
"Let the holiness of God shine forth" (cf. Mt 5, 16)

item 274

'end indifference and engage'



Pope Francis waves to members of the media as he leaves a morning session of the synod on family issues, at the Vatican.

Photograph: AP Photo/Alessandra Tarantino

Anyone trying to understand the interim discussion document which emerged from the Synod on the Family this week could do worse than read a [blog post](#) by young American mother Calah Alexander, even though it was written two years ago.

She describes being a crystal meth addict, trying to get her life together when she discovered she was pregnant. She was not Catholic, but she and her Catholic boyfriend started talking to a Cistercian priest. They wanted to get married, but the diocese that they lived in did not allow couples in their situation to marry until the baby was at least a year old. Calah talks about how living apart for the year would have been really, really difficult for her, given her state of emotional and mental instability. Her boyfriend was working almost full time while trying to finish a degree, and could not afford two households. Calah worried about how she would parent the baby virtually alone.

People were full of advice. Live like brother and sister, they were told. Calah wryly notes that this is widely acknowledged to require heroic virtue from even the most virtuous, "yet the likelihood that two people who hadn't attempted to live virtuous lives, basically ever, would be able to accomplish it was somehow not of interest to solicitous advice-givers". The Cistercian priest spent hours with them, individually and alone, trying, as she says, to help them begin to build a foundation "that might one day support a solid family".

He was with them for the long haul, gently, firmly, nudging them towards taking responsibility, but not expecting them to jump straight to sainthood. As part of the process, he suggested that they have a civil marriage, and not to live as brother and sister, because he believed that it would put too much of a strain on them at a tumultuous and difficult time.

Some staunch Catholics were horrified, and avoided their company. Their parish refused to baptise their daughter. When Calah applied to enter the Catholic Church, a couple who did marriage preparation for the diocese recommended that she not be received into the Church.

Baby steps

Through it all, their priest went out to bat for them, baptising the baby, writing letters to the bishop, and constantly, gently supporting them as they took baby steps towards stability and faith. Calah and her husband made it, insofar as any of us make it, in that they are now a practising Catholic family with four gorgeous kids. They stumble through the haze of exhaustion small children bring, trying to love each other, their children, and their God.

That's an example of gradualism – helping people edge their way towards a very high ideal, loving them where they are, and always, always reminding them that there is another step on the road, but you don't have to take it alone.

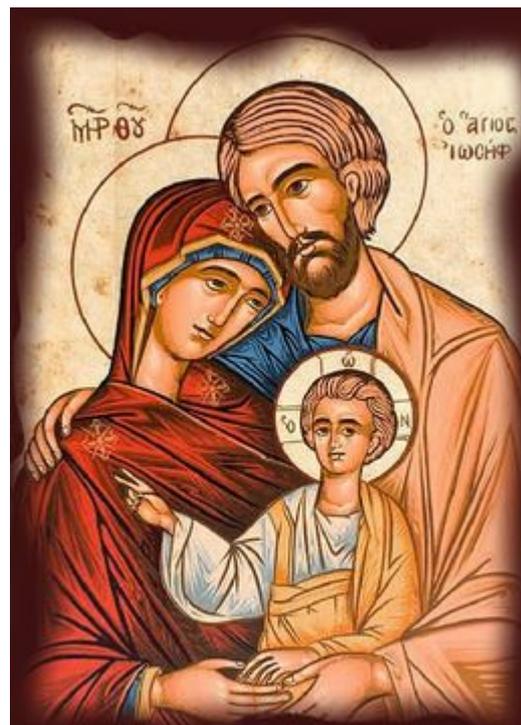
Grown-up discussion

Pope Francis called for discussion on family life, and we are getting it, but we have not been used to grown-up discussion in the Catholic Church. Instead, we have been excellent at mutual excommunication and caricature.

Much of what the document says has been given zero coverage – like this sentence that declares the importance of clearly denouncing “the cultural, social and economic factors, for example, the excessive room given to market logic, that prevent an authentic family life, leading to discrimination, poverty, exclusion, and violence”.

As for the much-quoted passages on homosexuality, they are asking questions without easy answers, but they are really important questions.

As the document asks about gay people, “Are our communities capable of providing that, [welcoming home] accepting and valuing their sexual orientation, without compromising Catholic doctrine on the family and matrimony?”



Sexual orientation is not the sum of a human being, but it is an important part. The document is suggesting that we need to be able to accept people for who they are, yet without compromising key Catholic teachings.

Calah Alexander and her young husband-to-be were not able to put the whole of Catholic teaching on sexuality into practice at first, but they wanted to do their best for their baby. Who acted like Christ, the priest who listened to them and helped them grow or the people who were horrified at their inability to fulfil all of the requirements?

And yet, their Cistercian priest also didn't tell them they were wonderful and that they didn't need to change a thing. The modern idea of mercy is often actually just thinly disguised indifference – not really caring enough about other people to support or indeed, challenge them.

Pope Francis is calling us to end that indifference and to start to engage with people. It's hard, messy work, but work that will eventually decide the success or otherwise of any family synod.

Breda O'Brien - The Irish Times

courtesy Rory Hanly sac [IR] – Rome – ITALY

20.10.14

hanlyrory@gmail.com

my thoughts on the family Synod

Recently I was having a discussion with one of my friends about marriage and family life. He narrated to me an incident where he had an intellectual debate with a woman, a lawyer by profession, who had separated from her husband and was living with another man. The woman's argument was: 'I love Jesus and I frequent Holy Mass, but why is the Church not allowing me to receive Holy Communion?'

My priest friend tried his best to explain to her the Church's teachings on marriage and the family but she wouldn't buy the arguments. She felt that the Church was just condemning her and refusing her communion with Jesus Christ. My friend told me that for the first time he was feeling defeated by her arguments as she had some valid points. Just then, he said, a simple example came to his mind; he told her that we cannot be under water and breathe at the same time – the law of nature doesn't allow us to do both simultaneously. That was when the woman started seeing the point of the Church's teaching. She understood that the two aspects in her life she was arguing for could not be combined or lived concurrently.



In fact this is just one incident! But priests are facing a lot of pastoral challenges like these nowadays in their pastoral ministry. I was very happy that Pope Francis called an Extraordinary Synod on the family, keeping in mind the coming Ordinary Synod on the same subject that will take place in 2015. I was very excited about the family Synod as I am a student of **John Paul II Institute of Marriage and Family**. The media provided very good coverage of everything surrounding it. A lot of excitement was created yet, at the same time, it tried to attack Catholic teaching so much that, at one point, one of the Cardinals had to say that this Synod is not about divorce but about family! We need not get carried away by the secular media.



There were many debates even before it commenced. These continued during the Synod creating a big divide among theologians. Some were very liberal and wanted more changes in the Church's teaching on marriage and the family; others were very faithful to the Church's doctrine. Even though, with the help of the media, many radical ideas sought to manipulate the Synod the influence of the Holy Spirit was altogether more powerful.

After the first week a draft Statement was released, but it was heavily criticized and the Synod fathers were forced to publish a new and amended Concluding text.

Issues that were highlighted were not necessarily common to the whole world. Each continent presented a different picture. Certainly there were shared issues but each Cardinal tried to highlight those more pressing in his own individual place and culture. Asia emphasised interreligious marriages. Europe, America and Australia expressed concerns on homosexuality and remarriage after divorce. The Middle East highlighted persecution, Latin America raised concerns about gang wars that affect families; Africa raised health issues that are impacting their families etc. One thing though which was very obvious is that the Church is showing great concern for families affected in all these various ways, and it is concerned about those marginalized and ostracized by society. It is trying to reach out to all because all are called to experience the mercy of God.



I would like to reflect on the whole Synod experience using the parable of the prodigal son. For me the elder son represents committed Catholics who live their marriage and family life faithfully and the father is pleased with them. The younger son represents those who, of their own freewill, chose a path that is disordered. The father is extremely merciful to those sons and daughters who find themselves outside the family fold. He is willing to receive them back with even greater joy. The Church today is showing such a merciful heart to those who have gone away from the family.

One noticeable thing was that differences of opinion amongst Cardinals were quickly picked up by the mass media, often giving wrong signals to simple God-fearing families and adding to their confusion. My greatest fear today is that this Synod could lead into another schism in the Catholic Church as there was open disagreement.

The Church is supported in every age by the Holy Spirit, promised to her by Christ himself (Jn 15:26). Therefore, whenever the Church faces great challenges in evangelization, she has the assurance that God is willing to accord her the graces needed for her mission. The Church's teaching on marriage, divorce, human sexuality, and chastity can be hard to receive. Christ himself saw this when he proclaimed it. However, this truth brings with it an authentic message of freedom and hope: there is a way out of vice and sin. There is a way forward that leads to happiness and love.

Recalling these truths, the Church has reason to accept the task of evangelizing families in our own age with joy and hope.

Nelson Rodriguez sac [BA] – Rome – ITALY
27.10.14
nelrod@rediffmail.com

you commented...

on #143 Thanks for these stories of the Korean and Polish martyrs...they're certainly inspiring figures, even if they leave me feeling my (at times) wobbly faith is wholly inadequate. That's where God comes in, I trust!

MB 26.10.14

Both touching stories. With regard to the Polish priest, it would be so easy to say "What a waste of a life" but, what a wonderful outcome with three of his family being graced to respond to their call to the priesthood. Truly, God's ways are not our ways.

MG 28.10.14