

Theologians call church sexual teachings 'incomprehensible,' ask for lay input

Joshua J. McElwee | Nov. 21, 2013 NCR Today

An international group of prominent Catholic theologians have called the church's teachings on marriage and sexuality "incomprehensible" and are asking bishops around the world to take seriously the expertise of lay people in their preparations for a global meeting of the prelates at the Vatican next year.

Church teaching on issues like contraception and same-sex marriage, the theologians write, are based on "abstract notions of natural law and [are] outdated, or at the very least scientifically uninformed" and "are for the most part incomprehensible to the majority of the faithful."

Addressing next year's meeting of church leaders, known as a Synod of Bishops, they say that previous such meetings involved "only carefully hand-picked members of the laity."

Those meetings, they write, "offered no critical voice and ignored abundant evidence that the teaching of the church on marriage and sexuality was not serving the needs of the faithful."

"We therefore urge the Catholic faithful and any other interested parties to share their experience and knowledge with the leaders of the church and to make their thoughts and their concerns known," the academics write in a [statement posted](#) [1] to the European John Wijngaards Catholic Research Centre.

More than fifty academics in a dozen countries around the world have signed the statement so far, including one retired bishop and several members of religious congregations.

Called by Pope Francis last month, the Oct. 5-19, 2014, global bishops' meeting is to focus on the theme "Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization."

Archbishop Lorenzo Baldisseri, the general secretary of the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican, [sent a letter Oct. 18](#) [2] directing bishops' conferences around the world to make preparations for next year's meeting by distributing in parishes and deaneries a questionnaire on Catholics views on church teachings.

Paul Murray, a professor of theology at Durham University in the U.K. who also serves as the president of the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain, said in a phone interview Thursday that the theologians' statement has been distributed to his association's membership.

John Wijngaard, a spiritual author and former priest for whom the Catholic research center is named, Murray said, is a member of the theological association and asked that the statement be circulated to the other members.

"We happily provide that service," said Murray. "Those messages are from one member to the membership rather than from the executive of the association to the membership."

Besides calling for more consultation with lay people, the theologians also claim that church teaching on same-

sex marriage leads to discrimination against gay and lesbian people. They also state that church teaching prohibiting use of artificial contraception must be reformed.

Regarding gay and lesbian people, the theologians state that the church "has still done very little to foster the acceptance of persons with alternative sexual orientations as dignified members of the church and society."

"The task of educating the faithful to respect all human persons who do not conform to one's own personal expectations, especially when those persons are living honorable lives, is yet to begin in the majority of Catholic parishes," the state.

Regarding church teaching on contraception, the theologians state: "Church leaders need to realize that the time has come to reform this teaching."

"It should be left to the conscience of every couple to find a responsible manner of regulating fertility that is appropriate for their own particular situation," the say.

"While some forms of avoiding conception may be considered less than ideal, these should not be labeled 'intrinsically evil,'" they continue. "Such terminology confuses more than it enlightens. The use of responsible contraception should not be considered matter for the sacrament of reconciliation."

Murray said his group's decision to circulate the statement does not mean they are endorsing its proposals.

"It holds no weight of commendation from the committee or the executive of the association," he said. "Had a member asked us to send around a position that was advocating a traditionalist line on the teaching that would have been circulated also as a message from a member to the membership."

Among the more prominent names signing the statement, which was drafted by Catholic University of Louvain emeritus professor Joseph Selling, are:

- Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, a retired auxiliary of Sydney, Australia, who previously taught canon law at the Catholic Institute of Sydney and led the Canon Law Society of Australia and New Zealand;
- Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Sandra Schneiders, an emeritus professor of theology at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, Calif., who is known for her writings on women religious;
- David McLoughlin, a senior lecturer at Newman University in Birmingham, U.K., and a former president of the Catholic Theological Association of Great Britain.
- Ursula King, an emeritus professor of theology at the University of Bristol's Institute for Advanced Studies in the U.K. who is known for her work on gender issues in religious contexts.

Wijngaard, a native Indonesian who lives in the Netherlands, resigned from his priestly ministry in the 1990s in protest to church teaching prohibiting the ordination of women to the Catholic priesthood.

His website is inviting other scholars to sign their statement and is also providing a forum where people can write responses the Vatican's Oct. 18 questionnaire.

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[1] <http://www.johnwijngaards.org/statement/>

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