

Marriage, Family, and the Extraordinary Synod

October 12, 2014

By Rev. Joseph Koterski, S.J.

Twenty-eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Readings: Isaiah 25.6-10a;

Philippians 4.12-14, 19-20;

John 22.1-14

Every three years since the close of the Second Vatican Council there has regularly been a synod of bishops. It is not a meeting of all the world's bishops like a council, but only of representatives from each episcopal conference. The themes of these meetings have varied, and at some point after each the pope has written an apostolic exhortation with his own reflections on the topic at hand. The first extended writing that we have from Pope Francis is of this sort, *Evangelii gaudium (The Joy of the Gospel)*, which not only offers Francis's commentary on the synod about the New Evangelization that was held while Benedict XVI was still in office, but also provides a window to the likely agenda for the new pontificate by virtue of its stress on renewing the Church's missionary zeal as crucial to the New Evangelization.

The Extraordinary Synod

Occasionally there have been extraordinary synods, and one is taking place at this very time. Significantly, the topic chosen for this meeting – “Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelization” – calls for reflection on marriage and family, and specifically for reflection on these subjects in light of the New Evangelization.

Given the steady pressure from some quarters to have the Church radically change her teachings on family and marriage so as to suit certain value trends typical of secular modernity (on contraception, for instance, or on same-sex unions), this choice of topic is a bold, albeit risky, selection. Some people have worried that even opening up a discussion about marriage and family in this way might fuel expectations that there will be shifts in the Church's teachings, just as the deliberations of the commission set up by Pope Paul VI prior to his encyclical *Humanae vitae* prompted speculation that the Catholic Church would follow the Anglicans in accepting contraception.

But every signal from Pope Francis thus far only confirms that he has no interest in reneging on the Church's teachings about contraception or on any other matter touching upon family, marriage, or sexuality. Rather, he sees the need for vigorous evangelization in this area, and thus seems ready to build on the initiatives of Pope John Paul II's theology of the body and Pope Benedict's *Deus Caritas Est*, with its vision of real charity as the common root of the Church's teachings on love, marriage, and family, on the one hand, and on the proper organization of society, on the other.

Social and Spiritual Crisis

As the preparatory document that announced this extraordinary synod states, “the social and spiritual crisis, so evident in today's world, is becoming a pastoral challenge in the Church's evangelizing mission concerning the family, the vital building-block of society and the ecclesial community.” The purpose of this extraordinary synod is to determine the state of the question and to elicit proposals from the bishops as an advance preparation for the next ordinary synod (to be held in 2015), which is to develop guidelines for the pastoral care of the person and the family.

We will do very well to pray with some intensity for the success of this gathering. Happily, the passages from the scriptures that the Church uses for this Sunday provide us with some guidance for considering this topic. At the core of today's readings is a focus on the goal of evangelization that are crucial in any age: We need to accept willingly and fully the message of Christ, if we want to enjoy happiness with God forever in heaven.

We find an allusion to this theme, for instance, in the reading from Isaiah, with its picture of the banquet of heaven ("a feast of rich foods and choice wines") in a place where God will "destroy death forever" and "wipe away the tears from every face." Likewise, in the passage from Matthew's gospel, Jesus uses a parable about a king who throws a grand wedding banquet for his son. When some of those invited make excuses and will not come to the banquet, the king sends messengers to the highways and byways, eager to fill his halls with guests. All those whom his servants can find are invited, "bad and good alike," so long as they will change into appropriate wedding attire.

This passage has long been understood as normative for the Church's missionary program of evangelization. The gospel is to be carried to all parts of the world. It is not reserved to any one people or culture, and all will be welcome. But to be welcome one must embrace the saving doctrines that Christ taught (one must put on "the wedding garment"), and not think that one's ordinary apparel (one's preferred opinions, untutored by the Church's teachings about the message of Christ) will suffice.

Timeless Truths

We live in an age of media spin. But as Catholic Christians living in this culture at this time, we dare not think that some media spin on the timeless truths that God has revealed in moral matters is any more valid than, say, the media spins that try, in one way or the other, to distort the founding principles of the American Constitution. Admittedly, our Constitution is a human document, crafted by human genius. But the principles that it uses for establishing a government of ordered liberty through a division of powers deserves our respect. It is not to be tinkered with lightly. Whatever opportunists might suggest to the contrary, the preservation of this form of government demands that we practice restraint so as to preserve the delicate balance needed for this country to remain a democratic republic. All the more so do we need to be steady and faithful when it comes to the higher loyalties we owe to Christ and the Church.

What Pope Francis has called for in this extraordinary assembly of bishops is profound reflection on the challenges that we face about marriage and family. The questions that he posed for discussion on the basis of the experience of Christians around the world – questions on which he has asked for widespread consultation – are not (as media spins have sometimes suggested) a call for revolution, for overturning what are truly non-negotiable principles of Catholic teaching in regard to marriage and family. The questions to be considered at this synod are invitations for us to go deeper in our understanding of the fundamental teachings of Christ.

The pope has asked for reflection about the nature of marriage in general and about Christian marriage in particular. These are questions about the role of the family in the evangelization of the world and the sanctification of every human person. Francis is clearly eager that everyone will have the resources of the Church and her sacraments in their efforts to reach the heavenly banquet.

Real Ways to Help

Among the issues that the synod will need to face is the situation of those who have remarried after divorce. In the section of the preparatory document that lists the problems of the present age needing special attention at the synod is this statement, which some have taken as a hint that the Church is preparing for some big change in her teaching:

By simply calling to mind the fact that, as a result of the current situation, many children and young people will never see their parents receive the sacraments, then we understand just how urgent are the challenges to evangelization arising from the current situation, which can be seen in almost every part of the “global village.”

Charity clearly requires that pastoral care be provided, but it would be a false compassion even to suggest that the Church could ever sanction adultery by giving a permission for remarriage to those who are still in a valid Christian marriage, whatever their status before civil law might be. It seems far more reasonable to think that Pope Francis envisions the demands of real mercy and of the gospel to consist of finding real ways to help such families understand the nature of Christian marriage.

Such couples might, for instance, be better encouraged to join others in the community who are unable to receive the Eucharist but instead come up in the communion line to receive a blessing, with arms folded across their breasts. Real help might well mean special catechesis for the children of such families. Real help might well mean making the possibilities for annulment better known and the procedures even more accessible.

The reason for having confidence that this is the sort of pastoral help that the pope intends to consider in this extraordinary synod comes from the later paragraphs in the preparatory text, including this one:

Jesus Christ restored the beauty of matrimony, proposing once again the one plan of God which was abandoned because of the hardness of the human heart, even within the tradition of the people of Israel (cf. Mt 5:31-32; 19:3-12; Mk 10:1-12; Lk 16:18). Returning to the beginning, Jesus taught the unity and faithfulness of the husband and wife, refuting the practice of repudiation and adultery.

Later paragraphs in the document cite other parts of scripture, important texts from Vatican II, and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The following quotation from John Paul II's *Familiaris consortio* is typical:

The only “place” in which this self-giving in its whole truth is made possible is marriage, the covenant of conjugal love freely and consciously chosen, whereby man and woman accept the intimate community of life and love willed by God himself (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 48) which only in this light manifests its true meaning. The institution of marriage is not an undue interference by society or authority, nor the extrinsic imposition of a form. Rather it is an interior requirement of the covenant of conjugal love which is publicly affirmed as unique and exclusive, in order to live in complete fidelity to the plan of God, the Creator. A person's freedom, far from being restricted by this fidelity, is secured against every form of subjectivism or relativism and is made a sharer in creative Wisdom (*Familiaris consortio*, 11).

Let us pray for this extraordinary synod and for the upcoming synod in 2015. What we need from God is inspiration about how to make well known and attractive these timeless truths about marriage and family as part of the work of the New Evangelization.

About the Author

Rev. Joseph Koterski, S.J. teaches philosophy at Fordham University and is president of the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars. Among his recent publications is An Introduction to Medieval Philosophy: Some Basic Concepts (2009). He has produced lecture courses on Aristotle's Ethics, on Natural Law and Human Nature, and most recently on Biblical Wisdom Literature for The Teaching Company, and courses on Spiritual Theology and on John Paul II's Veritatis splendor for the International Catholic University.

FOR FURTHER READING

2014-2015 Synods of Bishops on the Family, available at:

<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/marriage-and-family/2014-2015-synods-of-bishops-on-the-family.cfm>

Jim Graves, "Archbishop Kurtz: Synod Can Be 'a Catalyst' for Renewal," Catholic World Report (August 4, 2014), available at:

http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Item/3290/archbishop_kurtz_synod_can_be_a_catalyst_for_renewal.aspx

John Paul II, Familiaris consortio, available at:

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/

Rev. Joseph Koterski, S.J., "The Upcoming Extraordinary Synod," Fellowship of Catholic Scholars Quarterly 37, no. 1/2 (Spring/Summer 2014), available at:

<http://catholicsscholars.org/QuarterlyMain.php>

Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelization, Preparatory Document, available at:

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20131105_iii-assembly-sinodo-vescovi_en.html

Presentation of the Instrumentum Laboris for the Next Synod Assembly in October, available at:

<http://www.news.va/en/news/presentation-of-the-instrumentum-laboris-for-the-n>

Presentation of the Preparatory Document for the Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod on Pastoral Challenges for the Family, available at:

<http://www.news.va/en/news/presentation-of-the-preparatory-document-for-the-e>

IN SHORT . . .

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- ***But every signal from Pope Francis only confirms that he has no interest in reneging on the Church's teachings, but instead sees the need for vigorous evangelization.***
- ***The gospel is for everyone, and all will be welcome.***
- ***But to be welcome one must embrace Christ's saving doctrines; one's merely preferred opinions, untutored by the Church's teachings about the message of Christ, will not suffice.***
- ***It would be a false compassion even to suggest that the Church could ever sanction adultery by permitting remarriage for those who are still in a valid Christian marriage.***
- ***Real mercy requires that we find real ways to help families understand the nature of Christian marriage.***