



# IN AN AGE OF CONFUSION, THE CHURCH SEEKS CLARITY

## Perspectives on Marriage, Family, and the Synod

As we prepared this issue, the long-awaited October 4-25 Bishops' Synod on the Family was beginning. We decided to offer a number of reflections which would be valid no matter what happened at the Synod, in order to put the proceedings in some sort of context. Therefore, we asked several thoughtful Catholic writers to help us understand the issues.

In the pages that follow, we publish the reflections of canon lawyer Edward Peters; authors Thomas Storck

and Alice von Hildebrand; Director of the apostolate Courage, Fr. Paul Check; and Catholic marriage and family counselor Dr. Gregory Popcak. All offer perspectives on some of the underlying issues affecting the "crisis of the family" — a crisis the Synod convened by Pope Francis will advise him on how to address. These reflections all bear, in various ways, on the basic, fundamental question behind all the debate: How can Catholics — the institutional Church as a whole, but also each one of us individually — best answer Christ's call for us to convert from sin, yet also be merciful to sinners?

## THE CHURCH GRAPPLES WITH THE "GOVERNING CHARISM" OF THE EPISCOPACY

Why "an important chance for bishops to help the Pope" may be lost...

■ BY DR. EDWARD PETERS

September 2015 marks fifty years since the Synod of Bishops first shouldered its way onto the ecclesiastical stage. In the closing weeks of the Second Vatican Council, Blessed Paul VI — preempting what threatened to be a protracted debate on how papal-episcopal collegiality should be structured — established the Synod of Bishops with a strong institutional slant toward helping bishops help popes. The original synodal norms in *Apostolica sollicitudo*



Synod of 2012 on the New Evangelization were those bearing purely episcopal authority) until this episcopal side of the Church's governing charism erupted, most uncomfortably, during the Extraordinary Synod of 2014. While the assembled bishops' objections to what was experienced by them as manipulation by *curialistas* were themselves ultimately a manifestation of episcopal solicitude for the well-being of the

(1965) left it for popes to control, for example, the topics discussed by bishops at synods, the manner by which episcopal discussions should be pursued, and what use, if any, might be made of synodal deliberations in ecclesiastical governance. Canons 342-348 of the current Code of Canon Law preserve these papal prerogatives for synods; at times these constraints result in tension on the synod floor.

But despite the pro-papal bias of synodal regulations, the *episcopal* side of the

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divinely-mandated, papal-episcopal co-responsibility for Church governance (as recognized in Canons 331 and 336) had lately been coming into greater relief in synodal activity (note, for example, that the only clear synodal documents to come from the

Church, the manner in which this collegial care came across might have startled some into attempting still tighter reins on episcopal initiatives during a synod. And that would be regrettable, as follows.

Whether he meant to or no, Pope Francis has, in regard to some fundamental questions of Church doctrine and discipline, set blocks of bishops against blocks of bishops, and that prelatical clash must now be allowed to play out. Stifle the free expression of desires for a relaxation of Church teaching against civil divorce and

Opposite, Pope Francis poses with members of the Roman Rota to mark the start of the judicial year at the Vatican. The Rota is a Vatican-based tribunal that deals mainly with marriage cases (CNS photo/L'Osservatore Romano)

remarriage or for greater access to the Eucharist by those living in irregular unions, and the Pope risks, among other things, alienating most of the world's secular media (whose speed and power in shaping global thinking is still under-appreciated in the Vatican), offending a great many Catholics who have been convinced by the secular media that change is coming, and perhaps even provoking a formal schism among Northern European Catholics.

On the other hand, run roughshod over those articulating traditional teachings about marriage, divorce, and holy Communion, and the Pope risks demoralizing great numbers of active, practicing Catholics, especially in America and Africa, two demographics without which it would be hard for any pope to govern a world Church effectively.

Those holding Christ's teachings on marriage and divorce, and the Church's discipline on sin, repentance, and Holy Communion, to be settled matters, regret that the next synod seems destined to be a struggle for the defense of these teachings and disciplines against dilution from within. They would much prefer to see bishops grapple with, say, 'same-sex marriage,' the contraceptive mentality, or even the anachronistic requirement of canonical form for marriage, instead of listening to neo-pharisaical attempts to avoid the plain meaning of our Lord's words on marriage. But Canon 342 directs a synod "to assist the Roman Pontiff with the counsel" by considering "questions pertaining to the activity of the Church in the world" and right now, it seems, advice about proclaiming the basic teachings of Christ on

the permanence of marriage is of primary concern.

Finally, to this already volatile mix of marriage, divorce, and Communion controversies, the Pope has just added revolutionary norms on annulments in his *motu proprio Mitis Iudex*. Diocesan bishops, almost none of whom were consulted regarding their ability and willingness to take on direct judicial duties in annulment cases, will soon be expected to judge certain annulment cases personally. Now, hundreds of bishops will be in attendance at the next synod. If they do not ask for, at the least, a delay in the implementation of the more radical aspects of *Mitis*, the changes portended by these new procedures will no longer be a purely papal project and, I think, an important chance for bishops to help the Pope will be lost. ◻

## MORE THAN ONE WAY TO DESTROY A FAMILY

There is another side to moral and legal attacks on the family — economic pressure

■ BY THOMAS STORCK



Economic adversity can destabilize family life: Two young girls receive food at an outdoor soup kitchen in Washington. During tough economic times, children bear some of the heaviest burdens because of increased family stress, according to an annual study of child well-being (CNS photo/Jim West). To the left, Aristotle and Pius XI (1922-1939)

Since the 1970s, marriage and the family in the United States have definitely been under attack. Easy divorce, the ubiquity of pornography, a media culture that does little or nothing to support marriage...these are just a few of the obvious culprits in this attack, all of which have captured the attention of Catholic activists during the last several decades. And all of them are worthy of our attention. But there is a curious silence about the fact that whatever moral or legal dif-



Thomas Storck, an American Catholic scholar and writer, is known for his work on Catholic social teaching and how the economy affects family life

ficulties the family may be undergoing, there is another side to this attack which is equally deserving of our attention and action. For the family, like all humanity, depends upon a material basis without which it cannot flourish. Long ago Aristotle pointed out that for most people virtue is nearly impossible without sufficient material resources. All the

good laws, all the good examples, all the moral exhortations, will hardly avail much if a family is struggling to obtain its needs of food, housing, medical care and the like.

Pope Pius XI's 1930 encyclical *Casti Conubii* is often praised for its outspoken condemnation of contraception, divorce and such evils, but it is not usually remembered that in the same encyclical the Pontiff insisted that:

...such economic and social methods should be adopted as will enable every head of a family to earn as much as...is necessary for himself, his wife, and for the rearing of his



children.... To deny this, or to make light of what is equitable, is a grave injustice and is placed among the greatest sins by Holy Writ; nor is it lawful to fix such a scanty wage as will be insufficient for the upkeep of the family in the circumstances in which it is placed. (# 117)

And the Pontiff continued with the observation that because of a lack of material resources, "it is patent to all to what an extent married people may lose heart, and how home life and the observance of God's commandments are rendered difficult" (# 120).

Human beings are creatures of body and soul, and if we wish to promote family health, we cannot ignore our bodily needs. Since about 1975, wages in the United States have largely been stagnant, and the benefits of productivity have mostly accrued to the very wealthy - the top 10% or even 1%. The eco-

nomical ill effects of this for families have been masked to some degree by the entrance into the paid labor force of wives and mothers, but the social and moral effects cannot be hidden so easily. We fool ourselves if we think that we can remedy these ill effects solely by moral exhortations, or even by private charity, if we do not take steps to restructure the economy so as to "enable every head of a family to earn as much as...is necessary for himself, his wife, and for the rearing of his children."

Pope Francis, like his predecessors, has given considerable attention in his writings, especially in *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Laudato Si'*, to the injustices and inequalities produced by our economic system.

Thus the Fathers of the upcoming Synod on the Family, if they take a comprehensive view of the state of the family in the world today, cannot avoid paying attention to the economic basis for family life. While suffi-

cient income or resources do not guarantee flourishing families, for most people they are essential prerequisites, and any concern for family welfare that ignores their economic needs risks being hollow and even hypocritical.

For Catholics the question can hardly be clearer. We have a rich tradition of teaching by the Church's Magisterium which tells us how to organize a just social order.

Too few Catholics know that this teaching exists, and, what is much worse, there are some who deny that it has any authority or relevance.

If the Synod teaches with the clarity and authority of the entire line of Popes up to and including Francis, then perhaps it will help focus our attention on the necessary material basis for family welfare, a topic as important as those that have claimed our attention for the last thirty or forty years. ○

## CHRISTIAN ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE CHURCH'S SEXUAL ETHICS

Men and women who struggle heroically with same-sex attraction are "signs of contradiction" who must be heard

■ BY FR. PAUL CHECK

"No" is the word most often associated, in many minds, with the Catholic Church and the topic of homosexuality. As the civil authority in many countries attempts to redefine marriage, and where terms like "justice" and "discrimination" are not understood according to the natural moral law, the Church faces, at a minimum, a tremendous public relations burden. Her ministers must defend natural and sacramental marriage in the public square, but their sermons may be heard as attacks on people with homosexual tendencies. She begins most conversations about homosexuality on the defensive, facing the difficult task of proving a negative: "The teaching of the Church is not insensitive, homophobic, medieval, unfair, etc."

Many people have, predictably, and regrettably, stopped listening.



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Human nature does not change, as St. John Paul II made plain in *Veritatis Splendor* (no. 53). Therefore, authentic pastoral charity begins with intellectual charity, a proper and precise understanding of the human condition: man is wounded by Original Sin, but redeemed by Jesus Christ. The most quoted line from *Gaudium et Spes* (no. 22) lays the best foundation for pastoral charity in all its forms: "Christ the New Adam fully reveals man to himself and his most high calling." We can only live well if we first know who we are, and only Christ and his Church can fully instruct us in our

identity.

The Cross and the very real challenges of life notwithstanding, peace and fulfillment—not merely satisfaction or contentment—will never be found apart from Christian anthropology and the Gospel. "I have told you these things that my joy may be in you and your joy

Opposite, logo used by the Vatican during the celebration of this year's Synod on the Family. Below, *Susanna and the Two Elders*, by Paolo Veronese, in the Louvre in Paris, and *John the Baptist in the Desert* by the Master of Bern, c. 1495, now in the Kunsthhaus in Zurich

may be complete," Jesus said. (Jn 15:11) What are "these things"? Prohibitions and commands are not the heart of the Church's moral theology. Love is...love of God and love of neighbor, which the virtues and grace make possible for our fallen human nature. (cf. Jn 15:10) And, as *Gaudium et Spes* reminds us, love and fulfillment are found in self-gift and sacrifice. (no. 24)

The grammar of today, however, is not the natural law or Christian anthropology. Nor is the Church's moral theology, especially in sexual ethics, always welcome. So another approach is needed to begin the conversation on homosexuality. But let's consider two other things before I offer a suggestion about such conversations.

The fourth Joyful Mystery of the Rosary and the first of Our Lady's Seven Sorrows are the same moment: the Presentation of the Child Jesus in the Temple, where Simeon describes Jesus as both a "sign of contradiction" and "a light to the Gentiles" (Lk 2:34, 32), and he prophesies that a sword will pierce Our Lady's heart, even as the *Nunc dimittis*, a hymn of peace, is said for the first time in the Church's history. In fidelity to the Master, Christians cannot escape being signs of contradiction, but the Master has also promised us the peace Simeon experienced: the peace the world cannot give or take. (Jn 14:27)

Secondly, when he introduced *Veritatis Splendor* in 1993, then Cardinal Ratzinger praised chapter three of the encyclical, entitled, *Lest the Cross of Christ Be Emptied of Its Power* (I Cor 1:17), as among "the great texts of the Magisterium." Chapter three is the encyclical's pastoral and practical application of its scriptural and doctrinal core. The pastoral wisdom and encouragement that chapter offers might be summed up this way: in a fallen world, to testify to the truth in word and deed, out of love for Jesus Christ and for souls, will necessarily bring suffering...but only in the fidelity of the Crucified and Risen Savior can man find freedom and fulfillment. St. John Paul cites two of Sacred Scripture's heroes who enfleshed trust and a willingness to sacrifice themselves out of love for God: Susanna from the Old Testament and St. John the Baptist from the New Testament. Both were courageous in their commitment to chastity, and they drew others to the truth by their testimony. Thus would I suggest conversations addressing the Church's teaching on homosexuality might usefully begin with the testimony of men and women who are signs of contradiction and who have trusted in the

power of the Cross. These men and women have learned, often through pain and suffering, that Christian anthropology and the Church's sexual ethics mark the narrow path away from harm and toward fulfillment...not in a nice neat way, but in the way of the Crucified and Risen Savior. Life is by no means easy for them, but there is much joy to complement the sorrow.

They would not think of themselves like



this, but they are among today's heroes of the Gospel story, generally living hidden and quiet lives, in service and in fellowship with other like-minded people. Especially edifying is their belief that they are not members of the "Church of the saved," but members of the "Church of the striving," as Msgr. Ronald Knox said. They understand that the "no" of the Church's teaching falls within a much larger "yes" that is the invitation of Jesus to all of us in our human weakness, an invitation to which we must daily respond.

Along with Blessed Pope Paul VI, they believe that the Church is "an expert in humanity." They do not measure the teachings of the Church according to their personal experience. They measure their personal experience according to the teachings of the Church, and per Christ's promise, they find this liberating.

(cf. Jn 8:32) Even though such understanding does not vanquish their struggle, it gives that struggle meaning and purpose...and hope.

They are compelling witnesses to the truth because they have a credibility the world recognizes: they have been in the often hard and sometimes punishing school of experience. Grace has brought them to the field hospital of the Mystical Body, where they have encountered the Crucified and Risen Lord. They have much to teach us.

The voice of men and women with same-sex attractions who trust that what the Church teaches is true and leads to fulfillment has not been widely heard. They are signs of contradiction, even to some in the fold, because their feelings or inclinations, strong though they may be, do not convince them of the road to happiness. They may comprise a minority, but so did the Twelve Apostles. They "put a face" on what the *Catechism* says about homosexuality, and for that reason, they are our best ambassadors. They guide us away from sentimentality and to authentic Christ-like compassion, which flows from the truth of the human person and opens the soul to the efficacy of grace.

A final point. The connection between contraception and homosexual acts deserves consideration here: the approval and spread of deliberately sterile sex in marriage will logically lead to the approval and spread of deliberately sterile sex elsewhere. But for now, we refer to other wisdom from *Humanae Vitae*, also recalled by St. John Paul in *Veritatis Splendor*: "While it is an outstanding manifestation of charity towards souls to omit nothing from the saving doctrine of Christ, this must always be joined with tolerance and charity, as Christ himself showed by his conversations and dealings with men. Having come not to judge the world but to save it, he was uncompromisingly stern towards sin, but patient and rich in mercy towards sinners." (HV 29)

Humble souls who know they are the beneficiaries of the Lord's mercy are compelling witnesses to the goodness of God. They testify to Christian anthropology in a way that will never seem sterile, but will strike many as an authentic and beautiful light to the world. Their voice will provoke reflection and lead others to a change of heart. Their journey to and with the Lord is not complete, and they look to the Church for Jesus' love and strength. Shall we accompany them, and encourage them to persevere, even as they inspire us? ○