

## ON FAMILY: A TRULY 'EXTRAORDINARY' SYNOD OF BISHOPS

The Roman Catholic Church, since the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) has had thirteen Ordinary Synods and three Extraordinary Synods. The former category of Synods consists basically of Bishop-representatives elected by their respective Episcopal Conferences while the latter type consists mainly of the Presidents (or their special delegates) of the Episcopal Conferences. The Pope has the prerogative of appointing a certain number of Bishops-delegates for any of these two types of Synods. Heads of the Roman Dicasteries also form part of many Synods. A Synod of Bishops as it is understood in the post-Vatican II era, whether Ordinary or Extraordinary, is a consultative body to the Pope, which can vote on propositions to be presented to the Pope. But it is the Pope who finally drafts the end-result document, known as an Apostolic Exhortation. In the Catholic Church such a document has teaching authority, and the degree of such authority among papal documents is second only to a Papal Encyclical Letter. Last year, Pope Francis, in an unprecedented move, simultaneously called for an Extraordinary Synod (October 2014) and an Ordinary Synod (October 2015) in order to consult, discuss, and last but not least, to orient the course of the Catholic Church with regard to the main theme "Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelization". The Extraordinary Synod began on 5<sup>th</sup> October 2014 and ended on 18<sup>th</sup> October 2014 with the Beatification Mass of Pope Paul VI who was the first Pope to visit Sri Lanka in December 1970. Its Final Statement though not a definitive document is now presented to the Episcopal Conferences to be circulated around for wider consultation and reflection, the results of which would become eventually the 'Working Document' for next year's Ordinary Synod of Bishops in October on the same theme.

**Although the technical term "Extraordinary" is used to refer to this sort of a Synod (as we had just a few days ago) that consists mainly of the Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences, this particular Synod was not only technically, but also literally "extraordinary"! Discussed below briefly under the sub-headings that follow are the reasons why it was literally "extraordinary":**

### **1. Family is a main concern of the Church**

As the theme of the Synod itself suggests, Pope Francis by calling this particular Synod which is the first of his pontificate (and the one that would follow next year) has shown what his main priorities for the Church are, as its universal visible shepherd. From the time of St. John Chrysostom in the fourth century, the family has been called "the domestic Church" in the Catholic tradition, a phrase that has been often used by many today. To begin with, this concept flows from the basic fact that the Church is "a family of families". Any human being, by the very fact of his/her birth to the world, normally belongs to a family. Thus, biologically he/she would have parents and siblings, and other relatives. However, a Christian when he/she is baptized, becomes a member also of the wider family, the Church. Thus, it is no exaggeration to say that a Christian has two families: the biological family and the wider Christian family. But using the same basic fact of reality *vice versa*, one can say that not only the Church is "a family of families", but the family itself is "a domestic Church". Of course, historically speaking, the first gatherings of the early Christians were in houses (*oikos*) as we see in the New Testament itself. In addition to this historical fact, the term "domestic Church" necessarily implies that a Christian family ought to be a re-presentation (or a concrete

realization in a given situation) of the wider Church. It is the basic Christian unit, the basic building block that is instrumental in constructing or building up the wider Church.

Thus, Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903) revived this traditional understanding of the family as the domestic Church when he said “The Family was before the Church, or rather, the first form of the Church on earth”. The Second Vatican Council re-echoed the same view when it called family “the domestic Church” (*Lumen Gentium*, No:11). Pope Paul VI (1963-1978) wrote: “There should be found in every Christian family the various aspects of the entire Church”. In his *magna carta* on family, the Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio* (1981), Pope John Paul II re-affirmed that the Christian family is “the domestic Church” (no:21). Pope Francis, in his one and only Apostolic Exhortation thus far, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) says: “The Family is the fundamental cell of society where we learn to live with others....” (No:66).

Therefore, in short, any renewal of the Church as a whole has to begin from the family. In taking up such a basic but realistic theme, this Synod surely is “extraordinary”.

## **2. The Church’s Maternity towards her members in the Pastoral Field**

The Church is not only a teacher but also a mother to her faithful, as the title of Pope John XXIII’s popular Encyclical Letter *Mater et Magister* (1961) already had indicated. The present Pope, too, has continued to insist that the Church is a mother in the sense that any mother does not love only those morally upright children but also those who have not been that moral in their lives, those who have failed to live the moral ideal! A mother loves all her children, but more so, children who tend to have lost their way! Since there have been so many people all over the world who have failed to live the Christian ideal of marriage and family in one way or the other, especially during the last few decades, the need for the mother Church to reach out to such children of hers is surely the right thing. Although monogamous, heterosexual marriage is the ideal Christian marriage, during the last few decades there have been all sorts of deviations from this ideal. Thus we have today: civil unions, cohabitations, trial marriages, civil marriages of those who have got divorced,....etc. In addition to these deviations, in some countries today, there is also a clamour to get homosexual unions recognized as ‘marriages’! Since marriage is the foundation of any family here on earth, depending on the type of marriage, there has also been different types of families that have come into being in recent times. Ideally, a Christian marriage is an association of persons comprising of a woman and a man married to each other, and who are the parents of children to whom both are biologically parents. But many families today, especially in the West, have deviated from this ideal. For example, today, we have quite a number of single-parent families and also families wherein the parents are of the same sex (homosexuals adopting children). Then, there are the families based on a civil union with children whose parents were previously married in the Church. Surely, all these types are clear deviations from the ideal Christian marriage and family. But what about their relationship to the Church? Are they to be welcome in the Church? Or simply because they happened to be members of such families that have failed to live up to the Christian ideals, should they be kept outside the life of the Church? Since Jesus came mainly to call not the righteous but sinners (those who failed to live the ideal), is it not correct to assume that the Church as the Sacrament of Christ (the visible sign of Jesus Christ

in today's world) ought to reach out to these very people who have failed to live the ideal of marriage and family? It is precisely in such reaching out that the Church manifests herself as a mother. Obviously, the Church as the representative of Christ's continuing active-presence in the world, cannot simply consider only those who live the ideal marriage and family lives as her children. She has to (imitating her Master and Lord) reach out to those who have failed to live up to this ideal. The many discourses of the present Pope go along this particular line of thought, and the recent Extraordinary Synod itself was called to reflect, discern and see how the Church ought to go about in being a mother to such lost children of hers who live in the periphery of ecclesial life.

As such, this Synod was never meant to change doctrine on marriage but to see how the Church's doctrine could be applied in the contemporary lived pastoral reality. After all doctrine by itself in its own speculative sphere has no meaning if it is not applied to or relevant to the lived reality of persons! As the Lord Himself said, the Sabbath is made for man, and not man for the Sabbath! Doctrine, therefore, is for persons in the first place. Of course, the often rattled off phrase by some before and during the Synod "doctrine cannot change" is also not totally correct, simply because within the Catholic tradition, there are changeable and unchangeable doctrines even with regard to family and marriage. For example, the doctrine that a Christian family is always a gathering of a father and a mother (and not two fathers or two mothers, as in homosexual unions) is unchangeable. Also the doctrine that a Christian marriage is always a heterosexual and monogamous marriage is unchangeable; so is the doctrine that a valid sacramental marriage is indissoluble. However, there are changeable doctrines which are mostly to do with ecclesiastical discipline. This latter type has changed all along history or the Catholic tradition. For example, marriage as a sacrament was officially accepted by the Church only in the 12<sup>th</sup> century! Till then, the Church was reluctant to accept it as a sacrament, and so, there were only six sacraments. Another example of evolving doctrine will be the need to have a Church ceremony for marriage (the canonical form) in order to check the many clandestine marriages that were common at that time, which came into being only at the Council of Trent (1545-1563). **So, there are doctrines even on marriage that cannot change, and there are also doctrines on marriage that do change, and in fact, have changed or evolved in the course of history.**

It is also important to point out here that even the cherished Catholic doctrine that a Christian marriage is indissoluble has gone through its own evolution even within the New Testament itself. This Catholic belief on indissolubility which surely goes back to the Lord's teaching itself, has had its own nuances and adaptations in the application of it to the different pastoral contexts of Mathew, Mark and Paul. Thus, according to the crying pastoral needs of his community, Mathew while reaffirming the teaching on indissolubility, has nevertheless introduced what is known as the *porneia* exception clause, not once, but twice in his gospel (Mt.5:31; 19:9). Similarly, Mark, who was writing to the gentile Christian community in Rome had his nuances to this teaching, as he tries to accommodate a woman's right to divorce a husband which was prevalent in the society to which he was writing but was unheard of in the Jewish society to which Jesus taught the doctrine of indissolubility (Mk.10:11-12). Then, Paul, writing to the Christians of Corinth, while reaffirming the dominical teaching of indissolubility, also makes his own pastoral adaptation to that teaching according to the needs of the Corinthian community (1 Cor.7:12-15). Besides, all these examples

from the New Testament itself, we have had plenty of adaptations all through Church's history both in moral theological and canonical practice of the Church with regard to Catholic understanding of marriage. Simply put, this understanding was not what it was from the time of Jesus, but it has gone through its own evolution through the work of the Holy Spirit within the tradition, according to the differing pastoral contexts, down through the ages, as the Vatican II itself taught (*Dei Verbum*, No:8). After all, our tradition is a living tradition, and only a living tradition can and does change. As such, one cannot simply rattle off the hackneyed but erroneous statement, taking things completely out of context: "doctrine cannot change"!

It was Pope John XXIII who said: "the deposit of faith (of doctrines) is one thing, but their expression is another!" Later, Vatican II repeated the same teaching:

The recent studies and findings of science, history and philosophy raise new questions which effect life and which demand new theological investigations. Furthermore, theologians, within the requirements and methods proper to theology, are invited to seek continually for more suitable ways of communicating doctrine to the men of their times; for the deposit of Faith or the truths are one thing and the manner in which they are enunciated, in the same meaning and understanding, is another(*Gaudium et spes*, No:62).

Pope Francis' call to reflect, discern and see what we could do with regard to pastoral practice thus, is not mainly to change doctrine (especially the unchangeable/non-reformable doctrines), if necessary, according to the contemporary pastoral contexts, but to find new avenues within the inherited Christian tradition that would make the Church a 'mother' to those who have failed to live the ideal married or family life, even if necessary, changing Church's changeable (reformable) doctrines (known as Church discipline), and where necessary, reformulating them in ways that contemporary humans would be able to understand and put into practice. In this sense, too, the recent Synod was really "Extraordinary". However, it is necessary to state clearly here that neither the Pope nor any participant at the Synod ever talked about the changing of our cherished unchangeable doctrines, such as the indissolubility of marriage, during this Synod. Their preoccupation was to safeguard this dominical teaching but at the same time searching for ways and means to apply it to ever changing lived reality and finding ways to express state it afresh.

### **3. The Enhanced Participation of Bishops in the Synod**

In his very opening talk to the recent Synod, Pope Francis encouraged all participants, especially the bishop-participants to speak freely. He pointed out that all must speak clearly with freedom to say everything that the Spirit is prompting them to say. He also insisted on the need to listen with humility. "Speaking clearly with frankness and listening with humility are the keys to collegiality", he said. Pope Francis also made this Synod literally "Extraordinary" by allowing all possible space to freedom of expression which of course, is a fresh breath of air with regard to the collegiality of bishops, since the Second Vatican Council. He wished to exercise his responsibility as the Successor of Peter, but together with the College of Bishops, and not in isolation, so that the true voice of the Holy Spirit could be heard, discerned and listened to. That is why he reassured the bishops: "Have no fear, as this is done with Peter and under Peter"! This new attitude of enhanced

collegiality of bishops is surely a recovery of what the Second Vatican Council taught with regard to the Church's authority to teach in and through the Successor of Peter in communion with the College of Bishops (Cfr., *Lumen Gentium* Nos:22,23). In fact, in its turn, Vatican II did not invent such collegiality in teaching, but re-discovered what was already there in our Catholic tradition.

Re-echoing the above Vatican-II teaching on collegiality, at the Vigil Service at St.Peter's Square on the day before the Synod was officially inaugurated, the Pope said: "Already our coming together as one around the Bishop of Rome is an event of grace, in which the Episcopal collegiality manifests itself in a journey of spiritual and pastoral discernment". At the very opening session, the Relator General of this Synod, the Hungarian Cardinal Peter Erdo in his presentation of the collated responses to the pre-Synodal questionnaire (*Relation ante Disceptationem*) said that as a result of sending that questionnaire world wide, there was a much greater participatory response than at the earlier Synods. He also pointed out that the same results made it possible to incorporate into his presentation of the Working Document for the Synod ideas that had already circulated among bishops. This clearly is a sign of greater participation of not only bishops but also lay people.

The well-known Italian theologian Archbishop Bruno Forte who was also the Special Secretary to this Extraordinary Synod, stressed the importance of open dialogue and mutual respect. "It is important to put ourselves in front of each other with respect and to listen to each other" he said. Recalling how Pope Paul VI's efforts following the Second Vatican Council call for involving the voices of all the baptized in discussions, Archbishop Forte admitted that the bishops are still learning how to do this.

#### **4. An Inclusive Synod**

Although this is surely not the first Synod where all walks of Church life participated, including the laity, it certainly will go down in post-Vatican II Church history as the first Synod that had a wide-consultation of the whole Church even before the Synod began. The questionnaire that was circulated among all the local Churches by the Vatican in preparation for this Extraordinary Synod was in fact an open consultation on issues to do with family and married life, including those issues that were at least implicitly considered till fairly recently as taboo for open discussion, such as the pastoral care of those who live together without marrying, of those who were divorced and remarried civilly, of same sex unions, of single-parents, and regulation of births. In many countries the respective Episcopal conferences following the Pope's initiative did have wide consultations within their local Churches, that included lay consultations, too. As Cardinal Erdo said in his presentation of the collated results of that questionnaire, it was surely an unprecedented wide consultation, almost bringing to the fore once again in the Church the cherished Catholic belief of *sensus fidei* and *sensus fidelium*. After all, as the great theologians Yves Congar, Henri de Lubac and others taught, together with the Vatican II, the Holy Spirit always present in the Church will never allow the whole Church as a single body together to fall into error with regard to doctrine and morals (*Lumen Gentium*, No:12). The implication here is though the hierarchical teaching authority comprising of the Pope together with the Bishops have the unique privilege of having the final word in teaching faith and morals, it cannot and should not ignore its duty to consult all

the baptized in the Church in such matters of faith and morals (Cfr., *Dei Verbum*, Nos.8-10; *Gaudium et spes*, Nos.33,43). This Synod, surely made a clear effort to do just this, and in that sense too, it was “extraordinary”.

Moreover, unlike in earlier Synods, the Pope himself asked the participants to feel free, especially asking the bishop-members not to say only those things that would please the Pope but even things that the Pope would not like to hear, provided the bishops were convinced in faith and in conscience of what they were to say. This is an unprecedented freedom in the post-Vatican II era but something that was a characteristic hall mark of early Councils and Synods. In fact, at the end of the Synod, Pope expressed his heart-felt gratitude to all the participants for their courageous expressions of their deep faith convictions: “I can happily say that with a spirit of collegiality and synodality, we have truly lived the experience of a Synod, a path of solidarity, a journey together”.

One also needs to note that with this Synod, Pope Francis went down in history as someone who wanted explicitly to be inclusive in discussions and decision-making. His appointments to the Synod offices, and to the Synod itself, were not to do with those bishops who toed slavishly only his line of thinking. Cardinals and bishops who were known to be quite opposed to his own views were fearlessly and courageously nominated by the Pope in the list of bishop-participants that he was privileged to nominate. We need to say honestly that this too is a very clear, welcome deviation from the earlier post-Vatican II Synods. Thus, here too, we need to notice that the aim was to be all-inclusive so that the Holy Spirit had enough space to move about rather than being suffocated into one line of thinking.

## **5. An Inconclusive Synod**

This was not a decision-making Synod, nor was it a Synod that passed propositions that would have been later handed over to the Pope to write an Apostolic Exhortation as the other Synods were used to doing. Rather, it was mainly to set a well-reflected agenda for the next Ordinary Synod in October 2015 where the bishop-participants would be voting on different propositions to be handed over to the Holy Father to write his own Apostolic Exhortation which would be the final official magisterial teaching in this process of the two Synods, one following the other. As the Pope himself said in his final discourse to the Synod, with the end of this Synod begins a long period of intense and prayerful reflection of the whole Church on various aspects of Family living in the contemporary world according to the teachings of Jesus Christ. In that sense, this Extraordinary Synod is inconclusive in the sense that it is only one of the stages of the long and well-thought-out process of all-inclusive decision-making wherein the Holy Spirit has been allowed his due space.

## **6. The Charisma of Pope Francis**

At the Vigil Service in preparation for the Extraordinary Synod at St.Peter’s Square, the Pope outlined three precious guidelines for the participants in their search for what the Spirit was prompting when he said:

From the Holy Spirit we ask for the Synodal Fathers, first of all, the gift of listening: listening to God, until we breathe the will to which God calls us. Besides listening, “we invoke the

willingness for a sincere discussion, open and fraternal, which leads us to take charge with pastoral responsibility of the questions that this change of time bears with it. We will let our hearts flow, without losing our peace, but with the serene trust that in His time the Lord will not fail to lead us back to unity. Is not the history of the Church recounted perhaps with many similar situations, that our fathers were able to overcome with obstinate patience and creativity? The secret is in a look: and this is the third fit that we implore with our prayer. Because if we really intend to verify our step on the terrain of the contemporary challenges, the decisive condition is to maintain our gaze fixed on Jesus Christ – *Lumen Gentium* – to remain in contemplation and adoration of His face”.

It is important to note that all throughout this Synod, Pope Francis who was so enthusiastic in calling it in the first place, was present but silent, all the time intensely and patiently listening to the interventions of all the participants. He spoke at the Inauguration and the Conclusion of the Synod, both those speeches becoming classic in post-Vatican II Catholic Synodal history. In his homily at the opening mass of the Synod, based on the scripture readings of the Vineyard of the Lord, the Pope said: “Synod Assemblies are not meant to discuss beautiful and clever ideas, or to see who is more intelligent.... They are meant to better nurture and tend the Lord’s vineyard, to help realize his dream, his plan for his people. In this case, the Lord is asking us to care for the family, which has been from the beginning and integral part of his loving plan for humanity”.

In his strong-worded concluding speech, the Pope expressed his gratitude to all the participants, and said that he felt the presence of the Holy Spirit all through the Synod which he compared to a “journey”. What went down on record of this speech (which received a standing ovation for more than four minutes from the participants) are what the Pope called the five “tensions and temptations” one encounters during this sort of a “journey”:

1. A temptation to hostile inflexibility, that is, wanting to close oneself within the written word (the letter) and not allowing oneself to be surprised by God, by the God of surprises (the spirit); within the law, within the certitude of what we know and not of what we still need to learn and to achieve. From the time of Christ, it is the temptation of the zealous, of the scrupulous, of the solicitous and of the so-called “traditionalists” and also of the “intellectuals”.
2. The temptation to a destructive tendency to goodness (“il buonismo” in Italian) that in the name of a deceptive mercy binds the wounds without first curing them and treating them; that treats the symptoms and not the causes and the roots. It is the temptation of the do-gooders, of the fearful, and also of the so-called “progressives” and “liberals”.
3. The temptation to transform stones into bread, to break the long, heavy, and painful fast (Luke 4:1-4); and also to transform the bread into a stone and cast it against the sinners, the weak, and the sick (Jn.8:7), that is, to transform it into unbearable burdens (Lk.11:46).
4. The temptation to come down off the Cross, to please the people, and not stay there, in order to fulfill the will of the Father; to bow down to a worldly spirit instead of purifying it and bending it to the Spirit of God.

5. The temptation to neglect the *depositum fidei* (the deposit of faith), not thinking of themselves as guardians but as owners or masters (of it); or, on the other hand, the temptation to neglect reality, making use of meticulous language and a language of something to say so many things and to say nothing! They call them “byzantinisms”, I think these things!

Then, the Pope said that these “temptations” must not frighten us or disconcert us or even discourage us, as we go on the rest of the “journey” during the coming year. Truly, this was an “extraordinary” Synod, in this sense, too!

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