



Sacred Heart
UNIVERSITY

Sacred Heart University
DigitalCommons@SHU

Mission and Catholic Identity Publications

Office of Mission and Catholic Identity

10-20-2014

Synod Revealed the Muscle, Muck and Mire of a Living Church

Michael W. Higgins

Sacred Heart University, higginsmw@sacredheart.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/mission_pub



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Higgins, Michael W. "Synod Revealed the Muscle, Muck and Mire of a Living Church." *Globe and Mail* 20 Oct. 2014.

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Mission and Catholic Identity at DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mission and Catholic Identity Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact ferribyp@sacredheart.edu.



Sacred Heart
UNIVERSITY

Sacred Heart University
DigitalCommons@SHU

Mission and Catholic Identity Publications

Office of Mission and Catholic Identity

10-20-2014

Synod Revealed the Muscle, Muck and Mire of a Living Church

Michael W. Higgins

Sacred Heart University, higginsmw@sacredheart.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/mission_pub

 Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Higgins, Michael W. "Synod Revealed the Muscle, Muck and Mire of a Living Church." *Globe and Mail* 20 Oct. 2014. Web.

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Mission and Catholic Identity at DigitalCommons@SHU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mission and Catholic Identity Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@SHU. For more information, please contact ferribyp@sacredheart.edu.



Michael W. Higgins

Synod Revealed the Muscle, Muck and Mire of a Living Church

Special to The Globe and Mail

Published Monday, Oct. 20 2014, 7:22 AM EDT

Last updated Monday, Oct. 20 2014, 7:24 AM EDT

Michael W. Higgins is vice-president of Mission and Catholic Identity at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Conn.

The past two turbulent weeks of the Extraordinary Synod of Catholic Bishops in Rome is over. The donnybrook on the Tiber is finished. But the ripples will be with us for some time to come.

When Pope Francis ushered in the Synod on the Family with his opening address he pointedly observed that he wanted the Synod Fathers to speak with candour, without fear and without self-censoring. When it is otherwise (which it has been during the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI) “it is not good. It is not synodality, because it is necessary to say everything that in the Lord we feel must be said: without regard to station or status, without timidity.”

The bishops took up this exhortation with a vengeance. They debated all the neuralgic issues facing the Catholic family: divorce, remarriage without benefit of a decree of nullity, access to communion or the eucharistic table, cohabitation, same-sex marriages. And they did so in a display of episcopal openness rarely seen.

Conservatives like the Australian Cardinal George Pell judged discussion around the possible re-admission of Catholics with a canonically or legally “irregular” marriage to communion “counterproductive and futile [because] healthy communities do not spend most of their energies on peripheral issues [involving] the wounded, the lukewarm, and the outsiders.”

Progressives like the German Cardinal Walter Kasper countered that an understanding of the Gospel that reduces it to a penal code is ideological and illustrative of “a theological fundamentalism which is not Catholic.”

And this they said before the Synod even began. They established the broad boundaries of opinion that would surface with regularity, urgency, and resourcefulness throughout the proceedings.

The bishops fought over what deserves precedence: mercy or the law; they fought over the tension between doctrine and pastoral practice; they fought over language and nuance; and they fought over the consequences of such a public display of fighting at all.

Manila's Cardinal Luis Tagle underscored the connection between this Synod and the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) – its non-judgemental attitude toward the world, its affirming outreach, its rich transparency. Like the Council, convoked by John XXIII, a pope much like the current one in pastoral sensibility and fearless trust in the Holy Spirit, this Synod has injected new energy into an atrophying structure, provided a meaningful opportunity for intelligent reflection on complex and immediate spiritual challenges, and emboldened church leaders to speak their minds.

But there is the rub. Unaccustomed to speaking their minds so directly and so publicly, the prelates have uncorked a whirlwind of expectations, unleashed a dragon of devouring difficulties, and have created a mess.

And that is a good thing; it is a pledge of their pastoral earnest; it is an institutional sign of Pope Francis's agenda for enlightened governance; it is a dramatic statement of the church's troubled but prophetic role in our global world.

It has been inspiring watching them wrestle with the massive discrepancy that exists between theory and practice in the church rather than simply repeating ad nauseam the dogmatic but incredible nostrums of disapproval that have been a defining feature of churchspeak for too long.

And it has been excruciatingly frustrating to listen to the paternalism of Cardinal Peter Erdo of Hungary, the Relator of the Synod, who lamented that “many people today have difficulty in thinking in a logical manner and reading lengthy documents.” As if that were the issue.

But most importantly, this Synod has demonstrated to the puzzled or intrigued non-Catholics and to the anxious or hope-deprived Catholics that there is breath, muscle, muck and mire in a living church.

And that there is as much drama in that discovery as in any document the Synod will produce.