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THE 2014 SYNOD ON THE FAMILY

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Abstract

Pessimists among Catholic liberals say the Synod will not come up with anything more than a repetition of the 1980 Synod's outcome. Optimists remind us that we now have a different kind of pope — who will announce in early September a new set of his own appointees as members and auditors of the Synod. They could make a difference, linking perhaps to the 27 German bishops who would like to see the Church put its blessing on certain second marriages where the couples in question have arrived at a so called "conscience decision" to try marriage again. Some U.S. bishops might find themselves riding the same bandwagon, concerned over the fact that there are more than ten million American Catholics now settled down in their second marriages, many of them grown up enough to think they can still be good Catholics and go to weekly Communion without explicit permission from their bishop. Given the Vatican's culture of secrecy, we can only wait and see.

There was never any doubt about his main goal as pope: to step down from the imperial papal throne and put the papacy itself more at the service of the Church and the world. On the day he was introduced to the world as Pope Francis, March 13, 2013, Jorge Bergoglio pointedly referred to himself as "the bishop of Rome"— and not "the CEO of Christianity Inc." as Pope John Paul II had often presented himself, especially during his extensive travels to every end of the universe, full of advice for his local bishops, but notoriously never listening to them.

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What prevented Francis from stepping down from the papal throne? Nothing. And without issuing any decrees, he proceeded to do so in a variety of symbolic ways. He wouldn't wear a golden cross. He traded in the papal Mercedes for a Ford focus. Instead of moving in to the airy, 18-room Apostolic Palace, he took a two-room suite in the Vatican hotel.

And then, only weeks into his papacy, Francis appointed a special commission of eight cardinals to advise him about the governance of the Church, something he surely wouldn't have done if there was nothing wrong with the way the Church has been running in the 20th century — as the only absolute monarchy left in the world. An unaccountable Church clearly wasn't working — as Pope Benedict XVI demonstrated in a dramatic way when he threw up his hands and actually resigned a papacy besieged by one scandal after another.

When the College of Cardinals gathered to elect Benedict's successor, they knew they had to do something drastic. They not only elected someone outside the inner circle, they told him not to fear shaking things up. He proceeded to do exactly that — still a Jesuit in every fibre of his being, always committed to God's greater glory (and to the greater good of the people of God). In 1974, at a solemn meeting of the Jesuits' international leadership, Bergoglio, then the young provincial of Argentina, had heard the Jesuit General Pedro Arrupe describe the Jesuit spirit in no uncertain terms:

Jesuits are never content with the status quo, the known, the tried, the already existing. We are constantly driven to rediscover, redefine, and reach out for the *magis*. For us, frontiers and boundaries are not obstacles or ends, but new challenges to be faced, new opportunities to be welcomed. Indeed, ours is a holy boldness, a certain apostolic aggressivity, typical of our way of proceeding.

Now, more than a year into his papacy, Francis has not wavered in his resolve to fix whatever in the Church needs fixing. He started looking at his own absolute rule, but changing that will be a tall order, considering how entrenched the pattern of centuries. He and his Commission of Eight are still trying to decide how much power the pope can give away and still remain pope.

In the meantime, he has had other priorities. During the summer, Francis was working on an apostolic exhortation that would be ready for release in late November as *Evangelii Gaudium*, "The Joy of the Gospel." There, he underlined his main priority; "to respond adequately to many people's thirst for God, a spirituality which can

offer healing and liberation, and fill them with life and peace that will make life truly human and give glory to God" (n. 73).

His priorities disappointed both the Catholic left and the Catholic right. He said the Eucharist "is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak," insisting that "the doors of the sacraments" must not "be closed for simply any reason" — which prompted many pre-Vatican II Catholics to ask, "Is the pope Catholic?" Feminists refused to be charmed by this man's utter humanity, and demanded to know when he would start ordaining them to the sacred priesthood. Otherwise, he was a fraud.

Francis seemed to pay no mind to either of the factions in the Church's ongoing culture war. He preferred to keep the Church's mission focused "on Jesus Christ, and her commitment to the poor."

Church is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us. Not only do they share in the *sensus fidei*, but in their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. We need to let ourselves be evangelized by them. The new evangelization is an invitation to acknowledge the saving power at work in their lives and to put them at the centre of the Church's pilgrim way. We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them (n. 231).

This is the kind of language that made Pope Francis such a popular figure all over the Christian world. He had his eye on Jesus, and that is where he wanted to lead us — to Jesus.

I could hardly understand, then, why Francis decided to call for a Synod of Bishops on the Family to convene in Rome in the fall of 2014. Pope John Paul II had convened a Synod on the Family in 1980; it was a disaster because it fell so short of helping families who were challenged by the realities of their own married lives (for example, so many marriages ending in divorce) and by the unreal moral prohibitions laid on them by the Church. Why did he think a group of bishops could come to his Synod with anything but the same set of moral prohibitions? If anything, this group of bishops in 2014, all of them JP II appointees, were far less liberal than the bishops who attended the 1980 Synod. Some of the 1980 bishops, at least, laid out the idea that the Church was not a monolith; that in moral matters dealing with such an intimate and intricate institution as the family, the pope could not expect the whole world to follow a formulation of the divine law that had been written from some very special

perspectives — and by a tiny group of celibate clerics who were more eager to preserve what they perceived as traditional doctrine than inclined to plumb the depths of God's intentions for humankind. John Paul II ignored them.

Now we have another pope calling another Synod on the Family, faced with the same issues the bishops discussed (and dealt with so miserably) in 1980. If Francis wanted (for instance) to revise the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*, he could have done so with the stroke of a pen, or an impromptu, provocative remark at a news conference on the papal plane. Why would a new Synod on the Family look any different than the Synod of 1980? The men in the Synod Secretariat he charged with planning the 2014 meeting are long time Vatican hands who have been programmed to cling to the old certainties.

Their guidelines for this Synod seemed to come right out of the old Vatican playbook. How can we get across the Church's traditional teachings, they asked, 'to counteract the rise in acceptance of divorce, the increase in cohabitation, the influence of feminist ideologies hostile to Christian marriage, the 'culture of non-commitment,' the corrosive effect of migration on family ties, the spread of contraceptive practices, the use of artificial forms of reproduction, the recognition of same-sex unions.'¹

Some say that a group of celibate males (who have probably never even changed a baby's diaper) are the least likely people in the world to provide any special wisdom on the human family. Mary McAleese, the former president of Ireland, has called the idea "bonkers" — that a group of men who haven't raised their own kids can expect the mothers and fathers of families to understand, much less pay much attention to, their clerical perspectives.

I can think of only one scenario that makes any sense. Francis is carrying through with his commitment to give more power to the world's bishops. Let them come to Rome and do their best (or their worst) and make sure they come to the realization that their mind-set is hugely out of date. How will he do that? He has already done it by ordering up a survey of Catholic opinion about the Church's teachings on the family. I want to know what the people at large are thinking about these Church teachings. I want to involve everyone,

¹http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20131105_iii-assembly-sinodo-vescovi_en.html

he said. In my opinion, involving everyone (if Francis can bring it off) is a canny, even mischievous, move to bring some balance to the Church's moral teachings, delegated for too long a time to the Church's clerical, no-change party.

He had his Synod Secretariat draft a lengthy questionnaire to survey the opinion of the people of God — clergy and non-clergy alike — about their acceptance of the Church's teaching on a number of issues: birth control, second marriages after divorce, same-sex marriage, abortion. The Secretariat kept the results of that survey a secret, but a few bishops revealed a wide disparity between what the Church teaches and what its people do, something this well-informed Jesuit pope already suspected. (He has 17,000 Jesuits serving as his eyes and ears around the world.)

Robert Lynch, bishop of St Petersburg, Florida, reported that for a large percentage of his 6,800 Catholics polled, "On the birth control question, 'that train left the station long ago.' Catholics have made up their minds and the *sensus fidelium* [the sense of the faithful] suggests the rejection of Church teaching on this subject."

The bishops' conferences in Germany and Switzerland reported in the same vein. They saw a clear divergence between what the Church teaches on marriage, sexuality and family life and what Catholics — even those active in parish life — personally believed. The differences were seen "above all when it comes to pre-marital cohabitation, (the status of the) divorced and remarried, birth control and homosexuality."

Their text summarized the official responses to the Vatican questionnaire from all of Germany's 27 dioceses and some 20 German Catholic organizations and institutions. It said, "Most of the baptized have an image of the Church that, on the one hand, is family friendly in its attitude, whilst at the same time considering her sexual morality to be unrealistic."

Soon, a number of Catholic reform groups started producing their own versions of the Vatican questionnaire. If the pope wanted to know, they would tell him. Wittingly or unwittingly, Pope Francis had set up a struggle between the people at large who, taking the pope at his word, wanted a voice in the Synod's agenda, and a bureaucracy inside the Vatican that didn't have the time or the will to listen to them.

In November and December 2013, *Catholic Organizations for Renewal* (COR) asked 15 progressive U.S. Catholic groups to send out an

alternate, more understandable questionnaire. All together, responses came in from 16,582 men and women — 83 percent of them from laypeople, 27 percent from parents and 11 percent from professed religious, priests, deacons and seminarians. Even though this survey was conducted by progressive Catholic organizations, just 13 percent of respondents described themselves as a “member of a Church reform organization.” Fifty-three percent of them were weekly Mass-goers — marking them as roughly twice as faithful Mass goers than the U.S. average, as reported by CARA, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University: 24 percent.

COR said, “This was a tedious survey for respondents to complete — probably taking 45 to 60 minutes. The fact that 16,582 faithful submitted responses is testimony to the depth of care and concern they had for the future of the Church and the transmission of the Gospel. Their voices deserve to be listened to.”

The COR survey consisted of 49 items based on the Vatican’s original survey and, as did many diocesan surveys, the designers made alterations in the language to make it more accessible to a lay population. It also added three items — about marriage equality, the needs of children of parents in marriages not recognized by the church, and the importance of community availability of contraception.

Results of the survey’s quantitative questions were in the main consistent with similar studies by the other organizations and from international bishops’ conference reports. Here are some of the findings of this COR survey:²

Divorce and Remarriage

- 75 percent felt divorced and remarried couples believed their relationship to be worthy of the sacraments, regardless of church recognition of their union.
- 82 percent agreed that simplification of annulment rules would be beneficial.
- Ninety-two percent viewed parents in marriages not recognized by the church as approaching the church for sacraments, while 51 percent viewed them as approaching the church for catechesis and 52 percent, general teaching.

²The 15-page COR report of both qualitative and quantitative findings and an 81-page report of randomly selected written responses in English and Spanish are downloadable at www.mycatholicfamily.org.

- Most did not know of ministerial outreach at the diocesan (51 percent) or national (67 percent) level.

Marriage Equality and Ministerial Outreach to LGBT Catholics

- 73 percent said marriage equality is either extremely important (47 percent) or very important (26 percent).

- 64 percent felt there are Catholics in same-sex unions who do not believe their situation warrants denial of sacraments and still approach the church for them.

- 57 percent said there is a law recognizing marriage equality in their states.

This survey asked more in-depth questions about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) issues than other surveys. COR said, "The findings are worth reporting since they suggest there is more acceptance of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender couples at the parish and small faith community levels than at the diocesan level."

- Over a third of respondents saw dioceses as hostile and condemning of marriage equality (37 percent) and same-sex couples (35 percent).

- A significantly smaller number viewed their parishes as hostile and condemning of marriage equality (11 percent) and same-sex couples (13 percent).

- Even fewer saw their small faith community as hostile and condemning of marriage equality (3 percent) and same-sex couples (4 percent).

Responsible parenthood and family planning

- 1 percent said the teachings of *Humanae Vitae* were completely accepted. Fifty-six percent said they were not accepted, and 43 percent said they were accepted in part.

- 76 percent support alternatives to *Humanae Vitae*, including contraception.

- 80 percent judged availability of contraception to be either extremely important (56 percent) or very important (24 percent).

- Three-quarters indicated that the following of conscience about family planning, even when it is not consistent with church teaching, does not appear to restrict approaching the sacraments of reconciliation and the Eucharist.

In January and February, COR sent complete survey reports to the Vatican Synod Secretariat as well as to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. There is little evidence that the Synod Secretariat listened to a thing they had to say. COR says it received a “warmly written form letter” (though one can ask whether a form letter can be that warmly written) from the Secretariat and a generic postcard from the USCCB acknowledging reception of the COR report.

Catholic Church Reform Int’l (CCRI), a movement I helped found in June 2013 that ended up involving more than a million Catholics from 65 nations, spent four months and hundreds of man-hours in 2014 crafting four position papers bearing on the four themes suggested by the Secretariat. Its purpose: to help the Secretariat put together its agenda for the October 2014 Synod.

Though given absolutely no hope that the Secretariat would listen, CCRI wanted to believe it could help the Synod take a more pastoral approach on most of these moral issues. In fact, it believed its approach was the pope’s approach, a kinder, gentler way of mercy, listening to the people and their experiences rather than repeating past prohibitions.

Those who check out CCRI’s position papers at <www.catholicchurchintlreform.org> can see for themselves how CCRI was trying to set a new tone for the Synod.

In its position paper #1, “Creating An Effective Society Built on Fulfilling Relationships,” CCRI suggested the Synod “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.

CCRI even addressed itself to an increasingly serious situation in parts of Asia where there is now a decided increase in inter-faith marriages, often between Catholic women and Muslim men. CCRI told the Synod it had to do something about the situation. Parish priests do not recognize these inter-faith marriages as a sacrament,

indeed, they say the Catholic spouse is excommunicated for entering into an inter-faith marriage at all. The church's insistence on the baptism of such a union (Canon Law 1125:1) is another major obstacle, becoming an impediment to the loving relationship of the partners even before the marriage has begun. Frequently the Catholic partner is unable to make this promise, making a marriage in Church impossible. Consequently she (in the Asian male dominated society it is usually the woman who is forced to compromise) remains outside the sacraments and the religious community of her birth."

In position paper #2, "Openness to Life," CCRI suggested the Synod "Find and recommend ways to emphasize the joyfulness of our marriages, not by inventing new things to condemn, but by advising on the values and practices that genuinely promote all kinds of openness to life. It said boldly that the Synod" ...say frankly that *Humanae Vitae* was a mistake, honestly admitting that the teaching was never received and was, therefore, not a teaching at all. By doing this, the Synod would acknowledge that, particularly in family matters, the *sensus fidelium* can and should override the less-than-well-informed opinion of some in the clerical Church.

In position paper #3, "Gender and Sexuality," it offered some analysis of the Church's misogyny:

To protect their own vows of chastity and promises of celibacy, clerics warned themselves away from women with a dicey formula: sex=pleasure=women=sin. Clerics reflected that bias in their preaching, and so a good many of the faithful fell in line with this heresy. We call it a heresy because this equation goes against one of the longest unwritten traditions of the earliest followers of Christ: the sacramentality of everything and the goodness of sex as an expression of love.

In position paper #4, "How the Church Learns and Teaches," it said the Synod should listen more to the *sensus fidelium*:

The Council realized that baptism called all the faithful to active participation in teaching and governing, in mission and ministry. It made this abundantly clear through its use of words such as dialogue, collaboration, co-responsibility, partnership, subsidiarity, and collegiality.

In addition to sending these reports to the Synod Secretariat, CCRI also sent copies to every one of the 114 bishops and archbishops already appointed to the Synod. CCRI received only a form letter from the Secretariat and perfunctory thank you notes from a half-dozen U.S. bishops. A long time staff member in the Synod Secretariat explained to me in a phone call, "We don't have any time

to read, much less respond, to the tons of mail we receive every day. This is a Synod of Bishops, not a people's synod."

This was a strained response from a harried bureaucrat, but it illustrates the difference between a pope's desire to involve all the people and an understaffed Vatican office's ability to do its job. It was then racing to put together its 2014 agenda, called the *Instrumentum Laboris*.

That document, released on June 27, 2014, did not reflect much if any of the input given by groups around the world. It mostly outlined the case for no-change in the Church's classic teachings. Its authors seemed to say, "If the people only understood what we in our wisdom have been teaching them, they would have no problems."

This Synod staffer told me, "This is a Synod of Bishops, not a Synod of the People." As such, he said, this Synod would follow the lead of all the previous modern Synods: it would conduct the proceedings in secret.

This, I dare say, is an exceedingly poor way to get the people of the 21st century "involved" in the work of the Synod. Some suggest Pope Francis get millions involved in the Synod by bringing in the whole world. How would he do that? Simple.

Some reform organizations are petitioning the pope, asking him to broadcast the entire proceedings, gavel-to-gavel, on international satellite radio and television. The Vatican already plans to record the proceedings for its own broadcast archive. It could easily give the Vatican's TV and radio feed to the world's broadcast networks, which could pick up the event, just as they do for the month-long games of *futbol's* World Cup, and broadcast it in real time, or on a delayed basis.

We should not underestimate the radical nature of such a move. Once the pope breaches the Church's long time culture of secrecy, he throws a monkey wrench into the clerical system — indeed, into clericalism itself, which thrives on clerical privilege and an exclusive access to the inner working of the Church hitherto denied to mere laypeople. A newly informed laity wouldn't let that happen.

And the Synod's bishop-delegates would rise to the challenge; knowing their words could be heard in the world's living rooms, they might well want to speak out in language the people at large can understand. Synod speeches, all given in secret in years past, and

couched often enough in “Church Speak,” have led to little more than conversations among the bishops themselves. Official reports on those Synods, usually delivered a year later by the pope himself, are generally puzzling, if not completely irrelevant, to the people at large.

Broadcasting the Synod’s proceedings in real time would create a new kind of open Church: the bishops would speak and the people would listen. And they would do more than listen. They would react with their own ideas, which they could now express almost instantaneously through the mass media and the social media. This could transform the Synod from an intramural event to a worldwide, richer conversation between the people and the bishops — who are theoretically there to serve them. Pope Francis said he wanted every one of the faithful “involved” in the Synod. I wonder if he wants them that involved?

At this point, readers of *Asian Horizons* might welcome my predictions for the October Synod. Pessimists say the Synod, filled with bishops appointed by John Paul II and Benedict, will come up with anything more than a repetition of the 1980 Synod’s outcome. Optimists remind us that we now have a different kind of pope — who will announce in early September a new set of his own appointees as members and auditors of the Synod. They could make a difference, linking perhaps to the 27 German bishops who would like to see the Church put its blessing on certain second marriages where the couples in question have arrived at a so called “conscience decision” to try marriage again. Some U.S. bishops might find themselves riding the same bandwagon, concerned over the fact that there are more than ten million American Catholics now settled down in their second marriages, many of them grown up enough to think they can still be good Catholics and go to weekly Communion without explicit permission from their bishop.

More conservative bishops are sure to object. Some will cry havoc — to think that now the Church is trying to redefine adultery! Those in the forefront of such a redefinition can make a good case; they rely on the Church’s Biblical scholars who have observed that Jesus is supposed to have said eight different things to the Jews about divorce and that no one can now judge what Jesus really had in mind. Their opponents on the conservative side of the aisle will ask, with some reason, “Which of the Ten Commandments is the next to go?”

I would guess that the Synod might also review and revise the part of *Humanae Vitae* that says “every marital act should be open to the transmission of life.” Nature itself vetoes such an assertion: a woman is only fertile about five days a month. What is she doing when she is with her husband the other 25 days a month? Making a baby? No. But she is “making love,” or, even better, “making a marriage.” How can an up-to-date Church say this is a sin?

I give long odds that we will see the Synod approve the ordination of women (and shorter odds on the ordination of mature married men), extremely long odds that we will find the Synod taking a new, complaisant view of couples living together before marriage, and no chance at all that it will bless same-sex marriages.

Reform and renewal groups from around the world have not yet given up thinking they can have some influence on the Synod. On the eve of the Synod October 2-3, CCR Int’l will gather in Rome with its own Forum on the Family, a parallel synod open to all that will stand in solidarity with Pope Francis and make one more plea that the Synod listen to those with the lived experience of family life. This might come down to a battle to be fought in the court of worldwide public opinion, between the people at large and a group of ultra-conservative bishops.

Will the media pay much attention to that battle? At this point, no one can really say, nor will they until the bishop-delegates come flooding into Rome in late September and start giving interviews (or not) to the extremely well-informed members of the Vatican Press Corps. The media may well be distracted at that time by any of a half-dozen world crises, and hardly interested in a debate about birth control, etc. by a bunch of clerics who cannot be expected to have any special expertise on what spouses do in bed.

Putting the entire Synod on worldwide television would, of course, change everything.