

[Opinion](#)
[NCR Voices](#)



America Media's Gloria Purvis moderates a conversation on polarization with Cardinal Robert McElroy of San Diego; Bishop Daniel Flores of Brownsville, Texas; and Bishop Robert Barron of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota. (NCR screenshot)



by Michael Sean Winters

[View Author Profile](#)

Follow on Twitter at [@michaelswinters](#)

[Join the Conversation](#)

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. [Learn more](#)

May 17, 2024

[Share on Bluesky](#)[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops sponsored a webinar on May 14 as part of its "Civilize It: Unifying a Divided Church" campaign. My colleague Heidi Schlumpf [reported on the discussion](#), which featured Cardinal Robert McElroy of San Diego; Bishop Daniel Flores of Brownsville, Texas; and Bishop Robert Barron of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota, in a conversation moderated by America Media's Gloria Purvis. [The video of the discussion can be found here](#).

The issue of polarization within the church and within the country is a vexing one, and a one-hour webinar is not going to resolve the issues, but the discussion did represent some fine hors d'oeuvres for any effort that aims to ameliorate the toxicity of the culture.

Barron noted that he invited his older, more liberal clergy and his younger, more conservative clergy, to go golfing together, to have each other over for meals, to allow friendship to take some of the edge off of their differences. Many have noted that one of the reasons politics in Washington has become so toxic is that members of Congress go back to their districts each weekend, so they do not fraternize with each other, their kids do not attend the same schools, they do not run into each other at the opera or the museum as they did formerly. There is something to this but the differences are real and I am not sure a good filet mignon will overcome them.

Flores spoke about the synodal process and how it has the ability to help bridge some of the divisions within the church. He noted that the Holy Father probably had several things in mind when he decided to convoke the synodal process, but that one of them was this task of overcoming divisions, offering "a diagnosis of the culture, especially in the West, that is deeply divided and really unable to kind of have a human conversation anymore." He added that "to respond to that, the church has to upgrade the quality of its own communion." He noted that the Second Vatican Council taught that the church is called to be a sign of communion in the world, and that to be effective, we must be able to show that we love one another.

McElroy made the point that political and ideological polarization manifests itself much less in the ethnic parishes of his diocese. He said the ideological split in the wider culture is "much less prominent in the non-Anglo cultures." McElroy said we need to learn from those cultures, but did not speculate as to the core reasons. I will offer one: For immigrant communities, the faith is more decisive in their lives than it is for people who have settled into bourgeois patterns of self-sufficiency.

The most significant comments came early in the session, as a response to a question about engaging the realm of social media with its special quality of toxicity. Flores said he reminds confirmation classes, "It is always good to remember what Jesus would *not* do when he was out amongst the people. ... He would not be unkind especially to the poor and to those who had no standing in the world. And also he would never commit an injustice in order to promote justice. These are things Jesus would not do." Here is a barrier to the libertarianism of the age.

Advertisement

The comment reminded me that before Vatican II, when the church gathered in an ecumenical council, those councils would issue anathemas, stating what was unorthodox, what was inconsistent with the faith, what was beyond the pale. This always allowed a great deal of freedom, because anything that was not specifically declared out of bounds remained in bounds, and was up for discussion and debate. By switching to positive articulations of the faith, in both encyclicals and conciliar declarations, the Catholic is left trying to align oneself with what the pope or council said, rather than explore the freedom of the issues left in-bounds. It is a subtle shift, but an important one, one that confined the notion of fidelity within a more circumscribed intellectual and human terrain.

There is no going back, nor wanting to: The switch to a more positive articulation of the faith at Vatican II was a necessary one to be sure. But even good choices involve loss and much of the tension surrounding contemporary ideas of fidelity to the tradition miss the freedom the old approach afforded.

McElroy followed up by posing the question in a positive way: "How can we move to a deeper level where we build solidarity among people?" He recalled a study the bishops' conference did about 12 years ago that sought to probe ways to unite Catholics who are politically divided. "The one way that brought people together

across the board, those who are pro-life and stressing euthanasia and those who are stressing the poor and peace, and all this, they found that the virtue of compassion is the one thing that will bring people together. It is a bridging virtue." Not for the first time, McElroy coined a beautiful phrase: "a bridging virtue."

Bridges are something we build, and the cardinal is pointing to the need to build a culture characterized by solidarity. This is no Pelagian enterprise. It is the Holy Spirit who builds the church and uses us to accomplish the work. Culture is something old and new, inherited and modified from within and without. A faith that does not generate culture is a dead faith. If the bridging virtue of compassion is what connects the often disparate approaches to living the Catholic faith in our society, then it must be centered in all ecclesial efforts, including the synodal path, as a mark of the Holy Spirit's presence.

One point that was not explicitly mentioned but which needs to be emphasized is this: The work does not start by trying to change the culture. It starts by taking up our cross and following the Lord together. Those who [look to St. Benedict and his monks](#) as the saviors of civilization in their time usually miss this important fact: Benedict did not intend to save civilization. He aimed to save his soul and the souls of his fellows. The cultural impact flowed from the power of their faith, not the other way round.

Still, the discussion with the three bishops was helpful as a starter, identifying some key problems and offering some hints about how Catholics can begin the arduous work of healing the culture. It won't be easy. We have no promise our efforts will succeed, but we have an obligation to try.