

Synod on Family: Midterm report presented, 2015 Synod announced

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(Vatican Radio) As discussion at the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops on the Family got underway Monday morning, it was announced that the second phase of this process – next year's Ordinary Synod – will be held October 4-25, 2015, and will have theme: The vocation and mission of the family in the church and the modern world.

Following the announcement the General Rapporteur, Cardinal Peter Erdő, presented the mid-term report outlining the main questions highlighted over the past week of General Congregations which will now be examined in by the bishops, fraternal delegates, auditors and experts in the 'minor circles' or small working groups.

Cardinal Erdő began by highlighting that the Synod Fathers spoke of how Jesus looked at men and women with love, accompanying them patiently and with mercy. He spoke of how Jesus Christ, "the Truth, became incarnate in human fragility not to condemn it, but to heal it". Jesus – he said - taught marriage was indissoluble, but showed understanding of those who didn't live up to this ideal.

In the mid-term report the Synod Fathers speak of how it's the task of the Church to recognize those seeds of the Word that have spread beyond its visible and sacramental boundaries. They appeal to the "law of graduality," as a reflection of the way God reached out to humanity and led His people forward step by step.

The need was noted for further reflection on whether sacramental fullness doesn't exclude the possibility of recognizing positive elements even in imperfect forms. For example, whether there are positive elements in irregular marriages. The Synod Fathers make the point that when a civil marriage is stable, shows deep affection and care for children, then the Church should work to accompany it toward Sacramentality.

Card. Erdő spoke of the need for a missionary conversion, that the Church cannot stop at an announcement that is merely theoretical, but must go beyond. Christian marriage has to be a vocational decision taken with the proper preparation in an itinerary of faith. This because the Gospel of the family is the response to the deepest expectations of a person.

In the report the Synod Fathers state that the Church is particularly called to recognize suffering of abandoned spouses and how children are the real victims of family breakups.

Many synod members expressed the need for reformed, simplified procedures for annulments . Card. Erdő spoke of how this annulment reform will require diocesan bishops to take on new responsibilities and perhaps delegate a specially trained priest.

Regarding divorced and divorced and civilly remarried Catholics, the report speaks of the need for "courageous pastoral choices" and "new pastoral paths". The report calls for case-by-case discernment according to law of graduality, particularly regarding access to the Sacraments. Card. Erdő said dialogue on this topic will continue in local Churches over the coming year and responses will be brought to next year's Synod.

The report noted that the question of cohabitation might indicate commitment-phobia, but also a choice that is taken "while waiting for a secure existence" such as a steady job and income.

The question of homosexuality was then addressed, with a call to serious reflection. The Synod Fathers noted that homosexual persons have gifts and talents to offer the Christian community and that pastoral outreach to them is an important educative challenge.

In the report, the Synod Fathers also reaffirm that same-sex unions cannot be considered equal to matrimony. And it is unacceptable that pressure be brought to bear on pastors or that international bodies make financial aid dependent on the introduction of regulations inspired by gender ideology.

Finally, stating that openness to new life is essential part of married love, the Synod Fathers affirm the message of Paul VI's *Humanae Vitae* regarding the need to respect dignity of person in moral evaluation of methods of birth control.

Concluding his presentation of the mid-term report, Card. Erdő said that in imitating Jesus' merciful gaze, the Church must accompany her most fragile sons and daughters marked by wounded and lost love.

Below please find the full text of the Midterm Report:

III EXTRAORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS

RELATIO POST DISCEPTATIONEM

His Eminence Cardinal Péter Erdő

General Rapporteur (unofficial translation)

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Introduction

During the prayer vigil held in St Peter's Square on 4 October 2014 in preparation for the Synod on the family, Pope Francis evoked the centrality of the experience of family in all lives, in a simple and concrete manner: "Evening falls on our assembly. It is the hour at which one willingly returns home to meet at the same table, in the depth of affection, of the good that has been done and received, of the encounters which warm the heart and make it grow, good wine which hastens the unending feast in the days of man. It is also the weightiest hour for one who finds himself face to face with his own loneliness, in the bitter twilight of shattered dreams and broken plans; how many people trudge through the day in the blind alley of resignation, of abandonment, even resentment: in how many homes the wine of joy has been less plentiful, and therefore, also the zest — the very wisdom — for life [...]. Let us make our prayer heard for one another this evening, a prayer for all".

The source of joys and trials, of deep affections and relations – at times wounded – the family is truly a "school of humanity" ("Familia schola quaedam uberioris humanitatis est", Vatican Council II, Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, 52), of which we are in great need. Despite the many signs of crisis in the institution of the family in various contexts of the "global village", the desire for family remains alive,

especially among the young, and is at the root of the Church's need to proclaim tirelessly and with profound conviction the "Gospel of the family" entrusted to her with the revelation of God's love in Jesus Christ.

The Bishop of Rome called upon the Synod of Bishops to reflect upon the situation of the family, decisive and valuable, in its Extraordinary General Assembly of October 2014, a reflection which will then be pursued in greater depth in the Ordinary General Assembly scheduled to take place in October 2015, as well as during the full intervening year between the two synodal events. "The convenire in unum around the Bishop of Rome is already an event of grace, in which episcopal collegiality is made manifest in a path of spiritual and pastoral discernment": thus Pope Francis described the synodal experience, indicating its tasks in the dual process of listening to the signs of God and the history of mankind and in the resulting dual and unique fidelity.

In the light of the same discourse we have gathered together the results of our reflections and our dialogues in the following three parts: listening, to look at the situation of the family today, in the complexity of its light and shade; looking, our gaze fixed on Christ, to re-evaluate with renewed freshness and enthusiasm what the revelation transmitted in the faith of the Church tells us about the beauty and dignity of the family; and discussion in the light of the Lord Jesus to discern the ways in which the Church and society can renew their commitment to the family.

FIRST PART

Listening: the context and challenges to the family

The socio-cultural context

Anthropological and cultural change today influences all aspects of life and requires an analytic and diversified approach, able to discern the positive forms of individual freedom. It is necessary to be aware of the growing danger represented by an exasperated individualism that distorts family bonds and ends up considering each component of the family as an isolated unit, leading in some cases to the prevalence of an idea of the subject formed according to his or her own wishes, which are assumed as absolute.

The most difficult test for families in our time is often solitude, which destroys and gives rise to a general sensation of impotence in relation to the socio-economic situation that often ends up crushing them. This is due to growing precariousness in the workplace that is often experienced as a nightmare, or due to heavy taxation that certainly does not encourage young people to marriage.

Some cultural and religious contexts pose particular challenges. In African societies the practice of polygamy remains, along with, in some traditional contexts, the custom of "marriage in stages". In other contexts the practice of "arranged marriages" persists. In countries in which Catholicism is a minority religion, there are many mixed marriages with all the difficulties that these may lead to in terms of legal form, the education of children and mutual respect from the point of view of religious freedom, but also with the great potential that derives from the encounter between the differences in faith that these

stories of family life present. In many contexts, and not only in the West, the practice of cohabitation before marriage, or indeed cohabitation not orientated towards assuming the form of an institutional bond, is increasingly widespread.

Many children are born outside marriage, especially in certain countries, and there are many who subsequently grow up with just one of their parents or in an enlarged or reconstituted family context. The number of divorces is growing and it is not rare to encounter cases in which decisions are taken solely on the basis of economic factors. The condition of women still needs to be defended and promoted, as situations of violence within the family are not rare. Children are frequently the object of contention between parents, and are the true victims of family breakdown. Societies riven by violence due to war, terrorism or the presence of organized crime experience deteriorating family situations. Furthermore, migration is another sign of the times, to be faced and understood in terms of the burden of consequences for family life.

The relevance of emotional life

Faced with the social framework outlined above, a greater need is encountered among individuals to take care of themselves, to know their inner being, and to live in greater harmony with their emotions and sentiments, seeking a relational quality in emotional life. In the same way, it is possible to encounter a widespread desire for family accompanied by the search for oneself. But how can this attention to the care for oneself be cultivated and maintained, alongside this desire for family? This is a great challenge for the Church too. The danger of individualism and the risk of living selfishly are significant.

Today's world appears to promote limitless affectivity, seeking to explore all its aspects, including the most complex. Indeed, the question of emotional fragility is very current: a narcissistic, unstable or changeable affectivity do not always help greater maturity to be reached. In this context, couples are often uncertain and hesitant, struggling to find ways to grow. Many tend to remain in the early stages of emotional and sexual life. The crisis in the couple destabilizes the family and may lead, through separations and divorce, to serious consequences for adults, children and society as a whole, weakening the individual and social bonds. The decline in population not only creates a situation in which the alternation of generations is no longer assured, but over time also risks leading to economic impoverishment and a loss of hope in the future.

Pastoral challenges

In this context the Church is aware of the need to offer a meaningful word of hope. It is necessary to set out from the conviction that man comes from God and that, therefore, a reflection able to reframe the great questions on the meaning of human existence, may find fertile ground in humanity's most profound expectations. The great values of marriage and the Christian family correspond to the search that distinguishes human existence even in a time marked by individualism and hedonism. It is necessary to accept people in their concrete being, to know how to support their search, to encourage the wish for God and the will to feel fully part of the Church, also on the part of those who

have experienced failure or find themselves in the most diverse situations. This requires that the doctrine of the faith, the basic content of which should be made increasingly better known, be proposed alongside with mercy.

PART II

The gaze upon Christ: the Gospel of the Family

The gaze upon Jesus and gradualness in the history of salvation

In order to “walk among contemporary challenges, the decisive condition is to maintain a fixed gaze on Jesus Christ, to pause in contemplation and in adoration of His Face. ... Indeed, every time we return to the source of the Christian experience, new paths and undreamed of possibilities open up” (Pope Francis, Address of 4 October 2014). Jesus looked upon the women and the men he met with love and tenderness, accompanying their steps with patience and mercy, in proclaiming the demands of the Kingdom of God.

From the moment that the order of creation is determined by orientation towards Christ, it becomes necessary to distinguish without separating the various levels through which God communicates the grace of the covenant to humanity. Through the law of gradualness (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 34), typical of divine pedagogy, this means interpreting the nuptial covenant in terms of continuity and novelty, in the order of creation and in that of redemption.

Jesus Himself, referring to the primordial plan for the human couple, reaffirms the indissoluble union between man and woman, while understanding that “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning” (Mt 19,8). In this way, He shows how divine condescension always accompanies the path of humanity, directing it towards its new beginning, not without passing through the cross.

The family in God’s salvific plan

Since, by their commitment to mutual acceptance and with the grace of Christ couples promise fidelity to one another and openness to life, they acknowledge as constitutive elements of marriage the gifts God offers them, taking their mutual responsibility seriously, in His name and before the Church. Now, in faith it is possible to assume the goods of marriage as commitments best maintained with the help of the grace of the sacrament. God consecrates love between spouses and confirms its indissolubility, offering them help in living in fidelity and openness to life. Therefore, the gaze of the Church turns not only to the couple, but to the family.

We are able to distinguish three fundamental phases in the divine plan for the family: the family of origins, when God the creator instituted the primordial marriage between Adam and Eve, as a solid foundation for the family: he created them male and female (cf. Gn 1,24-31; 2,4b); the historic family, wounded by sin (cf. Gn 3) and the family redeemed by Christ (cf. Eph 5,21-32), in the image of the Holy Trinity, the mystery from which every

true love springs. The sponsal covenant, inaugurated in creation and revealed in the history of God and Israel, reaches its fullest expression with Christ in the Church.

The discernment of values present in wounded families and in irregular situations

In considering the principle of gradualness in the divine salvific plan, one asks what possibilities are given to married couples who experience the failure of their marriage, or rather how it is possible to offer them Christ's help through the ministry of the Church. In this respect, a significant hermeneutic key comes from the teaching of Vatican Council II, which, while it affirms that "although many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure ... these elements, as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward Catholic unity" (Lumen Gentium, 8).

In this light, the value and consistency of natural marriage must first be emphasized. Some ask whether the sacramental fullness of marriage does not exclude the possibility of recognizing positive elements even the imperfect forms that may be found outside this nuptial situation, which are in any case ordered in relation to it. The doctrine of levels of communion, formulated by Vatican Council II, confirms the vision of a structured way of participating in the *Mysterium Ecclesiae* by baptized persons.

In the same, perspective, that we may consider inclusive, the Council opens up the horizon for appreciating the positive elements present in other religions (cf. *Nostra Aetate*, 2) and cultures, despite their limits and their insufficiencies (cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, 55). Indeed, looking at the human wisdom present in these, the Church learns how the family is universally considered as the necessary and fruitful form of human cohabitation. In this sense, the order of creation, in which the Christian vision of the family is rooted, unfolds historically, in different cultural and geographical expressions.

Realizing the need, therefore, for spiritual discernment with regard to cohabitation, civil marriages and divorced and remarried persons, it is the task of the Church to recognize those seeds of the Word that have spread beyond its visible and sacramental boundaries. Following the expansive gaze of Christ, whose light illuminates every man (cf. *Jn* 1,9; cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 22), the Church turns respectfully to those who participate in her life in an incomplete and imperfect way, appreciating the positive values they contain rather than their limitations and shortcomings.

Truth and beauty of the family and mercy

The Gospel of the family, while it shines in the witness of many families who live coherently their fidelity to the sacrament, with their mature fruits of authentic daily sanctity must also nurture those seeds that are yet to mature, and must care for those trees that have dried up and wish not to be neglected.

In this respect, a new dimension of today's family pastoral consists of accepting the reality of civil marriage and also cohabitation, taking into account the due differences. Indeed, when a union reaches a notable level of stability through a public bond, is characterized by deep affection, responsibility with regard to offspring, and capacity to withstand tests, it may be seen as a germ to be accompanied in development towards the sacrament of

marriage. Very often, however, cohabitation is established not with a view to a possible future marriage, but rather without any intention of establishing an institutionally-recognized relationship.

Imitating Jesus' merciful gaze, the Church must accompany her most fragile sons and daughters, marked by wounded and lost love, with attention and care, restoring trust and hope to them like the light of a beacon in a port, or a torch carried among the people to light the way for those who are lost or find themselves in the midst of the storm.

Part III

The discussion: pastoral perspectives

Proclaiming the Gospel of the family today, in various contexts

The Synod dialog has allowed an agreement on some of the more urgent pastoral needs to be entrusted to being made concrete in the individual local Churches, in communion cum Petro et sub Petro.

The announcement of the Gospel of the family is an urgent issue for the new evangelization. The Church has to carry this out with the tenderness of a mother and the clarity of a teacher (cf. Eph 4,15), in fidelity to the merciful kenosi of Christ. The truth is incarnated in human fragility not to condemn it, but to cure it.

Evangelizing is the shared responsibility of all God's people, each according to his or her own ministry and charism. Without the joyous testimony of spouses and families, the announcement, even if correct, risks being misunderstood or submerged by the ocean of words that is a characteristic of our society (cf. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 50). On various occasions the Synodal Fathers underlined that Catholic families are called upon themselves to be the active subjects of all the pastoral of the family.

It will be decisive to highlight the primacy of grace, and therefore of the possibilities that the Spirit gives in the sacrament. This is about letting it be known that the Gospel of the family is a joy that «fills the hearts and lives», because in Christ we are «set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness, and loneliness» (*Evangeli Gaudium*, 1). In the light of the parable of the sower (cf. Mt 13,3), our task is to cooperate in the sowing: the rest is God's work. We must not forget that the Church that preaches about the family is a sign of contradiction.

For this reason, what is required is a missionary conversion: it is necessary not to stop at an announcement that is merely theoretical and has nothing to do with people's real problems. It must not be forgotten that the crisis of faith has led to a crisis in matrimony and the family and, as a result, the transmission of faith from parents to children has often been interrupted. Confronted by a strong faith, the imposition of certain cultural perspectives that weaken the family is of no importance.

Conversion has, above all, to be that of language so that this might prove to be effectively meaningful. The announcement is about letting it be experienced that the Gospel of the

family is the response to the deepest expectations of a person: to his or her dignity and its full realization in reciprocity and communion. This is not merely about presenting a set of regulations but about putting forward values, responding to the need of those who find themselves today even in the most secularized countries.

The indispensable biblical-theological study is to be accompanied by dialog, at all levels. Many insisted on a more positive approach to the riches contained in diverse religious experiences, while not being blind to the difficulties. In the diverse cultural realities the possibilities should first be grasped and in the light of them the limits and radicalizations should be rejected.

Christian marriage cannot only be considered as a cultural tradition or social obligation, but has to be a vocational decision taken with the proper preparation in an itinerary of faith, with mature discernment. This is not about creating difficulties and complicating the cycles of formation, but of going deeply into the issue and not being content with theoretical meetings or general orientations.

The need was jointly referred to for a conversion of all pastoral practices from the perspective of the family, overcoming the individualistic points of view that still characterize it. This is why there was a repeated insistence on renewing in this light the training of presbyters and other pastoral operators, through a greater involvement of the families themselves.

In the same way, the necessity was underlined for an evangelization that denounces clearly the cultural, social and economic factors, for example, the excessive room given to market logic, that prevents an authentic family life, leading to discrimination, poverty, exclusion, and violence. For this reason a dialog and cooperation has to be developed with the social structures, and lay people who are involved in cultural and socio-political fields should be encouraged.

Guiding couples on the path in preparation for marriage

The complex social reality and the changes that the family is called on today to deal with require a greater undertaking from the whole Christian community for the preparation of those who are about to be married. As regards this necessity the Synodal Fathers agreed to underline the need for a greater involvement of the entire community privileging the testimony of the families themselves, as well as a rooting of the preparation for marriage in the path of Christian initiation, underlining the connection between marriage and the other sacraments. In the same way, the necessity was highlighted for specific programs for preparation for marriage that are a true experience of participation in the ecclesial life and that study closely the diverse aspects of family life.

Accompanying the early years of married life

The early years of marriage are a vital and delicate period during which couples grow in the awareness of the challenges and meaning of matrimony. Thus the need for a pastoral accompaniment that goes beyond the celebration of the sacrament. Of great importance in this pastoral is the presence of experienced couples. The parish is considered the ideal

place for expert couples to place themselves at the disposal of younger ones. Couples need to be encouraged towards a fundamental welcome of the great gift of children. The importance of family spirituality and prayer needs to be underlined, encouraging couples to meet regularly to promote the growth of the spiritual life and solidarity in the concrete demands of life. Meaningful liturgies, devotional practices and the Eucharist celebrated for families, were mentioned as vital in favoring evangelization through the family.

Positive aspects of civil unions and cohabitation

A new sensitivity in today's pastoral consists in grasping the positive reality of civil weddings and, having pointed out our differences, of cohabitation. It is necessary that in the ecclesial proposal, while clearly presenting the ideal, we also indicate the constructive elements in those situations that do not yet or no longer correspond to that ideal.

It was also noted that in many countries an "an increasing number live together ad experimentum, in unions which have not been religiously or civilly recognized" (*Instrumentum Laboris*, 81). In Africa this occurs especially in traditional marriages, agreed between families and often celebrated in different stages. Faced by these situations, the Church is called on to be "the house of the Father, with doors always wide open [...] where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 47) and to move towards those who feel the need to take up again their path of faith, even if it is not possible to celebrate a religious marriage.

In the West as well there is an increasingly large number of those who, having lived together for a long period of time, ask to be married in the Church. Simple cohabitation is often a choice inspired by a general attitude, which is opposed to institutions and definitive undertakings, but also while waiting for a secure existence (a steady job and income). In other countries common-law marriages are very numerous, not because of a rejection of Christian values as regards the family and matrimony, but, above all, because getting married is a luxury, so that material poverty encourages people to live in common-law marriages. Furthermore in such unions it is possible to grasp authentic family values or at least the wish for them. Pastoral accompaniment should always start from these positive aspects.

All these situations have to be dealt with in a constructive manner, seeking to transform them into opportunities to walk towards the fullness of marriage and the family in the light of the Gospel. They need to be welcomed and accompanied with patience and delicacy. With a view to this, the attractive testimony of authentic Christian families is important, as subjects for the evangelization of the family.

Caring for wounded families (the separated, the divorced who have not remarried, the divorced who have remarried)

What rang out clearly in the Synod was the necessity for courageous pastoral choices. Reconfirming forcefully the fidelity to the Gospel of the family, the Synodal Fathers, felt the urgent need for new pastoral paths, that begin with the effective reality of familial fragilities, recognizing that they, more often than not, are more "endured" than freely chosen. These are situations that are diverse because of personal as well as cultural and

socio-economic factors. It is not wise to think of unique solutions or those inspired by a logic of “all or nothing”. The dialog and meeting that took place in the Synod will have to continue in the local Churches, involving their various components, in such a way that the perspectives that have been drawn up might find their full maturation in the work of the next Ordinary General Assembly. The guidance of the Spirit, constantly invoked, will allow all God’s people to live the fidelity to the Gospel of the family as a merciful caring for all situations of fragility.

Each damaged family first of all should be listened to with respect and love, becoming companions on the journey as Christ did with the disciples of the road to Emmaus. In a particular way the words of Pope Francis apply in these situations: «The Church will have to initiate everyone – priests, religious and laity – into this “art of accompaniment”, which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf. Es 3,5). The pace of this accompaniment must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life» (Evangelii Gaudium, 169).

Such discernment is indispensable for the separated and divorced. What needs to be respected above all is the suffering of those who have endured separation and divorce unjustly. The forgiveness for the injustice endured is not easy, but it is a journey that grace makes possible. In the same way it needs to be always underlined that it is indispensable to assume in a faithful and constructive way the consequences of separation or divorce on the children: they must not become an “object” to be fought over and the most suitable means need to be sought so that they can get over the trauma of the family break-up and grow up in the most serene way possible.

Various Fathers underlined the necessity to make the recognition of cases of nullity more accessible and flexible. Among the propositions were the abandonment of the need for the double conforming sentence; the possibility of establishing an administrative means under the responsibility of the diocesan bishop; a summary process to be used in cases of clear nullity. According to authoritative propositions, the possibility should then be considered of giving weight to the faith of those about to be married in terms of the validity of the sacrament of marriage. It needs to be emphasized that in all these cases it is about the ascertaining of the truth over the validity of the obstacle.

As regards matrimonial suits, the speeding-up of the procedure, requested by many, as well as the preparation of a sufficient number of operators, clerics and lay people, dedicating themselves to this, requires an increase in the responsibilities of the diocesan bishop, who in his diocese might charge a specially trained priest who would be able to offer the parties advice on the validity of their marriage.

Divorced people who have not remarried should be invited to find in the Eucharist the nourishment they need to sustain them in their state. The local community and pastors have to accompany these people with solicitude, particularly when there are children involved or they find themselves in a serious situation of poverty.

In the same way the situation of the divorced who have remarried demands a careful discernment and an accompaniment full of respect, avoiding any language or behavior that might make them feel discriminated against. For the Christian community looking after them is not a weakening of its faith and its testimony to the indissolubility of marriage, but rather it expresses precisely its charity in its caring.

As regards the possibility of partaking of the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist, some argued in favor of the present regulations because of their theological foundation, others were in favor of a greater opening on very precise conditions when dealing with situations that cannot be resolved without creating new injustices and suffering. For some, partaking of the sacraments might occur were it preceded by a penitential path – under the responsibility of the diocesan bishop –, and with a clear undertaking in favor of the children. This would not be a general possibility, but the fruit of a discernment applied on a case-by-case basis, according to a law of gradualness, that takes into consideration the distinction between state of sin, state of grace and the attenuating circumstances.

Suggesting limiting themselves to only “spiritual communion” was questioned by more than a few Synodal Fathers: if spiritual communion is possible, why not allow them to partake in the sacrament? As a result a greater theological study was requested starting with the links between the sacrament of marriage and the Eucharist in relation to the Church-sacrament. In the same way, the moral dimension of the problem requires further consideration, listening to and illuminating the consciences of spouses.

The problems relative to mixed marriages were frequently raised in the interventions of the Synodal Fathers. The differences in the matrimonial regulations of the Orthodox Churches creates serious problems in certain contexts to which have to be found suitable responses in communion with the Pope. The same applies to inter-religious marriages.

Welcoming homosexual persons

Homosexuals have gifts and qualities to offer to the Christian community: are we capable of welcoming these people, guaranteeing to them a fraternal space in our communities? Often they wish to encounter a Church that offers them a welcoming home. Are our communities capable of providing that, accepting and valuing their sexual orientation, without compromising Catholic doctrine on the family and matrimony?

The question of homosexuality leads to a serious reflection on how to elaborate realistic paths of affective growth and human and evangelical maturity integrating the sexual dimension: it appears therefore as an important educative challenge. The Church furthermore affirms that unions between people of the same sex cannot be considered on the same footing as matrimony between man and woman. Nor is it acceptable that pressure be brought to bear on pastors or that international bodies make financial aid dependent on the introduction of regulations inspired by gender ideology.

Without denying the moral problems connected to homosexual unions it has to be noted that there are cases in which mutual aid to the point of sacrifice constitutes a precious support in the life of the partners. Furthermore, the Church pays special attention to the

children who live with couples of the same sex, emphasizing that the needs and rights of the little ones must always be given priority.

The transmission of life and the challenge of the declining birthrate

It is not difficult to notice the spread of a mentality that reduces the generation of life to a variable of an individual's or a couple's plans. Economic factors sometimes have enough weight to contribute to the sharp drop in the birthrate which weakens the social fabric, compromising the relationship between generations and rendering the view of the future less certain. Being open to life is an intrinsic requirement of married love.

Probably here as well what is required is a realistic language that is able to start from listening to people and acknowledging the beauty and truth of an unconditional opening to life as that which human life requires to be lived to its fullest. It is on this base that we can rest an appropriate teaching regarding natural methods, which allow the living in a harmonious and aware way of the communication between spouses, in all its dimensions, along with generative responsibility. In this light, we should go back to the message of the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* of Paul VI, which underlines the need to respect the dignity of the person in the moral evaluation of the methods of birth control.

So help is required to live affectivity, in marriage as well, as a path of maturation, in the evermore profound welcoming of the other and in an ever fuller giving. It has to be emphasized in this sense the need to offer formative paths that nourish married life and the importance of a laity that provides an accompaniment consisting of living testimony. It is undoubtedly of great help the example of a faithful and profound love made up of tenderness, of respect, capable of growing in time and which in its concrete opening to the generation of life allows us to experience a mystery that transcends us.

The challenge of education and the role of the family in evangelization

The fundamental challenge facing families today is undoubtedly that of education, rendered more difficult and complex by today's cultural reality. What have to be considered are the needs and expectations of families capable of testifying in daily life, places of growth, of concrete and essential transmission of the virtues that provide form for existence.

In this Church can carry out a precious role in supporting families, starting from Christian initiation, through welcoming communities. What is asked of these, today even more than yesterday, in complex as well as mundane situations, is to support parents in their educative undertaking, accompanying children and young people in their growth through personalized paths capable of introducing them to the full meaning of life and encouraging choices and responsibilities, lived in the light of the Gospel.

Conclusion

The reflections put forward, the fruit of the Synodal dialog that took place in great freedom and a spirit of reciprocal listening, are intended to raise questions and indicate perspectives that will have to be matured and made clearer by the reflection of the local Churches in the year that separates us from the Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod

of bishops planned for October 2015. These are not decisions that have been made nor simply points of view. All the same the collegial path of the bishops and the involvement of all God's people under the guidance of the Holy Spirit will lead us to find roads of truth and mercy for all. This is the wish that from the beginning of our work Pope Francis has extended to us, inviting us to the courage of the faith and the humble and honest welcome of the truth in charity.