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Editorial: Synod questionnaire an opportunity to hear from the people

by NCR Editorial Staff

Editorial

The documents we reprinted as a pullout in the center of the Nov. 22-Dec. 5 issue of the newspaper were sent to *NCR* by someone who feared the questionnaire from the Vatican about next year's Synod of Bishops on the family wouldn't get as wide a distribution as intended, at least here in the United States. The bishops of England and Wales put the questionnaire online for all to examine and respond to, but the instructions from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops didn't seem to push for widest possible distribution.

NCR posted the documents online Oct. 31. At first, a couple church officials said *NCR* was making too much of this questionnaire -- "We get requests like this all the time. We'll handle it in the usual manner," they said. The Vatican spokesman, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, told another news outlet Nov. 2 that it is "only a document sent to bishops' conferences" and a part of the habitual "praxis" of the Synod of Bishops. To say the document was more than that, he said, was "not true."

But on Nov. 5, the Vatican had called a news conference to explain the documents and it too posted them online. The Synod of Bishops' general secretary, Archbishop Lorenzo Baldisseri, said he expected pastors would provide summaries of the views and experiences of their parishioners, and that their findings would be "channeled" in turn through national bishops' conferences for ultimate consideration by the synod. However, he also welcomed individual Catholics to communicate directly with the synod's offices at the Vatican. Synod staff would consider that input for the synod's working document, which should be published in May 2014, he said.

The questionnaire has also now been posted to the Vatican Radio website. At least two U.S. groups are collecting responses independent of the U.S. bishops. As a conference, the Australian bishops had not

decided how to handle the questionnaire, but one Australian bishop had already duplicated the survey and sent it to all the parishes in his diocese with instructions to pass it out. The Belgian bishops are putting it online and printing it in their magazines.

It is our understanding that the bishops' meeting in Baltimore in November were to discuss how to handle this survey. We hope that whatever they decide will result in the widest possible effort to collect the opinions and concerns of U.S. Catholics on an issue that is crucial on a personal level as well as to the future of the church.

Whatever the intentions of the synod's secretariat were, there is little doubt now that the questionnaire is being distributed widely. (One aspect of wide distribution that the Vatican won't overlook, but we North Americans may, is the danger that the media-rich West could dominate the discussion. Care will have to be taken to hear the voices of families in the global South.)

We knew that this synod was going to be different from past synods from its inception. Pope Francis has said before that he wants the synod process to be more consultative. He signaled his special interest in this synod on the family by taking the unusual step of leaving the Vatican, traveling down the Via della Conciliazione to the synod's offices, and joining a working meeting of the secretariat. The words describing this synod from its first announcement have been frank: Italian Archbishop Bruno Forte, special secretary for the synod, said it will discuss "wounded families, the divorced and remarried, [and] de facto couples." The frankness of language has carried over into the questions, which holds out the promise that the synod discussions will be based on true pastoral realities.

Since the synod documents became public, *NCR* has had conversations with a number of people with extensive contacts in the Vatican and who have observed quite a few synods over the years. The consensus among this group is that the process is different this time. While all synods and other Vatican-sponsored consultations use surveys and questionnaires and ask local bishops for input, this time the questions really seem to matter, they say. The questions matter because Francis wants to hear the answers, they say.

Two obstacles stand in the way of those who hope the synod on the family will be a realistic assessment of family life today and propose concrete pastoral approaches to meeting these challenges. First, the people with whom *NCR* spoke warned that Francis may not understand or fully appreciate the strength of the current he swims against in the Vatican bureaucracy and vested interests. Second, expectations may be dangerously high. The English bishop responsible for putting the questionnaire online has warned about this. An organizer of a U.S. response to the questionnaire told *NCR* that "an opportunity to talk about pastoral needs of people in real situations is very exciting for Catholics."

Francis has one more time raised our expectations. In this process, as in all initiatives he has undertaken since his election, there are no indications that church doctrine will change. While expectations may be met without changing doctrine, some kind of change must come out of this synod. If he wants to sustain Catholics' interest and excitement, the time is fast approaching when he must deliver something tangible.

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