

WHAT HAPPENED AT THE 2015 SYNOD?
OLD NUMBERING: PART 13
NEW NUMBERING: PART B

Some Important Miscellaneous Characteristics or Elements of the Synod

We look now at the composition of the Synod.

“A globally diverse group of male prelates took part in the discussions. They were a mix of those elected by bishops’ conferences around the world to attend the event and personal appointees made by the pope himself. So there were 279 bishops, prelates and priests announced as voting participants, coming from countries and regions all over the world. Francis appointed 45 members to the synod on his own authority, selecting prelates from Europe, Africa and even the island nation of Tonga [in the Pacific Ocean].” (Joshua J. McElwee, “Meeting’s bishop delegates are globally diverse,” National Catholic Reporter, October 9 - 22, 2015) The pope personally appointed four extra American bishops giving the United States’ delegates a total of 8 prelates who could vote.

Ten representatives of the world’s male religious orders and 25 heads of Vatican offices also participated. A number of auditors took part in the discussions who could not vote but who could participate in the discussions. These auditors numbered 17 individuals and 17 married couples (including the American couple, Catherine and Anthony Wiczak, of the Worldwide Marriage Encounter movement). Thirteen of the individual auditors were women (including three religious sisters).

The Synod did not form a parliament. “The most important thing to grasp about a synod of bishops is that all appearances to the contrary, it is not the legislative branch of the Catholic Church. It has no power to vote anything in or out; at most, it can only make recommendations to the pope.” (Allen) The pope had clearly stated that the Synod was not a parliament but a place to listen to the Holy Spirit. It was very interesting to read the following comment to this by Patrice O’Hamilton on Twitter: “No disrespect to my Church, but a room full of males discussing the family is not reality. Women are the heart of the home!” (Patrice O’Hamilton [@ahcros] on Twitter, “Digitally Speaking,” The Catholic Register, October 11, 2015)

It is an open public observation that there were divisions in respect to the Synod. “On Friday, October 4, 2015, a synod official tried to play down impressions of division. ‘There is no surprise about the fact that there are opposing opinions,’ said Italian Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisserri, who briefed reporters on the synod process. True enough – there are more than 5,000 Catholic bishops in the world, and the idea that they are ever in complete agreement is fantasy. What is a bit more unusual, however, is to put those divisions on full public display. Yet that seems to have been the case in Rome before the Synod.” (Allen)

A good example is what happened in Austria and Germany, Cardinal Christoph Schönbron did say before the Synod that he did not expect the Synod to recommend that remarried divorced people would be allowed to receive Communion but the Synod might probably invite pastors to assess the situation of each couple. “While marriage ‘by its very essence is designed for faithfulness and permanence,’ it was general knowledge that marriages often broke down, Schönbron said. There could be many elements of truth and holiness in irregular relationships including homosexual partnerships, he added. However, “the Bible states quite clearly that these are not part of the original plan of creation. ‘Male and female God created them. And the two shall be one,’ he pointed out.” (Christa Pongratz-Lippit, journalist, “Austria: Warnings and fears ahead of the Synod,” The Tablet, October 3, 2015)

Bishop Franz-Josef Bode of Osnabrück stated that “from what Pope Francis has said to date, I do not expect he will merely repeat what we in the Catholic Church have held on marriage about the family until now. I hope the discussions will not lead to a schism.” (Bode)

“Regarding Cardinal Robert Sarah’s announcement that the African Church would reject any rebellion against Church doctrine, Cardinal Walter Kasper, seen as a champion of liberalising the rules on Communion for the divorced and remarried, told Bavarian [Bavaria is a German region] Television’s Report München programme: ‘It is most annoying when certain cardinals and bishops polemicise in person. I decided not to do so and promised the Pope that I would not.’” (Pongratz Lippitt) Cardinal Sarah “is one of the contributors to the book of essays, Eleven Cardinals Speak on Marriage and the Family, published in Germany on 28 September [2015], which according to its blurb ‘engages genuine concerns while avoiding false compassion.’ Reacting in the Freiburg diocesan paper, Konradsblatt to the book’s publication, the Archbishop of Freiburg, Stephen Burger, said: ‘I find deeply troubling the fact that Christians are irreconcilably accusing each other either of betraying the faith and tradition of the Church or of not respecting the individual conscience.’” (Pongratz Lippitt)

Another simple exercise to manifest the above divisions is to consider the following medley of quotations:

- a) “Compromise would be unworthy of the Lord” (Cardinal Carlo Caffarra);
- b) “A false appeal to mercy runs the risk of trivialising the image of God” (Cardinal Gerhard Müller);
- c) “This is a Church of sinners. We make a mess of things.” (Cardinal Vincent Nichols);
- d) “Same-sex unions are fine so long as they are not called marriage” (Cardinal Godfried Danneels);
- e) “No one, not even the Pope, can destroy or change Church teaching” (Cardinal Robert Sarah);
- f) And “the Church should not look in the bedroom first, but in the dining room” (Cardinal Christoph Schönbron).

And to complete this mix, throw in what Father de Souza said earlier (see above)!

A comment made by a very competent scholar we have already encountered (Massimo Faggioli, associate professor and Church historian at the University of St. Thomas in Minnesota) also has application here. Before the Synod, he stated that the infighting in the Church must stop. “The alarming thing – for those who live in the Church and know its social and institutional fabric – is the cynical and unscrupulous attempt to exploit the person of the Pope in order to score a point in favour of the ideological opponents of the Pope. It is very disturbing that Church members do this, especially members ordained to the priesthood and active in the corridors of ecclesiastical power.” (Faggioli) So true!

We should not be surprised, as a result of the above, that there was/is confusion among the Catholic public. An easy way to check this out is to look at letters to the editors of Catholic publications. Just one small sample below to show this.

In the Catholic Register of October 25, 2015, in “Readers Speak Out,” there is a letter titled “confused lector” by Mark Anderson of British Columbia. Mr. Anderson, a gay man, states that he found it interesting that the Pope’s Mass in New York City during the papal visit to the United States this year included an openly gay lector. Mr. Anderson goes on to say that he was a lector in his parish but was removed from that liturgical position because he was gay and his marriage to a same-sex man did not conform to the Church’s teaching; he was also refused Communion from that point onward.

“Until I read about Mo Rocca [the gay lector at the pope’s Mass] acting as a lector at the Pope’s Mass, I had no problem understanding and accepting the Church enforcing this in my case because of its position on marriage. If the Church has a sacramental teaching on marriage, then it has to be applied consistently. But, judging by the Pope’s Mass in New York, the Church is clearly not applying this logic equally or consistently.” (Anderson) My heart goes out to him!

In the “Digitally Speaking” section of the same page of the above The Catholic Register, on Twitter Mr. Mark Brumley wrote about an earlier article in The Catholic Register, “Clash of the archbishops: Synod dispute between senior United States churchmen goes public,” and he stated the article was “unfortunately an opinion piece pretending to be reporting” (Brumley). This is not a fair assessment of the media, as we will see below shortly. A second person, Mr. Frederick Norton, responded to the same article on CatholicRegister.org: “And do you wonder why the pews are empty? I can only think of Woody Allen in the movie where they are all chained together and they all move first in one direction and then in another.” (Norton)

Before we leave the above (and even be discouraged by what we learned above), it needs to be said that there was/is a basic unity to the Synod, i.e., here we see the Church seeking the true voice of today’s Catholic/Christian family. The Synod was a meeting of concerned Catholics coming together to be open to the Holy Spirit of the Risen One.

“It is not surprising that there was evidence of clear differences of opinion that emerged in Rome, just as there were during last year’s [2014] synod deliberations But what those in the West and in other parts of the world shared is that family and marriage can be a source of great fulfillment ... The family can bring pain as well as joy. In Philadelphia [on his American visit] Pope Francis said that the family is an opportunity for the Church to offer care, protection and support for families. That support is needed in good times, but also in bad. Lay Catholics, like the bishops gathered in Rome, would not want to see a change to the indissolubility of marriage. But they looked to the Synod fathers to find a way of accompanying them when they face difficulties, such as marriage breakdown, divorce and remarriage.” (“Search For Synod Unity: Church Seeks True Voice of the Family,” editorial in The Tablet, October 10, 2015, emphasis added) This may not be the kind of tangible unity we all desired but it is a strong spiritual unity in the Spirit nevertheless.

And it is consoling to keep remembering what Cardinal Vincent Nichols said in early October 2015 (at the time of the early days of the Synod) that “I think the whole Church, me included, has a lot to learn about family life ... This Synod is not about doctrinal change. I do not think there is going to be changes in any of the Church’s teachings in the Synod.” (Nichols) We must be ready to accept the fact that most Synod participants felt the same way!

The media coverage in the West of the 2014 Synod and the 2015 Synod focused on three “big” questions:

- “Should the Church’s traditional ban on Communion for Catholics who divorce and then remarry civilly be relaxed?”
- Should the Church adopt a more welcoming posture to same-sex couples?
- Should the Church take a more positive view of couples who live together outside marriage, along with other forms of what have traditionally been called ‘irregular’ relationships, acknowledging some moral value to them even if they fall short of the ideal?” (Allen)

There is no question about the fact that these are very important questions that need to be faced but are they being overemphasized in the West? As Allen astutely observed, “when Pope Francis talks about threats to the family, he takes a 360-degree view [and these are the things about which he is concerned]” (Allen):

- youth unemployment
- the abandonment of the elderly
- the impact of immigration policies that split families up
- the fallout of wars
- ecological crises and poverty
- a culture of exaggerated individualism and consumerism
- neglect of children
- the impact of migration

- the challenges of extreme feminism and gender theory
- infertility
- abortion
- artificial reproduction
- aging
- etc., etc.

For the pope, any synod fails if it does not get around to looking at these challenges.

Thus in looking at the 2015 Synod, it is very important to remember that “for Francis, few issues are more pressing than nursing the open wounds the modern age has inflicted on family life. He has made family – in the traditional sense of the word – a priority of his pontificate and boldly asked his bishops to cast a wide net to examine several complex and interconnected pressure points that make family life difficult for so many in today’s culture ... The Pope has called family ‘the essential cell of society and the Church,’ and he says that cell is in crisis. It is a crisis that inflicts spiritual and material ‘devastation’ on countless people, he says ... Society has become blasé about marriage.” (“Editorial: Synod’s challenge” in The Catholic Register, October 11, 2015) Speaking at the United Nations Summit for the Post 2015 Development Agenda, Archbishop Paul Gallagher, Vatican Secretary for Relations with States, said “The family is the primary agent of sustainable development, and therefore the model of community and solidarity.” Pope Francis agrees with this 100%!

TO BE CONTINUED

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