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Invited or not, here they come

Joan Chittister | Jul. 3, 2014 From Where I Stand
Synod on the Family

Watch the TV ads carefully these days. You may not have much interest in the particular product they're selling at any particular time, but if you listen carefully, you can certainly learn a lot there about ecclesiastical physics. One advert teaches: "A body at rest tends to stay at rest; a body in motion tends to stay in motion." And another one says: "Every action creates a reaction." So there you have it. That's exactly what's going on in the church right now.

Whole bodies of people are moving forward while the bishops stay at rest. Most important of all, when the hierarchical church finally called for a response from the church at large about something important -- marriage, family, relationships -- material poured out of every lay group in the country. The data were clear: The laity was eager to respond. They wanted to be part of the conversation. They wanted to give back to the church the fruits of the sacrament the church has bestowed on them.

But not in one area alone or from one group alone.

For instance, the Association of Catholic Priests in Ireland has asked their bishop representatives to present three proposals to the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference with a view to forwarding them to Rome. Their proposals for official consideration include the acceptance of married priests, the ordination of women to the diaconate, and the recall of laicized priests to priestly ministry.

ACP members, in the minutes of their meeting record, know that "their proposals will cause disquiet and difficulty" but are nevertheless essential "to guarantee regular access to the Eucharist to the Irish Faithful." In 1984, there were 171 ordinations in Ireland. In 2006, there were 22. In 2013, there were only 70 seminarians in all of Ireland even considering the priesthood.

The problem is that proposals such as these have been presented from various regions of the church universal for years now. No real consideration yet from the "body at rest." Only a mandate not to even think about them.

Here, in our own case, an American-initiated global network of Catholics and Christians, Catholic Church Reform International, in collaboration with more than a hundred church organizations and individuals from 65 countries is calling for all Catholics to have an influential voice [1] in the decision-making of the church.

They are taking the pope seriously. Pope Francis invited the church to prepare for the upcoming extraordinary Synod of Bishops on the family by reporting to their bishops their own responses to the papal survey on the subject.

Catholic Church Reform International, in fact, is urging that all forms of family life be represented and invited to participate in the upcoming Synod of Bishops on the family. They "want a voice in the church." Their document is clear: "Both knowledge and experience of the challenges faced by families need to be understood before meaningful resolutions can be reached."

And they are prepared to help see that happen.

They are asking the synod to do four things:

1. To bless those who choose to live together in preparation for marriage as well as those who form new relationships after a marriage breaks down.

2. To say that *Humanae Vitae* was a mistake. They want the church to emphasize the joyfulness of marriage rather than finding new things to condemn. They're looking, they say, for the church to advise couples on the values and practices that genuinely promote openness to life. They want more from the church, it seems, than just another list of sins.

3. To treat all people with the same respect regardless of their sexual orientation and refrain from making gender a definition of the roles and tasks of either church or society.

4. To proclaim the truth that the church is expressed through the *sensus fidelium*, through "priests, religious, and the people learning and teaching together."

Furthermore, these issues and the position papers that support them have already been delivered to the synod office, to key curial offices and to all 114 presidents of bishops' conferences around the world.

Their goal, they say, is to help people understand that the church is their church and to encourage them to speak up and speak out.

This is clearly a body in motion.

Using their position papers to launch discussion on the agenda topics, the group is conducting worldwide regional gatherings from which to collect responses to the Vatican's own survey, which was -- or was not -- circulated throughout countries and dioceses. Lack of serious attention to the survey itself has become a comment on the value that bishops themselves put -- or did not put -- on lay insights on family life around the world.

Most important of all, Catholic Church Reform International is issuing an open invitation to anyone who wishes to attend its "Forum on the Family -- Listening to the Faithful [2]," to be held Oct. 2-3 at the Jesuit Oratory of S. Francesco Saverio del Caravita in Rome.

Just prior to the opening of the synod on the family itself, the summary report of regional responses developed there will be delivered to the synod office.

Clearly, as the physicists teach us, to every action, there is a reaction. And this reaction from the laity on "family" as it exists now is coming from the very heart of the people on whose lives the synod will pronounce.

Supporters of Catholic Church Reform International are coming to Rome, they say, to show solidarity with Pope Francis by welcoming his extraordinary synod. And they are taking a gift with them when they go: They are taking their own testimonies, the fruits of a yearlong international discernment on the questions the pope himself has asked the church to consider.

The only question is how that interest, participation, experience and discernment will be received.

From where I stand, it seems that too many times already, responses like this have been met by surprise or dismay by the very bishops who should themselves be alerting Rome to lay insights on important questions. Instead, the very thought that the voice of the people is itself echoing through the church has incited alarm far too often. As at Trent, for instance.

Indeed, this tension between motion and rest raises the question that may prove to be more important to the future of the church than the issues themselves. Before it's too late, somebody needs to ask the physicists what happens when the reaction to an action is simply dismissed.

[Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister is a frequent *NCR* contributor.]

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