



SYNOD ON THE FAMILY IN ROME CALLS FOR NEW ATTITUDES AND A NEW WAY OF BEING CHURCH

Currently, a group of bishops, clergy and married couples is meeting in Rome to discuss challenges facing families in today's world.

Earlier this past week, the Synod released a preliminary document which gives us a good sense of the challenges facing families and a new kind of response that some Church leaders, including Pope Francis, are considering. You can read the eleven-page document on the internet (see "*Relatio post disceptationem*"). The following are some excerpts from an article on the Synod by Jesuit priest, Fr. Tom Reese.

Listening, accompanying, respecting, valuing, discerning, welcoming, dialogue are words repeated throughout the new document being discussed by the synod of bishops in Rome this week. Words of condemnation and marginalization were avoided.

The document, called a "*relatio post disceptationem*," sums up what Cardinal Peter Erdo and the nine-member drafting committee see as the current synodal consensus as they move from a week of speeches into a week of small group discussions. The *relatio* will help focus the discussions in language groups and lead to a final document that will be the fruit of the synod and provide fodder for conversation throughout the Church as it prepares for the next synod in October 2015.

Listening

The first part of the document is titled: "*Listening: The context and challenges to the family.*"

What did the bishops hear as they listened to the voices of families?

"The most difficult test for families in our time is often solitude, which destroys and gives rise to a general sensation of impotence in relation to the socio-economic situation that often ends up crushing them," according to the *relatio*. "This is due to growing precariousness in the workplace that is often experienced as a nightmare."

It notes the varied cultural and religious context of families around the world, where polygamy, "marriage in stages," arranged marriages, interreligious marriages, cohabitation, divorce, children born outside of marriage, family violence, as well as war can occur.

The pastoral challenge then, is "to accept people in their concrete being, to know how to support their search, to

encourage the wish for God and the will to feel fully part of the Church, also on the part of those who have experienced failure or find themselves in the most diverse situations."

The bishops want to follow the example of Jesus who "looked upon the women and the men he met with love and tenderness, accompanying their steps with patience and mercy, in proclaiming the demands of the Kingdom of God."

In thinking about "wounded" families, the bishops found a "hermeneutic key" in the teachings of Vatican II on other Christian churches. Here the Catholic Church affirmed that "many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure," and "these elements, as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward Catholic unity."

The bishops conclude, just as Protestant churches have many elements of sanctification and truth, so too, can nonsacramental unions. "Realizing the need, therefore, for spiritual discernment with regard to cohabitation, civil marriages and divorced and remarried persons," explains the *relatio*, "it is the task of the Church to recognize those seeds of the Word that have spread beyond its visible and sacramental boundaries."

Rather seeing these situations as pure evil, "the Church turns respectfully to those who participate in her life in an incomplete and imperfect way, appreciating the positive values they contain rather than their limitations and short comings."

Article 41 of the Synod says: In a particular way the words of Pope Francis apply in these situations: The Church will have to initiate everyone—priest, religious and laity—into this "art of accompaniment," which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other. The pace of this accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 169).

Civil marriages and cohabitation

This calls for a new pastoral practice that accepts "the reality of civil marriage and also cohabitation, taking into account the due differences," reads the document. "Indeed, when a union reaches a notable level of stability through a public bond, is characterized by deep affection, responsibility with regard to offspring, and capacity to withstand tests, it may be seen as a germ to be accompanied in development towards the sacrament of marriage." This would not be true

of cohabitations that rule out any possibility of future marriage.

The synod wants to carry out its pastoral practice “with the tenderness of a mother and the clarity of a teacher (cf. Epg 4, 15),” in imitation of the mercy of Christ. “The truth is incarnated in human fragility not to condemn it, but to cure it.”

Important to this pastoral practice will be “the joyous testimony of spouses and families,” who will be key evangelizers for couples before and after their marriages.

“It is necessary not to stop at an announcement that is merely theoretical and has nothing to do with people’s real problems. Pastoral practice is not merely about presenting a set of regulations but about putting forward values, responding to the need of those who find themselves today even in the most secularized countries.”

The synod recognized the need for new pastoral paths in dealing with divorced families. “Each damaged family first of all should be listened to with respect and love, becoming companions on the journey as Christ did with the disciples of the road to Emmaus.” The bishops realize that priests and laity need to be trained to do this.

Annulments

The *relatio* reports that the annulment process was discussed and that “Various Fathers underlined the necessity to make the recognition of cases of nullity more accessible and flexible. Among the propositions were the abandonment of the need for the double conforming sentence; the possibility of establishing an administrative means under the responsibility of the diocesan bishop; a summary process to be used in cases of clear nullity.” Speeding-up the process “was requested by many.”

On the question of the readmission to Communion of divorced and remarried Catholics, the document acknowledges disagreements. “Some argued in favor of the present regulations because of their theological foundation, others were in favor of a greater opening on very precise conditions when dealing with situations that cannot be resolved without creating new injustices and suffering.”

One suggestion was allowing readmission to Communion following a “penitential path,” under the supervision of the local bishop. Readmission “would not be a general possibility, but the fruit of a discernment applied on a case-by-case basis, according to a law of gradualness, that takes into consideration the distinction between state of sin, state of grace and the attenuating circumstances.”

Greater theological study is needed on these issues, admits the bishops, “starting with the links between the sacrament of marriage and the Eucharist in relation to the church-sacrament.”

Welcoming homosexual persons

This is the part of the document that received the most headlines. The following is the full version of the piece addressing this sensitive issue.

“Homosexuals have gifts and qualities to offer to the Christian community: are we capable of welcoming these people, guaranteeing to them a fraternal space in our communities? Often they wish to encounter a church that offers them a welcoming home. Are our communities capable of providing that, accepting and valuing their sexual orientation, without compromising Catholic doctrine on the family and matrimony?”

The question of homosexuality leads to a serious reflection on how to elaborate realistic paths of affective growth and human and evangelical maturity integrating the sexual dimension: it appears therefore as an important educative challenge. The Church furthermore affirms that unions between people of the same sex cannot be considered on the same footing as matrimony between man and woman. Nor is it acceptable that pressure be brought to bear on pastors or that international bodies make financial aid dependent on the introduction of regulations inspired by gender ideology.

Without denying the moral problems connected to homosexual unions, it has to be noted that there are cases in which mutual aid to the point of sacrifice constitutes a precious support in the life of the partners. Furthermore, the Church pays special attention to the children who live with couples of the same sex, emphasizing that the needs and rights of the little ones must always be given priority.”

The last sentence would seem to rule out denying Baptism or a Christian education to same-sex couples.

On birth control, the bishops did not change teaching but said, “Probably here as well what is required is a realistic language that is able to start from listening to people and acknowledging the beauty and truth of an unconditional opening to life.”

Concluding remarks

The *relatio* concludes by noting that the document represents neither decisions nor simply points of view. Rather their reflections “are intended to raise questions and indicate perspectives that will have to be matured and made clearer by the reflection of the local churches in the year that separates us from the Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of bishops planned for October 2015.”

However these discussions develop, it is clear that the Church is embarking on them with a new pastoral style that is more compassionate and affirming.

Have a blessed week,

