

Family Synod: Next Step and Prospects?

David Timbs, Catholics for Renewal News commentary, 30 June 2014

On Friday June 27, the Vatican published the *Instrumentum Laboris* (Working Document) for the October Extraordinary Synod on the Family. The ordinary members of this *extraordinary* Synod are a representative body of Bishops from the five continents. They are the ones with a deliberative vote. There are others, clerics, religious and laity, who have been invited to participate in the Synod, will join in subgroup discussions and even address the plenary meetings.

There has been a great deal of criticism about makeup of participants for this Synod. Specifically many people are commenting that Pope Francis has missed a opportunity to make the composition of the Synod more representative of the actual People of God but to widen the avenues for participation, even voting, by non-bishops. This is a major negative especially since the Synod will be addressing a number of issues which have proven contentious for decades. One of them is the wide scale non acceptance of Paul VI's 1968 Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae* which taught that artificial birth-control is immoral. Surveys have shown that up to around 98% of adult Catholics have appealed to good, informed conscience in their non-reception and non-acceptance of this teaching as infallible, definitive or morally binding on them. This has caused a deep and fundamental crisis for the teaching authority and credibility of the Magisterium. It will not go away. It needs to be faced.

While sections of the document acknowledge the issues of authority and non-reception, the overwhelming number of responses indicate that the Catholic people have 'not understood' Church teaching, have been confused by outside influences or the Magisterium (Popes and Bishops) has not taught Catholic doctrine properly or effectively. The major challenge for the Magisterium continues to be that the Catholic laity heard the teaching loud and clear in the first place and rejected it. This invites an adult to adult mature and Christ-like conversation between the Catholic laity and its Leaders. The hierarchy of truths comes to mind.

A relevant section of the document:

A Diversified Acceptance of Church Teaching

13. A good number of episcopal conferences mention that, when the teaching of the Church is clearly communicated in its authentic, human and Christian beauty, it is enthusiastically received for the most part by the faithful. When an overall view of marriage and the family is sufficiently set forth according to tenets of the Christian faith, its truth, goodness and beauty is clearly visible. Church teaching is more widely accepted, when the faithful are engaged in a real journey of faith and are not just casually curious in what might be the Church's thinking in the matter of sexual morality. On the other hand, many respondents confirmed that, even when the Church's teaching about marriage and the family is known, many Christians have difficulty accepting it in its entirety. Generally speaking, where certain elements of Christian doctrine, although relevant, receive treatment, in varying degrees, other elements are overlooked, e.g., birth control, divorce and remarriage, homosexuality, cohabitation, fidelity, premarital sex, *in vitro* fertilization, etc. However, many responses recount how Church teaching on the dignity of human life and respect for human life might be more widely and readily accepted, at least in principle.

14. The observations rightly indicate the need for a greater integration of a familial spirituality and moral teaching, which would lead to a better understanding, even of the Church's Magisterium, in the field of moral issues related to the family. Some responses note the importance of identifying elements from local cultures which can be of assistance in understanding Gospel values. Such is the case in many Asian cultures often centered on the family. In these areas, some bishops' conferences argue that it is not difficult to integrate Church teaching on the family with the social and moral values present in these cultures. At the same time, attention needs to be given to the importance of intercultural exchange in proclaiming the Gospel of the Family. Ultimately, the responses and observations call for the need of establishing real, practical formation programmes through which the truths of the faith on the family might be presented, primarily to appreciate their profound human and existential value.

Some Reasons for the Difficulty in Acceptance

15. Some episcopal conferences argue that the reason for much resistance to the Church's teaching on moral issues related to the family is a want of an authentic Christian experience, namely, an encounter with Christ on a personal and communal level, for which no doctrinal presentation, no matter how accurate, can substitute. In this regard, some responses point to the insufficiency of pastoral activity which is concerned only with dispensing the sacraments without a truly engaging Christian experience. Moreover, a vast majority of responses highlight the growing conflict between the values on marriage and the family as proposed by the Church and the globally diversified social and cultural situations. The responses are also in agreement on the underlying reasons for the difficulty in accepting Church teaching, namely, the pervasive and invasive new technologies; the influence of the mass media; the hedonistic culture; relativism; materialism; individualism; the growing secularism; the prevalence of ideas that lead to an excessive, selfish liberalization of morals; the fragility of interpersonal relationships; a culture which rejects making permanent choices, because it is conditioned by uncertainty and transiency, a veritable "liquid society" and one with a "throw away" mentality and one seeking "immediate gratification"; and, finally, values reinforced by the so-called "culture of waste" and a "culture of the moment," as frequently noted by Pope Francis.

The full text of the *Instrumentum Laboris* ("Working Text" is linked [here](#)).