The so-called Synod on Synodality — officially, the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, the theme of which is, "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, and Mission" (Oct. 2021–Oct. 2023) — opened in Rome the weekend of Oct. 9-10, 2021 and in dioceses around the world the following Sunday. Unlike previous synods, each of which has been devoted either to a specific doctrinal/pastoral subject[1] or to the situation of the Church in a particular region of the world,[2] the focus of the current synod is much broader and bears upon the very nature of the Church herself (the object of *ecclesiology*, a particular branch of theology) to the point of seeking to fundamentally and permanently *change the Church* (or at least the traditional understanding of her divine constitution) and how she functions.[3]

As we shall see, the fundamental purpose of this "synodal journey" appears to be a further updating (*aggiornamento*) of the Church according to "the ecclesiology of Vatican II," a phrase found in a 2018 Vatican document that is critical for understanding the current synod (more on this later).

## Opening of the Synod

During his address at the opening "Moment of Reflection" (Oct. 9, 2021), Pope Francis made this fundamental purpose of change quite clear (emphasis added):

> "If we want to speak of a synodal Church, *we cannot remain satisfied with appearances* alone; we need content, means and structures that can facilitate dialogue and interaction within the People of God, especially between priests and laity. *This requires changing* certain overly vertical, distorted and partial visions of the Church, the priestly ministry, the role of the laity, ecclesial responsibilities, roles of governance and so forth."[4]

He emphasized how this two-year "synodal experience" presents an opportunity for the Mystical Body of Christ "to become a *listening Church*," as well as "a *Church of closeness*, that not only in words, but by her very presence weaves greater bonds of friendship with society and the world. A Church that does not stand aloof from life, but immerses herself in today's problems and needs, bandaging wounds and healing broken hearts with the balm of God."[5]

He even went so far as to quote Fr. Yves Congar (1904-1995), a progressive Dominican *peritus* (theological expert) at Vatican II and co-founder of the heterodox journal *Concilium*,[6] who "once said: 'There is no need to create another Church, but to create a

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different Church' (*True and False Reform in the Church*)."[7]

And among the "problems and needs" this "different Church" must address are found *environmentalism* and *human fraternity*, both of which involve interreligious dialogue and the associated danger of religious indifferentism — a heresy repeatedly condemned prior to Vatican II.[8]

## Environmentalism and Human Fraternity: Constituent Parts of the Present Synod

In the first section of the Synod's Preparatory Document (PD), "The Call to Journey Together," we read the following:

> "The synodal journey unfolds within a historical context marked by epochal changes in society and by a crucial transition in the life of the Church, which cannot be ignored: it is within the folds of the complexity of this context, in its tensions and contradictions, that we are called to 'scrutinize the signs of the times and interpret them in the light of the Gospel' (GS, no. 4)." (PD, n. 4)

After quoting a famous line from *Gaudium et Spes* (Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World),[9] and without ever defining the "crucial transition in the life of the Church," the document goes on:

> "A global tragedy such as the COVID-19 pandemic 'momentarily revived the sense that we are a global community, all in the same boat, where one person's problems are the problems of all. Once more we realized that no one is saved alone; we can only be saved together' (FT, no. 32). At the same time, the pandemic has also made the already existing inequalities and inequities explode: humanity seems increasingly shaken by processes of massification and fragmentation; the tragic condition faced by migrants in all regions of the world shows how high and strong the barriers dividing the single human family still are. The Encyclicals *Laudato si'* and *Fratelli Tutti* document the depth of the fault lines that run through humanity, and we can refer to these analyses to start listening to the cry of the poor and of the earth and to recognize the seeds of hope and of the future that the Spirit continues to sow even in our time: 'The Creator does not abandon us; he never forsakes his loving plan or repents of having created us. Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our

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> common home' (LS, no. 13)." (PD, n. 5)

Here we see the centrality of environmentalism (the theme of *Laudato Si*) and human fraternity (the theme of *Fratelli Tutti*) for the present synod, all within the context of "the COVID-19 pandemic".

Interestingly, an event took place last October, overlapping with the opening of the Synod in dioceses throughout the world (Oct. 17, 2021), which combined the themes of environmentalism and human fraternity and received the blessing of Pope Francis. The 2021 Parliament of the World's Religions (Oct. 16-18), the eighth such gathering since the parliament's inception in Chicago in 1893, was held "to gather the world's global interfaith movement and celebrate the enduring spirit and work of religious and spiritual communities striving toward a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world," according to the organization's website. As reported by Religion News Service at the time, "the major global issue that kept bubbling to the surface was the climate crisis and its long-reaching impact. The topic was addressed by a number of speakers across ideological and religious backgrounds."

Among those speakers was Cardinal Peter Turkson, then-Prefect of the Dicastery for the Promotion of Integral Human Development.[10] And Archbishop Christoph Pierre, current Apostolic Nuncio to the United States, sent the following message (dated Sept. 24, 2021) to Cardinal Blase Cupich, Archbishop of Chicago (location of the parliament's headquarters), on behalf of Pope Francis:

> "His Holiness Pope Francis sends cordial greetings to all taking part in the meeting of the Parliament of the World's Religions to be held virtually [due to COVID-19] on 17-18 October. He trusts that this experience of fraternal dialogue will draw attention to the universal aspiration of the human spirit to peace and the moral imperative to act with compassion in meeting the needs of our brothers and sisters in the larger human family. With prayers that the meeting will contribute to a more just and humane global society respectful of each person's inviolable dignity and 'rooted in the values of peace, mutual understanding, and harmonious coexistence' (Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together [Feb. 4, 2019]), His Holiness invokes upon the participants the divine blessings of wisdom, joy, and peace."

As we shall see, interreligious dialogue and ecumenism (dialogue amongst Christians),

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because they are integral to "the ecclesiology of Vatican II," are likewise constituent parts of synodality.

## What Is Synodality?

If you find yourself mystified by the term "synodality," you are not alone. During his homily for the opening Mass of the Synod in the Archdiocese of New York (Oct. 17, 2021), Cardinal Timothy Dolan candidly asked those in attendance at Saint Patrick's Cathedral (NYC):

> "Now, you ask, just what is synodality, of which St. Fran– [mistake] Pope Francis so often speaks? I don't know if I completely understand it, everybody. And the Holy Father happens to be honest, as well, in admitting that neither does he have the full comprehension, which I guess is the reason he summoned us to this endeavor. He kind of wants us to join him in praying and listening and discerning, examining ourselves personally and the Church communally, to see, well, to see if we're on the path that Jesus has set for His beloved Bride, His Mystical Body the Church."

Returning to the Synod's Preparatory Document (PD), we read that by convoking the Synod on Synodality "Pope Francis invites the entire Church to reflect on a theme that is decisive for its life and mission: 'It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium'" (PD, n. 1). The official *Vademecum* (Handbook) for the Synod repeats this quote ("It is precisely this path of synodality…"), taken from a pivotal 2015 speech given by Francis, and further states (emphasis added):

> "*Following in the wake of the renewal of the Church proposed by the Second Vatican Council*, this common journey together is both a gift and a task. By reflecting together on the journey that has been made so far, the diverse members of the Church will be able to learn from one another's experiences and perspectives, guided by the Holy Spirit (*PD*, 1). Enlightened by the Word of God and united in prayer, we will be able to discern the processes to seek God's will and pursue the pathways to which God calls us — towards deeper communion, fuller participation, and greater openness to fulfilling our mission in the world." (*Vademecum*, 1.2)

Concerning the nature of synodality, the *Vademecum* goes on:

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> "First and foremost, synodality denotes the particular *style* that qualifies the life and mission of the Church, expressing her nature as the People of God journeying together and gathering in assembly, summoned by the Lord Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit to proclaim the Gospel.[11] …
>
> The heart of the synodal experience is listening to God through listening to one another, inspired by the Word of God. We listen to each other in order to better hear the voice of [the] Holy Spirit speaking in our world today." (*Vademecum*, 1.2, 4.1)

Arguably the most revealing description of synodality, however, is found in the 2018 Vatican document mentioned at the beginning of this article — a document which cites Francis' 2015 speech some eleven times and begins by quoting the most (in)famous line of that speech: "It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium."

## "Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church"

"Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church" (hereafter SLMC) was produced by Rome's International Theological Commission (ITC) and approved for publication by Cardinal Luis Ladaria, S.J., Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and *ex officio* President of the ITC, "after receiving a favorable response from Pope Francis." Therein, we read:

> "Although synodality is not explicitly found as a term or as a concept in the teaching of Vatican II, it is fair to say that *synodality is at the heart of the work of renewal the Council was encouraging*. [Emphasis added]
>
> The ecclesiology of the People of God stresses the common dignity and mission of all the baptized, in exercising the variety and ordered richness of their charisms, their vocations and their ministries. …
>
> In this ecclesiological context, synodality is the specific *modus vivendi et operandi* of the Church, the People of God, which reveals and gives substance to her being as communion when all her members journey together, gather in assembly and take an active part in her evangelizing mission." (SLMC, n. 6)

Although no citation is provided, the phrase "ecclesiology of the People of God" is clearly a

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reference to *Lumen Gentium* (LG), Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, the second chapter of which is entitled, "On the People of God". While art. 14 of LG is devoted to discussing "the Catholic faithful," arts. 15 and 16 outline the novel teaching that Holy Mother Church is somehow "linked with" all manner of non-Catholics (art. 15), the latter being "related in various ways to the people of God" (art. 16): non-Catholic Christians, Jews, Muslims, "those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God," and even "those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God" ("without blame," despite the contrary teaching of Romans 1:18-20 and Vatican I's Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius* on the Catholic Faith, Ch. 2, art. 1).

And further, under the heading, "A new threshold in the wake of Vatican II," SLMC goes on to explain the continuity between the Council, synodality, and Pope Francis:

> "The fruits of the renewal promised by Vatican II in its promotion of ecclesial communion, episcopal collegiality and thinking and acting 'synodally' have been rich and precious. *There is, however, still a long way to go in the direction mapped out by the Council* [emphasis added]. …
>
> Hence the new threshold that Pope Francis invites us to cross. In the wake of Vatican II, following in his predecessors' footsteps, he insists that synodality describes the shape of the Church that emerges from the Gospel of Jesus, which is called to become incarnate today in history, in creative fidelity [?] to Tradition.
>
> In conformity with the teaching of *Lumen Gentium,* Pope Francis remarks in particular that synodality 'offers us the most appropriate framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself' [2015 speech] and that, based on the doctrine of the *sensus fidei fidelium* [sense of faith of the faithful], all members of the Church are agents of evangelization. …
>
> Besides, *synodality is at the heart of the ecumenical commitment of Christians* [emphasis added]: because it represents an invitation to walk together on the path towards full communion and because — when it is understood correctly — it offers a way of understanding and experiencing the Church where legitimate differences find room in the logic of a reciprocal exchange of gifts in the light of truth." (SLMC, nn. 8-9)

If synodality is premised on "the ecclesiology of Vatican II" (SLMC, nn. 42, 71) — an admittedly novel teaching (cf. SLMC, n. 5) which claims that virtually all of humanity,

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regardless of religious affiliation (or lack thereof), is connected to the Catholic Church in varying degrees — and if "synodality is at the heart of the ecumenical commitment of Christians" (SLMC, n. 9), then we begin to understand why the official Synod on Synodality literature includes statements such as the following (emphasis added):

> "Dioceses are called to keep in mind that the main subjects of this synodal experience are all the baptized. Special care should be taken to involve those persons who may risk being excluded: women, the handicapped, refugees, migrants, the elderly, people who live in poverty, *Catholics who rarely or never practice their faith*, etc. …
>
> Together, all the baptized are the subject of the *sensus fidelium*, the living voice of the People of God. At the same time, in order to participate fully in the act of discerning, it is important for the baptized to hear the voices of other people in their local context, including *people who have left the practice of the faith, people of other faith traditions, people of no religious belief*, [recall *Lumen Gentium*, discussed above] etc. For as the Council [Vatican II] declares: 'The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts' (*GS*, 1).
>
> For this reason, while **all the baptized** are specifically called to take part in the Synodal Process, ***no one*** — *no matter their religious affiliation* — ***should be excluded*** from sharing their perspective and experiences [again, recall *Lumen Gentium*], insofar as they want to help the Church on her synodal journey of seeking what is good and true." (*Vademecum*, 2.1)

The problem with much of the above is that it is diametrically opposed to traditional Catholic ecclesiology, which sees no value whatsoever in consulting those who are outside the Church in order to improve the state of things within the Church. Here, for example, is what the Roman Catechism (aka Catechism of the Council of Trent) states regarding the condition of non-Catholic "churches" (let alone non-Christian bodies!) in contrast to the one true Church:

> "And just as this one [Catholic] Church cannot err in faith or morals, since it is guided by the Holy Ghost; so, on the contrary, all other societies arrogating to

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> themselves the name of *church*, must necessarily, because guided by the spirit of the devil, be sunk in the most pernicious errors, both doctrinal and moral."[12]

Neither is it helpful to consult "Catholics who rarely or never practice their faith," since they are not living the Church's supernatural life of grace and are thus like "dead members [that] sometimes remain attached to a living body," to quote the Roman Catechism once again.[13]

## Increased Prominence for the Laity

As we have seen, there are several integral components involved in the current synod, including environmentalism, human fraternity, interreligious dialogue, and ecumenism. To these components we can also add that of *increased prominence for the laity*, an initiative which apparently seeks to turn the Church's divinely constituted hierarchical structure upside down.

On this point, SLMC observes (n. 57): "Taking up the ecclesiological perspective of Vatican II, Pope Francis sketches the image of a synodal Church as 'an inverted pyramid' [2015 speech] which comprises the People of God and the College of Bishops, one of whose members, the Successor of Peter, has a specific ministry of unity. Here the summit is below the base."

Traditionally, the laity have occupied the broad base of the ecclesiastical pyramid, with priests, bishops, and ultimately the Pope above them — not so the clergy may tyrannically trample the laity, but in a manner analogous to children being *under* the authority, guidance, and protection of their parents. To quote the Baltimore Catechism, the Church is "the congregation of all baptized persons united in the same true faith, the same sacrifice, and the same sacraments, *under* the authority of the Sovereign Pontiff and the bishops in communion with him" (emphasis added).[14]

In the new synodal Church, however, the traditional structure is unacceptable and must be "quashed," as SLMC makes clear:

> "Pastoral conversion for the implementation of synodality means that some paradigms often still present in ecclesiastical culture need to be quashed, because they express an understanding of the Church that has not been renewed by the ecclesiology of communion. These include: the concentration of responsibility for mission in the ministry of Pastors; insufficient appreciation of

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> the consecrated life and charismatic gifts; rarely making use of the specific and qualified contribution of the lay faithful, including women, in their areas of expertise." (n. 105)

Thus, we can expect to see a push for more lay empowerment (to borrow a secular buzzword) at all levels and in all areas of the Church throughout this "synodal journey".

## "Ten Thematic Nuclei": The Synod's DNA Revealed

In closing, let us briefly survey the so-called "ten thematic nuclei" listed at the end of the Synod's Preparatory Document (PD), which are repeated in the *Vademecum* (Handbook) and intended to be used as the means for conducting the worldwide "consultation of the People of God" (PD, 26) during the "diocesan phase" of the two-year synodal process (*Vademecum*, 3.1). Just as the nucleus of a cell is where its genetic material is stored, these "thematic nuclei" reveal the hereditary relationship between Vatican II, synodality, and several familiar traits of the Francis pontificate.

The ten themes are: **(1)** The Journeying Companions, **(2)** Listening, **(3)** Speaking Out, **(4)** Celebrating, **(5)** Co-Responsible in the Mission, **(6)** Dialogue in Church and Society, **(7)** With the Other Christian Denominations, **(8)** Authority and Participation, **(9)** Discerning and Deciding, and **(10)** Forming Ourselves in Synodality.

Each category includes questions for discussion, which the *Vademecum* envisions taking place via "moderated online discussion groups, self-guided online activities, chat groups, phone calls, and various forms of social communication, as well as paper-based and online questionnaires." Here are some examples of the questions found throughout the ten categories (PD, n. 30):

- "When we say: 'our Church,' who is part of it?" (See the Baltimore Catechism quote above for the correct answer.)
- "How are the Laity, especially young people and women, listened to?"
- "How do we promote the active participation of all the Faithful in the liturgy and the exercise of the sanctifying function?" (A primary theme of Vatican II's *Sacrosanctum Concilium*.)
- "What space is given to the exercise of the ministries of the reader and acolyte?"[15] (Two of the minor orders, which Paul VI decided to alter after the Council.)

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- "What experiences of dialogue and shared commitment do we have with believers of other religions and with non-believers?" (Primary themes of Vatican II's *Nostra Aetate*.)
- "What relations do we have with the brothers and sisters of other Christian denominations?" (Primary theme of Vatican II's *Unitatis Redintegratio*.)
- "How are lay ministries and the assumption of responsibility by the Faithful promoted?"
- "What tools help us to read the dynamics of the culture in which we are immersed and their impact on our style of Church?"

## Conclusion

Based on the evidence surveyed throughout this article, the Synod on Synodality is clearly intended to be an extension of the Second Vatican Council — a major push to more fully implement the problematic "ecclesiology of Vatican II" throughout the universal Church. Let us pray that the true *sensus fidei*, so often lauded by Pope Francis and other advocates of synodality, will be aroused in the souls of many Catholics, leading them to make their voices heard in defense of Tradition and in opposition to "profane novelties" (1 Tim. 6:20). As Catholic historian Roberto de Mattei explains in his book *Apologia for Tradition*:

> "… the *sensus fidei* can prompt the faithful, in exceptional cases, to refuse their assent to some ecclesiastical documents and even to take up, with regard to the supreme authorities, a position of resistance or of apparent disobedience. The disobedience is only apparent, because in these cases of legitimate resistance the principle that we must obey God rather than men applies (Acts 5:29). …
>
> …
>
> An attitude of resistance when confronted with a teaching of ecclesiastical authorities which involves a danger to the faith, should be understood not as 'disobedience' but, on the contrary, as loyalty and deeper union with the Church and Tradition."[16]

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[1] E.g., "Evangelization in the Modern World" (1974), "Catechesis in our Time" (1977),

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"The Christian Family" (1980), "The Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World" (1987), "The Formation of Priests in Circumstances of the Present Day" (1990), "The Consecrated Life and Its Role in the Church and in the World" (1994), "The Eucharist: Source and Summit of the Life and Mission of the Church" (2005), "The Word of God in the Life and the Mission of the Church" (2008).

[2] E.g., Particular Synod for the Netherlands (1980), First Special Assembly for Europe (1991), First Special Assembly for Africa (1994), Special Assembly for America (1997), Special Assembly for Asia (1998), Special Assembly for Oceania (1998), Special Assembly for the Middle East (2010).

[3] Granted, to a large extent this ecclesiological shift already took place via the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) — particularly in the document *Lumen Gentium* (Nov. 21, 1964) and its novel distinction between "the one Church of Christ" and "the Catholic Church," the former "subsisting" in the latter (art. 8) — and the establishment of "a permanent Council of bishops for the universal Church" by Pope Paul VI (*Apostolica Sollicitudo*, Sept. 15, 1965) towards the end of the Council. The current Synod on Synodality is simply pushing certain Conciliar novelties to further extremes.

[4] This is reminiscent of Francis' "dream," articulated in *Evangelii Gaudium* (Nov. 24, 2013), "of a 'missionary option', that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation" (n. 27). This "dream" includes "genuine doctrinal authority" for "episcopal conferences" (*ibid*., n. 32).

[5] All of this is premised on the belief that the Church has never really listened and has historically stood "aloof from life," ignoring contemporary "problems and needs," all of which is patently false. As for weaving "greater bonds of friendship with society and the world," one is reminded of the following words of Scripture: "Whosoever therefore will be a friend of this world, becometh an enemy of God" (Jam. 4:4).

[6] According to its website, "*Concilium* was founded in 1965 by some of the leading theologians of the time: Anton van den Boogaard, Paul Brand, Yves Congar OP, Hans Küng, Johann Baptist Metz, Karl Rahner SJ and Edward Schillebeeckx. *Concilium* exists to promote theological discussion in the spirit of Vatican II, out of which it was born. It is a catholic journal in the widest sense: rooted firmly in Catholic heritage but also open to other Christian traditions and the world's faiths."

[7] This calls to mind what Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò wrote in his first

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major intervention regarding the Council (June 9, 2020), namely, "that from Vatican II onwards a *parallel church* was built, superimposed over and diametrically opposed to the true Church of Christ. This parallel church progressively obscured the divine institution founded by Our Lord in order to replace it with a spurious entity, corresponding to the desired *universal religion* that was first theorized by Masonry."

[8] See, e.g., Gregory XVI, Encyclical *Mirari Vos* (1832); Pius IX, Syllabus of Errors (1864); Pius XI, Encyclical *Mortalium Animos* (1928).

[9] Writing in 1987, then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (the future Pope Benedict XVI), who served as a *peritus* (theological expert) for Cardinal Josef Frings of Cologne (1887-1978) during the Council, said that *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World) and *Dignitatis Humanae* (Declaration on Religious Liberty) together constitute "a countersyllabus [referring to Pius IX's Syllabus of Errors] and, as such, represents, on the part of the Church, an attempt at an official reconciliation with the new era inaugurated in 1789" (Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987], p. 382).

[10] The 73-year-old African prelate's five-year term as Prefect was due to expire at the end of 2021. Instead of renewing Cardinal Turkson's appointment, Pope Francis chose to appoint Cardinal Michael Czerny, S.J. to lead the dicastery on an interim basis (effective Jan. 1, 2022) "while awaiting the appointment of a new director," according to the Holy See Press Office communiqué on the subject.

[11] This is a direct quote from "Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church" (n. 70a), yet strangely no citation is provided in the *Vademecum*.

[12] Roman Catechism (ed. St. Charles Borromeo), Part I: The Creed, Art. IX (Rockford: TAN Books and Publishers, Inc., 1982), p. 107.

[13] *Ibid*., p. 100.

[14] The New Saint Joseph Baltimore Catechism, No. 2 (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Corp., 1969), q. 136 (p. 72). This definition conforms to that of St. Robert Bellarmine, who defined the Church as "the body of men of the same Christian profession and of the same Sacraments gathered in communion … under the rule of legitimate pastors and especially of the one Vicar of Christ on earth, the Roman Pontiff" (*On the Church* [trans. Ryan Grant], Vol. I, Book III [Post Falls: Mediatrix Press, 2017], p. 237).

[15] According to Francis' Motu Proprio *Spiritus Domini* (Jan. 10, 2021), women are now

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allowed to be formally instituted as lectors and acolytes by local bishops, contrary to the Church's entire liturgical tradition.

[16] Roberto de Mattei, *Apologia for Tradition: A Defense of Tradition Grounded in the Historical Context of the Faith* (Kansas City: Angelus Press, 2019), p. 95.

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