

Preparing for the Synod on the Family: the Australian Response

David G. Kirchhoffer and Natalie Lindner L'Huillier¹

- Author's Pre-Print Version. Final Version published in *INTAMS Review* 20(1) (2014): 111-117 available at: DOI 10.2143/INT.20.1.3036703

ABSTRACT

Australians responded enthusiastically to the calling of the Synod, though there appears to be a tension between expectations of doctrinal reform and pastoral reform. The Bishops Conference allowed each diocese to consult as it saw fit and submit its findings, in light of which a committee of four bishops drafted the official submission to the Synod. Other materials were also sent to the Synod office, including some directly by dioceses and other Catholic organisations. The dioceses surveyed made the preparatory document and questionnaire available online and in print. There was a high level of frustration expressed with the complexity of many of the questions. The Conference and most dioceses did not publish the findings of the consultation or their submission to the Synod. Nonetheless, these are likely to reveal trends with regard to co-habitation, pre-marital sex, contraception, the treatment of divorced Catholics and same-sex marriage similar to those of other western countries based on an analysis of existing quantitative data from the National Church Life Survey, diocesan reports to which the researchers were given access, and the Catholic media. There is an apparent disconnect between the lived experience of many Catholics and Church teaching in these areas. Moreover, there is a tension between issues of doctrinal confusion, doctrinal rejection, and pastoral care which could have consequences for whether the Synod should consider doctrinal reform or need only focus on pastoral care. Most importantly, the responses demonstrate that Catholics in Australia want to be better informed about Church teaching, want to be consulted about these matters, and want to have a say in the formulation of Church teaching. Not taking these wishes seriously risks further alienating many Catholics from the Church who express a disjuncture between Church teaching and their own life experience in these matters.

¹ The authors wish to thank those who responded to their requests for information, many of whom invested a significant amount of time. Particular thanks goes to Brian Lucas, general secretary of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, Robert Dixon, and Ruth Powell, director of the National Church Life Survey. Others are not named personally because it was decided to avoid mention of specific dioceses in this report, though this article would not have been possible without their assistance.

Australia has a good track record when it comes to broad consultation on pastoral concerns. Two examples stand out: first, the Australian Catholic Bishops' 1992 Pastoral Statement on the Distribution of Wealth in Australia, *Common Wealth for the Common Good*;² and second, the 1999 Report on the Participation of Women in the Catholic Church in Australia, *Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus*.³ The latter was the culmination of approximately six and half years of work.

By contrast, the Australian response to the calling of the Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelisation (hereinafter referred to as the Synod) was conducted in only a few months, and at time in the Southern Hemisphere when few people could be expected to dedicate significant time to responding to the questions.⁴ Despite this significant limitation, the response appears to have been a substantial one. Nonetheless, given the limitation in time and process, whatever findings are presented to the Synod should be interpreted as indicative, rather than conclusive.

This article, similarly, should be considered indicative rather than conclusive. In accordance with the request made by the office of the Synod, we were given very limited access to the actual results of Australian bishops' consultations with their dioceses or to the final submission of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) to the Synod office.

We considered three types of data: firstly, interviews with national and diocesan church representatives regarding the Synod response; secondly, a survey of Catholic media; thirdly, existing quantitative research on issues directly related to the questions sent by the Synod office. Our approach is largely qualitative rather than quantitative. We highlight those aspects that we deem most relevant for the purposes of this special edition of the INTAMS Review.

1. Responses by the ACBC and the Dioceses

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference

The Synod's preparatory material was received by the Conference and was circulated to all bishops, with the intention that each diocese would then decide how it might respond. Following a period of consultation, initial submissions were considered at the Conference Plenary on 28 November 2013.

² AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE: *Common Wealth for the Common Good*, North Blackburn: Collins Dove, 1992.

³ M. MACDONALD/P. CARPENTER/S. CORNISH/M. COSTIGAN/R. DIXON/M. MALONE/K. MANNING/S. WAGNER: *Woman and Man: One in Christ Jesus*, Sydney: HarperCollinsReligious, 1999.

⁴ The consultation period spanned both the summer holiday period as well as Christmas and New Year celebrations.

After discussion it was decided that, following consideration of diocesan submissions received by 18 December 2013, a committee of four bishops would draft a response on behalf of the Conference.⁵

A variety of material received from the dioceses, ranging from responses written by the bishop, through summaries and compilations of answers, to a straight passing on of all of the raw data collected by a diocese. Although the Conference did not directly request responses from any particular groups or church bodies other than the dioceses, they also received unsolicited responses from such groups.

The drafting committee circulated two drafts for comment among all the bishops on 10 and 24 January 2014, respectively, before the final document was submitted as the Australian bishops' reply to the Synod office. All other submissions were also sent to the Synod office, including a substantial Australian Marriage and Family Council document, which was appended to the Bishops' response. Some individuals or groups in Australia may have also made submissions directly to the Synod office.⁶

Diocesan Responses

Thirteen of Australia's twenty-nine dioceses were invited to participate in our research. These included metropolitan, regional and remote dioceses, and spanned the geography of the continent. Of the thirteen, four declined or were unable to participate due to the timing of our interviews. Among the nine dioceses that responded, six provided information related to the process of their consultation, while three provided information on both the process and the results of their consultation.

In general, the dioceses reported that the announcement of the Synod consultation was welcomed with interest. They noted that those who took up the opportunity to contribute did so with an openness and honesty that at times surprised those who were responsible for collating.

All nine dioceses made their consultation questions available electronically and in print form.⁷ Most dioceses reported difficulties with the language and expression of the questionnaire. One diocese modified the questions in order to make them more accessible. Other dioceses were concerned that the questions would not be understood well, but did not feel able to alter the questions without affecting the results. For many dioceses, frustration with the questions themselves was the most emphatically expressed response in our interviews. Of particular note, in a diocese whose cultural and linguistic diversity is more pronounced, the questions were described as being too difficult for 99 percent of the Catholic population.

⁵ All diocesan responses were received on behalf of the Conference by staff of the Bishops' Commission for Pastoral Life.

⁶ Two independent submissions from Australia on the Synod of which we are aware are The Oceania Synod Response: Equipes Notre Dame (Teams), and An Open Letter from the Australian Catholic Coalition for the Church Renewal to Pope Francis and the Synod Secretariat

⁷ Seven identified using Survey Monkey as a mode of making their survey available online. Several diocese made mention of efforts to make the full preparatory document available to respondents in printed form. They also indicated that availability was limited by the size of the document in relation to their capacity to print.

A number of dioceses indicated that they found the task of collating responses in a manner that retained the diversity and integrity of the responses challenging.

Dioceses that quantified the level of participation in the consultation reported that incomplete surveys were submitted in equal or greater number to those completed. It is not clear why people may have started but not completed the surveys. The difficulty of the questions may be partly responsible, but is unlikely to account entirely for the high proportion of people who did not answer any of the questions.

In Australia, there has been significant debate about whether or not the ‘findings’ or the bishops’ submission should be published before the Synod. One diocese expressed a strong desire for a nationally co-ordinated publication of the Australian consultation findings following the Synod in October 2014. It was argued that a nationally co-ordinated summary would enable the diocese to place its local findings within a broader national context, and assist the local church with its responsibility for pastoral planning as the universal Synod process continues to progress.

2. Analysis of Responses and Trends

Though we were not given access to the final document submitted by the Conference to the Synod office, it will likely reveal trends similar to those reported by other Western countries. Such trends include “that whilst Catholics accept the Church’s vision of marriage as a lifelong union of a man and a woman open to having children, there is a clear divergence between what the Church teaches and what the majority of Catholics believe in relation to premarital cohabitation, (the status of) divorce and remarriage and birth control.”⁸ We make this assertion based on quantitative data from the National Church Life Survey (NCLS),⁹ on the few diocesan findings to which we were given access, and on our analysis of Catholic media.

The Pastoral Research Office Report: what Catholics are doing

The Pastoral Research Office of the ACBC prepared a document as background to the questions asked by the Synod office to assist the bishops in the preparation of their submission. The document primarily compiled data from the 2011 Australian Census and the 2011 National Church Life Survey. What follows summarises aspects of this report.

In Australia, in 2011, “Seventy-eight per cent of all couples cohabitated prior to marriage”. Of these, 33 percent were married by a minister of religion rather than in a civil ceremony. Of all marriages in

⁸ DIOCESE OF BROKEN BAY: “Family Synod Process Moving Forward”, in: *Broken Bay News* June (2014), forthcoming, citing the press release by the German Bishops’ conference: “Pastoral challenges to the family in the context of evangelisation: Summary of the responses from the German dioceses and archdioceses to the questions contained in the preparatory document for the III Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops 2014” [document online] 3 February 2014; accessed 30 May 2014, available at http://www.dbk.de/fileadmin/redaktion/diverse_downloads/presse_2014/2014-012b-ENG-Fragebogen-Die-patoralen-Herausforderungen-der-Familie.pdf.

⁹ The National Church Life Survey (NCLS) is a multi-denominational survey of Christians in Australia that has taken place every five years since 1991. “The NCLS Board of Governors includes representatives from the four major partners: Uniting Mission and Education, NSW & the ACT; Anglicare Diocese of Sydney; Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, and the Australian Catholic University.” More information can be found at <http://www.ncls.org.au/>.

Australia, 9.8 percent were performed by a Catholic priest.¹⁰ This means that a significant proportion of Catholic marriages are likely to have been between people who co-habited prior to marriage.

De facto couples constituted 6.9 percent of the population compared to 6.4 percent of Catholics. Interestingly, the percentage of Catholics living in same-sex de facto relationships (same-sex marriage was still not possible anywhere in Australia in 2011) was only slightly less than that of the general population, 0.2 percent and 0.3 percent respectively.¹¹

Though only 17 percent of Mass-attending Catholics supported same-sex *marriage*, 40 percent supported allowing same-sex couples to register civil unions.¹²

Fifty-one percent of Mass-attending Catholics thought pre-marital sex was *not* morally wrong in a committed relationship.¹³

Family planning methods other than Natural Family Planning were being used by 54 percent of Mass-attending Catholics between the ages of 15 and 35. Yet, 78 percent had either never used Natural Family Planning or only used it in conjunction with other methods. The figures were similar for 35–59 year olds.¹⁴

Regarding the practice of refusing Communion to people who are divorced and remarried without an annulment, 41 percent of Mass attenders rejected it, while only 17 percent accepted it without difficulty.¹⁵

The cases of sexual abuse by clergy and religious have damaged the confidence in Church authorities of 49 percent of Mass attenders.¹⁶

Finally, 68 percent of Mass attenders indicated that they take guidance from Church teaching on moral issues but ultimately follow their conscience in moral decision-making. Twenty-seven percent claimed they always followed Church teaching.¹⁷ As noted by Robert Dixon, this is one of the more difficult statistics to interpret because the Church, of course, teaches that one should follow one's conscience.¹⁸

Dixon notes that people are less inclined to remain morally orthodox when the moral teachings are contrary to their lived experience. The most pertinent example of this, according to Dixon, is changing attitudes to pre-marital sex amongst Australian Catholics. As co-habitation rises, more and

¹⁰ R. DIXON/S. REID: *Pastoral challenges to the family: Research results for the Australian Catholic community, A Report to the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, Melbourne*: Pastoral Research Office of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference, 20 November 2013.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² N. HANCOCK/M. PEPPER/R. POWELL: *Attitudes to same-sex marriage and civil unions, NCLS Research Fact Sheet 13015*, Adelaide: Mirrabooka Press, 2013. See also R. DIXON/S. REID: *Pastoral challenges*.

¹³ N. HANCOCK/M. PEPPER/R. POWELL: *Attitudes to sex before marriage, NCLS Research Fact Sheet 13013*, Adelaide: Mirrabooka Press, 2013; R. DIXON: "What Do Mass Attenders Believe? Contemporary Cultural Change and the Acceptance of Key Catholic Beliefs and Moral Teachings by Australian Mass Attenders", in: *The Australasian Catholic Record* 90/4 (2013): 439–458; R. DIXON/S. REID: *Pastoral challenges*.

¹⁴ R. DIXON/S. REID: *Pastoral challenges*.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ R. DIXON: "What Do Mass Attenders Believe", n. 24.

more people know ‘good’ people (e.g. their own children or grandchildren) who are living in such arrangements, and they find it increasingly difficult to easily judge and condemn such practices as morally wrong.¹⁹

Diocesan Responses: what Catholics are saying

The diocesan responses to which we were given access confirm much of the above. They also provide further insight into how the realities noted are affecting people’s faith lives and the Church’s capacity for evangelisation. On the one hand, there is a perception of the Church’s disengagement regarding challenges that affect families. On the other, there is sense of enthusiasm on the part of respondents at being consulted. The latter present an important opportunity to the Church to address the former.

Catholics reported experiencing a tension between their faith and the cultures within which they live. They are challenged to reconcile the Church’s teachings and actions with their not-always-negative experiences of the secular world around them, and find this difficult. There is a sense of a widening gap between those whose family lives are considered orthodox and those whose family lives are not. Revelations of sexual abuse and the Church’s handling of it seem to further threaten the integrity of the Church as a moral teacher. The perceived disengagement by the Church can be characterised in three broad ways: (1) doctrinal confusion, (2) doctrinal rejection, and (3) lack of pastoral sensitivity.

(1) Dioceses reported that the Church’s teachings on family and family life were not widely understood, or that there was confusion regarding concepts like Natural Law.

(2) There were some notable exceptions. For example, the teaching on contraception was reported to be understood, but not accepted.

(3) While respondents do not always reject the Church’s position regarding a particular issue, for example in relation to same-sex marriage, they expressed their concern that a more pastoral response was required from the Church. There was also a strong agreement that the simplification of canonical practice in regard to marriage annulment would assist the Church’s pastoral capacities. Specific references were made to the need for pastoral care for children in irregular marriages, as well as co-habiting couples, divorcees, single parents, and couples in same-sex relationships.

Catholic Media: what Catholics are facing

Our analysis of Catholic media sheds further light on this sense of disjuncture that people seem to articulate between the pressure to be morally orthodox and the desire to be embraced and taken seriously by the Church.²⁰

The aforementioned 1999 report on the participation of women in the Catholic Church identified two broad approaches to that debate: “one oriented toward maintaining the current participation of

¹⁹ Ibid., 456–457.

²⁰ Nine articles appearing in Australian Catholic media were reviewed.²⁰ One of these consists of a summary of the findings of a diocese following its consultations in its diocesan newspaper. Two opinion pieces and one editorial were found dealing specifically with the Synod’s theme (rather than simply reporting the Synod’s announcement). While a full analysis of the Australian media is not possible within the scope of this article, that this same dichotomy of perspective was present across secular media outlets in Australia.

women, or even returning to the position of the pre-Vatican II Church, the other seeking an expanded role for women.”²¹ Our review of the Catholic media’s treatment of the calling of the Synod appears to reflect a similar dichotomy.

In an editorial in the *Catholic Weekly*, it is argued that the modern world, “the Australian government and our culture in general” at best, do not appreciate, and at worst actively devalue the family unit. The institution of the family is “consistently ignored, burdened, discriminated against and marginalised.” That is why the Synod has been called. Reform is ruled out. “The Church will not change its teaching in any of these issues.” The Church is not out of step with modern life, but rather the true champion of the family: “Calling two synods shows how it is the Church, not modern life, that is yet again putting the family where it should be—front and centre.”²²

By contrast, though agreeing that the Church should champion the cause of families, Andrew Hamilton argues, in *Eureka Street*, that a more inclusive understanding of family in Church teaching is necessary in order that the Church might do so more effectively. Hamilton looks at the challenges and opportunities within the process of Synod consultation. The distance between notions of family in Church teaching and the lived-experience of the majority of Australians is alienating and *the* underlying challenge of effective communication and evangelisation. The Church needs to move beyond idealisations of the family which deny the “harsher aspects of relationships, of neglected and abused children, the damaged health and early death of so many women, and the inequality of husband and wife.” It also needs to take account of the effects of differing economic pressures on families and their behaviour, e.g., the number of children people have.²³

3. Outlook

In *Common Wealth for the Common Good*, the ACBC stated that consultation as a “method has been called a new way of teaching which safeguards the role of the laity in the formulation of Church teaching and the role of the bishops as teachers within the Church and in society more broadly conceived. In other words, the bishops in this educational process are both teaching and learning.”²⁴ Our analysis suggests that this vision of consultation in the Church remains true today and may provide a meaningful way to identify and address (if not entirely overcome) the pastoral challenges to the family. The enthusiasm with which many people responded at a difficult time of year shows that people want to be heard, not only in identifying problems but in formulating teaching. The greatest risk to this process would be to disappoint them by ignoring them. This would serve only to increase the sense of disconnect and alienation that many have reported.

The debates regarding releasing the results illustrate this risk. Paul Collins points to the Synod office’s instructions to keep consultations confidential as an example of the tangle between theory and practice of lay consultation. Such a tangle reveals the temptation for the Church to control the

²¹ M. MACDONALD ET AL: *Woman and Man*, vii.

²² *The Catholic Weekly*, “Putting the family front and centre” [Editorial], in: *The Catholic Weekly*, 13 November 2014; accessed 6 May 2014; available at <http://www.catholicweekly.com.au/article.php?articleID=13000&classID=2&subclassID=98&class=Comment&subclass=Editorial>. *The Catholic Weekly* is a publication of the Sydney Archdiocese.

²³ A. HAMILTON: “Church’s family reality check”, in: *Eureka Street* 23/22 (2013): 11-12. *Eureka Street* is a publication of the Australian Jesuits.

²⁴ AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS CONFERENCE: *Common Wealth for the Common Good*, x.

very perspectives that it has invited from the faithful.²⁵ Moreover, what of the role of the local church? How and when is it appropriate for a local church to respond to the pastoral issues raised in consultation? And how are these responsibilities similar and different from those of the Extraordinary Synod?

Our analysis also suggests that how the Synod interprets what people are saying will be very important. One needs to look carefully at how people responded to determine not only what issues need to be addressed by the Synod, but how to address them. As Dixon has noted, “catechesis is only likely to be successful if it helps people . . . become actively engaged in discovering truth. What they are taught has to resonate with their experience.”²⁶ In other words, as seen in the analysis of diocesan responses and the media, the question of whether this synod is about doctrinal clarification, doctrinal change, or pastoral care is an important one. And it may be about all of these depending on the particular issue being addressed.

Consider, for example, a complicated notion like ‘Natural Law’. Let’s say a person reports that she understands Church teaching and agrees with it. What if she, quite plausibly though mistakenly, reduces Natural Law to doing what the Church tells her to do because the Church knows what God wants, and it is bad to disobey God? She understands what the Church requires of her in terms of moral behaviour, but she does not fully understand why this is the case. She may be doing the ‘right’ thing for the wrong reasons. Here, the implication is that the Church needs to do more to educate its members regarding the reasoning underpinning its moral teaching, which is a pastoral matter. No doctrinal change is required.

A second example. A person reports that he understands the teaching on Natural Law, but he rejects it as an adequate theoretical basis for the Church’s moral teachings, and rejects those teachings accordingly. Let’s assume that the person really does understand the Natural Law as articulated in Church teaching. This person sees the Church as teaching the wrong thing for the wrong reasons. Here, the implications may be both doctrinal and pastoral. If there are real objections to the underpinning theological and philosophical arguments to moral teachings, then it will be of little use to simply reiterate the teaching and demand obedience.

A third example. A person reports that she understands and accepts Church teaching on Natural Law and morality. She objects, however, to the way people deemed not to be living up to Church moral teaching are treated in and by the Church. Though this may look like it only requires a pastoral response to find ways to treat ‘sinners’ in a merciful and inclusive manner, the very idea that the Church should be merciful and inclusive in a pastoral sense may indeed require a reconsideration of doctrinal assumptions. Here, a person is claiming that the Church is teaching the right thing according one set of right reasons (Natural Law), but that the Church is doing the wrong thing according to another set of right reasons (Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful; Lk 6:36). Which reasons should hold the most sway and how the conflict should be resolved are doctrinal issues that will have pastoral consequences.

²⁵P. COLLINS: “Jury Still Out on Francis the Game Changer”, in: *Eureka Street* 24/ 4 (2014); available at <http://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?aeid=39074#.U40m9vN---o>.

²⁶R. DIXON: “What Do Mass Attenders Believe”, 457.

Finally, if consultation is to be an important characteristic of the Church, and the response to the Synod's request suggests that it should be, then whatever doctrinal or pastoral reforms arise from the Synod must be embedded in ecclesial structures, otherwise they remain incomplete. An example of the kind of embedded ecclesial structures that may contribute to furthering consultation and avoiding alienation is the Australian Catholic Marriage and Family Council, which is a permanent advisory body directly responsible to the Bishops Commission for Pastoral Life and which can provide consultation as the need arises. That the ACBC has many such advisory bodies, including the Pastoral Research Office, reflects the structural reforms that are necessary so that Church teaching and learning might be consultative and collaborative.

The message is clear. Simply asserting that the problem is one of inadequate understanding of the reasons for Church teachings and why they need to be obeyed will not address a number of the issues at hand, especially as people's experience changes. Moreover, simply finding ways to bolster Church teaching on moral issues by further bolstering existing theological arguments or ecclesial structures may be putting the cart before the horse. Something is not right simply because the Church has always taught it thus. It is right because of the right reasons. And therein lies the real challenge, because deep at the very heart of the answer lies our understanding of God.