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Vatican: Bishops must consult 'grass roots' on family synod

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In responding to a Vatican directive to listen "as widely as possible" to Catholics' views on issues like contraception, same-sex marriage and divorce, bishops globally must gather information from the "grass roots" of the faithful, the Vatican official overseeing the process said Friday.

The consultation, being taken in preparation for a 2014 Vatican meeting of Catholic bishops from around the world on issues of family life, cannot be limited only to the bishops' advisers, Archbishop Lorenzo Baldisseri told *NCR*.

"The consultation must gather information from the grass roots and not limit itself to the level of the Curia or other institutions," said Baldisseri, the general secretary of the Vatican's synod of bishops.

"Though involved in the process, they must cooperate by addressing themselves to the faithful, to communities, to associations and other bodies," he said.

Baldisseri was responding to email questions from *NCR* concerning his Oct. 18 request [1] that bishops worldwide prepare for next year's meeting by distributing a questionnaire [2] on family topics "as widely as possible to deaneries and parishes so that input from local sources can be received."

Pope Francis has called the meeting of bishops, known as a synod, for Oct. 5-19, 2014. The meeting will focus on "Pastoral challenges to the family in the context of evangelization."

Baldisseri's Oct. 18 questionnaire asked the individual bishops' conferences to question their populations on topics that sometimes have sharply divided the U.S. church, like the Catholic teaching prohibiting the use of artificial contraception, the possibility of a divorced Catholic to remarry or receive Communion, and the number of young people choosing to live together before marrying.

While bishops in some parts of the world have taken the questionnaire on as a national initiative -- the national office for the bishops in England and Wales posted one survey online -- bishops in the U.S. have been responding to the questionnaire in different ways.

Although at least 46 U.S. dioceses posted some form of the questionnaire online by Nov. 22 [3], others have yet to do so.

In his email Friday, Baldisseri said his office has not yet received responses to the questionnaire from any of the world's bishops' conferences because they are still gathering information from their individual dioceses and "other ecclesial institutions."

The synod office, he said, has set Jan. 31 as the deadline for conferences to submit responses.

Baldisseri also said his office has not received any requests to clarify the questionnaire from the world's bishops' conferences.

"The questions are clearly stated and the bishops who have been contacted, together with parish priests and other institutions, should have no problem in responding to them," he said. "Until now, we have not received any request for clarification."

Baldisseri said once his office receives the global responses, it will set up a temporary committee of experts to examine and summarize the material sent in.

"As soon as we receive the summary responses prepared by the episcopal conferences, an ad hoc group of experts, chosen by our office, will have the task of examining these responses and making a presentation which is to be a concise, faithful summary of all the responses," he said.

That group of experts, he said, "will then be challenged to direct work on a fitting, exhaustive and faithful summary" of the responses that will be used to create the formal working document for the synod, known in Latin as the *Instrumentum laboris*.

That first draft of that document will be presented and discussed at a meeting of the synod secretariat at the Vatican at the end of February, he said.

Asked how frequently he consults with Pope Francis in preparation for the synod, Baldisseri said he "will have continual contact" with the pontiff in the months leading up to the October 2014 event.

"Obviously, we are still in the preparation stage, and we will have to wait until the initial weeks of January to have some idea of how the consultation is progressing," he said.

"I would like to say that the consultation is not a survey or referendum," Baldisseri continued. "Instead, it is a request for information, observations and suggestions which must ensure an adequate, concrete response in keeping with the teachings of the church."

Asked his opinion about bishops and national conferences that have decided to make the entire questionnaire available to Catholics online as a survey, Baldisseri said "the questions have been made public and can be utilized as a person sees fit."

"However," he continued, "the seriousness of the consultation must be respected, above all, by treating the topics unbiasedly, completely and [with] all sincerity."

Baldisseri said individual Catholics are welcome to send their responses to the questionnaire directly to the synod office at the Vatican, but "the principal manner for sending individual responses, as specified in the letter of consultation, is to submit them to one's bishop who will then summarize all these responses in his response which he must make and send to his episcopal conference," he said.

"In this way, the principles of subsidiarity and collegiality are respected," he said. "Subsequently, the conference will further summarize all the responses from the individual bishops and, in turn, send its response to the General Secretariat."

Baldisseri also said it would be "preferable" if bishops did not change the questions, "which were assiduously prepared" by the synod staff at the Vatican, when using the questionnaire in their dioceses.

"Should bishops wish to adapt the questions to situations in their dioceses, they must do so by always respecting the content of the questions themselves," he said.

The topic of reformatting the questions was addressed at the U.S. bishops' annual meeting in November, when the American prelates held a 30-minute discussion [4] on the matter.

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