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Irish bishops: Vatican synod questionnaire reveals challenges families face

Dennis Coday | Mar. 18, 2014
Synod on the Family

The Irish bishops have reversed their decision not to issue a public statement [1] about the results of the survey they conducted for the Vatican on family life.

The statement they issued March 13 about the survey, which was meant as preparation for a world Synod of Bishops on family life scheduled for October, underscored the centrality of healthy family life to the mission of the church and acknowledged "the immense challenges faced by families in Ireland."

Challenging Irish families, the bishops said, are "problems arising from severe financial hardship, unemployment and emigration, domestic violence, neglect and other forms of abuse, infidelity" and limited state support for marriage and the family.

The bishops also acknowledged that church teaching can sometimes be a challenge, with some respondents seeing the teaching "as disconnected from real-life experience."

"Many ... expressed particular difficulties with the teachings on extra-marital sex and cohabitation by unmarried couples, divorce and remarriage, family planning, assisted human reproduction, homosexuality. The church's teaching in these sensitive areas is often not experienced as realistic, compassionate, or life-enhancing."

The bishops said they have a responsibility "to present faithfully the church's teaching on marriage and the family in a positive and engaging way, whilst showing compassion and mercy towards those who are finding difficulty in accepting or living it."

The bishops conclude by encouraging "all the faithful to engage in continued dialogue and discussions in these critical areas." They announced that the Irish Bishops' Council for Marriage and the Family will host a conference on the family and marriage June 14.

The bishops decided to issue the statement after they discussed the survey and the October Synod of Bishops during their annual spring meeting in mid-March. They decided to issue the statement "to acknowledge and thank the faithful who participated in the survey," Martin Long, spokesman for the Irish bishops, told *NCR* on Tuesday.

When the bishops' conference sent its report of the survey to the Vatican in February, they said the results were "a matter for the Synod of Bishops and not for the local Church."

But at least two bishops broke the silence before the March statement.

Archbishop Michael Neary of Tuam published a report of his consultation with the local church in his *New Dawn*

magazine, released Feb. 20. Dublin Archbishop Diarmuid Martin spoke about the survey Feb. 27 during a meeting at Holy Cross College, the major seminary in Dublin.

Neary reported that church teaching "is, for the most part well understood, but not generally accepted." Some "structural changes in society" have been "positive for family life and should be welcomed while others are seriously damaging," he said.

"In a society that has become 'less domestic friendly,' " Neary also found a strong call for the church "to support and cherish all family life in all its stages and struggles and difficulties."

At Holy Cross College, Martin said Catholic teaching on birth control, cohabitation, same-sex relationships and divorce is "disconnected from real-life experience of families -- and not by just younger people."

Many of the survey respondents in Dublin "said that the teaching appears as not practical in relation to people's day-to-day struggles, being at best an unrealistic ideal. There appears to be a 'theory-practice' gap," he said.

While clearly there was among the respondents "hesitancy, uneasiness and opposition" to same-sex marriage, "many felt that there should be some way of civilly recognizing stable same-sex unions," he said.

Brendan Butler, co-convener of the reform group We Are Church Ireland, welcomed the statement from the bishops' conference, calling it "a change of heart."

"Pressure from the Irish Catholic faithful brought about this 'metanoia,' " Butler told *NCR* on Monday. "People pointed to the conferences of the German, Swiss and Japanese bishops who were not afraid to assert their episcopal autonomy to be transparent and accountable to their Catholic people."

During the papacy of Francis, Butler said, Irish Catholics didn't want to hear that the Irish bishops were refusing "to divulge what, after all, were the studied views of the Catholic people who expected to be informed rather than be told that the old order of strict clerical secrecy still prevailed."

"Thankfully the Spirit of God's openness won out," he said. "Maybe now other bishops' conferences will equally respect the *sensus fidelium* of their Catholic faithful and publish their people's considered views."

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