

## Editorial: Obstacles riddle synod on the family's path

NCR Editorial Staff | Jul. 30, 2014

Synod on the Family

Editorial

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*Editor's note: The 50-page instrumentum laboris, or working document, that was released June 26 and will guide the discussion during the October Synod of Bishops on the family was dry and impersonal, lifeless almost, and that confounded us at NCR.*

*From personal experience and from listening to colleagues, readers and friends, we have experienced marriage and family life as life-giving and joyous. Marriage and family life is not without its challenges and struggles; it offers ample lessons in humility and forgiveness, but that, too, at the best of times can be nurturing. If the writers of the instrumentum laboris, which is now supposed to be being studied in dioceses throughout the world, had begun with the fundamental experience of people who have lived in marriages and raised families, we wondered, how different would it have been?*

*So we asked two NCR contributors to answer this: If the Synod of Bishops asked me about marriage, what would I say? On Monday, [we ran Mike Leach's response](#)[1]. On Tuesday, [Melissa Musick Nussbaum's](#)[2]. Today, we editorialize.*

Church leaders, looking around the contemporary landscape, concluded that marriage is under assault in an unprecedented way, and they're determined to fix it right now.

That assessment and desire are apparent throughout the 50-page *instrumentum laboris*, or working document, for the Synod of Bishops on "The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization," scheduled for this October at the Vatican. The instinct may be understandable, even commendable, but the pathway to fulfilling it is riddled with complex obstacles. The bishops, unfortunately, seem unaware of the most threatening obstacles, many of them inherent in the very culture out of which they work.

Since Pope Paul VI established the format in 1965, the Synod of Bishops has met 13 times in ordinary sessions, twice in extraordinary session, and has also held 10 "special" meetings focused on issues in specific areas of the globe. The gatherings have produced little that was unexpected. They have been benign at best and regressive at worst. The bulk of them occurred during the reign of Pope John Paul II, who seemed to have had little concern that his final documents summing up the content of the meetings bear any resemblance to what had actually been said. They were, in the end, his synods, and they would conclude what he wanted them to conclude and ignore the questions he wanted the church to ignore.

We are led to expect more authenticity from a Pope Francis-inspired synod if for no other reason than that he seems far more tolerant of questions and real dialogue than his predecessor.

Accordingly, the *instrumentum laboris* for the upcoming extraordinary session (a second, ordinary session dealing with the same subject will be held in October 2015) bears some remarkable observations and questions on such topics as natural law and divorced and remarried Catholics.

It is imperative, however, to first understand the culture in which the synod mentality is rooted. As diverse as the issues and personalities involved in meetings of bishops from around the world, a common thread binds all of these gatherings. They have been, without exception, organized by, participated in and interpreted for the world by a tiny representation of humanity, celibate and exclusively male, whose careers have been largely dedicated to maintaining the status quo in a very exclusive fraternity.

The disparity between those who will be doing the talking and deciding and those who will be talked about -- the *instrumentum* is concerned primarily with married men and women, as well as homosexual persons -- is, in this instance, particularly glaring.

Not to make too light of the matter, but imagine a synod on the clerical state in which ordained males were only tangentially consulted, and in which they were essentially barred from any direct involvement in the shaping of the conversation or in the conversation itself.

The problem is quite evident on the first page of the introduction to the *instrumentum*, which explains that during the first phase in 2014, "the synod fathers will thoroughly examine and analyze the information, testimonies and recommendations received from the particular churches in order to respond to the new challenges of the family." In the second phase in 2015, the work will continue by a representation of "a great part of the episcopate."

All of those men will consider answers to a questionnaire submitted by "synods of the Eastern Catholic churches ... episcopal conferences, the departments of the Roman Curia and the Union of Superiors General."

Actual families are finally mentioned as among those -- dioceses, parishes, movements, groups and ecclesial associations -- permitted to submit responses categorized as "*observations*." For some reason, the word is italicized in the text.

The point is easy to make. The whole exercise might have a bit more credibility if actual families -- wives, husbands, mothers, fathers, people who had raised children, their own biological children as well as adopted children -- had some direct input. This project is in need of the experience of other than vowed and celibate men and women who have given themselves to a way of life markedly different from that of most families in the modern world.

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The second major obstacle is the synod's fundamental point of view that marriage, unlike, say, the clerical state, is in particular trouble and needs the church's special attention in order to figure out how to combat all the "-isms" assaulting it. A significant truth resides in the critique of those who see marriage and the family mightily challenged by contemporary mores of consumerism, greed, individualism, secularism, hedonism and relativism.

It is fair to ask, however, how much more families are in trouble today than they were, say, during the past century, when twice the world was aflame and subject to almost unimaginable manifestations of hatred, bloodshed and disregard for other humans, and for decades the globe teetered on the brink of nuclear annihilation.

Finally, how effective might a synod be in its consideration of marriage and the family when, again, the celibate

men of the institution insist on rules regarding contraception that much of the community has consistently rejected for more than 50 years?

A section of the document abounds in the church's soaring rhetoric about marriage, analogizing it to the Trinitarian love of God and Christ's relationship with his church. Marriage is called "the great mystery" and a fundamental "community of love."

But when discussing sex, the deepest human expression of enduring love between two people, humans are reduced to the level of baboons, their only legitimate purpose for engaging in sex the production of more little humans. Love and procreation are reduced to biological necessity. And if that is not the primary intent of every sexual act, then the marriage is fundamentally flawed in the church's eyes.

The working paper for the synod claims the reason the teaching is rejected is because of lousy catechesis. Lots of married people would tell the synod it's because of even worse theology and anthropology. The men making the rules really don't understand the profound joy and endless implications of conjugal love in an enduring, committed relationship. They don't understand, in any ongoing, experiential way, that fundamental "community of love." It is about far more than producing offspring. Responsible parenthood involves so much more than making certain that each instance of sexual expression could result in another child.

Nor does the paper address at all what marriage could mean for those unable to conceive, or those who marry beyond their childbearing years. And dare we mention the reality that keeps pressing on us with a logic that seems to be accepted more and more by segments of the community -- homosexuals in a committed, loving relationship?

Perhaps the dynamic of unintended consequences that accompanied the meetings of the Second Vatican Council 50 years ago will be at play in these meetings, and we'll be treated to a much deeper and creative discussion of these issues than seems possible at the outset.

As hinted above, some encouraging signs poke through the lengthy *instrumentum*, and two are particularly relevant here. The first is the more than two-and-a-half pages spent on the term "natural law" and the fact that the concept "turns out to be, in different cultural contexts, highly problematic, if not completely incomprehensible."

One might add that it is incomprehensible not only because of varying cultural contexts but also because, on a more basic level, it is an outdated way to approach many of these issues.

The preparatory document also promises a robust and overdue discussion of people in "canonically irregular marriages" and how to approach them with a greater emphasis on "mercy, clemency and indulgence towards new unions."

Finally, there is hope that the gatherings will expand on the document's few mentions of the church's need to look at itself, especially the scandals and clerics who live lavishly. It will be worth the discussion if it leads, as it should, to a deeper examination of that culture. In fact, the argument could be made that that discussion and examination is far more urgently needed than another set of documents trying to get married Catholics to follow all of the rules.

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