onto institutions their own confusion and dissatisfaction and thus make unity impossible. (*Evangelii Gaudium* 227)

Conflict is an uncomfortable fact of life. Many of us try to avoid it altogether. But an alternative, more insidious, strategy has emerged that aims to re-narrate conflict in the language of abuse and victimization in order to absolve us of any responsibility for what transpired. Sarah Schulman, a queer novelist and intellectual, perceptively attends to this temptation in her book, *Conflict Is Not Abuse*.⁷ Schulman begins with the obvious; conflict is inevitable in any society. We come into human interactions with wide-ranging social habits, intentions, and presuppositions, only some of which we may be consciously aware. Our communicative abilities vary and can fail us in any given situation, leading to misunderstanding. The strength of a society will lie in good measure in how these conflicts are negotiated.

Schulman invites us to consider occasions of genuine conflict in which each party has real concerns and rights that merit attention. Postmodern power analyses, indebted to the work of Michel Foucault, can sometimes be helpful in assessing such conflicts. Schulman worries, however, of a real danger in reading every conflict exclusively through the lens of “power disparities.” Doing so may incline us to claim, often prematurely, that the one with whom we are in conflict is a perpetrator of abuse and we the victims of that abuse. Schulman recognizes well the reality and, indeed, horror of genuine abuse in its many

⁷ Sarah Schulman, *Conflict Is Not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility, and the Duty of Repair* (Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2016).

nefarious forms. She is unambiguous in her support of the rights of true victims. She has become increasingly concerned, however, about the growing cultural tendency to circumvent the hard work of conflict resolution by “overstating harm,” reframing legitimate conflicts within the perpetrator-victim paradigm. The road for such a strategy has already been paved by the demonizing tendencies of identitarian polarization. This temptation to “overstate harm” absolves us of the need for introspection regarding our own culpability and can dissipate energy necessary for constructive resolution, what she terms “the duty of repair.” This artificial elevation of conflict to the realm of abuse and the “overstatement of harm” gives license to an unmerited “righteous indignation” and can feed a culture of grievance. It can rob conflicts of their real complexity and obviate the possibility for social repair through self-critical reflection, mutual accountability, and good faith negotiation.

The escalation of conflict Schulman describes deserves our careful attention. We live in a world, and in a church, in which abuse is all too real and many victims struggle to be heard, but also one in which genuine conversations about hard questions may be increasingly difficult to have. The situation is exacerbated if in every conflict one party appeals to membership in a victimized class as an automatic warrant for claims of abuse. Not every conflict between a lay church employee and a parish pastor can be traced to clericalism. Not every critical comment appended to a student paper is “oppressive.”

Pope Francis is well aware of the grievous abuse that has been perpetrated on countless victims, but he also understands the difference between abuse and conflict and calls us to be a church and a society that is not afraid to address conflict forthrightly. Without a determination to resist the artificial escalation of conflict we cannot hope to engage in the hard work that genuine synodality, accompanying one another along the ecclesial journey of faith, demands.

HOW CAN THE CHURCH RESPOND?

Identitarian polarization and the artificial escalation of conflict represent considerable impediments to ecclesial synodality. They must be confronted with a set of concrete ecclesial practices. Such practices will find warrant in Jesus’ own liberative ministry and teaching about the reign of God: the radical

practice of open table fellowship, the refusal to place the adulterous woman under judgment, his injunction to pray for one's enemies. Nothing about this will be easy.

Our first Jesuit pope has consistently pressed for the practice of communal discernment as an antidote to these cultural forces. For Francis, communal discernment is quite different from a "parliamentary logic" focused on winning arguments and securing a majority in any dispute. Genuine communal discernment is committed to listening together for the voice of the Spirit along with a determination to follow where the Spirit leads. This communal discernment embraces necessary conflict and disagreement. It recognizes the inevitable limits of any one perspective and encourages an open posture toward alternative points of view. Above all it demands the cultivation of empathy for one's opponent. As Haidt observes, "empathy is an antidote to righteousness, although it's very difficult to empathize across a moral (and theological!) divide."⁸

One concrete response to the demands of our current moment would be to pursue opportunities for "in-group contrarianism." In-group contrarians locate themselves *within* a larger group, sharing its fundamental beliefs, values, and goals, while objecting to a particular policy, line of argument, or stratagem advocated by the group. An example from American partisan politics would be those Republicans who formed the "Lincoln Project" to oppose Trumpism within the GOP. Or consider those within the LGBT community who advocate caution and careful accompaniment when an adolescent claims a gender identity other than that assigned at birth and requests gender reassignment surgery.

Because in-group contrarians are not outsiders, their views cannot so easily be dismissed. Yet in-group contrarianism is extraordinarily difficult to sustain. This is due to a kind of mimetic proximity. The more "alike" we are, the more our "differences" stand out as a threat to what we take as our shared identities. The group pressure to purge the "traitor" from within is massive and usually pre-conscious. In the 1970s, Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann wrote of a "spiral of

⁸ Haidt, *Righteous Mind*, 58. The parenthetical comment is my own.

silence,” that occurs when people feel free to speak out only in situations in which they believe their views will be well accepted.⁹ The pressures facing those who would engage in this kind of in-group contrarianism are considerable.

In-group contrarians within the Catholic social justice movement, for example, might challenge their colleagues to end their awkward silence regarding the rights of the vulnerable unborn. In-group contrarians who inhabit a more conservative Catholic space might push back against selective doctrinal and moral purity tests for the reception of the Eucharist which, Pope Francis reminds us, is not “a prize for the perfect.” In the increasingly polarized discourses of academic Catholic theology, in-group contrarians who engage in contextual and liberationist approaches might have to risk their progressive credentials by raising awkward questions regarding not only the real contributions but also the potential limitations of critical instruments like feminist gender theory, queer theory, decolonial theory, and critical race theory. In-group contrarians who traffic in the Catholic *ressourcement* theological circle might need to stand up and insist on the limits and blind spots evident in the Great Tradition and invite their colleagues to grapple with the patriarchal and racist biases that may be “baked in” to central Catholic institutional structures.

In this fraught cultural and ecclesial moment, we might also consider ways of cultivating forms of a communal examination of conscience like those that occasionally take place in parish communal penance services. Such communal practices would create a space for critical self-reflection that could moderate our tendencies toward the perpetrator-victim binary and invite us to consider the extent to which we may share culpability for a given conflict. This kind of public and communal examination of conscience would help relativize and complexify our group identities. Luke Timothy Johnson recently suggested a reimagination of the ancient monastic tradition, a “Chapter of Faults,” in which a religious community challenged an individual member to acknowledge habits and attitudes inimical to the call to holiness and the life of

⁹ Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann, *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion—Our Social Skin*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

Christian community. This practice fell out of favor because it was so prone to abuse. But might there not be something salutary in a communal practice in which we were encouraged to address our concerns with one another (and not exempting community leadership) in straightforward and respectful ways? Where can that kind of practice happen in today's church?

Johnson has also proposed for our consideration the monastic tradition's commitment to the value of silence in communal life. He writes:

The most destructive forms of speech in community, Benedict understood, are those that involve judgments against the other. Benedict calls this form of speech "murmuring," included all forms of griping, gossiping, and nagging. He forbids it absolutely. . . . As we learn every day in our new world of constant chatter, savage judgment, and long-distance shaming via (anti)social media, when speech is totally without restraint, mercilessness is an almost inevitable consequence.¹⁰

Within our various faith communities, university faculties, and professional associations, "murmuring" has become ubiquitous. The practice of silence is not unrelated to a certain "custody of the tongue" in which we willfully refrain from verbal "cheap shots" made at the expense of those we oppose. I can think of times when I have spoken in public to my theological or ecclesial "tribe" and made a wisecrack at the expense of some notorious church figure in order to get a laugh and cement my in-group credentials.

Finally, liturgical practice commends itself for our consideration. Could we not return to the liturgy as a space for ecclesial healing and reconciliation? Many of us who have the privilege of teaching theology in the classroom have our students view the sumptuous film, *Babette's Feast*. We do so because it communicates so effectively the power of a shared meal to heal festering wounds and divisions. How might our attitudes toward one another change if we regularly gathered for worship with those with whom we disagree and together approached the altar, bound by a common faith and baptism?

¹⁰ Luke Timothy Johnson, "How a Monk Learns Mercy: Thomas Merton and the Rule of St. Benedict," *Commonweal* (September 26, 2018), <https://www.commonweal.org/how-monk-learns-mercy?fbclid=IwAR2undAimMJTqVrDIUDMSgkfHBeXv1YPSbwnldatvs5XgoKmh3iYQZC0wxk>.

How can we find more opportunities to gather together at the liturgy with those who do not belong to our in-group? For this to happen we will need to set aside our “liturgy wars” and resist the current ecclesial sorting in which liberal and conservative Catholics migrate to parishes that exhibit their particular liturgical preferences. We will need to submit to an ascetic disciplining of our liturgical desires and hew more closely to the actual practice of the rite as it currently stands, recognizing well its limitations. For liturgically conservative Catholics, this might mean forsaking ostentatious displays of eucharistic piety (e.g., priests dramatically lingering at the elevation, communicants equally dramatically genuflecting prior to eucharistic reception). It would require liturgically liberal Catholics to resist an excessive informality (e.g., priests presiding as if they were talk show hosts, the liturgical assembly performing the sign of peace as if it were a “hug fest” at a family reunion). Pope Francis’s *motu proprio*, *Traditionis custodes*,¹¹ was motivated by a concern for the divisiveness that resulted from Pope Benedict XVI’s declaration that the 1962 and 1969 Missals were equally legitimate, referring to them respectively as the extraordinary and ordinary forms of one rite.¹² Francis felt compelled to reassert the position of the council that there could only be one missal for the Latin church *sui iuris*, that which would result from the reforms the council mandated. Hopefully his action will eventually be seen for what it was, a call for ecclesial unity.

As we follow the lead of Pope Francis in our striving to become a more authentically synodal church, we must continue to press for institutional reforms that can make synodality a reality at every level of ecclesial life. However, these efforts at institutional reform will go for naught if they are not accompanied by concrete practices that can respond effectively to both the tribalizing forces of our time and the dangerous misrepresentation and escalation of conflict.

¹¹ Pope Francis, *Traditionis Custodes* (2021), https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/20210716-motu-proprio-traditionis-custodes.html.

¹² Pope Benedict XVI (2007), https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_ben-xvi_motu-proprio_20070707_summorum-pontificum.html.

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