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How Pope Francis could improve upon the Vatican's synod questionnaire

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NCR Today

I am intrigued by the fact that Pope Francis is seeking a greater understanding of the thinking of the laity on a number of key issues that have divided Catholics for decades. Given the customary top-down practices of the Vatican, there is something historic about that alone.

The issues of interest include views on artificial contraception, reception of Communion by divorced and remarried Catholics, the practices of couples living together before marriage, and how local parishes treat same-sex couples and their children, among other things.

Those who inaugurated the survey say they are not looking to change church teachings in these areas but to "understand how to effectively proclaim the Gospel of the family in the times we are living."

Whatever the motives, the data on what Catholics think about these issues already exist. Numerous polls over decades have shown that overwhelming percentages of lay Catholics have substantial problems with the teaching against artificial contraception. The majority believe the church should be open to divorce and remarriage afterward. And within the last two years, the majority now supports same-sex marriage.

What I find most interesting is the apparent scramble in some quarters to make sure one's views are represented to the Vatican. Some are worried the bishops will report their own views, not those of the laity. Others are concerned that only one "wing" of lay opinion will reach Rome.

I am trained in social science survey research. So to me, the answer to all this is simple: Commission a new poll that not only repeats well-worn questions about contraception and other issues but asks a bit more detail to get to what the pope is interested in knowing. For example: What are the problems

Catholics have with implementing the teaching on contraception?

This would provide a scientific random probability sample so social scientists could update existing data and ask more probing questions. The end product would be a scientific sample of U.S. Catholic opinion.

A reputable polling firm like the Public Religion Research Institute, the Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life or even Gallup could conduct such a survey.

Pope Francis is a highly educated Jesuit, so I'm sure he understands all this. But he should not hold his breath. On issues like contraception, divorce and remarriage, and same-sex unions, he will find considerable dissent from Catholic teaching. It may be time to revisit the old doctrine of the "sense of the faithful" and look at how that can be a guide to the Catholic teaching of the future.

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