

The Vocation and Mission of the Family

Rephrased Discussion Questions for the Synod in October 2015

Family is a very important human experience.

Here we come to know the joys of living in community with others, and the difficulties. We learn what it is to be loved, although we may only know it later; and we learn to love. We learn what it is to fail, to cause hurt, and to need forgiveness; and we learn to forgive. Look for where your experience is reflected, and what we may learn from that.

Bishops met in Rome in Oct 2014 for preliminary discussions. Their report, along with a set of questions, forms a discussion document ("*Lineamenta*") for the church worldwide to reflect on for October 2015. You can find the full original document & questions at <http://www.balallyparish.ie/> ... !!!

Preparation for the Synod is intended to look for both the signs of God's presence and the signs we can read in the lives of people in the world today:

- a) To generate fresh thinking about the reality of family life today, both in what might be seen as the traditional model of family and recognising how God is working also in non-traditional families.
- b) To reflect on what Christian faith tells us of the gift of family in its beauty and in its difficulties.
It is important to avoid the temptation to base this simply on the application of "doctrine": that is, of what may be seen as Church teaching.
- c) To identify ways in which the Church and human society can help renew the life of families, and be renewed by them.

Pope Francis set the scene on 4 October 2014

"Evening falls on our assembly. It is the hour at which one willingly returns home to meet at the same table, in the depth of affection, of the good that has been done and received, of the encounters which warm the heart and make it grow, good wine which anticipates the unending feast in the days of man.

"It is also the weightiest hour for anyone faced with loneliness, in the bitter twilight of shattered dreams and broken plans; how many people trudge through the day in the blind alley of resignation, of abandonment, even resentment: in how many homes the wine of joy has been less plentiful, and therefore, also the zest — the very wisdom — for life.

"Let us make our prayer heard for one another this evening, a prayer for all."

107 Questions!

There are 107 questions following, rephrased from the Synod document. We would need a month with nothing else to do! This may help:

The Pastoral Council in parish of Balally, Dublin, has put a few overall questions in frames like this at the start of each of the three parts. You may like to look at these, and see the questions below them as spelling out the details.

Numbers in the headings refer to the Synod Document. Where there are multiple questions under one number, here we have separated them as sub-questions.

Preliminary Question

Keep this in mind for all sections which follow.

Does the description of the various family situations in the Synod Document correspond to what we find in the Church and society today? Are there missing aspects which should be included?

Part I

Listening:

The Context and Challenges of the Family
See Part I of the Synod document

- A:** How is modern society and culture affecting family life in Ireland today? Helpful or harmful? Give examples.
- B:** What is the level of emotional maturity of parents and young people? How do internet and social media affect them?
- C:** What pastoral challenges face us as the Church in the care of families today? How can the Church community support families?

The Social and Cultural Context (Pars. 4 - 7)

- 1) In relation to cultural changes in the world today which affect family life, do you know of anything being done to help families in this?
 - a) To support sound personal relationships?
 - b) To develop social and economic policies helpful to the family?
 - c) To help when difficulties arise with children, the elderly, the sick?
 - d) To help us be aware of God's presence in family life?
 - e) Any particular challenges you know of?
- 2) What can help us understand better the changes in the way people are influenced to live their lives as individuals and in families?
 - a) What influences us in our understanding of human nature, our individual responsibility and gifts, our human rights and those of others, our relationships with others, our sexuality, relationships between men and women, respect for human life, our property, the part we undertake in our society and in our world? You may think also of other factors.
 - b) Of those things which influence our lives as individuals and families, which would you say have a really positive effect? Which have a negative result? Which have mixed results?
- 3) The Church can speak God's word, but can also go further:
 - a) How can the Church be near families to support them in extreme difficulties?
 - b) How can the Church help avoid those situations?
 - c) How can the Church support people and families of faith?
 - d) How can the Church help families stay together when strains arise in marriages?

- 4) Society today has become more and more multi-cultural, and much of life seems not to have room for religious faith. There are many different views on marriage.
 - a) How does or can the Church respond to these differences?
 - b) How does the Church respond when people do not accept the model of family life as formed by one man and one woman united in marriage?
 - c) How does the Church respond to people who do not see it as important that marriage be open to new life?

The Importance of Emotional Maturity in Life (8 - 9)

- 5) Christian families are important for helping younger people to emotional maturity.
 - a) What are some of the ways in which Christian parents support and guide children in this?
 - b) What are some of the things which hinder a person from becoming emotionally mature? What part do individualism, crisis in relationships, internet, pornography, etc. have in this?
 - c) What kind of training would be helpful for ordained ministers and for other qualified persons in order to support families?

Pastoral Challenges (10)

- 6) The Church wants to offer words of truth and hope which will help people address the great questions of human existence.
 - a) To what extent and by what means is the pastoral care of families addressed to people in the concrete circumstances of their lives?
 - b) How can we encourage and support those who desire to form a family?
 - c) How can we appreciate those in family situations which do not correspond to the Christian vision?
 - d) How do they respond to the Church's efforts in her mission to them?
 - e) How prevalent is the normal model of marriage among the non-baptized, and also in relation to the desire to form a family among the young?

Part II

Looking at Christ: The Gospel of the Family

- A:** What do you see as the intrinsic goodness and strength of the family? How does this goodness and strength make family life worthwhile?
- B:** How can we of the Christian community recognise that goodness and strength within wounded and broken families? How can we find such goodness and strength in the presence of so much pain and suffering within our world and within our families?

The family is good news for the world. This good news, this "gospel", is vital in the work of the Church today. The family is the first experience of church – the "domestic church" – for a child of Christian parents. This is the vocation and mission of the family. The married couple in their union are made in the image of the living God. To live this, we want to keep Jesus as the focus of our vision.

Looking at Jesus and Learning from him (Pars. 11 – 13)

- 7) In your experience, does teaching from Sacred Scripture and getting to know Jesus in this way help

families? What does the Sacrament of Marriage mean for couples and for the Church?

Does it help us in our pastoral care of the family in a way which is courageous and faithful?

- 8) Can you say what is of particular value in relation to marriage and families that can be seen to be realized in the lives of young people and married couples?
 - a) What form do they take? Are there values which can be highlighted?
 - b) Are there aspects which are harmful or sinful and are to be avoided and overcome?
- 9) What can we learn from natural human experience if we are to have a good foundation for the pastoral work of the Church in the maturing of a couple's Christian married life?
- 10) Are there ways we can help people appreciate the understanding of marriage as indissoluble as a gift and a strength?
- 11) Can a relationship with God be a help to married people when they experience difficulties in their own relationship?

Knowing that Jesus had human experience of family, can this inspire in good and bad times? What can we learn from his meeting with the Samaritan woman at the well?

The Family in God's Salvific Plan (ns. 14 - 15)

- 12) Can you suggest ways to help the understanding of Christian marriage as God's fulfilment of human nature, even when it seems a great burden?
- 13) Can you suggest ways to help see the family as a prime experience of church, the "domestic church", an essential agent in the work of bringing the Good News, the Gospel, to the world?
- 14) Can family life, within itself and in the world, be seen as a missionary calling?

The Family in the Church's Documents (ns. 16 - 19)

- 15) Marriage is a community of life and love, the spouses' gift of self to each other, building up the Body of Christ, the Real Presence of Christ in the world. How can a family become aware of their spirituality not just of each person but of the family itself as an experience of the life of and in Christ?
- 16) Can some way be found to help families be aware of this, including when they are very aware that this is a lived process, not something they have already achieved?

The Indissolubility of Marriage and the Joy of Sharing Life Together (ns. 20 - 21)

- 17) What can be done to help us understand the value of an indissoluble and fruitful marriage as the path to complete personal fulfilment?
- 18) What is there in family life which is a unique experience of the joy of human existence?
- 19) Does the Church show also an appreciation of the value and goodness in the marriages and families of those who are not Christians?

The Truth and Beauty of the Family and Mercy Towards Wounded and Fragile Families (22 - 27)

- 20) "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." This was the subject of

much comment in the media.

How can the Church do better in embodying the truth that no one is beyond the mercy of God? How can this truth be expressed in the Church's pastoral activity towards families, especially those which are wounded and fragile?

- 21) How can we as a Church show that clearly, without being unfaithful to the full message of the Gospel?
- 22) What can be done so that persons in the various forms of union between a man and a woman — in which human values can be present — might experience a sense of respect, trust and encouragement to grow in the Church's good will, and come to appreciate the Christian tradition of the experience of marriage?

Part III

Confronting the Situation: Pastoral Perspectives

- A:** The State has its own areas of responsibility, for example in health, education, housing, social welfare. How can the State help resource people in developing mature and stable relationships?
- B:** What is distinctive and outstanding about Christian marriage and marriage as a sacrament?
- C:** How can we as a Church recognise what is authentic in the lives of those who are separated or divorced? Those who are divorced and remarried? Single-parent families? Civil marriages? Those living together? Can we welcome them into the sacramental life of the Church without compromising the values of lifelong Christian marriage?
- D:** Every person has gifts and qualities to offer the Christian community. In the context of Question 40 below: How can the Christian community recognise and respect the giftedness in all situations where there is love, in a way which does not exclude or discriminate?
- E:** How can we offer pastoral care and welcome to persons of homosexual orientation and their families? How can God's will be discerned in their situation?

All the preaching and teaching in the world about marriage and family will achieve little unless it can be seen in the lives of married Christian couples and families. Families are absolutely vital.

Proclaiming the Gospel of the Family Today in Various Contexts (ns. 28 - 37)

- 23) Do priests show a real appreciation of marriage and the family? How can families help with this in the training of priests?
- 24) The rapid evolution in society requires a constant attention to the kind of language we use in pastoral communication.
Is there some way we can show clearly how important is God's presence and grace in family life, so that family life is recognised as lived in and guided by the Holy Spirit?
- 25) We speak of "the Gospel of the Family". Have you suggestions as to how each family could be seen as an example of the grace of God so that society might acknowledge the family's dignity and mission? What changes in the Church are needed to help bring this about?

- 26) Families need the support and collaboration of social and civil institutions.
 - a) How is this actually done? What criteria are used to inspire it?
 - b) In this regard, what role can be played by family associations?
 - c) What cultural, social, political and economic factors, like putting market forces before the good of people, that threaten authentic family life and lead to discrimination, poverty, exclusion, and violence?
- 27) How can relations between family, society and civil life be fostered for the benefit of the family?
How can the support of the State and the international community be fostered on behalf of the family?

Guiding Engaged Couples in Their Preparation for Marriage (n. 38)

- 28) Many forces in the world today can make it difficult for Christians preparing for marriage. How is marriage preparation offered to highlight the vocation and mission of the family according to faith in Jesus Christ? Is marriage seen as a true experience of what the Church is? How can preparation be renewed and improved?
- 29) Christian Initiation of Adults is at times part of preparation for marriage. How can that Initiation better show how Baptism, Eucharist and Marriage are connected?

Accompanying Married Couples in the Initial Years of Marriage (n. 39)

- 30) In your situation, is there support for couples in the first years of their marriage? Can other families, and family movements, help in this?
- 31) Are there significant initiatives already being undertaken? What elements need further development in parishes, dioceses or associations and movements?

Pastoral Care of Couples Civilly Married or Living Together (ns. 40 - 42)

- 32) There are situations resulting from a multiplicity of cultural and economic factors, practices grounded in tradition, and the difficulty of young people to make lifetime commitments.
What criteria in a proper pastoral discernment of individual situations are being considered in light the Church's teaching?
- 33) Is the Christian community able to be pastorally involved in these situations?
 - a) How can it assist in discerning the positive and negative elements in the life of persons united in a civil marriage, so that they may consider the Sacrament of Matrimony?
 - b) How can those living together be assisted to decide to marry?
- 34) What response is to be given to traditional forms of marriage in stages or those marriages arranged between families?

Pastoral Care for Separated, Divorced and Not Remarried, Divorced and Remarried, and Single-Parent Families (ns. 43 - 53)

- 35) Married people with problems in their relationships should be able to count on assistance from the Church with understanding which heals, liberates and encourages growth in the Christian life.

- a) Is the Christian community in a position to undertake care of those in families which are hurting, so that they can experience the Father's mercy?
 - b) How does the Christian community engage in removing the social and economic factors which often determine this situation?
 - c) What steps have been taken and what can be done to increase this activity and the sense of mission which sustains it?
- 36) Are there shared pastoral guidelines at the level of the local Church?
How can a dialogue be developed among the various local Churches and Rome?
- 37) How can the procedure to determine cases of nullity be made more accessible, streamlined and possibly without expense?
- 38) 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.
- a) What are the prospects in such a case? What is possible?
 - b) What suggestions can be offered to resolve forms of undue or unnecessary impediments?
- 39) Does current Church legislation provide a valid response to the challenges resulting from mixed marriages between Christians of different Christian Churches, or from inter-religious marriages between a Christian and a person of another faith? Should other elements be taken into account?

Pastoral Attention towards Persons with Homosexual Tendencies (ns. 54 - 55)

- 40) The pastoral care of persons with homosexual tendencies poses new challenges today, due to the manner in which their rights are proposed in society.
- a) How can the Christian community give pastoral attention to families with persons with homosexual orientation?
 - b) What are the responses that, in light of cultural sensitivities, are considered to be most appropriate?
 - c) Avoiding all unjust discrimination, how can such persons receive pastoral care in these situations in light of the Gospel?
 - d) How can God's will be discerned in their situation?

The Transmission of Life and the Challenge of a Declining Birth Rate (ns. 56 - 58)

Influences in the world today may reduce the generation of human life to just one variable of an individual's or couple's. Sometimes, economic factors are burdensome, contributing to a sharp drop in the birth rate that weakens the social fabric, compromises relations between generations and renders a future outlook more uncertain. Openness to life is an intrinsic requirement of married love. In this regard, the Church supports families who accept, raise and surround with affection children with various disabilities.

- 41) The transmission of life is a fundamental element in the vocation and mission of the family. They are thereby co-workers with the love of God the Creator, and are the interpreters of that love for their children.

- a) Are there steps that have been taken to show the beauty and dignity of becoming a mother or father?
 - b) How can dialogue be promoted with the sciences and biomedical technologies in a way that respects the human ecology of reproduction?
- 42) A loving motherhood and fatherhood needs support.
- a) Does the Christian community offer this? How?
 - b) Is it courageous in proposing valid solutions even at a social and political levels?
 - c) How can adoption and foster-parenting be encouraged as a powerful sign of fruitful generosity?
 - d) How can the care and respect of children be promoted?
- 43) For a Christian, maternity and paternity are a real vocation.
- a) Is this vocation sufficiently emphasized in catechesis?
 - b) What formation is offered so that it might effectively guide the consciences of married couples?
 - c) Are people aware of the grave consequences of demographic change?
- 44) How does the Church combat the plague of abortion and foster an effective culture of life?

Upbringing and the Role of the Family in Evangelization (ns. 59 - 60)

- 45) Providing for the education of their children is part of the mission of parents. It is not always easy.
- a) Do they find solidarity and support from the Christian community?
 - b) What suggestions might be offered in formation?
 - c) What steps can be taken to acknowledge the role of parents in raising children, even at the social and political level?
- 46) Christian parents know that it their privilege and duty as Christians to help their children grow in faith, but they may often find it difficult to know how to do this. Can you suggest how they can be helped in this, and how their local church can support it?

**The Conclusion of the Synod Document
Paragraph 61:**

These proposed reflections, the fruit of the synodal work that took place in great freedom and with a spirit of reciprocal listening, are intended to raise questions and indicate points of view that will later be developed and clarified through reflection in the local Churches in the intervening year leading to the XIV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, scheduled for October 2015 to treat *The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and in the Contemporary World*.

These are not decisions already taken, nor are they easy subjects. Nevertheless, ***in the collegial journey of the bishops and with the involvement of all God's people***, the Holy Spirit will guide us in finding the road to truth and mercy for all.

This has been the wish of Pope Francis from the beginning of our work, when he invited us to be courageous in faith and humbly and honestly to embrace the truth in charity.