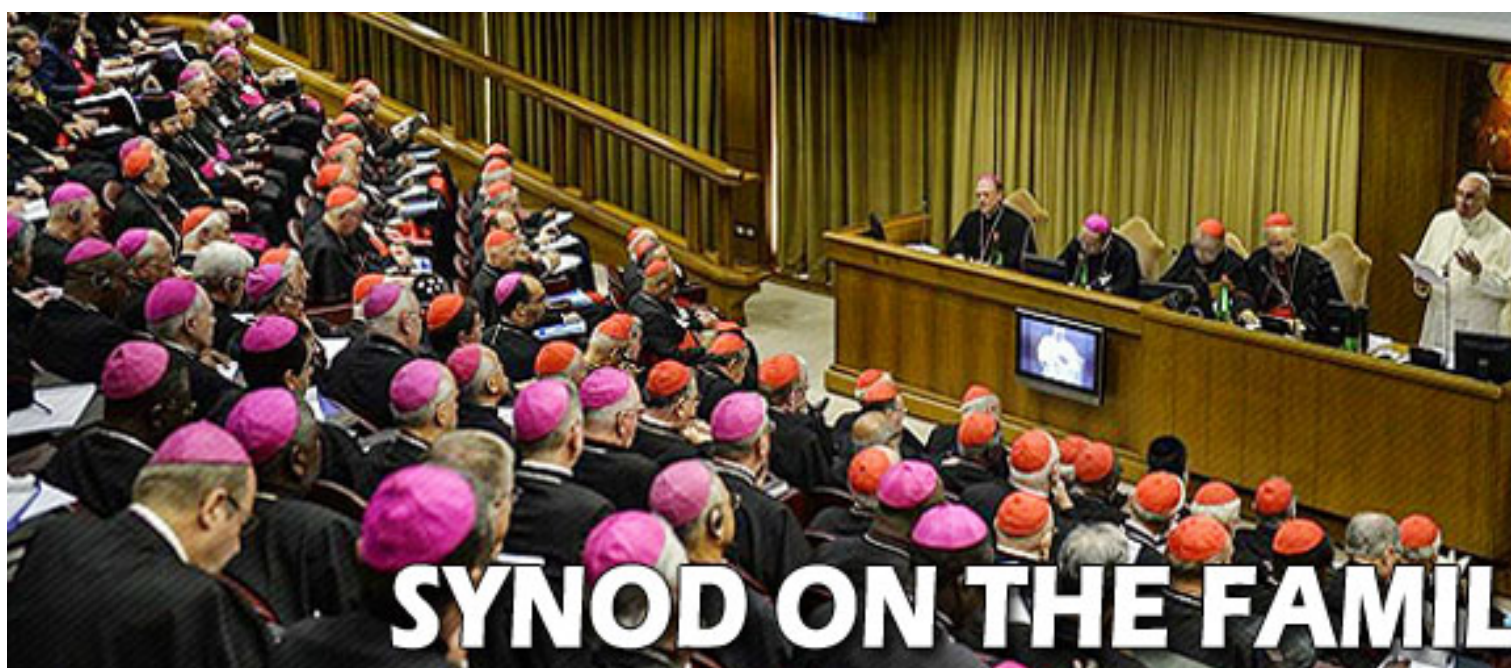


Vatican asks for wide input on 2015 synod on the Family

Synod on the Family

VATICAN CITY For the second time in two years, the Vatican has asked national bishops' conferences around the world to seek input from Catholics at "all levels" about how the church should respond to sometimes difficult questions of modern family life, such as divorce and remarriage.



Issuing a document in preparation for a second worldwide meeting of Catholic bishops on family life next year, the Vatican has also stressed the need for mercy in responding to such difficult situations -- even asking the bishops to avoid basing their pastoral care solely on current Catholic doctrine.

The call for input came Tuesday in a document released by the Vatican's Office for the Synod of Bishops, which in October 2015 will to host the second of two global bishops' meetings called by Pope Francis for 2014 and 2015.

The document is partly a summary of the last meeting in October and partly a series of 46 questions meant to help prepare for the next synod. The Vatican synod office is sending the document in coming days to bishops' conferences around the world.

In its preface, Tuesday's document states that the questions are aimed "an in-depth examination of the work initiated" at the last synod.

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"The proposed questions which follow ... are intended to assist the bishops' conferences in their reflection and to avoid, in their responses, a formulation of pastoral care based simply on an application of doctrine, which would not respect the conclusions of the Extraordinary Synodal Assembly and would lead their reflection far from the path already indicated," the document states.

Quoting the final document from the 2014 synod, it continues: "It is a matter of re-thinking 'with renewed freshness and enthusiasm, what revelation, transmitted in the Church's faith, tells us about the beauty, the role and the dignity of the family.' "

"For this purpose, the episcopal conferences are asked to choose a suitable manner of involving all components of the particular churches and academic institutions, organizations, lay movement and other ecclesial associations," the document states.

Later in the document, the instructions to the national bishops' conferences are made even more explicit when the Vatican's synod office tells them to involve "all levels" of the church in their analysis of the questions provided.

"It is important to be guided by the pastoral approach initiated at the Extraordinary Synod which is grounded in Vatican II and the Magisterium of Pope Francis," the document states later.

"The episcopal conferences have the responsibility to continue to examine ... thoroughly and seek the involvement, in the most opportune manner possible, all levels of the local Church, thus providing concrete instances from their specific situations," it continues.

"Every effort should be made not to begin anew, but to continue on the path undertaken in the

Extraordinary Synod as a point of departure," it states.

The 2015 synod is to be held Oct. 4-25, 2015, at the Vatican on the theme: "The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and Contemporary World." It follows the 2014 synod, held Oct. 5-19, on the theme: "Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization."

The 2014 synod, known as an extraordinary synod, mainly involved the presidents of the world's bishops' conferences. The 2015 synod, known as an ordinary synod, is to be much larger, involving several elected representatives from each bishops' conference.

The 2014 synod was likewise preceded by a questionnaire sent to bishops' conferences around the world, which spurred a massive response from the conferences and also from lay Catholics globally.

Tuesday's document includes the final document of the 2014 synod as a Lineamenta, or an initial preparatory document for the 2015 synod. It then has eight pages of questions, 46 queries in all, to be used by the global bishops' conferences in studying the 2014 synod document and in preparing for the 2015 synod.

Beyond quoting from the final 2014 synod document, the questions also quote extensively from Francis' apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* ("The Joy of the Gospel"), stressing common themes of Francis' papacy so far, such as mercy and being a church that goes to the peripheries of society.

One of the 46 questions takes the theme of mercy head-on, asking: "How can people be helped to understand that no one is beyond the mercy of God and how can this truth be expressed in the Church's pastoral activity towards families, especially those which are wounded and fragile?"

The questions for the bishops' conferences are split into three parts, following the sections of the 2014 synod's final document. In the final series of questions, the bishops are asked to consider how the church cares for "wounded families," such as single-parent families or those who are separated or divorced and remarried.

Recapping discussions at the 2014 synod, the document states: "The Pastors at the Synod asked themselves -- in an open and courageous manner but not without concern and caution -- how the Church is to regard Catholics who are united in a civil bond, those who simply live together and those who, after a valid marriage, are divorced and remarried civilly."

Quoting *Evangelii Gaudium*, the document continues: "In the synod discussion it was evidenced the need for a pastoral line based on the art of accompaniment, 'the pace of [which] must be steady and reassuring, reflecting our closeness and our compassionate gaze which also heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life.' "

One question asks: "Is the Christian community in a position to undertake the care of all wounded families so that they can experience the Father's mercy? How does the Christian community engage in removing the social and economic factors that often determine this situation? What steps have been taken and what can be done to increase this activity and the sense of mission which sustains it?"

Another question addresses the situation of divorced and remarried persons specifically, saying: "With regard to the divorced and remarried, pastoral practice concerning the sacraments needs to be further studied, including assessment of the Orthodox practice and taking into account 'the distinction between an objective sinful situation and extenuating circumstances.'"

"What are the prospects in such a case?" that question asks. "What is possible? What suggestions can be offered to resolve forms of undue or unnecessary impediments?"

Current doctrine prohibits Catholics who are divorced from remarrying without receiving an annulment of their first marriage. While such Catholics are currently prohibited from receiving Communion, the 2014 synod discussed that prohibition in light of practices in the Eastern Orthodox churches that allow for second, non-sacramental marital unions.

Tuesday's document also addresses a question to the bishops about pastoral care for gay people, but calls them "persons with homosexual tendencies."

"The pastoral care of persons with homosexual tendencies poses new challenges today, due to the manner in which their rights are proposed in society," the document states.

"How can the Christian community give pastoral attention to families with persons with homosexual tendencies?" the document asks. "What are the responses that, in light of cultural sensitivities, are considered to be most appropriate?"

"While avoiding any unjust discrimination, how can such persons receive pastoral care in these situations in light of the Gospel?" it continues. "How can God's will be proposed to them in their situation?"

The Vatican document also touches upon the church's prohibition of the use of contraception, outlined in Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*.

"What are the most significant steps that have been taken to announce and effectively promote the beauty and dignity of becoming a mother or father, in light, for example, of *Humanae Vitae* of Blessed Pope Paul VI?" the document asks. "How can dialogue be promoted with sciences and biomedical technologies in a way that respects the human ecology of reproduction?"

Among the range of other questions directed at the bishops' conferences, the Vatican also asks:

How church teachings might better be promoted and known.

"The Church's Magisterium in all its richness needs to be better known by the People of God," the document states. "Marital spirituality is nourished by the constant teaching of the Pastors, who care for the flock, and grow through their continual attentiveness to the Word of God and to the sacraments of faith and charity."

"What initiatives in catechesis can be developed and fostered to make known and offer assistance to persons in living the Church's teaching on the family, above all in surmounting any possible

discrepancy between what is lived and what is professed and in leading to a process of conversion?" the document asks.

How the Catholic theological notion of the indissolubility of marriage can better be respected.

"What is being done to demonstrate the greatness and beauty of the gift of indissolubility so as to prompt a desire to live it and strengthen it more and more?" the document asks.

"How can people be made to understand that Christian marriage corresponds to the original plan of God and, thus, one of fulfillment and not confinement?" it asks at a different point.

How the church might provide "pastoral care" to those living together outside of marriage.

"What criteria in a proper pastoral discernment of individual situations are being considered in light of the Church's teaching in which the primary elements of marriage are unity, indissolubility and openness to life?" the document asks.

"Is the Christian community able to be pastorally involved in these situations?" it asks at a different point. "How can it assist in discerning the positive and negative elements in the life of persons united in a civil marriage so as to guide and sustain them on a path of growth and conversion towards the Sacrament of Matrimony? How can those living together be assisted to decide to marry?"

The Vatican has so far published Tuesday's document online only in Italian, but it is expected to be translated into various languages before being sent to the global bishops' conferences.

The episcopal conferences are expected to be given some months to organize their responses to the document's questions, which are to be sent to the Vatican's synod office in order to be used to create a working document, known formally as an *Instrumentum Laboris*, for the 2015 synod.

Responses to the questionnaire for the 2014 synod somewhat overwhelmed the Vatican synod office: It received tens of thousands of pages of responses from bishops, lay groups and lay people.

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Source:

<http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/vatican-asks-wide-input-2015-synod-not-based-doctrine>

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