



2014 EXTRAORDINARY SYNOD PASTORAL CHALLENGES TO THE FAMILY IN THE CONTEXT OF EVANGELIZATION

Pope Francis has called for an Extraordinary Synod to be held in October 2014. The focus of the Synod is Marriage and Family. Archbishop Lorenzo Baldisseri, Vatican General Secretary of the Synod, distributed to the bishops of the world a preparatory document entitled “Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelization” which concluded with a series of questions. These questions allowed the local Churches to actively participate in the preparation of the Extraordinary Synod, whose purpose is to proclaim the Gospel in light of the pastoral challenges facing the family today. Bishops were encouraged to seek consultation on these questions. In November I invited people to participate in this consultation process. An online survey was prepared and its availability announced through parish bulletins and announcements as well as on the archdiocesan website. The Synod preparatory document was posted and people were encouraged to read the preparatory document for the context of the questions.

The questions from the preparatory document called for essay style responses. People were invited to complete that form of the survey or to go to a survey written in a more accessible form. People were asked to reflect prayerfully and answer as many questions as they were able. The survey concluded on December 15, 2013. The results of the survey were analyzed and I sent my report on the responses from the people to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops which, in turn, submitted a report to the Vatican Synod Office.

Below are the results of the survey. Over 1300 surveys were submitted. Survey responses outside of the geographic territory of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee were removed as well as any surveys which were incomplete. We believe that a good sampling was achieved. The demographics are depicted on the first page of the Survey Analysis and percentages are given for results. Here is my summary of what I gleaned from the survey responses:

General Analysis

Teaching on the Family:

An overwhelming majority claim that they understand the teachings of the Church on the family and have received formation through formal education, homilies and personal reading. At least half of the respondents state that they do not accept the Church's teaching on family. A majority claimed that putting the Church's teaching on family into practice is difficult. Many state that there is a need for greater catechesis on family. Major reasons which hinder the acceptance of the teachings: growing secularization, irrelevance of the Church as moral authority and the clergy sexual abuse crisis. The majority of those taking the survey said that they do not understand "Natural Law."

Family and Evangelization:

Half of those surveyed stated that their experience of marriage preparation was a positive one while the remaining half was divided between not having a good experience and indifference. The majority offered their support for the concept of family as the domestic church. They believed that this teaching should come from their parish and especially through homilies. The overwhelming majority maintain that the best support of marriage and family life is through the witness of healthy, integrated families. Three quarters of the respondents stated that family prayer is important or very important with the most common shared prayer being Sunday Mass or meal prayers. Multiple factors inhibit family prayers such as lack of time, distance, low priority and prayer experienced mainly as personal and therefore private.

Pastoral care needs to be provided for the formation of couples and couples in crisis situations. It was suggested that this could be accomplished by making priests or deacons available for pastoral support or parishes could be called upon to provide mentor couples for those married but in crisis. An overwhelming majority declare that cohabitation is a reality in their experience of family and friends. Cohabitation by Catholics appears to be similar to the general population. Almost every respondent knew some or many divorced and remarried Catholics. A majority were unaware of any outreach from the parish or the Archdiocese to divorced and remarried Catholics. Most say that those in irregular situations (cohabitation or remarriage without annulment) either do not know their situation is irregular or they are not sure that they know. About half think that, if they know, they are indifferent to that fact. Also about half think that these couples feel marginalized.

A strong majority questions the Church denying the sacraments to those divorced and remarried. A majority think that the annulment process should change and be simplified while a minority is not sure. More than half claim they have never heard a sermon about mercy toward the divorced and remarried while an overwhelming majority are unaware of any ministry designed to aid those in irregular marriages.

Same Sex Unions:

Most respondents felt that there should be a distinction between “unions” and “marriage” and that both the state and the church should permit same sex “unions” but not call them “marriages.” There was criticism of what was perceived as “heavy handed” actions by the church and church leaders to forbid couples in a loving relationship to marry. Those opposed to same sex unions perceived the state as overstepping its role in redefining marriage. The type of pastoral attention which should be given to those who live in same sex union is the promotion of a virtuous life within the Catholic community. The vast majority stated that children of same sex unions should be given the same pastoral support as children in heterosexual unions. There was no clear indication of what parents of children from same sex unions want from the Church or how the Church can meet their needs.

Openness to Life:

The majority of respondents claim that they understand the Church’s teaching on the regulation of birth and the concept of responsible parenthood. The vast majority stated that they knew the difference between artificial contraception and natural family planning. Better than half do not accept the Church’s teaching on the regulation of birth and a small percentage are not sure. The two reasons given for the difficulty in accepting the teachings were personal resistance and lack of trust in natural family planning. However there was only a slight minority that could identify any of the listed methods of natural family planning. More than half stated that their position on birth control does not affect their reception of the sacraments. The majority of the respondents held that the difference between the Church’s position and that of the society is that the Church holds to procreation as one of the purposes of marriage and the society doesn’t. A strong majority thought that fostering generosity among the faithful would foster an increase to openness to life. A strong majority further expressed that divorce and separation are the most critical situations in family life.

SURVEY ANALYSIS

Demographics

Religious status: Almost 95% - baptized and practicing Catholic

Gender: 62% Female

Role: 82% laity; almost half parents

Marital status: Over 76% married

Age:

Age	Percentage	Number
18-25	2.9%	30
26-35	10.4%	106
36-45	15.7%	161
46-55	23.9%	245
56-65	22.5%	230
66-75	19.5%	199
76-85	4.8%	49
Over 85	0.3%	3

Education: 69% with bachelor's or master's degrees

SURVEY CONTENT

Teaching on Family:

- Almost 83% say the Church's teaching on family has been WELL PRESENTED
- Almost 90% say they received FORMATION on the Church's teaching on family
- Formal education, homilies and personal reading were the major ways of receiving formation
- Almost 83% say they UNDERSTAND the Church's teaching on family
- There is almost a 50/50 (49.4% Yes / 50.6% No) split on whether or not they ACCEPT the Church's teaching on family
- Almost 72% say putting the teachings into practice is difficult
- Over 60% say there is need for more catechesis on family
- Cultural factors in the United States which hinder the full reception of the Church's teaching on the family: growing secularization of culture (71%), irrelevance of the Church as moral authority (66%), clergy sexual abuse crisis (64%)
- Over 73% say people do not understand the meaning of "natural law"

Family and Evangelization:

- Only 50% say their experience of marriage preparation was a positive one; other 50% split between saying it was not a good experience and no recent experience
- 77% say that support for concept of family as domestic church should come from parish support for families; almost 70% say homilies should do so (multiple answers possible)
- Almost 75% say family prayer is important or very important with 74% saying they pray daily or weekly and the most common form of prayer are Sunday Mass and meal prayers

- Multiple factors are said to inhibit family prayer – lack of time, distance, low priority, prayer is private
- Almost 90% say that it is the witness of healthy, integrated families that most supports marriage and family life
- The pastoral care the Church needs to provide in supporting couples in formation and couples in crisis situations was evenly spread over the three options - priests and deacons need to be available to couples for pastoral support; archdiocese needs to provide resources to couples in crisis; parishes need to provide mentor couples for those married but in crisis
- Over 85% say that cohabitation is a reality in their experience of family and friends
- Almost 70% say the percentage of couples cohabiting is between 40% and 80%; there is not much difference in what they project about Catholics cohabiting
- Over 86% say they know some or many divorced and remarried Catholics
- Almost 64% are unaware of any outreach to these couples from the parish or archdiocese
- Most say that those in these irregular situations (cohabitation or remarriage) either do not know their situations is irregular or they are not sure they know
- Almost 50% say that, if they know, they are indifferent to that fact
- Almost 50% say these couples feel marginalized
- Over 71% say the biggest question about divorce and remarriage is: "Why should the people who most seek the consolation of the Church be denied the reception of the sacraments?"
- 66% say the annulment process should change and be simplified; 27% are not sure
- Almost 85% say they are unaware of any ministry to help those in irregular marriages and more than 50% say they have never heard anyone preach about mercy to these couples
- More than 60% are not sure how the Church reaches out to these couples

Same Sex Unions:

- Most responses about the promotion of same sex unions by the state were nuanced – there should be a distinction between “unions” and “marriage” and the state should allow unions and the Church should do the same; criticism of what is perceived as “heavy-handed” actions by church / church leaders to forbid any people who are in a loving relationship to marry; those opposed, see the state as overstepping its role in going against traditional understanding of marriage
- The most common response to the kind of pastoral attention that should be given to these couples was that priests can encourage and give support to those who live in same sex civil unions to strive to live a virtuous life within the Catholic community
- 82.5% say the children of same sex civil union couples should be given the same pastoral support as children in civil unions of heterosexual couples

- Regarding education for children of irregular marriages, there was no clear pattern of response on what they think parents of these children want from the Church or how the Church can meet their needs

Openness to Life

- Over 64% say they understand the Church teaching on regulation of birth
- Over 66% say they understand the concept of responsible parenthood
- 85% say they understand the difference between artificial contraception and natural family planning
- Over 56% say they do not accept the Church teaching in this area and another 17% are not sure
- The two reasons most selected for the difficulty in accepting the teaching were resistance to the teaching and lack of trust in natural family planning
- Less than 10% recognize any of the listed methods of natural family planning
- More than 50% say their position on regulations of birth does not affect their reception of the sacraments
- Over 72% say the biggest difference between Church teaching and general society is that the Church teaches that one of the purposes of marriage is the procreation of children and this is not acknowledged in society
- On how can the Church foster generosity and openness to life among married couples over 70% say the Church should foster generosity among all the faithful
- No clear pattern of response on how the Church can help couples accept more children
- Almost 80% say divorce and separation are the most critical situations in family life