

# **Appeal of international reform movements to the Synod Fathers in Rome: “Follow Pope Francis’ way of dialogue and reform!”**

All matters concerning the family and sexual ethics have been an important part of the reflections of our organizations and movements for many years. We were inspired by the renewal brought into the Church by the Second Vatican Council, which we believe has now been taken up very clearly by Pope Francis.

Over the years we have been deeply concerned about the constantly growing gap between the convictions and conscience of a vast majority of the People of God and the doctrinal teaching and pastoral practice of the Magisterium of the Church.

The two synods called by Pope Francis give hope that the time has come for a new fidelity to the Gospel, so that doctrinal teachings are no longer an obstacle to the faithful who want to practice the Christian virtues in family life.

We participated in the dialogue promoted by the two questionnaires of the Office of the Synod in many ways. As a result, in what follows we present our thoughts and proposals to you as the participants in the Synod on the main issues that we believe should be addressed.

## **The fundamental problems of the family**

We are very pleased to note that the first part of the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the 2015 Synod (cp. 12-27) contains a list of the basic problems concerning the family that were hardly discussed in the Extraordinary Synod in 2014. This part of the document seems to realize that previously the focus of attention was too limited, concentrating almost entirely on the issues of married couples themselves. The *Instrumentum Laboris* shows a fuller awareness, mentioning those social and economic factors that very deeply affect many families, such as poverty, social exclusion, unemployment and lack of jobs, migration, the condition of the elderly and the disabled.

The People of God strongly expressed their opinion, in responding to the questionnaires, that the forthcoming Synod should reflect in depth on all these issues.

A further important aspect concerns the issue of the relationship between parents and children, and in general all educational issues. So far, these issues have not been taken up by the Synod; it looks as if the family is conceived as something that concerns only its adult members. Children are mentioned only because they may suffer from a crisis in the relationship between their parents, or as victims of abuse, violence and exploitation (cp. 29). This is not enough!

We ask for a proper consideration of the situation of oppressed and abused children and women. In many parts of the world women are not regarded as equal to men, either in law or in social practices and custom. They do not have the same rights, they are disregarded and ill-treated, and they are the object of gender-based violence. Children’s rights are neglected in numerous ways. For example, in some parts of the world they are seen as commodities or as

cheap workers; they are abducted for military purposes; they suffer all kinds of physical and psychological violence. The Roman Catholic Church must clearly and courageously expose, challenge and oppose such practices, and signal our solidarity with the victims of abuse, the oppressed and the marginalised.

### **The fundamental problems of clerical sex abuse**

The Synod should send a clear message of repentance to the survivors of clerical sex abuse and their families and to the whole Church, many of whom have been devastated by the sexual abuse of children and the institutional Church's protection of paedophiles and the cover-up of their criminal acts from civil authorities. The failures of the institutional Church have resulted in a multitude of further child abuses. The Synod must commit the institutional Church to changing canon law which continues to prohibit bishops reporting paedophile priests to civil authorities unless a State law compels reporting. All who have failed to act to protect vulnerable children must be publicly held accountable for these grave injustices done to children. The Synod must commit to a Christ-like reform of the Church's global governance structures and culture that permitted these abominations.

### **Consultation Process and Composition of the Synod**

We welcome the new way of general consultation, requested by Pope Francis before the first Extraordinary Synod in October 2014, and that has been carried out again in these months leading to the Ordinary Synod in October 2015. It has enabled us all to know the opinions of the People of God better: opinions that are often far from what the Church has proposed concerning family and sexual ethics. The results of the consultations, which regrettably did not everywhere take place in a transparent manner, generally confirmed the desire of the People of God to change doctrinal and pastoral positions, so as to be more attentive to the "signs of the times" and more strongly inspired by the Gospel.

It seems to us that these results suggest that the voting members of the Synod are not fully representative of the Christian people, and are not well equipped to deal with the gravity and complexity of the problems affecting the family of today. We proposed, and expected, that the Synod would be really open to the participation of the People of God, women and men, couples, single parents and groups involved in the issues under discussion. The present composition of the Synod does not reflect the complexities of Catholic families.

The list of members of the Synod, published by the Vatican on 15th September, confirms our observations.

### **Marriage, divorce and remarriage**

A revision of the traditional understanding of the indissolubility of marriage is necessary and urgent: the ideal of indissolubility has to be adapted to the limitations of human beings that can fail, for many and diverse reasons, in the goal of building a marriage that lasts forever.

We all believe that the ideal of indissolubility of the marriage bond represents a personal response to the profound desire for mutual and enduring love: a "never-ending" love. But as for the participation of the divorced and remarried in the Eucharist, the Roman Catholic Church should go back to the practice of the first centuries, which is still followed by the Orthodox Churches. That is to fully admit the couple, divorced and remarried according to

civil law, to all the sacraments and in the Church, after a pastorally supported period of time. They should then be gladly accepted by their Christian community.

The *Instrumentum Laboris* 2015 takes a step forward when it envisages the re-examination and elimination of “the forms of exclusion currently followed in liturgical and pastoral practice ... as well as those in education and charitable activity”. (cp. 120)

So we hope that the Synod will recognize that, for every divorced remarried person, the general principle of freedom of conscience should apply. If the divorced remarried person wishes to receive the Eucharist, he/she must be able to do so without any censorship, direct or indirect, by the Christian community.

Just before the Synod, Pope Francis has signed a *Motu Proprio* about the canonical processes for the declaration of nullity of marriage. Despite our principal criticism of the concept of nullity of marriage we agree with and welcome the simplification of the procedure; and we also welcome the decision placing the judge under the responsibility of the bishop, which will allow for a more pastoral consideration of the issue.

We ask for a proper consideration of the situation of children and women, who are more vulnerable and may be affected from an economic point of view by a decision of nullity.

The Christian community will also have to focus on a new approach to marriages concluded only according to civil law, and to stable partnerships. We should rather concentrate more on the reality of the relationship of the couple and with their children than on the formal aspects of their union, inviting them to the sacrament of marriage.

Priests who have married and ask to be readmitted to pastoral activities should be accepted, so that we all may profit from their experience and abilities.

### **Homosexual individuals and couples**

A revision of the relationship of the Church community with gay people is necessary and urgent.

We think that the opening of the *Relatio post disceptationem* should be retained. What appears in the *Instrumentum Laboris* 2015, as well as the invitation to the Christian community (n. 40 of the questionnaire) to propose to them “ God's will ... in their situation.” is wholly inadequate. Instead, homosexual persons and couples in the Christian community should not only be welcomed expressly, but also invited to be full members of the Church, with every right and every duty, and be given the opportunity to contribute their specific sensibilities to the Church.

Every regulation or discriminatory practice against homosexuals in Church and society should be challenged and opposed.

Homosexuals and their relationships should be accepted by the church, following the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, as well as the Civil laws that are legalising them.

### ***Humanae Vitae***

The teaching of the Magisterium regarding contraception in the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae* has not been accepted by the People of God. Since its publication very many Catholic couples have decided instead to follow their own conscience.

Neither ritually repeating the importance of *Humanae Vitae* nor mentioning it as little as possible nor emphasizing only certain aspects – as in the *Relatio Synodi* and in the questionnaire for the Synod 2015 – will help to bridge the gap.

In the *Instrumentum Laboris* for the coming Synod there is a mild reference to the role of conscience. This is a step forward that we welcome greatly.

If there is too much resistance to revising the teaching on contraception, the Synod should at least remain silent on this issue.

We strongly hope that the Synod assembly will be able to accept the voice of the Spirit moving in the direction of a real change of ecclesiastical and pastoral approaches to all these issues, as has happened many times in the history of our Church.

Brother bishops, let yourselves be enlightened by the Holy Spirit!

Rome, September 2015

*This appeal was initiated by groups organising two international conferences in Rome in November 2015 commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965):*

- ‘Commemorate and renew the Pact of the Catacombs’  
November 11-17, 2015, Info: [www.pro-konzil.de](http://www.pro-konzil.de)
- ‘Council 50: A Church - Inspired by the Gospel - For the World’  
November 20-22, 2015, Info: [www.council50.org](http://www.council50.org)