



**Catholic Church Reform Int'l.**  
A global network seeking renewal of the Church

April 13, 2015

Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri  
Secretary General for the Synod of Bishops  
Palazzo del Bramante,  
Via della Conciliazione, 34  
00193 Roma, Italy

**VIA ELECTRONIC AND EXPRESS MAIL**

Dear Cardinal Baldisseri,

These are times of joy and vigor in the Church. His Holiness Pope Francis has called us to a path of accompaniment, of “walking with” the other, and reflection on the meaning and practice of mercy: if one “searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?”

In response to the joy-filled call and example of Pope Francis we have set our hearts upon a journey to accompany our beloved Church to a better place in the eyes of all the people of God. Our particular concern is to expand participation of the faithful in the life and decisions of the Church. Vatican II foresaw the significance of this participation for the future of the Church, and encouraged participation by instituting collaborative structures in parishes and dioceses. Pope Francis and the International Theological Commission have added their voices to this encouragement.

When Pope Francis called an Extraordinary Synod on the Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization, his vision energized us to participate by having regional dialogues and conducting surveys in preparation for a Forum on the Family which we held in Rome two days prior to the start of the Extraordinary Synod. In preparation for the regular Synod in 2015 we have continued this participation by conducting a survey with global reach, whose results are consolidated in the attached response to the questions in the *Relatio Synodi*.

We pray for you and for the guidance of the Spirit so that the members of the Synod will be overcome with the joy of the Gospel to find a way forward for families.

Yours in Christ,

For the Strategy Team  
On behalf of Catholic Church Reform International

**Response of  
Catholic Church Reform International**

to

**Questions Aimed at a Response to  
and an In-Depth Examination of  
the *Relatio Synodi***

I. [Introduction: To Synod Fathers](#)

We are in earnest prayer for the success of the Synod, which is dedicated to the Pastoral Needs of Families. We support the efforts to date to engage the faithful to listen to a broad representation of our stories, to define our challenges in light of Church teaching and to encounter our Church in a more contemporary manner in the acts and modeling of the New Evangelization.

In response to the *Lineamenta* we have engaged in a study of the core issues and condensed survey responses for clarity. We have also identified commonalities of responses from the faithful in different parts of the world as well as differences that define a diversity of cultural practices that need attention and recognition using the principle of subsidiarity.

It is the goal of Catholic Church Reform International to facilitate the evangelizing dialogue Pope Francis has requested in preparation for Synod 2015, and we have used the tools of the virtual age to let the Pope know his call for reform has resonance at the grass roots. Our hope in providing this response to the *Lineamenta* is to assist the Bishops as they reach out to the faithful.

We gathered the voices of the faithful using a simpler questionnaire inviting Catholics and even Catholics who have drifted away to share their lived experiences about factors that help them live their lives as Catholics, and to discuss those aspects of Church teachings that cause problems or are not understood. It is our hope that clearer vision and cooperation will result.

For these reasons, we have worked to gather a profile of opinions, beliefs, attitudes and stories from respondents to our global questionnaire that comprehensively reviews each core issue the Synod Fathers have marked for discussion. We offer this work as our gift to the Synod in the hopes that this may help the Church we love to think as one.

## II. Preliminary Question and Comments

### ***Preliminary Question Applicable to All Sections of the Relatio Synodi***

*Does the description of the various familial situations in the Relatio Synodi correspond to what exists in the Church and society today? What missing aspects should be included?*

RESPONSE:

The description of family situations is missing several aspects that should be included. As a worldwide network, our perspective is global. In India the culture of arranged marriages disapproves divorce to such an extent that although the formality of divorce is less common the reality of divorce lies beneath the surface, where divorce is invisible. In South America the poverty of so many families in contrast to the economic situation in Western countries makes families vulnerable to promotion of Western styles of consumption. In some countries, including the Philippines, the economic need to seek employment elsewhere separates families, placing additional stress on marital relationships. And in Africa the culture supports extended families, which complicates a pastoral model based on the nuclear family.

More needs to be included about the relationships of those who are divorced and remarried, taking into consideration cultural differences that may suggest different paths to correct injustice with mercy. And greater empathy and compassion needs to be shown to the concrete circumstances of relationships between those who are committed to one another but who are of the same sex. The description of these relationships is curtailed after the point at which the relationships are marginalized by doctrinal considerations.

### **COMMENTS APPLICABLE TO ALL SECTIONS OF THE *Relatio Synodi***

God's grace is in the margins. While the norm of a family beginning with marriage of a man and a woman is articulated by the *Relatio Synodi*, and direction is given to encourage and support such families, this norm is made a basis for marginalizing a broader range of familial relationships. All of these relationships -- those within the norm and those outside it -- face the challenge of investing these relationships with love. The survey responses which are reflected in this submission are nearly unanimous in their recognition that grace can and does abound in familial relationships outside the stated norm, and that the Church's doctrinal marginalization of these relationships has been a disservice to the people of God. This marginalization is cutting the Church off from finding God's grace in differences which should serve as invitations to a more inclusive Church.

#### **God's Book of Nature**

Small changes in perspective, faithful to Jesus Christ and the long tradition of the Church, can enable insight and turn marginalization from an

injustice into a fuller recognition of God's unfolding truth, love and unity. The signs have been accumulating for some time in what St. Augustine called God's book of nature. Even in God's book of nature truth is in the margins. To pursue the periphery is to be awed by God's wisdom and embarrassed by human concupiscence. It was human to believe the heavens could be described with perfect circles, and so Ptolemy used Aristotle's premise of an Earth centered universe to construct cosmic motion as circles within circles. Even Copernicus and Galileo bent to the circular temper of the times in seeing the Earth's orbit around the sun as a circle instead of an ellipse. The evidence of an ellipse was in the margins, because the orbit was almost a circle. Isaac Newton brought definition and clarity to human understanding by discovering laws of motion that explained why celestial orbits were elliptical.

Even the heavens have surprises. There were marginal differences between the predictions of Newtonian mechanics and the observed reality – slight wobbles in the orbits of known planets. Astronomers used these marginal departures from Newton's theory to find the new planets of Neptune and Pluto. Yet this approach did not work for certain wobbles in Mercury's orbit. The marginal difference between Newtonian predictions and the observed data for Mercury was not understood until Albert Einstein re-conceptualized space and time with his General Theory of Relativity.

Truth remains in the margins, on the periphery of our vision. Our attention to this periphery, our journey to the margins, continues to be a great teacher, bringing us to a fuller but always incomplete understanding of what God has wrought in creation. We should not fear the margins, but embrace them. That is the path toward truth.

### **Change as the Engine of Creation**

A cosmological perspective shows that what began with physics almost 14 billion years ago became chemistry as the stars formed and created the elements, and then became biology as second and third generation stars formed with planets like Earth, and then became human consciousness as we know it, after almost four billion years of evolution on planet Earth. Those of faith will understand that this progression is not a mechanical reduction from physics but a vibrant and continuing unfolding of creation, each step contributing something new, something that could not be predicted from what had come before (Bernard Lonergan, S.J., *Insight*, p. 257).

This creation story is awesome, worthy of the God of our ancestors, and comes to us through God's book of nature. Thus the path of finding truth by going to the margins is God's path, a path that serves for the development of personal morality and Catholic social teaching as well as science. In many ways this is a surprise because it unifies science and religion in a common quest to explore the margins. But ours is a God of surprises.

Change is experienced by the individual in development from childhood to adulthood. Change is experienced by society in a different way in the course of development of new social structures and practices. Development from

childhood to adulthood is mediated by the family and the community. Human knowledge of the mind teaches that this development is accompanied by neurological growth in the frontal cortex, where connections to more primitive structures in the brain gradually enable conscious control over bodily functions. By analogy, moral growth can be modeled in terms of gradual development of a spiritual cortex enabling control over more primitive inclinations of the conscious mind. Responsibility for these developments in the individual is centered on the conscience.

Human knowledge of society suggests an analogous course of development with respect to new social structures and practices. These new structures and practices are not initially understood and present opportunities which are taken advantage of, often by those whose primary interest is the self. Social structures and practices thereby arise and become entrenched without having been examined through the lens of justice. Catholic social teaching understands that it is necessary and appropriate that these social structures and practices be examined and reformed so as to make them more just.

Thus the development of the individual and the development of society present the freedom and opportunity for behavior that is self-centered rather than other-centered. If human conscience is responsible for dealing with the concupiscence associated with individual development, then society is responsible for a comparable social conscience to deal with manifestations of collective concupiscence. But change itself is the engine of God's surprising creation.

### **Change in the Church**

And the surprises do not end with the idea that truth is in the margins for both science and religion. There is a certain collegiality between scientists who do not see God because they reduce reality to physics and those of faith who hold fast to a dual reality, one for the cosmos and another for the Church. These faithful are willing to live with an evolutionary view of the cosmos provided that the signs of a changeless God are preserved in his Church. Both miss the dynamism of a living and loving God, the first because they miss God entirely by reducing reality to physics and the second -- our coreligionists -- because they are discomfited by change.

Those coreligionists who are averse to change in the Church must have their concerns addressed in order for our Church to respond effectively to the signs of the times. To put the matter directly, these coreligionists of ours believe that change in the Church undermines the rock of their salvation. Rocks don't change, or change so slowly that the changes are imperceptible. The accelerating pace of change in today's world together with persistent violence and lawlessness are seen as signs that civilized society is unraveling, and that the world is sliding toward chaos. And like the Israelites at the time of Moses, these coreligionists of ours see the path to salvation from this coming chaos as requiring a restoration of God as the source of immutable law. Church law, in particular, must be preserved as a bulwark against impending moral chaos.

Pope Francis is a blessing. We thought he was counseling our bishops and pastors -- many of whom are these coreligionists of ours, averse to change in the Church -- to accompany the people with dialogue and in charity. We thought he was urging them to tend to the wounded as if in a field hospital, and to acquire the smell of the sheep. If that is what we thought, we thought too narrowly. Francis asks no less of us. We too are called to a ministry of accompaniment with dialogue and in charity. These coreligionists of ours -- not only bishops and pastors, but friends and neighbors and many we do not know -- are in a field hospital, wounded by a fear that what they hold dear is about to change. Those who want the Church to change are called to become accustomed to this smell of the sheep in a different way, along a different path. This path has been brought to our attention by God's creation, as a surprise, from the margins of our consciousness. All the people of God -- who are coreligionists for each other -- are called to go to the periphery, and to go there with the joy of a missionary. Francis has been quite persistent in this call, and has shown prescience in leading us along this different path.

Who are those on the margins? Who are those sheep whose smell teaches us about ourselves, about who we are in God's eyes? The Synod on the Family asks us these questions about those who experience family life across the globe, in different cultures and circumstances. Those responding to the survey that is the basis for this submission are in substantial consensus that current Church teachings marginalize same sex couples and those who divorce and remarry, and that this marginalization is unjust and must be changed. To a certain extent, more in some communities than in others, these Church teachings are being ignored in practice. However, the public formalities of marriage present issues that are particularly neuralgic because the Church as an institution plays a significant and public role. These public formalities are much less pronounced for Church teachings regarding the regulation of birth, which are also ignored in practice.

But it is clear that the need for change with respect to these Church teachings on the family cannot be addressed effectively unless those who see these Church teachings as unjust go to a different periphery, to those for whom the prospect of change in these Church teachings is an open wound. It is here that those who see change as a necessary response to injustice are called to engage in a ministry of accompaniment with dialogue and in charity.

All this woundedness -- as experienced by same sex couples barred from marriage by Church teachings, as experienced by those who are divorced and remarried barred from the Eucharist by Church teachings, as experienced by those who are troubled by Church teachings on the regulation of births, and as experienced by those who fear that the integrity of the Church itself would be compromised by changes in these Church teachings -- calls for the mercy of a field hospital whose ministry is to discern root causes and dress all these wounds together lest they continue to bleed separately. It is here that we should look



for a better understanding of reality, so that we can continue to invest reality with love, which is our mission.

Remarkably -- and happily -- there is a simple and elegant resolution to all this woundedness. It is a resolution which seems obvious when stated, because it relies upon basic Church teachings. It relies upon the hierarchy of truths by which Jesus distinguished between the reign of God and the legal pretensions of the Pharisees. It relies upon the biblical teachings of Jesus, understood as exhortations toward the reign of God working in tandem with mercy. It is a solution that meets the test Pope Francis has set for binding wounds in a field hospital: deal with the root causes of the wound, otherwise a bandage is of no use.

### **The Gospel as Exhortation**

The missionary zeal of followers of the Risen Christ is driven by the Spirit from within not by Church teachings from without. It is the same Spirit, whatever the gift (1 Cor. 12:1-11). In this Spirit Pope Francis said "If someone is gay and searches for the Lord and has good will, who am I to judge?" It is this Spirit, written on every heart (Jer. 31:31-34), that is the source of the unity for which Christ prayed (John 17:20-23).

Jesus exhorted his followers to do more than Mosaic law required. Where the law said "do not murder" he said "do not be angry" (Matthew 5:21-22). Where the law said "do not commit adultery" he said "lusting after another is to commit adultery in one's heart" (Matthew 5:27-28). Where the law said "a divorce requires a certificate of divorce" he said "to divorce is to commit adultery" (Matthew 5:31-32; Mark 10:2-12). Where the law said "do not break your oath" he said "make no oath at all, simply say 'yes' or 'no'" (Matthew 5:33-37). Where the custom is "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth" he said "turn the other cheek" (Matthew 5:38-39). Where you are sued for your shirt, give over your coat as well (Matthew 5:40). Where you are forced to go one mile, go two miles instead (Matthew 5:41). Where the custom is "love your neighbor, and hate your enemy" he said "love your enemy, and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:43-44)

These examples have in common a different frame of mind, a turn from being satisfied with compliance with the law and custom to seeking alignment with a perfect God (Matthew 5:48), which in our Trinitarian conception is alignment with the Spirit within. Perfection may not be possible, even if we follow our conscience as best we can, but a journey toward being more responsive to the Spirit within is what Jesus is calling us to undertake. It is the journey in response to this call through which we participate in the coming-to-be of the reign of God. This journey can be undertaken and this participation can be made real in the hearts and minds of each of us, in communion with the whole Church. It is this journey beyond the law of Moses to a different frame of mind that fulfills the promise of Mosaic law and brings the kingdom that Jesus preached (Mark 1:15). And until that transition is completed, the law remains (Matthew 5:17-20).

It is that tension between the law and the reign of God that is at the root of tension within the Church between those calling for change and those holding fast to Church teachings as they are.

The journey toward being more responsive to the Spirit within is of a different character than compliance with the law of Moses. The standards of the law are enforced by the community. It is this enforcement regime which gives the law its character, and is the reason for practical accommodation to hardness of heart (Mark 10:5). The journey toward the Spirit is different. Whereas compliance with the law is judged from without by the community, the journey toward the Spirit is measured from within, by the Spirit and through conscience. The community can help with sharing of experience, but cultivating a closer connection to the Spirit is the responsibility of the individual. The community can imitate Jesus and use exhortations to prompt a Spirit filled frame of mind, but the connection to the Spirit is owned by the individual conscience.

### **The Example of Mercy Set by Jesus**

The difference between community enforcement of law and the journey toward greater responsiveness to the Spirit within is illustrated by the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:2-11). Under Mosaic law the woman was to be stoned. But Jesus said, "let any one of you who is without sin cast the first stone." No one cast a stone, and Jesus then said, "I do not condemn you either. Go and leave your life of sin."

We do not have an account of what then happened to this woman, but the mercy shown her might well have set her on a journey toward a more attentive relationship to the Spirit within her. Such a journey may be long, but has a pattern and trajectory fundamentally different from methods of the law. Such a journey is accompanied by the discipline of conscience, whereas the law is accompanied by discipline of the community – in the case of this woman, the discipline of stoning.

The Spirit does not ask more than can be done, yet an exhortation ("go and sin no more") would have been challenging to this woman. By being merciful Jesus touched something in this woman's heart that might have given her hope in spite of failure, to keep her coming back to continue the journey. In this sense mercy serves as a midwife to a journey toward better alignment of this woman's will with the Spirit within her.

### **A Proposal for the Synod Fathers**

What Jesus did for this woman caught in adultery is an example that can be followed, without changing Church teaching. The Church has long taught that there is a hierarchy of Church teachings. Not all teachings are given the same priority or effect. Law enforced by the community is one category of Church teachings; Gospel exhortations that serve the journey toward a closer connection to the Spirit written on the individual's heart are in a different category.

What Jesus did for this woman caught in adultery was simply change the category of the teaching. The teaching against adultery remains, but the mercy



applied by Jesus took the teaching out of the category of law enforced by the community and set it as a Gospel exhortation within the context of a conscientious journey toward better alignment with the Spirit within.

The community enforcement regime of stoning was preempted by the mercy which Jesus showed this woman. This mercy was in service to the reign of God in the human heart, which goes beyond the justice of the law, as Thomas Aquinas understood (*Summa*, I.21.3).

In similar fashion, following the example of Jesus, the Synod Fathers can apply mercy in service to the reign of God in the human heart by authorizing transfer of particular Church teachings from the category of law enforced by community discipline to Gospel exhortation, dispensing with community discipline in favor of the individual's conscientious journey with the Spirit. Mercy serves as a midwife for this journey, maintaining hope in the face of failure. It is the same Spirit of the one God in all of us, but journeys may be quite diverse and focus on different exhortations at different times. What is possible for one may not be possible for another, as judged by the Spirit. But common to all journeys is the joy of making an investment of love in the reality that exists.

This approach resolves a number of concerns. As survey results show, and as our survey confirms, in the current state of affairs a number of Church teachings on the family, teachings which are taken to be in the category of law enforced by the community, leave pastors silent or ineffective. Changing the category to Gospel exhortation would open up preaching toward maintaining hope and pursuing joy on the journey, whatever the struggles with conscience and circumstance. People can more appropriately focus on the real challenges of their journeys, seeking pastoral support as needed.

This approach also facilitates appropriate adaptation to regional or cultural differences. The needs of good order and discipline in a particular region or cultural context may suggest the use of community enforcement mechanisms that would not be appropriate or effective for a teaching in another region or cultural context.

### **A Dialogue with Those Opposed to Change in the Church**

The above proposal is a contribution to a dialogue with those in the Church community – our coreligionists – who stand in Pope Francis' field hospital wounded by the prospect of change in Church teachings. The above proposal has been crafted to address the root causes of these wounds. The remarks preceding the proposal present in summary form a description of God's creation showing how change is manifest in a continuing unfolding of the cosmos consistent with both physics and a God of surprises, and how human understanding is advanced by going to the margins. Reality appears to be of a piece in this respect, with the same teachings about the character of change and the importance of seeking out the margins evident in both science and religion.

The remarks then preface the above proposal with a description of its roots in what Jesus said and did as recounted in the Gospels. Jesus preached the reign of God as going beyond the law, as a fulfillment, using language of

exhortation. Finally, the story of the woman caught in adultery (John 8:2-11) is given as an example of the very proposal presented: taking a teaching which under Mosaic law was enforced by the community and mercifully removing its community enforcement aspects so that it could support a journey toward a closer connection to the Spirit within. The role of mercy is to serve as a midwife to this journey, which itself is toward the reign of God which Jesus preached. What Jesus did by this example is to establish a category in the hierarchy of truths different from community enforced law, a category we have called "Gospel exhortation."

The point of this contribution to dialogue is to assuage concerns about the ill effects of change, and to provide a way of responding to injustice in the application of certain Church teachings related to the family by placing the teaching in a different category, indeed a more elevated category closer to the reign of God at the heart of Jesus' preaching.

*Women in the Family and in the Church*

The teachings of the institutional Church on women are believed by survey respondents to countenance the subordination of women, and these teachings are not being received. In the West these teachings strain the credibility of the Magisterium. In the Philippines it is believed that these teachings reflect a patriarchal social system that contributes to the physical and emotional abuse of women and girls. In India these teachings compromise what should be the Magisterium's prophetic role against a cultural subordination of women.

The Magisterium has repeatedly said that it has no authority to ordain women, a policy emblematic of teachings that subordinate women. While this is a more nuanced statement than the theologically contested notion that women cannot be ordained, this teaching remains a source of consternation for many of the faithful. The good faith efforts of the Magisterium to emphasize the unique role of women in the family are frequently understood as confirmation of a more basic subordination.

Admittedly, this subordination has long cultural roots, and these roots serve to ossify teachings that trace their origin to Christ's choice of men as the twelve apostles. But in the eyes of survey respondents the Resurrection tells a contrary story, a story whose promise is being remarkably confirmed by the teachings of God's book of nature. These teachings show a cosmic unfolding of reality that places the Resurrection and the reign of God as the fruit of that unfolding, not interventions of God upon a separately created cosmos. The world continues to be made new by a gracious God. The Eucharist that we celebrate in remembrance of the Last Supper is recognition -- even for the doubting Thomases among us -- of a presence within the assembly of the Risen Christ, a presence even more awesome than the fleshly presence described by the Evangelists. Reality is more than flesh and blood; it is a fullness of life that is captured neither by words nor by conceptions born of earlier stages in the unfolding of the cosmos. In the Hebrew lexicon of the day, blood meant life.

The words of flesh and blood used by the Evangelists were the most riveting they knew of to express a reality whose fullness was beyond their comprehension.

And so it can be for a more life affirming view of women, emerging out of prior conceptions that were not adequate to express the fullness of truth. More adequate conceptions do not overturn prior conceptions so much as fulfill their promise through *metanoia* (see Mark 1:15). The lesson of God's unfolding book of nature is that the inadequacy of prior conceptions is inherent, and the created cosmos groans for conceptions that more adequately express the fullness of life. At this time and place in the history of the Church the respondents to our survey call upon the Synod Fathers to make new, to reform and refresh, the teachings on women that are no longer in condition for reception.

We ask that our coreligionists who in good faith oppose such changes in Church teachings engage us on a journey of dialogue where our mutual humility is not to the concepts of those with whom we disagree but to the enduring love of the living God.

### III. Responses to Numbered Questions

The foregoing remarks, in particular the Proposal for the Synod Fathers, apply to all questions. Additional written comments are provided for questions which were of greatest interest to our respondents, including #33 (living together), #35 (divorced and remarried), #40 (same sex relationships) and #41 (birth control).

#### **Part I**

##### **Listening: The Context and Challenges of the Family**

As indicated in the Introduction (ns. 1 - 4), the Extraordinary Synod was intended to address all the families of the world in a desire to share their joys, struggles and hopes. At the same time, considering the many Christian families who faithfully live their vocation, the Synod expressed to them a sense of gratitude and encouraged them to become involved more decisively, as the Church strives to “go out of herself”, and to rediscover the family’s vital character in the work of evangelization, primarily in nourishing for themselves and for families in difficulty the “desire to form a family”, which endures and underlies the conviction that an effective proclamation of the core message of the Gospel must necessarily “begin with the family”.

The path of renewal delineated by the Extraordinary Synod is set within the wider ecclesial context indicated by Pope Francis in his Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, namely, starting from “life’s periphery” and engaging in pastoral activity that is characterized by a “culture of encounter” and capable of recognizing the Lord’s gratuitous work, even outside customary models, and of confidently adopting the idea of a “field hospital”, which is very beneficial in proclaiming God’s mercy. The numbers in the first part of the *Relatio Synodi* are a response to these challenges and provide a framework for reflecting on the real situation of families.

The proposed questions which follow and the reference numbers to the paragraphs in the *Relatio Synodi* are intended to assist the bishops’ conferences in their reflection and to avoid, in their responses, a formulation of pastoral care based simply on an application of doctrine, which would not respect the conclusions of the Extraordinary Synodal Assembly and would lead their reflection far from the path already indicated.

##### **The Socio-Cultural Context (ns. 5 - 8)**

*1. What initiatives are taking place and what are those planned in relation to the challenges these cultural changes pose to the family (cf. ns. 6 - 7): which initiatives are geared to reawaken an awareness of God’s presence in family life; to teaching and establishing sound interpersonal relationships; to fostering social and economic policies useful to the family; to alleviating difficulties associated with attention given to children, the elderly and family members who are ill; and to addressing more specific cultural factors present in the local Church?*

The most fundamental initiative that must be taken within the Church is to involve all the Faithful in the governance of our Church. Before Vatican II, non-ordained Catholics were told that they were part of "the learning church," and that bishops were "the teaching church." During the Council, however, the bishops realized they too had to learn. When Pope John XXIII said the church needed to "read the signs of the times" and engage in *aggiornamento*, he meant that all of us – bishops, clergy, religious, lay men and women – had to become part of a learning church, figuring out together what we had to do to bring the Gospel up to date and make it relevant for our times.

Among the committed faithful, the *sensus fidei* of the laity, bishops, and theologians should be distinguished, for the individual perspectives on the faith of each group contribute in different ways to the *sensus fidelium*.

The contribution of the laity's *sensus fidei* is the special synthesis they make of their secular activities and religious values lived out in family and society. With their particular charisms they have an intuitive and prophetic ability to read the signs of the times and God's will in the contemporary world. In applying the Gospel to their daily lives in their particular secular contexts and cultures, the laity has a fundamental role in handing on the Word of God and contributing to the teaching office. Indeed, 'in accord with their knowledge, competence, and pre-eminence, laypersons have the right and even at times a duty to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the Church. Further, they have a right to make their opinion known to the other Christian faithful, with due regard to the integrity of faith and morals and reverence toward their pastors and with consideration for the common good and the dignity of persons' (CIC, 212.3).

The *sensus fidei* of bishops (and popes) is a particular 'charism of truth' given to each bishop individually and to the college of bishops as a whole in their capacity as the Magisterium, the official teaching authority of the Church. It is not some supernatural infused or special additional knowledge of revelation. Like all believers each individual bishop, constantly called to conversion, has to attempt to make sense of the faith and witness to it with personal conviction. When exercised in a teaching authority, this charism must always be related to both the *sensus fidelium* and theology in a harmony of the one Spirit of Truth. Indeed, it is in the local particular church where the authoritative dialogical interaction between bishop, *sensus fidelium* and theologians has its beginnings, and in national episcopal conferences, where the local perspectives of individual bishops will challenge the whole group and vice versa. The dynamic of personal learning and conversion takes place particularly when bishops come together in synods and councils, and dialogue among themselves and with theologians. Consensus at Vatican II dynamically re-envisioned the redemption of the whole church through a more just salvific plan.

The *sensus fidei* of theologians (*sensus theologorum*), working in a broad range of disciplines, contributes to the *sensus fidelium* through their special charism of academic and reflective scholarship, grounded in their own individual

faith seeking understanding, interpretation and application. They attempt an imaginative integration of the faith by constructing a coherent systematic vision which can illumine the faith of their contemporaries and later generations in new contexts. Their starting point should always be 'local', grounded in a particular context, culture, place and time, for theology at the local level is vital for listening to and discerning the results of the Spirit's enabling of Christians to understand, interpret and apply the faith in new ways. The scope of their inquiry includes the *sensus fidei* of the laity, sacred Scripture and tradition, the teachings of the Magisterium, the work of other theologians, and the discoveries of the secular sciences. They proceed in constant open dialogue with other contemporary theologians and with the oversight of the Magisterium, always seeking reception and approval.

During Vatican II, we finally rejected a long, corrosive Catholic anti-Semitism. On reflection, the members of the Council embraced our Jewish brothers and sisters. They got to that point by listening to the voices of Jews themselves and by following the lead of Catholic biblical scholars and theologians. They not only put aside some wrong thinking. They adopted some right thinking. This kind of learning from all, not just from clergy, is what we believe Pope Francis is seeking.

Learning can give birth to love, and love to learning. Within families, parents and their children, grandparents and grandchildren, and older siblings, we see a constant rhythm of learning and loving, and loving and learning that reinforces and enhances communication, builds trust, and promotes closeness and mutual respect. Within the family of the faithful, between the ordained and non-ordained, we would like to see that same rhythm prevail.

In calling the Synod, Pope Francis said that he wanted to "continue the reflection of the People of God in its entirety, to move forward in communion with the entire ecclesial community to decide on common pastoral orientations dealing with the most important aspects of our life." In saying this, he was calling on all the faithful to contribute their understanding, interpretation, and application of the faith lived out daily in their families, for it is their "sense of the faith" which can help the whole church transmit the Gospel into new cultures and contexts.

*2. What analytical tools are currently being used in these times of anthropological and cultural changes; what are the more significant positive or negative results? (cf. n. 5)*

*3. Beyond proclaiming God's Word and pointing out extreme situations, how does the Church choose to be present "as Church" and to draw near families in extreme situations? (cf. n. 8). How does the Church seek to prevent these situations? What can be done to support and strengthen families of believers and those faithful to the bonds of marriage?*

How the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Church currently chooses to be present "as Church" needs to change. While bishops might insist they understand



the challenges facing families today because they themselves grew up in a family with parents, siblings and grandparents, their knowledge of family is based exclusively on their family of origin; they have no experience of the family of procreation. If they truly want to understand the contemporary family, before they meet in Synod, they have no option but to consult families themselves. Committed Catholics who live daily in family have the experience necessary and possibly a particular intuitive and prophetic ability to read the signs of the times and God's will for families in the contemporary world. Bishops have a duty to listen to families. Even canon law encourages bishops to provide the faithful of their dioceses with official forums through which they can voice their opinions and be properly listened to. And in *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis cautions bishops "to abandon the complacent attitude that says: 'We have always done it this way.' I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style, and methods of evangelization in their respective communities. A proposal of goals, without an adequate communal search for the means of achieving them, will inevitably prove illusory. The important thing is to not walk alone, but to rely on each other as brothers and sisters.... (n. 33).

Sadly, too few local Churches have set up local councils where people can talk and listen to one another, and sometimes, where they have, they have been muted by the official Church. Similarly, too few national conferences of bishops have convened the national or plenary councils available under canon law, at times simply deeming them "not opportune." Despite Vatican II calling for synods to flourish, few have.

*4. How does the Church respond, in her pastoral activity, to the diffusion of cultural relativism in secularized society and to the consequent rejection, on the part of many, of the model of family formed by a man and woman united in the marriage and open to life?*

We agree with Pope Francis when he wrote in "The Joy of the Gospel," n. 117: "Cultural diversity is not a threat to Church unity....We would not do justice to the logic of the incarnation if we thought of Christianity as mono-cultural and monotonous with everyone reading off the same script and thus showing more fanaticism than true evangelizing zeal. Of course, there will be times when differences in the interpretation of scripture and tradition will emerge among the faithful, when bishops, theologians, and the *sensus fidelium* will not be in full accord. It would appear that the Church is now in one of those times when diversity need not destroy its unity. Published responses to the Synod's recent survey indicate that many Catholics, including theologians, across the world hold views at odds with the official teaching on contraception. If large numbers of the Catholic faithful do not accept this teaching on such a significant moral matter, can it be considered a teaching at all? On other marriage-related issues as well, such as forbidding those who divorce and remarry to come to the Eucharistic table, many Catholics, particularly those who are well-educated and informed,

cannot agree with the official teaching. We hope the Synod reconsiders its position on these matters.

### **The Importance of Affectivity in Life (ns. 9 - 10)**

5. *How do Christian families bear witness, for succeeding generations, to the development and growth of a life of sentiment? (cf. ns. 9 - 10). In this regard, how might the formation of ordained ministers be improved? What qualified persons are urgently needed in this pastoral activity?*

There is strong global support for the need for married clergy as well as support for celibate women to serve as pastoral leaders in ministry.

### **Pastoral Challenges (n. 11)**

6. *To what extent and by what means is the ordinary pastoral care of families addressed to those on the periphery? (cf. n. 11). What are the operational guidelines available to foster and appreciate the "desire to form a family" planted by the Creator in the heart of every person, especially among young people, including those in family situations which do not correspond to the Christian vision? How do they respond to the Church's efforts in her mission to them? How prevalent is natural marriage among the non-baptized, also in relation to the desire to form a family among the young?*

The image of the Church in the minds of our grown children has become distorted by the cases of abuse and by treatment of women, of those divorced and remarried, and even of religious sisters. Perception that this treatment is harsh and merciless and out of harmony with the love the Church is supposed to preach is driving our young people away. The only means for the Church to bring them back is with changed perceptions instead of distorted ones and pastoral compassion that inspires trust and confidence.

## **Part II**

### **Looking at Christ: The Gospel of the Family**

The Gospel of the Family, faithfully preserved by the Church from the time of Christ's Revelation, both written and transmitted through the ages, needs to be proclaimed in today's world with renewed joy and hope, continuing all-the-while to look at Jesus Christ. The vocation and mission of the family is fully configured to the order of creation which develops into that of redemption, as summarized by the desire of the Council, "let the spouses themselves, made to the image of the living God and enjoying the authentic dignity of persons, be joined to one another in equal affection, harmony of mind and the work of mutual sanctification. Thus, following Christ who is the principle of life, by the sacrifices and joys of their vocation and through their faithful love, married people can become witnesses of the mystery of love which the Lord revealed to the world by his dying and his rising to life again" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 52; cf. *The Catechism of the*

*Catholic Church, 1533-1535*). From this vantage point, the questions arising from the *Relatio Synodi* are devised to prompt a faithful and bold response from the Pastors and the People of God in a renewed proclamation of the Gospel of the Family.

### **Looking at Jesus and the Divine Pedagogy in the History of Salvation (ns. 12 - 14)**

Accepting the invitation of Pope Francis, the Church looks to Christ in his enduring truth and inexhaustible newness, which also sheds light on the family. "Christ is the 'eternal Gospel' (*Rev 14:6*); he 'is the same yesterday and today and forever' (*Heb 13:8*), yet his riches and beauty are inexhaustible. He is forever young and a constant source of newness" (*Gaudium Evangelii*, 11).

*7. A fixed gaze on Christ opens up new possibilities. "Indeed, every time we return to the source of the Christian experience, new paths and undreamed of possibilities open up" (n. 12). How is the teaching from Sacred Scripture utilized in pastoral activity on behalf of families. To what extent does "fixing our gaze on Christ" nourish a pastoral care of the family which is courageous and faithful?*

The *relatio* speaks of keeping a fixed gaze on Jesus Christ. One respondent to our survey said that Christ accepted all people. He did not turn anyone away. He said he was proud that he could model his life on "a man as good as Christ." He believed the Church was looking for ways to reject people and to deny them. He believed loving acceptance was the way to act. He no longer believed in the dictates and doctrine—he said that they were ways of separating people from Christ. He pointed that Paul went to the gentiles, not Jews, and that the gentiles then became Christians. . Unless the church changes its approach, he doubted that it would ever be successful in bringing back those on the periphery.

*8. What marriage and family values can be seen to be realized in the life of young people and married couples? What form do they take? Are there values which can be highlighted? (cf. n. 13) What sinful aspects are to be avoided and overcome?*

The Church first declared marriage a sacrament at the Synod of Verona in 1184, and further codified rules for marriage at the Council of Trent in the 16th century. After that, validity depended on the free consent of the two parties, expressed in public and in the presence of a priest and two other witnesses. Husband and wife had to be faithful. Valid marriages were indissoluble once consummated.

Before clerics and Roman lawyers started strongly influencing marriage in the early Middle Ages, European cultures had worked out a two-step process, with a formal "betrothal" period followed, sometimes much later, by marriage. Before witnesses, the couple would publicly proclaim their desire and intention to marry; they would live together and sleep together during a kind of trial marriage until they were sure of their compatibility or their fertility before they

entered into a permanent marriage – just as, even today, those entering religious life often take first, simple vows and then have an extended period before taking final, solemn vows.

The Church might well consider re-instating this betrothal period as a kind of preparation for marriage. Taking into account our longer life spans, it is not unreasonable that couples would wish to be certain about the commitment that they are about to make and living together enables them to reach that certainty. In some countries today, this is, in fact, the norm. Young adults live together for a time; then they get married. Should the Church consider this "a sin?" We think not.

*9. What human pedagogy needs to be taken into account — in keeping with divine pedagogy — so as better to understand what is required in the Church's pastoral activity in light of the maturation of a couple's life together which would lead to marriage in the future? (cf. n. 13)*

The lived experience of marriage and that of committed relationships in general has changed markedly in recent decades. Bishops at the Synod must find a way to hear from the experiences of people in diverse family structures so that it becomes clear to them that there are situations where individuals attempt to live integral lives in good conscience, balancing all the obligations and compromises that they may have to make when preferred options are not open to them. Our Church needs to fully understand and support this. Jesus never rejected anyone who came to him in good faith and showed an empathy that astounded everyone. If the Church wishes to engage the minds of people today, it also needs to rekindle their hearts, as Jesus did.

*10. What is being done to demonstrate the greatness and beauty of the gift of indissolubility so as to prompt a desire to live it and strengthen it more and more? (cf. n. 14)*

The teachings of the Church must come to reflect a realization that relationships do fail. And a Christ-like forgiving Church gains nothing by marginalizing couples who miss the mark, or worse, forcing these couples and their children to suffer through hateful so-called "marriages." We have to ask ourselves, "What would Jesus want?" We are human and, despite all efforts, there can be circumstances where considerable harm is done and not just to individuals but to the whole family unit if the union is forced to continue.

Christians have always been aware of what Jesus was remembered to have said about divorce, but we haven't been quite sure what those words meant. A leading Catholic biblical scholar, Raymond F. Collins, says there are eight versions of Jesus' teaching on divorce, and there is no easy way of identifying which one reflects that teaching in its pristine form.

Contemporary scholars say that Jesus' prohibition against divorce was itself culturally-conditioned. His condemnation of divorce was an effort to

counteract an abuse he observed among Jewish men of his time, who would divorce their wives, making them automatically unfit for another, because, we are told, no self-respecting Jew would marry a divorced woman.

The Eastern Orthodox churches, where married men can become priests (but not bishops), have a long tradition affirming that a validly contracted marriage is dissolved only by physical death. Nevertheless, these churches recognize divorce in the face of unbearable marital discord, which they say is a kind of death. The Eastern Orthodox Church sees divorce and remarriage as the exception, not the rule, but when they do, they do so in imitation of "the mercy and understanding exercised so profusely by our Lord during His life." In the Western Church we might consider taking a similar merciful and compassionate viewpoint.

What stops the Western Church from following the compassionate lead of our Orthodox brothers and sisters? Most likely it is pure legalism. The Church created long lasting difficulties for itself and for the people of God by giving too much power to its canon lawyers who made a community of love into a contract inspired by Roman law. Other systems of law are far less rigid, allowing for conditions, presumptions, differing circumstances, cancellation of contracts by mutual consent, and the common good. Above all, they recognize a hierarchy of values.

Holding a marriage together for a lifetime is not always the best solution for one or both. The Church must become a compassionate church. Support and bless all efforts by the faithful to develop genuine, loving and fulfilling relationships.

*11. How can people be helped to understand that a relationship with God can assist couples in overcoming the inherent weaknesses in marital relations? (cf. n. 14) How do people bear witness to the fact that divine blessings accompany every true marriage? How do people manifest that the grace of the Sacrament sustains married couples throughout their life together?*

Marriage is a beautiful vocation but so little understood by the church hierarchy. Clerics often give the impression that women are to be feared because they present temptations to their celibate vocation, a vocation that is often presented as higher than marriage. This attitude has led to clericalism and the belief that clerics are "above sex" as well as deserving of special status and associated privileges. By taking a wider view of life, the members of the Vatican Council reframed the Church's moral theology making it more faithful to the Gospel than to abstract philosophical ideas. In their redefinition of marriage, the Council looked more to the experience of human couples than to canon law. After bitter debate, the Council ended up rejecting the old dichotomy between "primary and secondary ends of marriage" as defined by Pius XI in 1930. Instead, in *Gaudium et Spes*, they set conjugal love at the core of marriage: "Such love, merging the human and the divine, leads the spouses to a free and mutual gift of themselves. Such love pervades the whole of their lives. Indeed,

by its generous activity, it grows better and grows greater. Therefore it far exceeds mere erotic inclination, which, selfishly pursued, soon enough fades wretchedly away. And then the startling statement: "This love is uniquely expressed and perfected through the marital act." This means that the so-called "marital act" does this beyond all other acts and in a way most typical of the love it expresses and completes. Furthermore, the Council Fathers warned couples not to break off love and full intimacy when "they find themselves in circumstances where at least temporarily the size of their families should not be increased." And so, in *Gaudium et Spes*, the Council came closer than the Church had ever come to dealing with the experience of marriage as loving couples live it. In effect, they put a new blessing on the act called "making love."

After such a solemn statement as that from the Council itself, the world was astonished only three years later to read Paul VI's *Humanae Vitae* declaring that "every matrimonial act must be open to the transmission of life." Paul VI was misled by some very bad science. Theoretically, a man is fertile 365 days a year. In the early 20th century, scientists discovered his wife is fertile some five days a month. So, Pope Paul's order that "every matrimonial act should be open to a new transmission of life" needs a revised interpretation. When married couples embrace, they are not only making love. They are making a marriage and creating a family whose devotion to Christ will set them on the joyful task of making a better world.

### **The Family in God's Savific Plan (ns. 15 - 16)**

In creation, the vocation of the love between a man and woman draws its full realization from the Paschal Mystery of Christ the Lord, who, in his total gift of self, makes the Church his Mystical Body. Christian marriage, in drawing on the grace of Christ, thus becomes, for those who are called, the path leading to the perfection of love, which is holiness.

12. *How can people be made to understand that Christian marriage corresponds to the original plan of God and, thus, one of fulfillment and not confinement? (cf. n. 13)*

We recommend that the Synod on the Family put far greater emphasis on creating fulfilling relationships and far less on confinement:

- Support and bless all efforts by the faithful to develop genuine, loving and fulfilling relationships. Bless those who make a genuine commitment to live together before marriage as well as those who form a new relationship after a marriage breakdown.
- Develop new ways of assisting those who are experiencing marital difficulties. Married deacons through their preaching and pastoral care do provide a special witness and understanding through their experience of married life.
- Recognize the reality of relationship breakdown and not exclude from sacramental life those who, in good faith, have been unable to sustain



their first marriage. There are many situations where individuals could not sustain the marriage no matter what they do, especially in instances where their partner has simply left them.

- Show more understanding and compassion in relation to all forms of committed relationships – whether they be second marriages, inter-faith marriages, or same-sex relationships. Our Church should always show in its teaching that the sacraments are not just for those who appear to live out the ideals but for those who are unable to do so although they continue to strive for them. In restricting the sacraments the Church sometimes overlooks the example of Jesus who never rejected anyone who came to him with a sincere heart, frequently seeking out even public sinners to show the power of his love.
- Recognize that some marriages die. When this occurs, couples should be encouraged to come to the Eucharistic table – and not on the condition that they live as brother and sister. The Fathers of Vatican II recognized lovemaking at the heart of marriage, when they wrote, "Such love, merging the human and divine, leads the spouses to a free and mutual gift of themselves . . . Such love pervades the whole of their lives. Indeed, by its generous activity, it grows better and grows greater."

13. *How can the Church be conceived as a "domestic Church" (Lumen Gentium, 11), agent and object of the work of evangelization in service to the Kingdom of God?*

14. *How can an awareness of this missionary task of the family be fostered?*

### **The Family in the Church's Documents (ns. 17 - 20)**

The Church's Magisterium in all its richness needs to be better known by the People of God. Marital spirituality is nourished by the constant teaching of the Pastors, who care for the flock, and grow through their continual attentiveness to the Word of God and to the sacraments of faith and charity.

15. *The Lord looks with love at the Christian family and through him the family grows as a true community of life and love. How can a familial spirituality be developed and how can families become places of new life in Christ? (cf. n. 21)*

16. *What initiatives in catechesis can be developed and fostered to make known and offer assistance to persons in living the Church's teaching on the family, above all in surmounting any possible discrepancy between what is lived and what is professed and in leading to a process of conversion?*

### **The Indissolubility of Marriage and the Joy of Sharing Life Together (ns. 21 - 22)**

“Authentic married love is caught up into divine love and is governed and enriched by Christ’s redeeming power and the saving activity of the Church, so that this love may effectively lead the spouses to God and may aid and strengthen them in the sublime mission of being father and mother. For this reason, Christian spouses have a special sacrament by which they are fortified and receive a kind of consecration in the duties and dignity of their state. By virtue of this sacrament, as spouses fulfil their conjugal and family obligation, they are penetrated with the spirit of Christ, which suffuses their whole lives with faith, hope and charity. Thus they increasingly advance the perfection of their own personalities, as well as their mutual sanctification, and hence contribute jointly to the glory of God” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 48).

17. *What initiatives can lead people to understand the value of an indissoluble and fruitful marriage as the path to complete personal fulfilment? (cf. n. 21)*

The Church could play a much more beneficial role in providing pastoral care for people facing difficulties in marriages and/or relationships?

- Support and bless all efforts by the faithful to develop genuine, loving and fulfilling relationships
- Assume an advisory role rather than a prescriptive role
- Recognize the reality of relationship breakdown and not exclude from sacramental life those who, in good faith, have been unable to sustain their marriage
- Provide resources for families experiencing relationship breakdown
- Simplify the Annulment process
- Ensure that children of divorced relationships are welcomed and treated respectfully

18. *What can be done to show that the family has many unique aspects for experiencing the joys of human existence?*

19. *The Second Vatican Council, returning to an ancient ecclesial tradition, expressed an appreciation for natural marriage. To what extent does diocesan pastoral activity acknowledge the value of this popular wisdom as fundamental in culture and society? (cf. n. 22)*

At the Second Vatican Council, we realized in a new way that the teachings of the Catholic Church could evolve, that they have continued to do so during the past 2,000 years, and that our Church does not have a monopoly on religious truth. We affirmed the value of other religions and the freedom of conscience of all human beings. We recognized the difference between faith and theology: we have one faith, but we can have many interpretations of that faith – that is, many theologies that help us understand who and what we are as Christians. It is important to us, the members of Catholic Church Reform International, that we can sometimes differ from certain official Church positions

and still be good Catholics, indeed that we can find new ways of applying the message of Jesus to help in making a better world.

We hoped that the Second Vatican Council had reopened the rule of love Jesus Christ taught. Yet, over fifty years later, some Church leaders insist on preserving hardened judgments that many committed Catholics reject. In today's world, if Church teaching makes no sense to them, they by-pass official directives, not to be irreligious, but to preserve the soul of our religion. We believe with Cardinal Avery Dulles that, when they rejected change – particularly that promoted in Vatican II – the institutional Church leaders' static conceptions and shallow understanding of both gender and sexuality stifled the development of official Church teaching for the present and future. Old ideas on women, more cultural than religious, have caused widespread defections, damaged our relationship with other Christian Churches, and have thrown doubt on many of the Church's other moral teachings.

Some complain that Catholics no longer believe in natural moral law. If that is true, there is a reason for it. Many poorly trained Churchmen do not understand it and cannot explain it. We are called to do good and avoid evil. After that, we have to use our minds to discern what actually is good, or evil, according to our reading of Scripture, the constantly changing criteria in society and the promptings of our inner conscience. Our moral teachings must make rational sense to us and, therefore, must take into account contemporary developments in science, psychology, biology, and the humanities. Popes once held slaves; until the time of Pius IX, pope-rulers had felons beheaded; and they condemned those who lent money at interest. Official Church teaching should encourage well-developed consciences, seek out new frontiers of expertise, and check its own lines of argument. In recent times, sadly, the official Church silenced many of its theologians who were challenged by the Second Vatican Council to find new ways of expressing ancient truths.

### **The Truth and Beauty of the Family and Mercy Towards Wounded and Fragile Families (ns. 23 - 28)**

After having considered the beauty of successful marriages and strong families and shown appreciation for the generous witness of those who remain faithful to the bonds of marriage, even when abandoned by their spouses, the Pastors at the Synod asked themselves — in an open and courageous manner but not without concern and caution — how the Church is to regard Catholics who are united in a civil bond, those who simply live together and those who, after a valid marriage, are divorced and remarried civilly.

Aware of the obvious limitations and imperfections present in many different situations, the synod fathers assumed the positive outlook indicated by Pope Francis, according to which “without detracting from the evangelical ideal, they need to accompany with mercy and patience the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively occur.” (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 44).

20. *How can people be helped to understand that no one is beyond the mercy of God? How can this truth be expressed in the Church's pastoral activity towards families, especially those which are wounded and fragile? (cf. n. 28)*

People are far more ready to understand this than the hierarchical church. It is Church Fathers who need to be convinced that no one is beyond the mercy of God. It is incumbent on the Church to stop being an exclusive club made up of members who keep all the rules. For its very survival, the Church must become an inclusive community where all are welcomed. Like Pope Francis, our vision is a Church more like a field hospital: nursing the wounded, welcoming the forsaken, showing compassion to those hurting, and forgiving those who have made mistakes along the way.

Here are a few of the ways this can be expressed in the Church's pastoral activity:

- Welcome all the baptized who wish to receive the Eucharist.
- Demonstrate compassionate outreach to family members in these relationships.
- Simplify the Annulment process.
- Affirm each person's right to make decisions based on a well-formed consciences.

21. *In the case of those who have not yet arrived at a full understanding of the gift of Christ's love, how can the faithful express a friendly attitude and offer trustworthy guidance without failing to proclaim the demands of the Gospel? (cf. n. 24)*

22. *What can be done so that persons in the various forms of union between a man and a woman — in which human values can be present — might experience a sense of respect, trust and encouragement to grow in the Church's good will and be helped to arrive at the fulness of Christian marriage? (cf. n. 25)*

Pope Francis has been trying to bring us back to our roots in Jesus by refusing to give what we used to call "binding papal pronouncements" on a whole host of moral issues. He wants us to focus on following Jesus and living his message: loving God and our neighbor, learning how to forgive ourselves, and go forward in hope when we fall short of the mark. Sister of Mercy Margaret Farley has pointed out how we have moved from this focus:

"In Western culture, at least since its Christian formation, there has been a persistent tendency to give too much importance to the morality of sex. The sexual has threatened to take over the moral focus of whole generations of persons. Everything about the 'sexual' is considered 'moral' or 'immoral,' and 'morality' is almost reduced to 'sexual morality.' All of this is to the detriment of concerns about economic justice, the oppression of whole peoples, political dishonesty, and even theft and the taking of life."

Most Church teaching depicts sex as a means of continuing the species but, in every other sense, that it is a guilty pleasure wrapped in sinfulness. If we

look to see what Jesus said about sex, then we find very little in the Gospels. When he intervenes in an attempt to prevent the stoning of the woman accused of adultery, he only condemns those who want to hurt her. "Let him who is without fault cast the first stone." If Jesus were alive today (and come to think of it, he is alive in us!) he would surely acknowledge that sexuality – like so many other fields of human activity – possesses a crucial moral dimension. All the more so, since sex has an unrivalled capacity both to hurt and to heal, and touches intimately upon the greatest power that we humans have – the power to express and receive love.

### **Part III**

#### **Confronting the Situation: Pastoral Perspectives**

In examining Part III of the *Relatio Synodi*, it is important to be guided by the pastoral approach initiated at the Extraordinary Synod which is grounded in Vatican II and the Magisterium of Pope Francis. The episcopal conferences have the responsibility to continue to examine this part thoroughly and seek the involvement, in the most opportune manner possible, all levels of the local Church, thus providing concrete instances from their specific situations. Every effort should be made not to begin anew, but to continue on the path undertaken in the Extraordinary Synod as a point of departure.

#### **Proclaiming the Gospel of the Family Today in Various Contexts (ns. 29 - 38)**

Because of the needs of the family and, at the same time, the many complex challenges that are present in the world today, the Synod emphasized making a renewed commitment to proclaiming the Gospel of the Family in a bold and more insistent manner.

*23. How is the family emphasized in the formation of priests and other pastoral workers? How are families themselves involved?*

*24. Are people aware that the rapid evolution in society requires a constant attention to language in pastoral communication. How can an effective testimony be given to the priority of grace in a way that family life is conceived and lived as welcoming the Holy Spirit?*

This is the only place in this survey where the word "welcoming" is used. The church in Pope Francis eyes should be like a field hospital, healing wounds and welcoming all back to the church. Jesus exemplified mercy in his dealings with sinners. And so should his church.

Ninety-four percent of respondents in our first survey opposed withholding the Eucharist for those who were divorced and remarried, and 90 percent each for those in an interfaith marriage and not married in the Church because they could not promise to baptize their children, for those living in a relationship

without marriage and for being in a same-sex relationship. Eighty-five percent rejected withholding Eucharist for persons in another Christian denomination.

*25. In proclaiming the Gospel of the Family, how can the conditions be created so that each family might actually be as God wills and that society might acknowledge the family's dignity and mission? What "pastoral conversion" and what further steps towards an in-depth examination are being done to achieve this?*

The conversion most needed is on the part of the hierarchical Church. Bishops must recognize the dignity and mission of each family member by listening to them and recognizing that the Spirit speaks through them as well. If the Church of the 21st century truly wants to understand the challenges and lived experiences facing families today, going along with Francis' call for dialogue, bishops must create opportunities for dialogue with all forms of families - divorced and remarried couples, same sex couples and families, couples in interfaith marriages, couples living together, and the like.

Asked whether certain dialogue venues—synods, and pastoral and financial councils with decision-making authority—exist in their diocese, 63 percent of our first survey answered, "to my knowledge, none of the above." Seventeen percent said there were elected parish pastoral councils with decision-making authority, and 10 percent or fewer said there were diocesan pastoral or financial councils with decision-making authority, or mandatory synods.

*26. Are people aware of the importance of the collaboration of social and civil institutions on behalf of the family? How is this actually done? What criteria are used to inspire it? In this regard, what role can be played by family associations? How can this collaboration be sustained even in a bold repudiation of the cultural, economic and political processes which threaten the family?*

*27. How can relations between family, society and civil life be fostered for the benefit of the family? How can the support of the State and the international community be fostered on behalf of the family?*

### **Guiding Engaged Couples in Their Preparation for Marriage (ns. 39 - 40)**

The Synod recognized the steps taken in recent years to facilitate an effective preparation of young people for marriage, stressing, however, a need for a greater commitment of the entire Christian community in not only the preparation but also the initial years of family life.

*28. How is marriage preparation proposed in order to highlight the vocation and mission of the family according to faith in Jesus Christ? Is it proposed as an authentic ecclesial experience? How can it be renewed and improved?*

*29. How does the catechesis of Christian initiation present an openness to the vocation and mission of the family? What practices are seen as most urgent? How is the relation*



*among Baptism, Eucharist and marriage proposed? What emphasis is given to the character of the catechumenate and mystagogy which is often a part of marriage preparation? How can the community be involved in this preparation?*

### **Accompanying Married Couples in the Initial Years of Marriage (n. 40)**

*30. Does marriage preparation and accompanying couples in the initial years of married life adequately value the important contribution of the witness and sustenance which can be given by families, associations and family movements? What positive experiences can be reported in this regard?*

To formulate valid Church teachings on marriage preparation and the initial years, the Church must responsibly listen to the faithful and honor their lived experiences.

*31. The pastoral accompaniment of couples in the initial years of family life — as observed in synodal discussion — needs further development. What are the most significant initiatives already being undertaken? What elements need further development in parishes, dioceses or associations and movements?*

To acknowledge the lived reality of families today, the Church must include a broad spectrum of families (not just bishops and clerics) in the 2015 Synod gathering. The invitation for families to participate in the Synod should be the first stage of an ongoing exchange between bishops and the faithful on a wide range of contemporary issues. This should continue in dioceses and parishes everywhere.

Church teachings should recognize and respect sexual expression in loving relationships.

- As a unique expression of love that brings the couple closer than anything else
- As a selfless and altruistic giving of self to the other
- As the love relationship strengthens, it models a profound example of love to children
- As a committed and loving relationship that provides stability for the family

### **Pastoral Care of Couples Civilly Married or Living Together (ns. 41 - 43)**

The Synod discussed diverse situations resulting from a multiplicity of cultural and economic factors, practices grounded in tradition, and the difficulty of young people to make lifetime commitments.

*32. What criteria in a proper pastoral discernment of individual situations are being considered in light the Church's teaching in which the primary elements of marriage are unity, indissolubility and openness to life?*

33. *Is the Christian community able to be pastorally involved in these situations? How can it assist in discerning the positive and negative elements in the life of persons united in a civil marriage so as to guide and sustain them on a path of growth and conversion towards the Sacrament of Matrimony? How can those living together be assisted to decide to marry?*

The same pastoral care that is applied to couples entering marriage should be available to those who are civilly married or co-habiting. But doctrinal aversion to pre-marital relationships stands in the way. It would help if the Church in general and pastors in particular were less inclined to see reality through the lens of doctrine and more willing to accompany people in the circumstances where they are. Such accompaniment would be facilitated if the long experience of the Church as a community could be expressed as Gospel exhortations in support of journeys of conscience rather than as doctrinal rules. (See "Proposal for the Synod Fathers", *supra*). This approach would also highlight the importance and challenge of investing the reality of married life with love, and enable a discussion of sin as the absence of such love.

34. *In a particular way, what response is to be given to problems arising from the continuity of traditional forms of marriage in stages or those between families?*

#### **Caring for Wounded Families (Separated, Divorced and Not Remarried, Divorced and Remarried, Single-Parent Families) (ns. 44 - 54)**

Synod discussion highlighted the need for a pastoral based on *the art of accompaniment*, "the pace of [which] 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).

35. *Is the Christian community in a position to undertake the care of all wounded families so that they can experience the Father's mercy? How does the Christian community engage in removing the social and economic factors which often determine this situation? What steps have been taken and what can be done to increase this activity and the sense of mission which sustains it?*

The Church's teaching on the indissolubility of marriage complicates this situation. In some local church communities scant attention is paid to whether a spouse has been married before. Most people are understanding of the difficulties that may have caused a first marriage to break up and are happy to support a second marriage that works. But the Church as a whole would be in a better position to serve the needs of remarried people if it gave priority to pastoral care instead of doctrine. Somehow it seems incongruous that a Church that calls itself Christian is compromised in its Christian witness when dealing with remarried people. Teaching should be directed the challenges of the reign of God, of getting up after a fall and getting back on the road toward union with a loving God. The effort to work within the existing doctrinal framework by

placing doctrine at the service of good pastoring is a positive sign, and may lead eventually to seeing the Church's teaching on the indissolubility of marriage as a Gospel exhortation rather than a law requiring community discipline. (See "Proposal for the Synod Fathers", *supra*).

36. *How can the identification of shared pastoral guidelines be fostered at the level of the particular Church? In this regard, how can a dialogue be developed among the various particular Churches cum Petro and sub Petro?*

37. *How can the procedure to determine cases of nullity be made more accessible, streamlined and possibly without expense?*

38. *With regard to the divorced and remarried, pastoral practice concerning the sacraments needs to be further studied, including assessment of the Orthodox practice and taking into account "the distinction between an objective sinful situation and extenuating circumstances" (n. 52). What are the prospects in such a case? What is possible? What suggestions can be offered to resolve forms of undue or unnecessary impediments?*

39. *Does current legislation provide a valid response to the challenges resulting from mixed marriages or interreligious marriages? Should other elements be taken into account?*

### **Pastoral Attention towards Persons with Homosexual Tendencies (ns. 55 - 56)**

The pastoral care of persons with homosexual tendencies poses new challenges today, due to the manner in which their rights are proposed in society.

40. *How can the Christian community give pastoral attention to families with persons with homosexual tendencies? What are the responses that, in light of cultural sensitivities, are considered to be most appropriate? While avoiding any unjust discrimination, how can such persons receive pastoral care in these situations in light of the Gospel? How can God's will be proposed to them in their situation?*

At the level of the larger Church pastoral care of LGBT persons and their families has been abysmal. Were it not for good priests and religious in local communities the situation would appear hopeless. The net result is LGBT enclaves, and relatively few parish communities where LGBT persons feel nurtured. The Church would be better served by a theology that recognizes the reality that parents and friends of LGBT persons know first hand: same sex attractions are a normal part of God's creation. The percentages are small but real. The current theology against same sex relationships is based upon scriptural interpretations that are contrary to the teachings of God's book of nature. This theology is therefore becoming an increasing embarrassment to the Church, as St. Augustine forecast (*The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, Book I, 19-21,

39-41). This embarrassment will only get worse unless pastoral attention learns from the loving experience of parents and friends of LGBT persons.

What the larger Church needs is a path out of this embarrassment, hopefully without the long delays of the Galileo affair, which also involved a conflict between scriptural interpretation and God's book of nature.

### **The Transmission of Life and the Challenge of a Declining Birthrate (ns. 57 - 59)**

The transmission of life is a fundamental element in the vocation and mission of the family: "They should know they are thereby cooperators with the love of God the Creator, and are, so to speak, the interpreters of that love in the task of transmitting human life and to raising children; this has to be considered their proper mission" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 50).

41. *What are the most significant steps that have been taken to announce and effectively promote the beauty and dignity of becoming a mother or father, in light, for example, of Humanae Vitae of Blessed Pope Paul VI? How can dialogue be promoted with the sciences and biomedical technologies in a way that respects the human ecology of reproduction?*

The Church's public condemnation of contraception is so pronounced that married couples are left to their own devices in dealing with this issue. The beauty and dignity of parenthood is largely missing or unnoticed within the shadow of the Church's position on artificial birth control. Church teaching should recognize that when a couple makes love, they are making a marriage. The Church as a whole would be better served by a public posture that addressed the experienced reality of married life not in terms of an external set of rules that are to be followed but rather in terms of the challenges which any married couple faces in responding to the temptations of placing self above the welfare of the partner and the welfare of the union. This approach would enable the larger Church to be a genuine conduit of experience for the beauty and dignity of married life and children rather than a door closed to artificial birth control. It would facilitate this approach if the teachings against artificial birth control could be understood as Gospel exhortations rather than prohibitions. This understanding might also create room in the Church's public discourse to use Catholic social teaching to oppose the marketing of artificial birth control products from abroad for the purpose of imposing population limits. (See "Proposal for the Synod Fathers", *supra*).

42. *A generous maternity / paternity needs structures and tools. Does the Christian community exercise an effective solidarity and support? How? Is it courageous in proposing valid solutions even at a socio-political level? How can adoption and foster-parenting be encouraged as a powerful sign of fruitful generosity? How can the care and respect of children be promoted?*

43. *The Christian lives maternity / paternity as a response to a vocation. Is this vocation sufficiently emphasized in catechesis? What formation is offered so that it might effectively guide the consciences of married couples? Are people aware of the grave consequences of demographic change?*

44. *How does the Church combat the scourge of abortion and foster an effective culture of life?*

#### **Upbringing and the Role of the Family in Evangelization (ns. 60 - 61)**

45. *Fulfilling their educational mission is not always easy for parents. Do they find solidarity and support from the Christian community? What suggestions might be offered in formation? What steps can be taken to acknowledge the role of parents in raising children, even at the socio-political level?*

46. *How can parents and the Christian family be made aware that the duty of transmitting the faith is an intrinsic aspect of being a Christian?*

It is the specific role of the Magisterium to listen, guard and expound.

The Magisterium must listen to and receive the *sensus fidelium* in the exercise of its formal authority, because the faith that the Magisterium proclaims is the faith of the whole Church. The Magisterium, therefore, does not just teach; it must also listen, receive, and learn. Likewise, the *sensus fidelium* does not just listen passively and learn; it also teaches and must be listened to. There is a rhythm to the teaching and learning of both.

Listening requires an attitude of openness to the other in dialogue, a spirit of hospitality, and a willingness to learn from genuine encounter and engagement. Learning can only take place when there is a preparedness to grow, to encounter a new reality, and to accept a new viewpoint. In the practice of and witness to the faith there needs to be a unique harmony (*conspiratio*) between the Holy Spirit, the Magisterium and the *sensus fidelium*.

If the Church is to reach a consensus (*consensus fidelium*) in the formulation of its official teaching, there has to be a genuine process of ecclesial dialogue between the lived faith of the People of God in its entirety, the Magisterium, and the work of theology. The one cannot stand without the others, but all together, and each in its own way, subject to the action of the Spirit, they contribute effectively to the salvation of souls. If the formal teaching of the Magisterium is to be authoritative and received as such, all three authorities must be interrelated and in harmony.

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