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Response to the Questionnaire in Preparation for the Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on The Family and Evangelisation

The Swedish Justice and Peace Commission invited people to answer the questionnaire as published on the web-page of the Conference of The Bishops of England and Wales. The following is a summary of the answers received before the 16th of December 2013.

1. The Diffusion of the Teachings on the Family in Sacred Scripture and the Church's Magisterium

Many people do not know about the teachings on the family in detail and are mostly reading secondary literature or comments on the official documents. The teaching is often perceived as devoid of mercy towards those who for different reasons have failed in their marriages and family lives. The divorced, those who have remarried without having obtained annulment of their first marriage, those who are living in homosexual partnerships or young people living in cohabitation often feel discriminated against in the teaching of the church. There is hardly any kind of pastoral care for these groups of people in the parishes.

In general, the teaching on fidelity between two partners is accepted and appreciated. But it is rather the lack of comprehensiveness towards those who fail that is badly perceived.

In some parishes there is a good preparation for marriage and baptism where family life is contextualised and problematized. But in other places, the official teaching is just presented without any questioning.

People outside the church, in the surrounding society, have great difficulty in understanding the sacramentality of the marriage. It is perceived as rigid and lacking charity. Faithfulness is highly valued but only as far as the partners can live in peace with one another.

Another thing which is not understood by the surrounding society, and also by many Catholics, is the prohibition to use artificial contraceptives. Many people don't see the difference between natural family planning and artificial contraceptives as the intention is the

same, not to get pregnant. Some Catholics would also advocate the use of contraceptives in order to avoid unwanted pregnancies and abortions.

The issue of the use of contraceptives is also connected to the widespread habit of pre-marital sexual relationships and cohabitation, especially among young people. Many of these young Catholics will finally settle in marriage and family life, but during their sometimes very long periods of university studies they see this kind of life as responsible especially in relation to future children.

2. Marriage according to the Natural Law

Catholic lay people in general do not use the concept of Natural Law, only some academics. One serious problem with this concept is also that ordinary people, and academics, would interpret the Natural Law in a wider sense than what is done by the official teaching of the Church. This means, for example, that love between two homosexual partners is judged in the same way as between two heterosexual partners. This does not automatically mean that people would affirm a sacramentally valid marriage between two homosexual partners. The importance here is rather that there should be a juridical protection of the individuals in a civil union or partnership.

3. The Pastoral Care of the Family in Evangelization

The significance of good marriage preparation has increased at least in some parishes. In some places, the future couples meet to share their faith and questions. As a consequence, the awareness of the family as the “domestic Church” has been promoted.

The success of transmitting faith depends on a good collaboration between families and the parish. If the preaching, in the wide sense, is perceived as being too far away from the reality in which the young are living there will simply not be a transmission of a sustainable faith. This is even more so where celebrations are carried out in Latin and where young girls and boys cannot take an active part in the liturgy. Many young people are alienated from their local parishes and they quite often feel that they are not needed by the Church.

There are too few role models of families where all members are actively taking part in the evangelization of the parish.

Some parishes offer groups for couples in crisis or already divorced persons.

4. Pastoral Care in Certain Difficult Marital Situations

As already mentioned above, cohabitation ad experimentum is a pastoral reality in our context. Roughly 60% of the couples taking part in groups of marriage preparation are already living together, some of them would also come to these groups with their children.

Partnerships can be registered civilly, both homosexual and heterosexual partnerships. We are lacking any statistics but it is very common.

Separated couples, divorced and remarried, is a strong reality in our context. There are hardly any pastoral programmes for these groups, at least nothing on a diocesan level. Some parishes offer very good support groups for separated and divorced persons.

There is a lot of suffering among the faithful who are living in difficult marital situation. Many feel ostracised in their parishes, by their parish priest as well as by other more “successful” couples. There is very little mercy or tenderness shown here. Many people who are living in these situations turn to other church communities where they are welcomed. Many practising Catholics are of the opinion that this is a very unethical position of the Catholic Church.

Among the divorced and remarried some would receive the Eucharist, especially in places where they are not known. However, many of them are suffering from not being able to “officially” receive the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Many Catholics consider it rather cruel that these persons cannot receive the Sacraments as they often have gone through the most painful moments in their lives.

To handle this problem is not only a question of canonical practice. The Church is more in need of a change of attitude, a conversion, to recognise that the sacraments are there as a healing of a broken communication between God and weak human beings. The sacraments are not for the “perfect”, for the self-justified persons, but for the sick and wounded people. If this is lived concretely then we will also find juridical solutions to these situations.

There is no specific ministry for separated, divorced or remarried couples even if individual priests sometimes are doing a good pastoral work among these persons. Unfortunately, God’s mercy does not seem to be proclaimed to these people, rather we hear too many condemnations from the pulpit.

5. On Unions of Persons of the Same Sex

There is a law recognizing civil unions for people of the same-sex. The majority of the protestant ecclesial communities are also marrying homosexual partners within the church context. On a juridical level the civil unions for people of the same-sex are equal as a marriage.

These civil unions are accepted by the vast majority of people in society and by the majority of the ecclesial communities. In the Catholic Church it depends on the parish priest if people living in civil unions are accepted or not. There is a wider tolerance towards homosexual persons today, although many of the immigrant priests and most of the orthodox communities do not accept persons who openly declare their sexual orientation.

The pastoral attention towards this group should be the same as for everybody else. This would be especially true if the couple has adopted children.

6. The Education of Children in Irregular Marriages

It is very difficult to give any statistics on this point. There are many testimonies of children who have been refused to go to their first communion because of one or both of their parents

living in “irregular situations”. When such things happen, other children and their parents tend to turn to other ecclesial communities for catechesis and communion even before approaching the parish priest.

7. The Openness of the Married Couple to Life

Practising Catholics will almost certainly evaluate different methods of family planning. However, they will do this from their conscience which is nurtured by the teachings of the Church, but also by natural and social sciences. The general opinion is that children have a right to be longed for, even if unplanned children very often are much loved. But as long as the society is not equal between men and women it is all the more necessary to practice safe methods of family planning. If not, it is almost always the woman who has to take the ultimate responsibility for the child.

The question how an increase in births could be promoted is considered a bit surprising. The challenge is rather to create good conditions in which each child and all children could be raised socially, economically, culturally and religiously! And in our country, the relatively high nativity rates depend on an excellent child care allowing both parents to have a professional work and long parental leave for either of the parents with very good economic compensation.

8. The Relationship between the Family and the Person

Jesus Christ reveals the mystery and vocation of the human person. How can the family be a privileged place for this to happen? If the family is characterised by its faith and Christian love in a spirit of mutual respect and communion, if the family leaves behind all authoritarian power structures and practice a democratic dialogue and shows comprehension towards each of its members, then this can happen.

A person’s encounter with Christ can be obstructed if he or she is brought up with authoritarian methods and if the child experience double moral standards.

Crisis of faith can be destructive as well as creative not only for the person but also for his / her family. In these cases, spiritual guides in the Church can be of great help to the individual and to the family.

9. Other Challenges and Proposals

If the Church shall be respected in its evangelisation it has to get rid of all authoritarian structures and abuses of power on all levels. Trustworthiness goes together with an honest humility today. All representatives of the Church have to practice a sincere dialogue, especially with those who are poor, those who have failed in their family life or in their professional life. You will never become an authority in the right sense if you are authoritarian in your behaviour.

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