

ARCHBISHOP'S HOUSE,
WESTMINSTER, LONDON, SW1P 1QJ



25/26 October 2014
30th Sunday of the Year

My brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ

Today I would like to tell you a little about the recent Extraordinary Synod of Bishops held in Rome on the theme of the pastoral challenges facing the family in the context of evangelisation. I was privileged to take part in this two week meeting. I found it a rich and moving experience.

You may have heard or read that this Synod has been about changing the teaching of the Church on marriage, family life or sexual morality. This is not true. It was about the pastoral care that we try to offer each other, the 'motherly love of the Church', especially when facing difficult moments and experiences in family life.

You may have heard that the Synod represented a 'defeat for Pope Francis' or that he was disappointed at its outcome. This is not true. At the end of our meeting Pope Francis spoke at length about his joy and satisfaction at its work. He told us to look deeply into our hearts to see how God had touched us during the Synod, and to see how we may have been tempted away from the promptings of the Holy Spirit. The Synod, he insisted, has been a spiritual journey, not a debating chamber.

In fact, the very word 'synod' means making a walk or a journey together. That's what we did. Our journey was an exploration of all the problems facing the family today, from the effects of war, immigration, domestic violence, polygamy, inter-religious marriages, to cohabitation, the breakdown of marriage, divorce and the situation of those who have ended a valid marriage and entered another union, another marriage. The vastness of the picture and the suffering it represented was, at times, overwhelming.

We also looked at the great joy of family life and the importance of marriage at its heart. We listened to husbands and wives speaking of the difficulties they had overcome, the struggles they face and the deep joy they experience in their mature marriages and family lives. They were moving moments. A lovely description of the family was offered: the family as 'a sanctuary of holiness' with emphasis always on the sharing of prayer at the heart of family life.

Pope Francis set the tone. He asked us to look reality in the eye; to speak openly from the heart; to listen humbly and respectfully to each other. This is what we did. There was no rancour, no contestation. There were disagreements, of course. But he told us to live through the experience with tranquility and trust. And we did. It was a marvellous experience of the Church as a family and of the Church, at this level, hard at work, trying to follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit and express them in carefully chosen words.

During the Synod we worked on various documents which were trying to catch the views and desires of all the participants. By the end I believe we got there. So the Synod ended with a 'Synod Report' on which we voted, paragraph by paragraph. The votes indicated, quite simply, where agreement was more or less total and where it was not. This Report now forms the starting point for the next Synod on the family, to take place in a year's time. The theme of this next Synod, in October 2015, takes us on from where we left off: 'The Vocation and Mission of the Family Today'.

Central to the work of the Synod that has just ended was the desire to strengthen and reinvigorate the pastoral practice of the Church. A central principle for this pastoral care emerged clearly: that in trying to walk alongside people in difficult or exceptional situations, it is important to see clearly and with humility all the good aspects of their lives. That is what comes first. From this point, we learn to move together towards conversion and towards the goodness of life that God has for us and that Jesus opens for us all. This positive approach flows right through the 'Synod Report' and I hope will increasingly shape our attitude towards each other.

This is especially true with regard to individuals who, for example, have decided to live together without marriage, or for Catholics in second marriages. These realities are part of their journey in life and while not in keeping with the pattern the Lord asks of us, their lives are often marked by real goodness. This is the basis for our care of them, for our approach to them, our invitation to them, to come closer to the Church and deepen their faith and attend carefully to its call. We say this confidently because it is within the call of our faith, the call of Jesus to each one of us, expressed in the truth of the Gospel and treasured in the Church, that our deepest happiness is to be found.

There has been much talk about how the Synod reflected on the situation of people of a same sex attraction. There was no suggestion that the teaching of the Church might somehow give approval to the notion of 'same-sex marriage' or that its teaching on sexual morality is to change. However two things were very clear. The first is that we should never identify people by their sexual orientation. Every person is endowed with unique dignity, both as an individual and as a Christian. This dignity is always, always to be respected. Secondly, it is the teaching of the Church that they are not only to be respected but also always accepted, with compassion and with sensitivity (Catechism of the Catholic Church 2358). This teaching has to be translated into loving care, in our daily life in the Church, in our parishes, and indeed in society.

But Pope Francis went a little further. He spoke of 'the Church composed of sinners.....that has doors wide open to receive the needy, the penitent and not only the just.' He spoke about the duty of pastors always to welcome into the Church those in difficult situations or in trouble. Then he corrected himself saying that we, as pastors, were not simply to welcome them but to go out and find them, just as the Good Shepherd did for those who had drifted away.

At the end of the Synod, in his closing address, Pope Francis said this: 'Dear brothers and sisters, now we still have one year to mature, with true spiritual discernment, the proposed ideas and find concrete solutions to so many difficulties and innumerable challenges that families must confront; to give answers to the many discouragements that surround and suffocate families.....May the Lord accompany us and guide us in this journey for the glory of His Name.'

So that is what we must do. I hope, in a while, I will be able to put before you ways in which your prayer and reflection on these themes can be a contribution to this ongoing work of renewal in the life of the Church, in response to the unfailing love of Jesus, under the leadership of Pope Francis and always in union with him.

Yours devotedly

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Vincent Nichols". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

✠ Cardinal Vincent Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster