

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

***SHOULD THE PEOPLE OF THE CHURCH BE HEARD?***

The need to listen to the people of God was stressed by Vatican II in a major document of the Council, *Lumen Gentium* - the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church:

*“The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief.”*

This is a reference to the “sense of faith of the faithful”, in Latin ‘*sensus fidei fidelium*’, often shortened to *sensus fidelium*. The broader notion is that of “the sense of the faith”, or in Latin *sensus fidei*. More recently, the 2014 Vatican publication by the International Theological Commission ‘*Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*’ (linked [Here](#)), noted that

*“the faithful, and specifically the lay people, should be treated by the Church’s pastors with respect and consideration, and consulted in an appropriate way for the good of the Church”;*

In discerning the ‘sense of the faith’, the magisterium must be informed by an understanding of the sense of faith of the faithful. This is traditional Catholic doctrine. Blessed Cardinal John Henry Newman said it powerfully in 1859 (linked [Here](#))

*“the body of the faithful is one of the witnesses to the fact of the tradition of revealed doctrine, and because their consensus through Christendom is the voice of the Infallible Church”;*

There are clearly disconnects between the teaching of the magisterium and the *sensus fidelium* – does this indicate that the magisterium is remote from the lived experiences of the people of God?

**Are the people of the church being heard?**

There has been considerable debate worldwide about the extent of consultation and involvement of the people of the Church in preparation for and representation at the Synods on the Family.

The consultation process has been simply inadequate, mostly a passive approach of making a complex survey with leading questions available with little publicity, secretly collating the limited responses, and probably ignoring the non-compliant responses. The formal survey did not seriously seek to engage the families who have so much knowledge to share.

Given the role of diocesan synods as envisaged by Vatican II, it is a pity that bishops throughout the world did not recognise an opportunity to convene diocesan synods, or some other such forum, as an effective means of listening to the faithful on these important matters – as a means of discerning the real *sensus fidelium* in order to better inform the Synod on the Family. As it stands, the processes of consultation for the Synod on the Family do not accord with the proper role of the people of the Church for the synod to grasp the *sensus fidelium*, the sense of faith of the faithful.

Catholics for Renewal, with the Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Renewal, wrote to both our bishop representatives (Bishop Hurley and Archbishop Coleridge) setting out the inadequacies of consultation in Australia and elsewhere, stressing:

- The need to listen to all, including those who have walked away from the Church;
- The importance of lay representation at the Assembly and consultation on their selection;
- Suggesting names of impressive couples and individuals to attend the Synod;
- The need for better means of reaching the people of the Church;
- The negative impact of the Church's non-accountable system of governance on pastoral care of families;
- The need to include women in top decision making in the Church;
- The damage done by the Church's protection of paedophiles.

We were pleased to receive initial responses from both bishops and engage in some discussions with Bishop Hurley, but we remain disappointed that the views of Catholics more generally have not been sought in any effective manner. We note however that many Catholics, although comprising a very small minority, went to considerable trouble to submit their views through the very limited process that was briefly available.

The Australian Catholic Coalition for Church Renewal also wrote to the Cardinal secretary to the Synod, Cardinal Baldisseri proposing a number of impressive lay people to attend the Synod as lay observers, and copying to the

Australian representatives. No reply has been received, a common Vatican means of dealing with correspondence that has been experienced by many lay organisations throughout the world.

The complete list of synod participants and papal appointees was released Monday 14 September by the Vatican (Catholic Herald, Tuesday 16 September 2015 linked [Here](#)). In addition to the 166 synod members elected by national bishops' conferences, 22 heads of Eastern Catholic churches, 25 heads of Vatican congregations and councils and 10 heads of men's religious orders, the Pope appointed an additional 45 synod fathers. There will be more than 360 participants. The majority of the 51 observers and 23 experts appointed by the Pope are laymen and laywomen, including 18 married couples. These 42 men and 32 women will not have voting rights.

It seems that the only Australian lay observer will be Maria Harries, research fellow in social work and policy at the University of Western Australia, expert on mental health, child protection, child migrants and social services, and member of the "Truth, Justice and Healing Council" assisting the Australian bishops' respond to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. One might have hoped that the representation at the Extraordinary Synod of 2014 which included several Australian couples might have been increased.

One must question the claim of the Vatican in the "working instrument" (*Instrumentum Laboris*), that their summary of the proposals "*can serve as a dependable reflection of the insights and perceptions of the whole Church on the crucial subject of the family.*"<sup>i</sup> – in the circumstances, an exaggeration to say the least. Perhaps another indication of the disconnect?

*Peter Johnstone,  
President, Catholics for Renewal Inc.  
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