

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 MIGHT WE EXPECT FROM THE SYNOD ON THE FAMILY?***

**THE BIG ISSUES?**

A key question for the 2015 Synod is an apparent disconnect on the nature of Christian family life between the teachings of the institutional Church and the lived realities of many families.

The disconnect is illustrated by some worldwide research outside Australia based on a comprehensive survey in 2013 of the views of 12,000 self-identified Catholics on a number of Church teachings and disciplines concerning the family (Voice of the People, Univision, 2013). The survey was across five continents and 12 countries representing 61% of the world's Catholic population (note Australia, Ireland, Canada, Germany and some others were not included). The teachings queried were:

- Divorce - individuals divorced and remarried outside the Catholic Church, are living in sin which prevents them from receiving Communion
- Marriage of Priests – should it be allowed?
- Women becoming priests – should women be admitted to the priesthood?
- Abortion – Should abortion be allowed in all cases, some particular cases (e.g. mother's life in danger), or not at all?
- Contraceptives – Support or oppose their use?
- Gay marriage – support or oppose marriage between two people of the same sex?
- Gay marriage in the Catholic Church – should the Catholic Church perform marriages between two people of the same sex?

The responses are too detailed to elaborate here but can be summarised. First, the most conservative responses came generally from Africa (Uganda and Congo) and the Philippines, with more progressive responses from Europe and North America, with South America more progressive than conservative.

Divorce: Only Uganda and Congo had a majority (very large) agreeing with current refusal of Communion to remarried divorcees. The Philippines had a slight majority opposing current policy and all the rest had overwhelming

majorities opposing current denial of communion to remarried divorcees.

Marriage of priests: The US, Columbia, Brazil, Argentina, Spain, France, Poland and Italy strongly supported priests being allowed to marry. Majorities in Uganda, Congo, Mexico and the Philippines were strongly opposed.

Women becoming priests: surprisingly similar proportions in all countries as for Marriage of priests, but not quite as strong support.

Abortion: Strong opposition to allowance in all cases but a lot of support for allowance in some particular cases. Majorities against all abortion only in Congo, Philippines and Uganda.

Contraceptives: Overwhelming support (generally 80-90%) throughout the world for the use of contraceptives except a small majority opposing in Congo and Uganda.

Gay marriage: Outright majorities in favour in United States and Spain. Very strong opposition in Congo, Uganda, Philippines and Poland.

Gay marriage in the Catholic Church: Spain and the US had the highest proportions of support but, in all countries, majorities opposed. Again, very strong opposition in Congo, Uganda, Philippines and Poland.

It's likely that Australia would not be too different to the other developed nations such as the USA and Europe, judging from research of the Pastoral Research Office of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (*What do Mass Attenders Believe?* February 2014), which indicated that 51% of Australian Catholics considered abortion to be always morally wrong but 46% justified in limited circumstances. The same research indicated that 42% of Australian Catholics considered premarital sex to be always morally wrong, and 51% not wrong if in a committed relationship.

The Church is not a democracy, but the leaders of the Church must listen to the people of the Church who live the challenges of daily life and experience the world at every level. The question is first, what Church positions can and should be changed? and secondly, how can the Church be more pastoral and effective in its teachings?

There is little doubt that the Church cannot and would not change its teachings on respect for life before birth nor on the desirability of the indissolubility of marriage, but it could certainly be more practically understanding of the

situation of those who procured abortions in extraordinary circumstances and it could also be more pastoral towards those whose marriages have failed and who have entered into new unions. The permanent denial of the Eucharist to people who have moved on from a failed marriage, whatever the cause, is not a pastoral approach and implies condemnation of many good people.

It is disappointing that the issue of contraception is apparently not on the agenda for the synod, a teaching that has not been accepted, indeed that has been ignored by the people of the Church. Pope Paul VI, in *Humanae vitae* in 1968, rejected the recommendations of the Pontifical Commission on Birth Control, which concluded that artificial birth control was not intrinsically evil and that Catholic couples should be allowed to decide for themselves about the methods to be employed.

Paul VI's reasons for reinforcing the ban on artificial birth control reflect a continuing difficulty for popes fearing scandal in changing the established Church teaching of their predecessors, particularly difficult teachings by which some Catholics have considered themselves bound over a long period. I would have thought however that the approach attributed to John Maynard Keynes, was more honest and Christ-like, namely "*When the facts change, I change my mind.*"

Similarly, the basis for the ban on women's ordination and especially the consequential exclusion of women from senior governance positions in the Church by limiting those positions to priests, is dubious to say the least and arguably contrived. On married priests, the Pope could allow priests to marry tomorrow. On gay marriage, the Church needs to do a lot of thinking in the context of Christ's most important commandment to love one another; the Church's treatment of those to whom God has given a different form of sexuality is not in accordance with that commandment of love.

Perhaps the biggest issue for the synod is the opportunity to fix the dysfunctional governance of the Church so that it might examine these matters in a Christ-like manner. Certainly Pope Francis has talked a lot about a pastoral approach as in his famous comment regarding homosexuality: "*Who am I to judge?*"

This Synod is an opportunity to walk the talk and to cease the judgemental and clericalist approach in much of the Church's teaching and governance.

### **WHAT IS IN THE MIND OF POPE FRANCIS?**

There seems to be a tendency to expect too much of Pope Francis. He seems a

truly humble and holy man, but he is of course still human with the frailties of humanity. He has shown true leadership towards a more Christ-like Church, but he has been reluctant to deal with the institutional Church's dysfunctional governance, particularly in the scandal of clerical child sexual abuse.

His two major documents, his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* and his Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'* are truly deep and thoughtful analyses for the world to ponder, providing strong leadership in core Christian values. However, leadership is also about effecting necessary change, a considerable challenge in a very old institution which the late Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini SJ, a Jesuit colleague of Francis, described just weeks before his death on 29 August 2012 (interview in National Catholic Reporter, 4 Sep 2012 linked [Here](#)) as being "200 years behind the times." Martini added:

*"The church must recognize its errors and follow a radical path of change, beginning with the pope and the bishops. The pedophilia scandals compel us to take up a path of conversion."*

Leadership requires listening. Just a week ago, in a video message delivered to theologians and others at an international congress in Buenos Aires, Francis said, "Without encountering families and the people of God, theology runs the great risk of becoming ideology" (5 Sep 2015 Catholic Herald (linked [Here](#)))

In a 2013 address to bishops in Latin America, Francis asked if the bishops give the laity "the freedom to continue discerning . . . ? Do we support them and accompany them, overcoming the temptation to manipulate them or infantilize them?" (National Catholic Reporter, Sep. 3, 2015 sourced 5 Sep 2015, linked [Here](#)). And further:

*"Clericalism is also a temptation very present in Latin America. Curiously, in the majority of cases, it has to do with a sinful complicity: the priest clericalizes the lay person and the lay person kindly asks to be clericalized, because deep down it is easier. The phenomenon of clericalism explains, in great part, the lack of maturity and Christian freedom in some of the Latin American laity."* (Pope Francis, [Apostolic Journey to Rio De Janeiro on the Occasion of the XXVIII World Youth Day, Address to the Leadership of the Episcopal Conferences of Latin America during the General Coordination Meeting](#), Sumaré Study Center, Rio de Janeiro, Sunday, 28 July 2013)

This comment is clearly not limited to Latin America. The people of the Church must stop infantilizing themselves and take up their responsibility to ensure a Christ-like Church. Bishops must be accountable but that applies to all the

people of God.

Francis is clearly a skilled and strategic agent of change and needs to be if he is to effect progressive changes in the Church.

### **WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE OUTCOMES OF THE SYNOD ON THE FAMILY AND NEXT STEPS?**

Pope Francis demonstrated his strategic skills in first calling the Extraordinary Assembly last year to open up the issues. He has raised expectations but he has also stirred opposition from the reactionaries of the Church.

Robert Mickens, an experienced journalist and Vatican observer, commented recently in Global Pulse (linked [Here](#) for Global Pulse subscribers):

*“The small, but tenacious group within the Synod of Bishops that’s leading the fight against any development of Catholic doctrine on marriage and human sexuality is growing more and more nervous.”*

Mickens commented in another piece, *“Pope Francis is walking through a minefield of a very divided Church, and an increasingly divided hierarchy, and he must keep both sides content to some extent.”* (Global Pulse, September 2, 2015 (linked [Here](#) for Global Pulse subscribers))

Francis has chosen his personal appointments of participants in the assembly carefully to ensure an informed debate, including Cardinals Walter Kasper and Godfried Danneels, both now 82 years old and retired, and not seen as friends of the traditionalists. Among the additional 51 observers and 23 experts appointed by the Pope, the majority are laymen and laywomen, including 18 married couples. The 42 men and 32 women, who will not have voting rights, represent a more geographically diverse mix with fairly equal representation for Asia, Africa, the Americas and the Middle East, and a slightly higher number from Europe. Clearly, the number and involvement of the laity is very limited; the method of their selection is unknown and certainly not the result of consultation with the people of the Church.

It is difficult to imagine that this assembly will not generate some change towards a more pastoral Church, but will the change be substantive? It is clearly handicapped by an inadequate attempt to hear the people of the Church. There has been very little speculation about what Francis might do next if the changes are inadequate. That judgement depends of course on what Francis wants and of that we cannot be sure.

Perhaps Pope Francis is beginning to consider a subsequent ecumenical council to address the desperately needed reforms in the governance of the Church. At the least, this Assembly on the Family, whatever its outcomes, will have paved the way for such a council on the 50th anniversary of Vatican II. If Francis is listening to the people of the Church and truly respects the sense of the faithful, so strongly endorsed by Vatican II, he will see the need for a major reform and will ensure that there is a strong representation of the laity at a Vatican III, a substantially stronger and better selected representation than is attending this October's Synod on the Family.

*Will the people of the church be heard at the Synod on the Family?* The answer cannot be an emphatic affirmative, but importantly the journey of the Church listening to the people of God will have begun.

*Peter Johnstone,  
President, Catholics for Renewal Inc.  
18 September 2015*