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No consensus on meaning of Vatican synod questionnaire

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Nearly a week after news that the Vatican has asked for the world's bishops to distribute among Catholics a questionnaire [1] on issues like contraception, same-sex marriage and divorce "immediately" and "as widely as possible," there is no consensus on what that direction means.

Moreover, comparing notes from recent Vatican statements, it is hard to decipher whether the call for consultation is unprecedented or something that's happened for decades.

The Vatican's chief spokesman said in an interview over the weekend [2] that the Vatican's request for the world's bishops to survey Catholics on how certain topics affect their lives was part of a habitual "praxis."

Yet the official who sent the questionnaire [3] said Tuesday it is part of a wide-ranging project to reform how the Vatican reaches out to bishops and faithful around the world.

The questionnaire was sent Oct. 18 by the Vatican's Synod of Bishops, which is preparing a global meeting of prelates for next October. Called by Pope Francis last month, the Oct. 5-19, 2014, meeting is to focus on the theme "Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization."

Francis and his Council of Cardinals, a group of eight cardinals who are advising Francis on reforms of the Vatican's central bureaucracy, discussed the synod on the family at their Oct. 1-3 meeting. Sources at the Vatican told *NCR* following that meeting that the synod on the family would not be business as usual.

The upcoming synod, those sources said, would provide for substantial consultation at the local level, involving dioceses and parishes. *NCR* was told in early October that Vatican officials had discussed using the Internet to allow rank-and-file Catholics to offer ideas and reactions along the way.

It would seem that the bishops of England and Wales had this idea; they put the Vatican's Oct. 18 questionnaire online [4].

But when Archbishop Lorenzo Baldisseri was asked at the Vatican press briefing Tuesday if that action was something other bishops' conferences should emulate, he said the "question answers itself" and was "not worth considering."

Baldisseri, the secretary general of the Vatican's Synod of Bishops, was the author of the Oct. 18 letter.

The letter, first reported by *NCR* [5], asks the conferences to quiz their populations on the sometimes-controversial topics in advance of a Vatican synod on the family next October.

A synod is a global meeting of Catholic bishops, usually devoted to a particular theme.

Baldisseri, who was appointed to his Vatican role Sept. 21, spoke publicly for the first time about the synod and

his request to the bishops' conferences at Tuesday's press briefing along with two other senior prelates.

Mentioning that his office is expected to undergo revision with the reforms of the Vatican bureaucracy being undertaken by Francis, he said the pope wanted to strengthen his office to better promote collegiality and consultation between the pontiff and the world's bishops.

The document regarding next year's synod, he said, was sent "to initiate the process of consultation." The document was sent to dioceses around the world "with the aim of obtaining concrete and real data on the synodal theme," he said.

Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, however, said in an interview with the Catholic News Agency [2] on Saturday that the questions will only be used by the synod in an advisory way. Lombardi is the director of the Holy See Press Office.

In the letter he sent to the bishops' conferences in October, Baldisseri directed the prelates to distribute the questionnaire "immediately as widely as possible to deaneries and parishes so that input from local sources can be received."

One question is whether the archbishop and the Vatican meant for the world's bishops to conduct a survey of their populations using the questionnaire. The U.S. bishops' conference did not request the U.S. episcopate to undertake that wide of a consultation, telling the bishops in an Oct. 30 memo sent with Baldisseri's letter only to provide their own observations.

Speaking on background to *NCR* over the last week, several U.S. bishops and former bishops' conference staffers said they found the instructions in Baldisseri's Oct. 18 letter and Jenkins' Oct. 30 memo to be conflicting. Between the two documents, the bishops and staffers said, it was unclear what kind of consultation the bishops are expected to do.

Dolores Leckey, who led the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Family, Laity, Women and Youth from 1977 to 1997, said in an interview she had not seen a similar request from the Vatican during her time with the U.S. bishops.

Leckey said her bishops' office had undertaken a two-year consultative process for the 1987 Synod on the Laity, but that process came as an initiative of the U.S. bishops and not at the Vatican's request.

The bishops elected to attend that synod from the U.S. decided they "wanted to hear what the people had to say," Leckey said.

While the Vatican had not initially made the Oct. 18 document available, it was posted Tuesday at the Synod of Bishops' website and was distributed through the Vatican press office.

Baldisseri said pastors were expected to provide summaries of the views and experiences of parishioners and that their findings would be "channeled" in turn through national bishops' conferences for ultimate consideration by the synod.

Individual Catholics are welcome to communicate their views directly to the synod's offices at the Vatican, Baldisseri said. His staff is preparing the synod's working document, which should be published in May.

Archbishop Bruno Forte, an Italian who is to serve as the secretary for the upcoming synod, said at Tuesday's Vatican briefing that the process for this synod is a "broad and deep process of listening to the life of the church and of the most pressing challenges posed to her."

Forte said he wanted to emphasize the "pastoral slant" of the theme as "a perspective through which the Holy

Father invites us to look upon the value of the family and the challenges it faces today."

"It is not, therefore, a matter of debating doctrinal questions," Forte said. "But rather how to understand how to effectively proclaim the Gospel of the family in the times we are living, characterized by a clear social and spiritual crisis."

Among questions asked by the Vatican in the Oct. 18 document are topics that sometimes have sharply divided the U.S. church, like the Catholic teaching prohibiting the use of artificial contraception, the possibility of a divorced Catholic to remarry or receive Communion, and the number of couples choosing to live together before marrying.

Baldisseri said Tuesday he was asking the bishops' conferences to respond by the end of January so his secretariat could use their material in meetings expected for February.

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