

Marginal Man at the Synod

by David M. Thomas, Ph.D.

On Friday, September 26, Pope John Paul II joined 216 bishops from around the world to celebrate a Mass in the Sistine Chapel which signaled the beginning of a World Synod of Roman Catholic Bishops. It was the fifth such meeting since the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). The topic for this Synod was "The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World."

In his opening homily the Pope stated, "We are deeply convinced that through the Christian family the Church lives and fulfills the mission given to her by Christ." He went on to characterize the Christian family not simply as an object of evangelization but also as "the necessary subject for which nothing else can be substituted: the creative subject." It was clear that the Pope saw centered in this topic a set of issues closely related to the basic vitality of the Church. For the next five weeks he would listen to his brother bishops as they related to him the condition of the Christian family in the parts of the world they represented. They would, at the same time, offer to the Church suggestions for enriching the lives of Christians whose vocation calls them to family living.

The Catholic Church in the United States was allowed to send four bishops. They were elected from the ranks of the National Council of Catholic Bishops. Present, therefore, among the bishops in the Sistine Chapel on that Friday morning in late September were Archbishop John Quinn of San Francisco, Archbishop Joseph Bernardin of Cincinnati, Archbishop Robert Sanchez of Santa Fe, and Auxiliary Bishop of Baltimore Francis Stafford, who was also Chairman of the U.S. Bishops' National Commission on Marriage and Family Life. The Pope had also invited Cardinal Terrance Cooke of New York to join the U.S. delegation.

It is customary for delegates to a synod to bring with them advisors (or *periti*) to assist them in formulating their presentations (which the Synod terms "interventions"), and I had been invited to serve in that capacity. For five weeks I lived and worked with our delegation. What follows

are some of my reflections on what I hope will be a major event in the life of the Church, a benchmark in the development of the Church's sensitivity to the needs and capacities of the Christian family.

I would like to clarify how a synod fits into the life of the Roman Catholic Church. Primarily, a synod is an advisory meeting. It is an opportunity for the Pope to listen firsthand to bishops from virtually every country where Roman Catholicism is present as they share with him their observations on a topic of significant Church concern. When family life was announced as the topic for the Synod of 1980, immediate speculation both inside and outside the Roman Catholic Church focused on whether the Synod would call for a reaffirmation or change in the teaching of that church on artificial contraception. For myself, the strong emphasis on that single area hurt both the internal workings of the Synod itself and the reporting of its deliberations to the rest of the world. This is not to say that the topic was insignificant, but much happened in the Synod which failed to get adequate attention and coverage. What follows are some of the highlights of the month-long meeting.

What was most apparent to those who watched the Synod delegates enter the hall each day was their national and cultural diversity. In fact, it can be argued that this Synod represented a move of the Catholic Church toward becoming not simply a multi-national body, but also a multi-cultural community. After each daily session,

there was always extensive discussion of the "interventions" of the Third World bishops, particularly those from Africa. At times like this, the vibrant youth of the Church in Sub-Saharan Africa became evident. Cardinal Lauren Rugambwa of Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, called for a more sensitive appreciation of indigenous customs. "The local churches must be allowed to find solutions on the pastoral level to problems arising from Christianity and African cultures meeting each other, especially in the area of family life . . . Some of the [Roman Catholic] church's legislation on marriage may have to be drastically revised and reduced to essential laws applicable to the universal church." What's behind the Cardinal's view is the need to see Christianity as related to all of what's fundamentally good in human culture. This point was brought to sharp focus in an intervention by Cardinal Maurice Otungo of Nairobi, Kenya. He boldly stated, "Our African family values are not only helpful or useful—they are indispensable for the incarnation of Christianity in Africa today."

What the Synod struggled with continually was the timeless issue of the relationship of Christianity to human culture. While the concern may be more obvious in places like Africa or Asia, it is also key to the Church's survival in more technological and post-Christian cultures like Europe and North America. Also critical is the Church's response to cultures where the powers of society weigh heavily on the imprisoned masses as is the case in parts of Latin America and Eastern Europe. Can the Church speak with realism and understanding in these various and often quite different settings? Can the teachings and pastoral activity of the Church enrich God-inspired expressions of life and love present in different ways, but flowing from the same Source? Can the Christian family flourish in these many settings without compromising its values and basic religious orientation?

Unfortunately, the procedural limitations of the Synod did not allow for an in-depth discussion of this or any topic. After all, there were more than two hundred delegates who came to the Synod each with an agenda from their respective countries. I became aware of this in a conversation I had with Cardinal Hume from England. Asking him who the bishops from Great Britain brought with them as advisors, his response was quite pointed. He replied that he brought to the Synod the hopes and desires of two thousand Catholics with whom he had consulted in a formal meeting just prior to coming to



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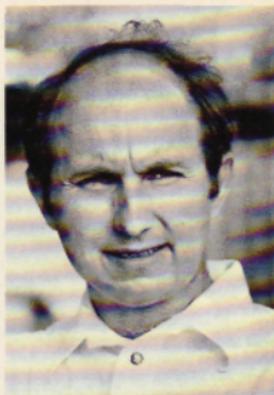
Rome. Like the other delegates, he would be allowed only a few precious minutes to articulate those sentiments.

But these time restrictions need not be misinterpreted. For, in the long run, the Synod can be viewed as the *beginning* of a formal and on-going discussion throughout the Roman Catholic Church on a broad range of issues which affect family life. The question now should not be what did the Synod do? Rather, what has the Synod begun? We can anticipate the Pope issuing a major statement in response to the recommendations placed before him by the delegates at the conclusion of the Synod. But there will also be, hopefully, an intensification of pastoral effort in areas of Church life to assist the Christian family in reaching its full potential. The majority of interventions were aimed at that goal. It is, therefore, worthwhile to highlight some of the more significant concerns touched upon at the Synod itself.

On the very first morning of the Synod's formal deliberations, Archbishop John R. Quinn of San Francisco brought before the *Pontiff* and the rest of the Synod delegates the issue of the Roman Catholic Church's teaching on the morality of artificial contraception. He made it very clear right from the beginning of his address that he accepted the teaching as it was presented in Paul VI's encyclical letter, *Humanae Vitae*. But he also noted that, for many, the arguments supporting the conclusions of the encyclical were un-

developed. Citing Paul VI's own words, given soon after the issuance of the encyclical, Archbishop Quinn asked that there be a deeper examination of the issue as part of "a fuller, more organic and more synthetic exposition" of the Roman Catholic Church's teaching on responsible parenthood, based on a richer portrayal of a theology of sexuality. The tone of his intervention was respectful, and his recommendation for further and deeper study was carefully nuanced so as not to give the impression that he was in any way denying the validity of the existing teaching.

So much for good intentions. The press picked up on his suggestion and twisted it to imply that he was confronting the Pope, calling for a new teaching. It was true that an accurate understanding of what the Archbishop said would be difficult for those demanding simplistic black or white answers. He was calling for development of deeper insights into his church's teachings. He wanted it stated so that it could be understood and appreciated by most people. To achieve this it would require research and sustained dialogue between theologians and the official teaching authority of the Roman Catholic Church. It would require a major expenditure of effort with no certain promise of a simple or easily accessible resolution. It would also require the Catholic Church to be more sensitive in the way it communicates its teaching, not only to the laity but also to pastors. It was clear that when one considers all that was suggested by Arch-



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bishop Quinn, his desired goal could not be reached within the framework of the Synod. The Synod could only support the need for such a study and recommend strategies for its enactment.

Other issues of grave importance came before the Synod which also made it clear that further study and discussion would be necessary. For example, could the non-Catholic partner in a Catholic interfaith marriage receive the Eucharist during a Catholic Mass? How are such marriages related to the quest for union among the various Christian churches? What can be done to prepare for and enrich these types of marriages?

Also demanding attention was the issue of *divorce and remarriage of Catholics*. Could those in second marriages still receive the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist? Was the Roman Catholic Church acting in accord with its deepest values in dealing with marriage cases through the tribunal system, particularly in the granting of annulments?

Absent from the interventions was any request that the values of the Church be



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compromised to accommodate these relatively new pastoral problems. But it was also felt that the Church ought not place unreasonable burdens where it was not absolutely necessary. The compassion of Christ was often mentioned as that which should set the spirit of the Church's response to those in difficult situations. Typical of the bishops' attitudes was that of Archbishop Nicholas Marcus Fernando of Colombo, Sri Lanka, who asked the Synod to help all families. "Otherwise, we too as leaders of the people may merit the censuring words of Christ regarding the Pharisees, 'They tie up heavy burdens and lay them on men's shoulders, but will they lift a finger to move them? Not they.'"

All this was felt to call the Roman Catholic Church to a level of pastoral awareness and theological sophistication unprecedented perhaps in its entire history. There was a feeling among many delegates that the issues raised called for new types of church response. But the resources needed for that response, both theological and pastoral, were not readily available. Again, this indicated that the Synod could only be a beginning. More had to follow.



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The United States delegates were in the forefront of requesting further developments. Archbishop Joseph Bernardin of

Cincinnati, in the very first intervention of the Synod, called for a more positive and better developed theology of sexuality. Archbishop Robert Sanchez of Santa Fe soon followed with a call for greater support for families in the development of their unique spirituality. Bishop Francis Stafford of Baltimore asked that the Roman Catholic Church adopt a plan for comprehensive family ministry related to the needs of each locale. He mentioned that the Catholic Church in the United States was already moving in that direction as it implemented its Plan of Pastoral Action for Family Ministry. Some bishops commented that in Sanchez's and Stafford's interventions there was expressed the heart of the Church's concern: the spiritual together with a practical way to draw forth its fullness.

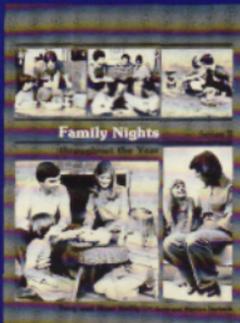
Cardinal Terrance Cooke of New York asked the Synod to look carefully at the many life-related issues, particularly that of abortion, and their relationship to family life. In a flurry of interventions from the United States, the Synod was asked by our delegates to examine the effect of drugs, migration, warfare, and poverty on family life. It was clear that responsible leadership was being exercised by the United States Catholic bishops.

It became apparent about midway in the Synod's deliberations that it would be most appropriate to have testimony not only from the bishop-pastors of the church, but also from family persons whose primary vocational mission was lived in the family setting. Fortunately, a few were already present in the meeting hall; at the specific request of the Pope, it

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"The discussions begun will, with the Spirit's help, stimulate conversations between families and within families"

had been decided only a few short weeks before the beginning of the Synod to invite a select group of lay persons to the Synod as "auditors" or "listeners." Mother Teresa was among those invited in that role.

Through the first two weeks, the auditors listened with interest, but with some degree of frustration. It was not that they disagreed with the thrust of the interventions, but they felt that they had something to offer as married and family persons. Most of the bishop delegates also felt that their testimony would enhance the discussion. Finally, two couples, one from Europe and the other from Africa, were called to address the Synod. So also was Mother Teresa. This was a procedural breakthrough in that it brought a new perspective into the Synod.

During the third week, when the Synod delegates broke into smaller language groups, all the auditors moved from simply a listening to a speaking role. The frustration they experienced in the earlier days gave way to a feeling of being recognized and valued. (This procedure of including the laity ought to receive serious consideration in the future as the Catholic Church reflects on the nature of its consultations, particularly in matters which directly affect its lay members.)

The final days of the Synod centered around two very difficult tasks. The Synod members decided to formulate a message to families, based on the key insights which surfaced during their discussions. The message was to be short, supportive, and challenging. It was to be pastoral in tone and style. Final formulation of the message was achieved only on the last day of the Synod. It was translated into many languages and published widely in the week following the Synod.

The other task was to submit to the Pope a set of propositions or recommendations which would embody the basic spirit and concerns of the Synod. It was not that the Pope was unaware of the many ideas which came to light during the Synod (he attended all the major sessions), but the Synod itself had to achieve a fundamental consensus, which was no easy task.

I mentioned earlier that one of the most noticeable features of the Synod was the cultural diversity of its delegates. What

came to light in the various interventions was that the problems of First World and Third World families were quite different. Bishops from the First World spoke of problems relating to intimacy, spirituality, secularism, and consumerism. The Third World families were troubled by government control, poverty, and the loss of traditional customs. In both situations, the family was struggling to survive, but the reasons for its distress were different.

To realistically deal with this diversity, the Synod called for as much local pastoral planning as possible without further compromising the unity of the Church. This principle of "localization" was also extended to where it became a principle for dealing not only with cultural differences but with family differences, too. Representative of this sentiment was the view of Archbishop Joseph MacNeil of Edmonton, Alberta, President of the Canadian Conference of Bishops. His belief was that the Synod should support family life not only by providing "opportunities for confirming, encouraging, strengthening, and assisting the believing people who are trying to live the message of the Lord" but also by inviting families themselves to play a greater role in the determination of their religious life. Thus, the Archbishop added, "Our conviction is that to announce the good news to families is to say that the primary responsibility for Christian family life is theirs."

What, then, will be the most significant result of the Synod? It will be found in *Catholic families themselves, the family next door and mine*. The Roman Catholic Church has begun serious deliberations concerning issues which touch all families. But this discussion will, with the Spirit's help, stimulate conversations between families and within families. The message from the Synod has been published throughout the world. Many of the papers and interventions are also being made available in the respective countries of the delegates. Soon John Paul II will offer his personal reflections on what was discussed at the Synod. And in the end, those words hopefully will serve to enrich the Christian life of Catholic families everywhere and hasten the day when our lives will be such that reconciliation with our brothers and sisters is possible. — I feel that a step has been taken toward family. **MLF**

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