

The 14th General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops  
Rome, 4-25 October 2015  
"The vocation and mission of the family in the Church "

***WHAT ARE SYNODS, ESPECIALLY THIS SYNOD ON THE FAMILY?***

**Synods in the Church**

Synods, in the words of Peter Wilkinson (Wilkinson, Peter J. *Catholic Synods in Australia*, 1844-2011, December 2011, linked [Here](#)), were “an integral part of church governance since the time of the Apostles and have played a key role in how Catholics understand their faith, live it, and confront the issues of their times in the light of their understanding of the Gospel.”

Apart from universal worldwide synods such as the Synod of Bishops, there’s also provision in canon law for ‘particular’, more local, synods that can be plenary (national), provincial or diocesan. These latter forums have however fallen into disuse despite both a strong endorsement from Vatican II, which ‘earnestly desired’ that “*the venerable institution of synods and councils flourish with fresh vigor*” (*Christus Dominus*, n. 36), and the active endorsement of local synods by every pope since Vatican II. No plenary or provincial councils or synods have been held since Vatican II, now 50 years ago; there have been just six diocesan synods. The last diocesan synod for Melbourne was held in 1916.

It would seem that our bishops are not committed to the engagement with the faithful that Vatican II so strongly emphasised.

**The Synod of Bishops**

The “Synod on the Family” is actually an assembly of the worldwide Synod of Bishops, a forum of all the bishops of the world established by Pope Paul VI in 1965 shortly after the close of the Second Vatican Council, to continue the Vatican II spirit of collegiality and communion, and to provide counsel to the Pope on important questions facing the Church.

The Synod of Bishops is an ongoing permanent forum, even when not in session, with a permanent secretariat headquartered in Rome. Individual assemblies such as next month’s Assembly on the Family include representatives of bishop conferences throughout the world.

The pope convenes **ordinary** assemblies of the Synod of Bishops usually every 3-4 years, on current topics of universal and pastoral concern "for the good of the universal Church". An **extraordinary** assembly of the Synod of Bishops is called to deal with matters "which require a speedy solution" - participants also are fewer, usually the Presidents of the Bishops' regional/country Conferences. Last October's 2014 **extraordinary** assembly, attended by Archbishop Hart as President of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, was called to look at the family and evangelisation, and in essence to prepare the way for the now imminent **ordinary** assembly (to be attended by ACBC elected representatives – Abp Coleridge and Bp Hurley).

The Pope is the President of the Synod and has the authority:

- to convoke the Synod of the Bishops
- to ratify the election of participants in the assembly
- to determine the topic of discussion
- to distribute the material for discussion to those who should participate
- to set the agenda
- to preside either personally or through delegates over the assembly;

The Pope may appoint further participants in any assembly of the Synod of Bishops, up to 15% of those who participate either *ex officio* (cardinals running the Roman Curia and heads of Eastern Catholic Churches) or from episcopal conferences. The complete list of all those who will be attending the upcoming assembly starting 4 October was announced on Tuesday 15 September, less than three weeks before the Synod starts. The Pope has personally appointed 45 bishops as voting members.

The Synod of the Bishops discusses the topics proposed to it and makes recommendations to the Pope who "*has full and supreme power in the Church*" (canon 332) but note that the College of Bishops, whose head is the Pope, is also the subject of supreme and full power over the universal Church "*together with its head and never without this head*" (c. 336). The authority of the Pope is thereby constrained to some extent under the provisions of canon law.

The Synod of the Bishops offers an *opportunity* for improvement in the governance of the Catholic Church. It is possible that the Synod on the Family may begin to deliver that improvement. We will see!

### **Assembly on the Family**

The **Extraordinary** General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops October 5-19, 2014, was the third Extraordinary General Assembly ever held. Its title was "*The pastoral challenges of the family in the context of evangelization*" - the *Instrumentum Laboris* (Latin for "working instrument"), linked [Here](#), said that

the Extraordinary General Assembly "will thoroughly examine and analyze the information, testimonies and recommendations received from the particular Churches in order to respond to the new challenges of the family." That statement suggests a level of input from the faithful that simply did not occur.

Even the secular media took an interest in the 2014 Extraordinary Assembly, especially when controversy erupted over publication of an unexpectedly progressive, interim, working document that was denounced by some participants. That controversy can be expected to continue with the Ordinary Assembly.

The focus was mainly on how to care pastorally for Catholics living in "irregular unions" (those remarried after civil divorce, unmarried cohabitating couples, and especially gay Catholics, and their desire to receive the Eucharist.

The 2014 **Extraordinary** synod was also noted for a new prominence of African bishops, a possibly significant change to the dynamics. The **Ordinary Assembly** 2015 - October 4-25, 2015 will mark the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of establishment of the Synod of Bishops.

Next month's gathering on the Family is an **Ordinary** General Assembly (the 14th) of the Synod of Bishops, focusing on "The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and the Contemporary World."

### **Why is this Ordinary Assembly on the Family important?**

The Assembly is expected to focus on the difficulties confronting families in contemporary society including couples in formation and in crisis, passing on the faith, the needs of families within irregular marriages, and the impacts of various Church teachings.

The Synod seems unlikely to consider contraception, and any discussion on different sexualities is likely to be resisted strongly and therefore limited. However, given the history of Vatican II, where bishops rejected the restrictions of the agenda, it is just possible that the Synod could recognise and indeed assert the need to examine obvious areas of disconnect between the institutional Church and the people of the Church.

This ordinary assembly of the Synod of Bishops is important primarily because it offers hope for a beginning of renewal of the Church, hope reinforced by the preparatory work of the 2014 extraordinary assembly, despite the continuing controversy.

The Church has some serious failings, and the family in all its forms, as the nucleus of communities within the diocese and the universal church, is affected by most of those failings. Many of the ‘family’ areas identified at this stage can be seen as but symptoms of more substantial failings in the Church’s governance, such as its very dated structure, the clericalist culture and its canon law, and other inadequacies and dysfunctions;

The worst impact of the Church’s dysfunctional governance has been the criminal abuse of children throughout the world, much of which was caused by the institutional Church’s protection of criminal paedophiles. The clearest indication of failure is the depleted pews and in particular, certainly in the developed world, the departure of young people from the Church as they reach adulthood, a fact known too well to most remaining practising Catholics. The Church has always sought to gain converts to the good news of Christianity, but we are in fact suffering the loss of our own children from the faith.

An obvious failing to many Catholics, but perhaps not obvious to many in the Church hierarchy, is the major disconnect between the teaching of the magisterium and the *sensus fidelium*, the sense of faith of the faithful. That disconnect seems particularly apparent between the teachings of the institutional Church on the nature of a Christian family life and the lived realities of many families.

This assembly is important because it has the opportunity to address these issues. That opportunity will be wasted if the bishops do not heed the people of the Church

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