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Lay groups launch surveys to answer Vatican questionnaire

Brian Roewe | Nov. 16, 2013

While U.S. bishops consider how best and how broad to collect information ahead of a 2014 global bishops' meeting on family issues, several lay Catholic groups took the task into their own hands.

In mid-November, a coalition of 15 church reform groups -- primarily members of Catholic Organizations for Renewal -- created an online survey for U.S. Catholics to offer their thoughts on the preparatory document to the 2014 Synod of Bishops, which will focus on the theme of "pastoral challenges to the family in the context of evangelization."

Before the coalition announced the survey, Marianne Duddy-Burke told *NCR* that the idea emerged from a concern that the U.S. episcopacy would not consult with lay Catholics as they compiled their responses.

"This is a chance for people to have their voice heard," said Duddy-Burke, executive director of DignityUSA, one of the sponsoring organizations.

Other sponsors include the American Catholic Council, Call to Action, FutureChurch, Voice of the Faithful, the Women's Ordination Conference and Fortunate Families.

The survey, hosted online at www.surveymonkey.com/s/SynodOnFamilyUS [1], will remain open for response through Dec. 15. At that point, the coalition will compile and send the responses to four prelates: Archbishop Lorenzo Baldisseri, secretary general of the Synod of Bishops; Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, papal nuncio to the U.S.; Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley, the American representative on Pope Francis' Council of Cardinals; and Archbishop Joseph Kurtz of Louisville, Ky., the newly elected president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The U.S. bishops' conference has set Dec. 31 as a deadline for response from its members, in order to meet the Vatican's request for a summary by the end of January.

Others have launched similar surveys, including the bishops of England and Wales and of Belgium.

Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good on Nov. 1 launched its version (papalsurvey.com [2]) in English and Spanish, sending it to its 30,000 members and posting it online. As of Nov. 12, more than 3,000 people had completed the survey, with more than half of the respondents coming from outside the nonprofit's network.

"We're really trying to make this an articulation of the American Catholic church," Christopher Hale, a senior fellow with Catholics in Alliance, told *NCR*. He said the survey will remain open as long as a steady flow of people continue to respond.

So far, results have shown respondents giving the church adequate marks on teaching about marriage and the family, although with a too narrow, sex-focused scope. Others noted plentiful resources for engaged couples, but fewer for those already married and struggling. The survey also showed mixed responses in outreach to gay

persons, same-sex couples, and the divorced and separated, and a consistent call for a church of mercy.

The survey efforts followed news reports [3] Oct. 31 that the Vatican had sought broad feedback before the 2014 synod. The themes outlined by Baldisseri in the preparatory document touched on "many new situations requiring the Church's attention and pastoral care": mixed or interreligious marriages; single-parent families; views of marriage as temporary; reformulations of the family concept; and media and current cultural influences on the understanding of marriage and family life.

The attached questionnaire [4] expanded these areas into other corners of modern-day family life: the acceptance of natural law concerning marriage and church teaching on family planning; marriage preparation efforts; the reality of cohabitation, separated and divorced-and-remarried couples; and pastoral attention to same-sex couples, marriages and families.

Both the Catholics in Alliance and coalition surveys tweak the original language in their respective surveys to make it more accessible to ordinary Catholics, decisions that have drawn some criticism. Duddy-Burke responded that the coalition survey was less about the data and more about the feedback the open-ended questions elicited.

"What is really going to be heard here is sort of the cries of the people, in some ways when they are talking about their pastoral needs and where they are seeing them being met, and where they're not being met through the church structure," she said.

While the Vatican document was theological in nature, the Catholics in Alliance survey is pastoral, Hale said, as well as comprehensible to a large number of people.

"This is not a poll on doctrinal issues. This is a survey on pastoral experiences," he said, adding that it hopes to highlight the experiences of Catholics in the pews.

The Catholics in Alliance survey condensed the Vatican questionnaire's nine areas and 39 questions into eight questions organized into four areas: the church and family life; outreach to divorced and separated persons; outreach to same-sex couples and gay persons; and being a church of mercy and of welcome.

While the volume of responses has not surprised Hale, some of the answers they've contained have.

"People are really thinking deeply about these issues and want to contribute," he said.

That includes Kristen, 34, of Norman, Okla., who prepared for marriage with her husband at their local parish. After a few years, though, they experienced a "sophomore slump" and found their parish offered little assistance in coping.

"We were prepared well for the wedding, but not for the ups and downs of married life," she said in her response. "We went to an evangelical church nearby to get some help and found it. It would have been great to instead find that kind of help in our own Catholic parish."

Kristen's response showed Hale that when Catholic parishes and priests fail in fulfilling their people's spiritual needs, they'll turn to other sources. Still, a broad theme throughout has shown that the respondents desire to find a space for themselves and others in the church.

"The biggest message I've got from this was American Catholics want to work together with their leadership in moving the church forward," he said.

As part of that, organizers at Catholics in Alliance hope their survey provides a model for bishops to use in their dioceses. A handful of bishops already have begun conversations with Catholics in Alliance, and some dioceses have promoted the survey through their social media channels.

Whether the surveys and ensuing synod result in demonstrable changes in the church remains to be seen, but so far, the discussion surrounding them has brought an unexpected energy around a typically mundane meeting.

"The fact that these questions are being raised, and there seems to be an opportunity to talk about pastoral needs of people in real situations is very exciting for Catholics," Duddy-Burke said.

Some have taken the call for input as a call to return to the church, responses have shown. In that way, Hale said the surveys have become vehicles of the new evangelization.

"Pope Francis has made it clear that the voice of every Catholic matters in the church, no matter how often they practice the faith, there's a home for them here, and we want to re-invite them," he said.

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