

## *The Synod on the Family – what can we expect?*

Speaking notes of Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, Archbishop of Dublin

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“I was surprised to find myself one of a small group of veterans at the last year’s Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the Family. I was in fact one of the very few participants who had been present also at the earlier Synod of Bishops on the Family which took place in 1980.

I can add that I also had attended many Synods in the intervening period, albeit in a variety of capacities. This has given me some insights into how Synods work; where they have worked well and where they have run into difficulties. For me, attending last year’s Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod was an occasion for comparisons and for reflection of what had happened in the past thirty five years.

I found it interesting, first of all, to reflect that both Pope John Paul and Pope Francis took the family as the theme for their first Synod. Both had been diocesan bishops up to the moment of their election – one in a country under communist persecution and the other in the challenging and changing religious reality of Latin America – yet both saw clearly, each from their own perspective, how Christian marriage and the family are vital for the transmission of the faith and for the stability of society. Both saw the need not just to defend the teaching of the Church, but to foster the Christian vision of the family and to present that vision in an attractive and appealing way in the real situations of today’s changing world.

On a historical note, it is interesting to recall that Pope Paul VI had, in fact, wanted to hold a Synod on the Family but he feared that in the immediate period after the publication of *Humanae Vitae* it would not be possible to create the proper atmosphere. Ten years after *Humanae Vitae*, however, he felt that the time to hold a Synod on the family had come and he communicated that to the Secretariat of the Synod just before he died.

The question was taken up by Pope John Paul I who formally communicated his decision to dedicate the Synod to the theme: *The Christian Family in the Contemporary World*, but he also died before the theme was formally made public.

Pope John Paul II then took up the question very shortly after his election but he was not happy with the theme as it had been formulated by his predecessor. He felt that the theme needed a different thrust, rather than being just a general debate on the situation of the family in the world with all its problems. He chose that unusual term “*de muneribus*”, the mission of the family in the contemporary world.

He used the concept of the threefold mission of all Christians, priestly prophetic and kingly, as a reminder of the fact that the family is not just a cluster of problems, but something which has a vital contribution to bring to the life of the Church and to society and must be supported. Christian married couples have a mission within the Church which must be fostered and never supplanted. Christian marriage and family life are ecclesial realities; they are realities of faith and of living the Christian life.

Synods have traditionally had a common working pattern involving the publication of a preparatory position paper or *Lineamenta* on which Bishops’ Conferences could reflect, followed then with a Working document, *Instrumentum Laboris*, which constituted an agenda for the actual Synod discussion. These were prepared by the Permanent Council of the Synod, a body of 12 bishops elected at the conclusion of each Synod together with three bishops appointed by the Pope.

On the occasion of the Extraordinary Synod of last year, Pope Francis surprised us all by asking that the *Lineamenta* that had been drawn up should be accompanied with a lengthy questionnaire and this questionnaire be studied, not just by the bishops, but by as wide a representation within the Church as possible.

It was a revolutionary challenge. I think that some bishops had to read the instructions a few times before they realised exactly what they were being asked to do.

The idea was surprising and the reactions varied. One reaction was typical of us Irish. We immediately found faults with the questionnaire. The language was too complex, the time available was too short, and how then were we going to carry out such a consultation.

This reaction was of course valid but the danger was that we would spend so much time looking at the problems about the questionnaire, that we would end-up doing nothing at all. That is what actually happened in some parishes even here in Dublin. The perfect can easily become the enemy of the good!

Having attended many Synods, I can see that what was an imperfect questionnaire – which had to be completed within a short time-frame right around the world – did in fact bring about a change in direction concerning the Synod and its discussions.

That change was made even more evident by the fact that on the very first morning of the Synod, Pope Francis said that he wanted an open and honest discussion. He said:

“After the **last Consistory** (February 2014), in which the family was discussed, a Cardinal wrote to me, saying: what a shame that several Cardinals did not have the courage to say certain things out of respect for the Pope, perhaps believing that the Pope might think something else. This is not good, this is not *synodality*, because it is necessary to say all that, in the Lord, one feels the need to say: without polite deference, without hesitation. And, at the same time, one must listen with humility and welcome, with an open heart, what your brothers say. *Synodality* is exercised with these two approaches. It is necessary to say with *parrhesia* all that one feels”.

I am sure that you all know what the word *parrhesia* means, but I have to say that I had to Google it. It is a term found in the Greek **New Testament**, where it means “courageous and bold speech” and the ability of believers to hold their own in discourse before political and religious authorities. We find it in Acts 4:13: “Now when they saw the *boldness* of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus”.

I find it fascinating to note how this Gospel use of the term *parrhesia* not just encourages us to speak candidly and boldly, but it seems to be saying also that there is a sense in which boldness of speech is something that must be characteristic of those who are followers of Jesus. Catholicism is not a “yes-man” faith. Candid affirmation of faith – the Acts of the Apostles seems to say also – is not necessarily the gift just of the learned. It is rooted in a depth of faith rather than in a degree or diploma.

Pope Francis attended every working session of the Synod – except on the occasion of the Wednesday General Audience. He arrived every morning on foot, creating some surprise on the first morning when he arrived twenty minutes ahead of time and began the session exactly at nine-o-clock. It was funny to watch eminent Cardinals, used to having five minutes grace at Vatican meetings, having to discretely slip into their places in the Synod Hall, like children arriving late for school.

The world-wide consultation had shown that there was a strong recognition that the Church’s teaching on marriage and the family is not easily understood in today’s world, especially by young people. In today’s culture, many of the classical terms regarding marriage and the family have taken on a different meaning in secular society.

The Synod’s own analysis was very realistic. The perfect family rarely exists. All over the world families struggle. Families struggle due to poverty, unemployment and marginalization. Families find it difficult to transmit faith to their children. In many parts of the world families are struck by wide-scale emigration and the separation that this entails. In my discussion group there was a married couple from Iraq who spoke movingly of the struggle that families in that region face being driven from their homes if they do not renounce their Christian identity. The perfect family rarely exists, but in the midst of great challenges great families exist and struggle and they must be supported.

With over 190 Synodal Fathers from so many countries in the world it was inevitable that concerns would be different. The challenges which the Church faces in supporting families are different in

different parts of the world. In my English speaking discussion group there were five African bishops, seven Asians, one from Papua New Guinea and just two from traditional Catholic countries, myself and the Archbishop of New York. There was a lay couple from the United States, a couple from Iraq, a lay theologian from Lithuania and a Presbyterian Pastor from Nigeria.

Bishops from Africa spoke about Polygamy; bishops from Asian countries where Christians were in a minority spoke about marriage between people of different faiths. There were discussions about processes of annulments. There were discussions about marriages of Christians who had a very weak understanding of their own faith. An interesting aside, was that a Bishop from Greece mentioned to me that he had many Irish weddings taking place on his Islands, arranged by marriage planners as a sort of business within which the faith dimension was reduced to a colourful ceremony.

The strong message of the Synod was a call for a radical renewal of the Church's pastoral support for marriage and the family. In the pluralism which exists today in every part of the world we need a radical catechesis on marriage and the family. Marriage preparation is not just preparation for a Church wedding, much less a matter for filling-out canonical forms. Marriage must be understood as part of a life-long catechesis or itinerary of faith about the Sacrament of Marriage.

It was stressed that marriage preparation and the accompaniment of marriage is a life-long task and one which belongs within the work of parishes and the day to day life work of evangelization and cannot be outsourced. This has particular implications for Ireland.

At the 1980 Synod there was reference to secularization and a changing understanding of family in Western societies. Over the past thirty five years that challenge has become worldwide. Right across the world the number of Catholics who are only civilly married or who cohabit is increasing. At times this is due to a different anthropology; at times it is due to a lack of awareness of the true meaning of the Christian vision of marriage; at times it is due to harsh economic and social conditions. Our cultures have allowed Church weddings to become too expensive for many. Permanence in human relations is difficult today. Marriages fail.

The tone which Pope Francis wished to give the Synod was never condemnatory. The Church must encounter families where they are. The Church must listen to where God is speaking also through the witness of those Christian married couples who struggle and fail and begin again. The tone was one of reaching out pastorally and of reflecting the mercy of Jesus. Pope Francis constantly stresses an image of the Church as a "field hospital on the scene of a battle". At the field hospital what matters is the first contact with one who is wounded. It is not a place for diagnostics, but a place where people are taken up into the caring arms of someone, where their wounds are washed and cleaned and they receive a welcome of care and concern.

One Bishop took up Pope Francis' image of the Church as a "field-hospital" where wounds are healed, saying that too often the Church appears more like the city morgue where all the pathologies of the things that have gone wrong with the family are examined without emotion. That is something we must keep in mind in the way we reflect for the future. We should not get bogged down with problems, but bring a message of hope and encouragement.

It is inevitable that in reporting a major Church event like the Synod certain issues would be given particular attention and become what I called the "celebrity issues". In the case of last year's Synod the celebrity issues were the possible admission of divorced and civilly remarried Catholics to Holy Communion and the pastoral response to people of homosexual orientation. The Synod did dedicate much of its time to these questions and the views were different. There was also a vast amount of extra-Synodal reflection and even polemics around the issues.

Pope Francis wanted openness at the Synod and he trusted those present at the synod to take the discussions as far as they could and in all honesty. The Synod's final Report is addressed to the Bishops' Conferences of the World and through them to the Christian communities.

The biggest challenge remains; how in today's complex cultural situation can the Church open a dialogue with men and women and young people where they are and lead them to a deeper idea of the Christian understanding of marriage. This will surely involve a radical rethinking of the

Church's pastoral care for marriage and catechesis among young people in the future.

Why two Synods? Pope Francis looked at the Synod as a process, beginning with a consultation, then an Extraordinary Synod with just one delegate from each country, then a new discussion period leading to the Ordinary Synod of this year. There is, however, a difference between the two Synods which is important to remember.

The aim of the extraordinary Synod held last year was to gather *factual information* about the situation of the marriage and the family around the world. The aim of this year's Synod is to take up the conclusions of the extraordinary Synod and propose *pastoral reflection on how our ecclesial support for marriage and for family life can be strengthened and renewed*. The aim of the reflection process that we are undertaking this year is not to provide further analysis of current situation but to propose pastoral strategies for the future.

Such pastoral reflection should not focus just on certain controversial questions or on the negative factors. We should be looking at a broad renewal of pastoral services. Pastoral services to support marriage and the family include preparation for marriage; the education of young people to the Christian understanding of marriage; fostering an itinerary of faith which might accompany men and women during the course of their married and family life; how families can be helped in their role in passing on the faith to the coming generations. How can families find new ways of praying together? What can parishes do in this context? How often do we hear homilies on marriage and the family? How often do parishes celebrate married couples in their calling and struggles?

Parishes are different. It is not necessary for each parish to answer all the questions of the questionnaire. Each parish can choose those which they feel most suited. Where the language is considered difficult, the questions can be reformulated as long as the changes in language do not alter the content of the questions.

The teaching of the Catholic Church on marriage and the family is a challenging one. The Bishops at the Synod stressed that they were not there to change fundamental teaching about the indissolubility of marriage. The teaching of the Catholic Church on marriage is well known and is not something just Irish. That teaching is the same in Ireland and in any other country in the world. Some of the comments on the Synod by journalists and by bishops – bishops who were at the Synod and bishops who were not at the Synod – stressed the disagreements that seem to have appeared. Let me quote Pope Francis' comments at the closing of the Synod:

Many commentators, or people who talk, have imagined that they see a disputatious Church where one part is against the other, doubting even the Holy Spirit, the true promoter and guarantor of the unity and harmony of the Church – the Holy Spirit who throughout history has always guided the barque, through her Ministers, even when the sea was rough and choppy, and the ministers unfaithful and sinners.

Personally, I would be very worried and saddened if it were not for these temptations and these animated discussions; this movement of the spirits, as St Ignatius called it (Spiritual Exercises, 6), if all were in a state of agreement, or silent in a false and quietist peace. Instead, I have seen and I have heard – with joy and appreciation – speeches and interventions full of faith, of pastoral and doctrinal zeal, of wisdom, of frankness and of courage: and of *parresia*.

The Bishops stressed that their concern about couples who were divorced and remarried did not undermine their absolute commitment to the Church's teaching on the indissolubility of marriage. There was never any idea that the Church would simply say to all and sundry that since their marriage had broken down and that they had entered into another union that they automatically could receive the Eucharist. Cases are very different. In some cases a partner may have been abandoned and then finds someone with whom they have made a new life with a real sense of mutual love and permanence. In other cases the breakdown of a marriage might have been the fruit of irresponsibility and even injustice or abuse on the part of one of the partners. Each case is different.

The covenant bond of Eucharist and the covenant bond of Christian marriage mirror each other and must be lived authentically. Where the covenant bond of Christian marriage is broken, there is a

rupture in the relationship with the Eucharist. Neither relationship is purely personal, but both are public. The challenge is to see where we can find objective ways – and not just subjective interpretations – in which that covenant relationship can be restored through a process of penitence and not just cheap forgiveness. The Eucharist, on the other hand, is not just a reward for the Saints, but a medicine to heal sinners.

Similarly in the discussion as to how to reach out to and recognise the situation of men and women of same sex orientation, it was clearly stressed by all that there is a radical difference between marriage between a man and woman and marriage between people of the same sex. Yet the Church has to welcome these, our brothers and sisters as they are.

That said there was an equally clear recognition of the fact that people will not come to understand the Church's teaching simply by decree or dictate. The real problem is that the Church has been negligent in presenting its own teaching more effectively.

The Church in Ireland for far too long started out from the position that the majority of Irish men and women understood and accepted the Church's teaching on the nature of marriage. For too long Catholics felt that the fact that Catholicism was the majority faith in Ireland and thus numbers were on our side and numbers were our strength. As time went on and the culture of Ireland changed, the numbers decreased and the cultural factors which affect all western countries are just as active in Ireland as elsewhere.

Does that mean that the Church should simply recognise social change and either change its teaching or shut up? What the Church in Ireland has been weak on is that of presenting in a convincing way to our younger generations the values which underlie our teaching on marriage and the family.

There is a sense in which in Ireland "the Church" taught married couples what marriage was about, whereas for the Church married people are not passive recipients of teaching. The sacrament of marriage is not just a blessing for a man and a woman on their wedding day. The sacrament of marriage is a sacrament given for the building up of the Church. Christian married couples have a calling and a special charism within the Church which should make them active protagonists in fostering the values of love and life, of permanence and fruitfulness, which are the essential of marriage life.

The authentically lived experience and struggle of spouses can help find more effective ways of expression of the fundamental elements of Church teaching. This means that the Church must also listen to married couples. The Church must listen also to where God is speaking through the witness of those Christian married couples who struggle and fail and begin again and fail again. The experience of failure and struggle cannot surely be irrelevant in arriving at the way we proclaim the Church's teaching on marriage and the family.

The Church must reach out to encounter families where they are, but that does not mean that you simply leave people where they are. The Church speaks of a law of gradualness, not in the sense that "anything goes", but that we can be led, by the help of grace, to move step-by step towards living our Christian vocation more fully.

When we reach out to people in what for the Church are irregular situations, they may become more open and gradually begin to come closer to more sensitive understanding of the Church's teaching on marriage as a lifelong commitment. We will attain more by reaching out to them rather than by simply condemning. We have to learn from the pedagogy of Pope Francis which is what I call "a pedagogy of pastoral patience".

In his closing words at the end of the Synod, Pope Francis himself described the basis for this pedagogy of patience quoting his predecessor Pope Benedict XVI:

"This is the supreme rule of conduct for the ministers of God, an unconditional love, like that of the Good Shepherd, full of joy, given to all, attentive to those close to us and solicitous for those who are distant, gentle towards the weakest, the little ones, the simple, the sinners, to manifest the infinite mercy of God with the reassuring words of hope."

Marriage and the family are complex social realities. Marriage is not simply about "two

individuals who are in love”. The Christian teaching about marriage stresses the complementary relationship between male and female, which is not just a social construction. Marriage is also about a stable and loving relationship where children are generated and educated. Family is also an intergenerational reality. The stability of marriage contributes in a unique way to the stability of society, even though that reality is realized only partially. It is important in our discussions about marriage and the family in these days that people should stop for a moment and look at what marriage and the family mean within society.

The challenge of the Synod of Bishops is to re-awaken in our communities a sense of the importance of the mission of married people in the Church. Pope Francis has asked for the contribution around the world of married couples and parish communities as to how we should address these questions.

There were many negative comments on the first questionnaire, but it is also interesting that the one response which was almost unanimous around the world was: it is important that the Pope asked. The Pope is asking again and we have a responsibility to ensure that we take the opportunity he offers seriously.

But what is involved is more than a questionnaire to be filled in. It is not about ticking boxes. It is about how seriously we as Christian believers feel that we can support marriage more effectively and that we introduce our young people into the mystery of Christ’s love which is reflected in what Christian marriage is about. The love of Jesus Christ is the fundamental support that Christian couples have in developing their love of each other and of their children.

I close, again, with the words of Pope Francis at the conclusion of the Synod:

“Dear brothers and sisters, now we still have one year to mature, with true spiritual discernment, the proposed ideas and to find concrete solutions to so many difficulties and innumerable challenges that families must confront; to give answers to the many discouragements that surround and suffocate families.

May the Lord accompany us, and guide us in this journey for the glory of His Name, with the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of Saint Joseph”.

And his very final words were words with which he concludes most of his speeches: “Do not forget to pray for me”. Let us remember that request also.” ENDS

- See more at: <http://dublindiocese.ie/2015/03/04/the-synod-on-the-family-what-can-we-expect/#sthash.dJ4tN1Bq.dpuf>