

St. Paul Inside the Walls Catholic Center for Evangelization
 Madison, New Jersey, USA
 3 December, 2014

What Is The Way Forward? Where Do We Go From Here?

“Some Reflections on the Evangelizing Ministry of St. Paul Inside the Walls in Preparing for the Synod of Bishops Fourteenth Ordinary General Assembly on the "The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and the Modern World" in Rome from 4-25 October, 2015 in the Spirit and Vision of Pope Francis”

1. In No. 33 of *The Joy of the Gospel* Pope Francis says:

Pastoral ministry in a missionary key seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says: “We have always done it this way.” I invite everyone to be bold and creative in this task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization in their respective communities. A proposal of goals without an adequate communal search for the means of achieving them will inevitably prove illusory. I encourage everyone to apply the guidelines found in this document generously and courageously, without inhibitions or fear. The important thing is to not walk alone, but to rely on each other as brothers and sisters, and especially under the leadership of the bishops, in a wise and realistic pastoral discernment.

2. The methodology of the Third Extraordinary Synod was the "See," (starting with listening to the lived experience of married couples) "Judge" and "Act" process. Many commentators have emphasized the fact that the bishops and cardinals publicly disagreed with one another in their attempt to discern what is good for the church. The Catholic Church really has not had this experience since the open debates of the Second Vatican Council. The pope himself supported this open discussion. This is an **on-going process of listening, discussion,¹ dialogue, debate, discernment and proposed pastoral responses** leading up to the Synod of Bishops Fourteenth Ordinary General Assembly to take place in Rome from 4-25 October, 2015. The pope likes to call this process a journey or a path in the spirit of the meaning of the word "synod." He emphasizes, "The synod is not a parliament, it's a protected ecclesial space. And this protection exists so (that) the Holy Spirit can work."²

¹ See the creativity of St. Paul's Young Adult Fireside Chat: Open discussion for young adults that welcomes opposing viewpoints on the great moral issues of our day.

² "Pope Francis Speaks Up on Synod Process – 'It Isn't Over,'" *Catholic News Agency (CNA)*, 30 November, 2014, retrieved on 2 December, 2014,

Pope Francis says that he is open to changing Catholic Church regulations and practices (NOT doctrine) for pastoral reasons, that is, finding a “pastoral solution.” He says if there is a consensus of the recommendations of bishops on the local level (for example, a national or regional episcopal conference) on a particular pastoral issue, change is possible in the context of a process of subsidiarity (decentralization) and collegiality.³

3. Number 39 – “Guiding Engaged Couples in Their Preparation for Marriage” -- in the *Final Report of the Third Extraordinary Synod of Bishops on the Family*:

The complex social reality and the changes affecting the family today require a greater effort on the part of the whole Christian community in preparing those who are about to be married. The importance of the virtues needs to be included, among these chastity which is invaluable in the genuine growth of love between persons. In this regard, the synod fathers jointly insisted on the need to involve more extensively the entire community by favoring the witness of families themselves and including preparation for marriage in the course of Christian Initiation as well as emphasizing the connection between marriage and the other sacraments. Likewise, they felt that specific programs were needed in preparing couples for marriage, programs which create a true experience of participation in ecclesial life and thoroughly treat the various aspects of family life.

ACTION: Lengthen and deepen the pre-marital catechesis. Beginning and advanced training programs for married couple accompaniers (mentor couples) and other facilitators/formators/presenters/trainers. Emphasize Train the Trainers (TOT) Workshops for parishes, schools and marriage programs. Engaged couples SCCs that are both a faith sharing group and a support group. Married couple accompaniers are called upon when needed. This overall approach would insure that the engaged couple not focus too much on the celebration and social aspects of their wedding.

4. Number 40 – “Accompanying Married Couples in the Initial Years of Marriage” – in the *Final Report of the Third Extraordinary Synod of Bishops on the Family*)

<http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/pope-francis-speaks-up-on-synod-process-it-isnt-over-37950/>

³ In an interview with the author at Georgetown University on 9 October, 2014, Father Ladislaus Orsy, SJ confirmed that “affective collegiality” involves a consultative process by the world bishops while “effective collegiality” is involves a deliberative process (decision-making that includes voting to reach a consensus). Francis wants national bishops’ conferences to be more involved in the collegial process and ideally present a consensus view on a particular pastoral topic from the grassroots level. The Holy Spirit works through the consensus of these local bishops.

The initial years of marriage are a vital and sensitive period during which couples become more aware of the challenges and meaning of married life. Consequently, pastoral accompaniment needs to go beyond the actual celebration of the Sacrament (*Familiaris Consortio*, Part III). In this regard, experienced couples are of great importance in any pastoral activity. The parish is the ideal place for these experienced couples to be of service to younger couples, **with the possible cooperation/involvement of associations, ecclesial (church) movements and new communities.**⁴ Married couples need encouragement in a basic openness to the great gift of children. Emphasis on the importance of a familial spirituality and prayer life should lead couples to meet regularly to promote growth in their spiritual life and solidarity in the concrete demands of life. Meaningful liturgies, devotional practices and the Eucharist celebrated for entire families were mentioned as vital factors in fostering evangelization through the family.

ACTION: Lengthen and deepen the post-marital catechesis. Beginning and advanced training programs for married couple accompaniers (mentor couples) and other facilitators/formators/presenters/trainers. Emphasize Train the Trainers (TOT) Workshops for parishes, schools and marriage programs. Newly married couples SCCs that are both a faith sharing group and a support group. Married couple accompaniers are called upon when needed.

5. Numbers 2, 8, 28 and 45 of the *Final Report of the Third Extraordinary Synod of Bishops on the Family*. The Catholic Church should accompany families and couples who are wounded and on the periphery. This includes mercy toward broken and fragile families.

⁴ The official Italian text of this sentence is: “La parrocchia è considerata come il luogo dove coppie esperte possono essere messe a disposizione di quelle più giovani, con l’eventuale concorso di associazioni, movimenti ecclesiali e nuove comunità.”

In the AMECEA Region (Eastern Africa) in general the Catholic Church see the various associations, ecclesial (church) movements and new communities connected to marriage such as Couples for Christ, Faithful House, Family Life Ministries, Holy Cross Family Ministry, Marriage Encounter, Marriage Preparation (Married Prep), Pre-Cana, Pro-Life, Retrouvaille, Small Christian Communities (SCCs), other Christian Family Movements and their various centers and institutes as an important assistance and a big help to the parish. The Catholic Church continue to offer a range of formation opportunities and approaches. There is not a single program/one size fits all approach.

While some priests might see these groups as “sheep stealers” (setting up separate exclusive groups of married couples outside the parish structure), most priests and pastoral agents welcome and depend on these specialized groups in marriage ministry within the parish structure. So the best translation of *concorso* has the contextual meaning of cooperation/collaboration/involvement/assistance/a running along with/with the help of.

Pope Francis' challenge to all Catholics to "evangelize the peripheries and the margined" is a special call. He explains: "Jesus renewed his call to each one of us to become his missionary disciples. May we perceive this call as the most important thing in our lives and share this gift with others, those near and far, even to the distant geographical and existential peripheries⁵ of our world."⁶ No. 20 of *The Joy of the Gospel* states: "All of us are asked to obey the Lord's call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the 'peripheries' in need of the light of the Gospel." This is part of the shift in mission being existential/situational as well as geographical/territorial. No. 120 states: "In virtue of their Baptism all members of the People of God have become missionary disciples.

ACTION: Special outreach programs beginning with listening, accompanying, walking with before teaching (the Emmaus model).

6. Number 2 – "The Gospel of the Family and Family Ministry" -- in the *Report Preceding the Discussion at the Third Extraordinary Synod of Bishops on the Family*).

Vibrant communities exist in parish composed of married couples or entire families who meet regularly, pray together, study and thoroughly discuss the *Catechism of the Church*, read the *Bible* and talk about everyday problems, difficulties and the beauty of life lived in common by couples and treat questions concerning the upbringing of their children. In other words, they strive to combine faith with life. They help each other in times of illness, unemployment or other problems. Many of them participate in the work of *Caritas*. Many help in the preparation of engaged couples for marriage in strengthening their relationship of friendship which is to endure long after their wedding. Groups of young Catholic mothers with young children also accommodate mothers without any religious affiliation or non-believers, thus creating a new form of mission. Families are forming various new communities which assist couples in crisis or help women in existential or psychological difficulty.

ACTION: Special outreach programs beginning with listening, accompanying, walking with before teaching (the Emmaus model).

7. Specialists continue to study the complex social and cultural reality of the USA. In the follow-up/follow-down to the Third Extraordinary Synod of Bishops in Rome in October, 2014 on Family and Marriage it was proposed to emphasis SCCs composed of the following specialized groups:

- Youth (Generation Y 18-22 year olds)

⁵ These existential peripheries and margins are people and situations in pain and suffering.

⁶ Pope Francis, "Message of Pope Francis for the Twenty-Ninth World Youth Day" (Palm Sunday, 13 April 2014), *Catholic Information Service for Africa (CISA) Email News Bulletin*. Issue No. 30, 11 April, 2013.

- Young Adults (Generation Y 23-35 year olds)
- Engaged Couples
- Newly married Couples
- Married Couples with Little Children

These small communities would combine lectionary-based faith sharing and being a support group. The engaged couples and newly married couples could consult married couple accompaniers (mentor couples) when necessary.

8. From an Eastern African perspective: The Chairman of AMECEA⁷ (see bookmark on SCCs in Eastern Africa) Archbishop Berhaneyesus D. Souraphie's intervention on behalf of 11 African counties: The pastoral challenges that face Catholic families in Africa are:

1. **Poverty:** material poverty forces husbands or wives to migrate within countries or go to neighboring countries or abroad, especially in the Arab world. This creates cracks in the marriage bond.

2. **Migration** is also linked to trafficking and also dispersion of children who most of the time spill over to become street children and prone to be trafficked and abused.

3. **HIV/AIDS:** a disease which creates division in the family and frequently divorce. Usually both parents are affected and sometimes both die, leaving children under the care of grandparents. NOTE: 71% of the 35 million people living with HIV/AIDS in the world live in sub-Saharan Africa.

It is very important to understand that these three challenges are interconnected and part of Africa's overall social, cultural, economic and political context and reality.

Online Resources:

1. Vatican Website
www.vatican.va

⁷ AMECEA is an acronym for "Association of Member Episcopal Conferences in Eastern Africa." It is a service organization for the National Episcopal Conferences of the nine English-speaking countries of Eastern Africa, namely Eritrea (1993), Ethiopia (1979), Kenya (1961), Malawi (1961), South Sudan (2011), Sudan (1973), Tanzania (1961), Uganda (1961) and Zambia (1961). The Republic of South Sudan became independent on 9 July, 2011, but the two Sudans remain part of one Episcopal Conference. Somalia (1995) and Djibouti (2002) are Affiliate Members. AMECEA is one of the eight Regional Episcopal Conferences of SECAM (Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar).

<http://w2.vatican.va/content/vatican/en.html> (for English)
http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/index.htm (Synod of Bishops)

2. Origins Online CNS Documentary Service
<http://www.originsonline.com>
3. Google Search
<http://www.google.com>
4. Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website and “Facebook Page”
www.smallchristiancommunities.org

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