

Editorial

Synod on the Family: Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelization

On 8 October 2013, Pope Francis convoked the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, to be held from 5-19 October 2014, to treat the topic, "The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization." The Ordinary General Assembly is scheduled to take place in 2015. In preparation for the Synod, a Preparatory Document, which, besides introducing the various challenges that the Christian families face, contained a questionnaire, was sent out in 2013, inviting responses from the pastors as well other faithful.¹ Based on these responses the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Synod was published on 24 June 2014. In the introduction to the *Instrumentum Laboris*, Cardinal Baldisseri, the General Secretary of the Synod of Bishops, says that a great number of detailed responses was submitted by the synods of bishops, Episcopal conferences, departments of the Vatican Curia, Union of Superiors General, dioceses, parishes, movements, groups, families, as well as academic institutions. Many extensive surveys of Catholic attitudes and practices were undertaken by different networks in the wake of the preparation for the Synod.² In short, the Church as a whole has responded enthusiastically to the initiative of inviting responses to various issues and problems that the family faces in the contemporary times.

The Synod has evoked great enthusiasm and hope among the Catholics. We do not know what the decisions of the Synod would be

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

²"The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization, *Instrumentum Laboris*, introduction.

or whether the Synod would lead to radical changes or developments. We can leave that to the discernment of the Synod Fathers under the inspirations of the Spirit. However, it is interesting to note the process undertaken in preparation for the Synod. First of all, it is openly acknowledged that the family today is facing serious challenges and that somehow there is a gap between the Church's proclamation of the Gospel of the family and its reception by the faithful. Instead of accusing the faithful alone for this gap, perhaps there is an attempt to understand the real life situation of the faithful, to evaluate whether the Church's "Gospel of the family" is sensitive to their life contexts and problems. Inviting detailed responses a wide range of questions itself shows that the Church is aware of the need of being "inspired" not only by the pastors and experts, but also by the faithful as a whole, by their lived experience, by their experience of difficulties, problems, perplexities and suffering.

There was, evidently, pessimism among many: What happened in the 1980 Synod on the Family? Did anything change? Will anything change in this Synod? Won't it be only another occasion to reemphasise the 'unchanging' teaching? However, gradually pessimism gave away to enthusiasm and hope, at least for a good number of people. This was to a great extent due to the style of Pope Francis that gives hope to people. An enthusiasm that witnesses to the truth that the Spirit is still active in the Church! The enthusiastic response from the part of the faithful also confirms that for them their faith matters, that they desire to get actively involved in the life of the Church, that we are not living in a "post-Christian" era.

Although the Second Vatican Council taught that the entire People of God shares in Christ's prophetic office and that a supernatural instinct of the faith (*sensus fidei*) empowers them and hence the whole body cannot err in matters of faith and morals, it was not often experienced that "the entire body of the faithful... manifest this special property by means of the whole peoples' supernatural discernment in matters of faith when 'from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful' they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals" (Cfr. LG, 12). This does not mean that decisions on faith and morals are to be taken on the basis of majority opinion alone. The first and foremost responsibility of the Christian community is to be faithful to Christ, but nobody is excluded from this process of discernment.

The “instinct of faith” which all the faithful share gives them the responsibility and right to get actively involved in the discernment of the will of God. Besides, it reminds each faithful of the responsibility and right to make conscientious discernment and decision. The process undertaken for the Synod is in that way an affirmation of the dignity and role of the conscience, in day-to-day life of the faithful, in the life of the Church and its teaching.

Sexuality, marriage and family have been major areas where the gap between the teaching of the Church and its reception in the life of the faithful has been widely felt especially in the last few decades. The gap cannot be attributed only to the ‘permissive culture’ or the ‘immorality’ of the people. Defensive attitudes in the wake of sexual revolution, advancement in science and technology, changes in the attitudes of people have widened the gap, making the Church often insensitive to the actual problems that people face, to their “joy and hope, grief and anguish” (GS, 1) leading to failures in discerning the ways of being faithful to the Lord, “reading the signs of times” (GS, 1). Different studies have revealed that a good number of practising Christians, theologians and leaders of the Church have difficulty in understanding the teaching and putting it into practice. Teaching regarding ‘openness to life’, the divorced and remarried are only a few examples where this difficulty is more acutely felt. The difficulty that the faithful experience and subsequent non-reception of the teaching could be an indication that there is a failure from their part in discerning the will of God. But, it could be also a sign that at least in some cases the decisions were taken by those in authority without taking into consideration the lived experience of the faithful and without adequate discernment of the “instinct of faith” which is given to all the faithful. As mentioned above, we cannot predict what will happen in the Synod. However, that the Church is seriously taking into consideration the lived experience of the people, and that they are made active participants in the process of discernment of the will of God have given great hope to them.

In most countries extensive surveys and studies have been conducted in preparation for the Synod and in many countries the members of the hierarchy encouraged the faithful and different organisations and groups to respond to the questionnaire. It is doubtful whether the hierarchy in India took any active step to involve the faithful to actively participate in the preparations of the Synod, through encouraging them to respond to the questionnaire, or through constructive discussions and dialogue. In that way, an

opportunity for exercising the '*sensus fidei*' of the people, for making them more responsible and participating Christians through the exercise of their conscience was bypassed to a great extent. There were, however, attempts to conscientize the faithful through seminars, conferences, etc. Catholic media also have been giving great importance to the Synod through frequent reports and updates of the surveys, opinion of experts, lived experience of people and so on. Moreover, many have been actively involved in the social media and through email groups. However, it seems that the hierarchy in India (and perhaps at least in some other countries!) have to take more seriously the role of the faithful in discerning the will of God. Let us hope that determined and concrete steps will be taken at least before the Ordinary General Assembly scheduled to take place in 2015.

June 2014 issue of *Asian Horizons* reflects on the Pastoral Challenges to the Family as a preparation for the Synod on the Family. Though the Preparatory Document is taken as a basis for this reflection, we are not attempting to cover all the issues that the Document refers to. There are articles dealing with a few issues mentioned in the Document. Julie Clague assesses the extent of the non-reception of teaching of the Church on certain matters of family life. Examining thoroughly the findings of some extensive surveys, she examines the implications of these findings for Church's attempts to discern the *sensus fidei*. While remaining hopeful of the outcome of the Synod, she points out that, "New institutional mechanisms must be found to allow the lay faithful to play their full part in the joint task of discerning the *sensus fidei* of the faithful, and in helping to close the gap between the theological rhetoric of pastors and the pastoral realities of the people." Robert Blair Kaiser says that in spite of pessimism expressed by some Catholics, there are hopes that this Synod will not be a mere repetition of the 1980 Synod. Joseph Pamplany discusses the Christian understanding of marriage and family based on the biblical vision. He affirms that marriage and family were God's idea and that family must be the subject and object of evangelization, liberation and humanisation. Johnson Pradeep R. Points out that the concept of marriage has changed currently due to changes in the social, religious and political scenario. He looks at various issues both as a practising Catholic and a professional psychiatrist.

Discussing "openness of the married couple to life," J. Charles Davis summarises the teaching of the Church on procreation,

responsible parenthood and medical technological possibilities and challenges in matters of fertility and infertility. While clarifying the teaching of the Church on these issues, he tries also to present the difficulties that people face in their actual life situations. In light of the Eastern Orthodox concept and practice of *oikonomia*, Sajan Thomas attempts to show how it can help in the (re-)consideration of divorce and remarriage. Following this, there are two articles on mixed marriage. Sebastian Payyappilly, underscoring the fact that mixed marriages are on the increase, focuses on the need of pastoral care of the mixed marriage families. Though the Church is concerned about safeguarding the faith of its members, its approach, according to Payyappilly, is pastoral and ecumenical. Michael Peters also agrees that there is an increase in marriages of “disparity of cult” and underlines the importance of addressing this situation in the marriage preparation programmes and ongoing pastoral care of the families. Shaji George Kochuthara presents dowry as a social-structural sin, and argues that it contradicts the basic Christian vision of marriage. According to him, the Church has not yet undertaken committed action to eradicate this evil, which leads to a lot of family problems, including violence.

Following the discussion on the Pastoral Challenges to the Family, there are two articles. Joseph Xavier attempts to revisit Rahner’s understanding of divine revelation in the light of man’s transcendental openness to God. Reginald Alva assesses the contributions of the Charismatic Renewal Movement in the renewal of the Church, especially in the field of education.

Let us hope and pray that the forthcoming Synod will help the Church to proclaim the Gospel of the Family, “reading the signs of the times.”

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