

Homily on the Twenty-Ninth Sunday 2014

Comments on the Extraordinary Synod of the Family

Over the course of the last two weeks, there has been much attention to the extraordinary synod of the family conducted in Rome. Bishops from around the world gathered with the Holy Father, Pope Francis. The bishops conducted an engaging, at times startling, conversation about the hopes and challenges regarding the welfare of the family as a sign and instrument of the gospel of life and human dignity in the world. There were much speculation and rash judgments about what was said during those meetings in the Vatican. It is important to say at this juncture that this candid global conversation is the first step in preparation for another synod on the family to be held in October, 2015.

Even as the work of this extraordinary synod continues in preparation for the ordinary assembly of the synod of bishops in 2015, we must also bear in mind that the popular – and in some arenas prevalent -- notion that the doctrinal teachings of the Church would change does not recognize that this teaching is not ours to change because it is the teaching of Jesus. Questions of pastoral practice and discipline may change. We can explore how best to care for people and bring them consolation of the gospel but the nature of the gospel, or the Church, or the family does not change. The unique, creative dignity of the family

generated by the committed love of a man and woman is an undeniable part of human nature and an essential part of the saving plan of Jesus. We cannot redefine this. Rather, we are defined by it. Pope Francis said this well in his closing remarks at the end of the synod. We are not the masters of faith given to us by Jesus, the good teacher. We are the servants. Speaking of himself, Pope Francis said that he was the servant of the servants who serve the family, the Church and Christ, the good shepherd who gave his life for us so that we might find our life in him.

In the dizzy spinning of the synod discussions over the past few days, the teaching of the Church is not different but perhaps people are beginning to hear the Church differently. Some of these perceptions may be erroneous and even distort the synod's intention but we should not fail to recognize an opportunity to re-present, re-introduce the beautiful, merciful, wise character of the gospel that give life and hope to a broken and confused world.

In today's gospel the Pharisees and Herodians came to Jesus with the intention of trapping him in his own words (Mt. 22.15-21). They proposed to the Lord fixed, rigid partisan alternatives. Whatever he chose would have put him into trouble, either with the religious authorities on one hand or the Roman oppressors on the other. Their question did not seek the truth. They only wanted to destroy Jesus. The Lord did not fall into their game.

His was a morally proportionate response: “Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” Jesus had his sight fixed on the kingdom. He would be prepared to give his whole self to God the Father because he knew that his whole being belonged to him. At the same time he also acknowledged the prudent justice of participating in society. His answer was not trapped in the rigid either/or alternative of his interrogators.

In his closing remarks yesterday, Pope Francis cautioned against the temptations that can push the Church to accept false options. He mentioned on one hand a “hostile inflexibility” that is unwilling to listen. On the other hand, he warned of a “deceptive mercy” that is too quick to accommodate while failing to treat and cure the roots of sin. He also spoke against the temptation to come down off the cross. He urged us to resist, “The temptation to come down off the Cross, to please the people, and not stay there, in order to fulfil the will of the Father; to bow down to a worldly spirit instead of purifying it and bending it to the Spirit of God.”

These are careful and caring words intended to ensure that the evangelizing work of the gospel continues to respond to the challenges of a world desperately in need of the wisdom and mercy of Jesus. When St. John Paul II called the Church to a new evangelization, he said that the evangelization must be new

in its expression, its methods, and its enthusiasm. (Opening Address of the Nineteenth General Assembly of CELAM, 9 March 1983, Port-au-Prince, Haiti) Then quoting from the Letter to the Hebrews, he proclaimed that Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13.8). I hear this same message in the work of Pope Francis and the bishops who gathered around him. The Church must find expressions, methods, and a new enthusiasm with which to speak to the world about the beauty and dignity of the family as a sign and an instrument of the gospel of Jesus who was, and is, and always will be the saving light and joyful hope of humanity.