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Japanese bishops: Vatican mindset doesn't fit Asian church

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Vatican City — Japan's bishops have publicly responded to a Vatican survey of global Catholics' views on family issues, stating bluntly that church teachings are not known in their country and the Vatican's Europe-centric view hampers efforts at evangelization in places where Catholics represent a small minority of the population.

In a sometimes pointed 15-page report issued in preparation for an October meeting of the world's bishops, known as a synod, the Japanese state the church "often falls short" by "presenting a high threshold for entry and lacking hospitality and practical kindness."

Stressing many times that Japanese Catholics represent only about 0.35 percent of the country's population and that some 76 percent of those Catholics marry non-Catholics, the Japanese ask the global church to "go beyond" a series of norms and rules that separate Catholics from one another.

"It is necessary to go beyond merely saying to men and women who do not follow Church norms that they are separated from the community and actively provide them with opportunities to encounter the Christian community," the Japanese state.

The text, released in Japanese and English and first reported by the Union of Catholic Asian News, is a summary of responses from the country's bishops and religious superiors to a Vatican questionnaire published in preparation for the October synod.

Called by Pope Francis last year, the Oct. 5-19 meeting is to focus on the theme "Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization."

Approximately 150 Catholic cardinals from around the world are converging on the Vatican this week for a meeting Thursday and Friday that is to partly focus on the preparations for the synod ahead of Saturday's consistory, a formal event at which 19 new members are to join their ranks.

Likewise, the Vatican office responsible for preparing for the synod is expected to meet Monday with its 15-member planning council to formally prepare for the event.

The Japanese responses to the wider inquiries of the questionnaire are blunt and to the point. In response to a question on how Japanese Catholics accept the church's teachings prohibiting artificial contraception, for example, the Japanese state: "Contemporary Catholics are either indifferent to or unaware of the teaching of the Church."

"Most Catholics in Japan have not heard of *Humanae vitae*," the Japanese state, referring to Pope Paul VI's encyclical letter banning the practice. "If they have, they probably do not make it an important part of their lives. Social and cultural values as well as financial considerations are more important."

"There is a big gap between the Vatican and reality," they continue. "Condom use is recommended in sex education classes in schools."

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Responding as to whether Japanese Catholics promote so-called natural methods of birth control, the Japanese respond: "There are some attempts to introduce such practices as the Billings Method, but few people know about it. For the most part, the Church in Japan is not obsessed with sexual matters."

In response to a question on couples who live together before marriage, the Japanese say, "The pastoral practice of the Church must begin from the premise that cohabitation and civil marriage outside the church have become the norm."

"In developing a pastoral orientation, it is perhaps important to recall that the only time in the gospels that Jesus clearly encounters someone in a situation of cohabitation outside of marriage (the Samaritan woman at the well) he does not focus on it," they state. "Instead, he respectfully deals with the woman and turns her into a missionary."

The Japanese also call for a rethinking of church procedure for those seeking annulments, stating "a simplified procedure for annulments is not only needed, it is essential."

"While simplification is needed along with compliance with the legal provisions, a realistic response to the situation people actually face is essential," they state. "Simplification of the legal proceedings will be the salvation of those who are suffering."

In other areas, the Japanese respond to the questionnaire's inquiries by focusing on unique challenges faced in their country, stressing particularly a work ethic among the population that does not encourage making time for family needs and the varied problems faced by many Japanese Catholics married to non-Catholics.

To the first point, the Japanese state: "In situations where both parents work, many children return to an empty house."

"Shared meals are rare," they continue. "Consequently, there are no opportunities to share conversation. Each member of the family faces difficulties, but since there is no fellowship each is lonely and has little experience of loving or being loved."

Toward the end of their response, the Japanese ask that the church "supplement the pastoral care of people facing difficulties in their family life with a vision of the Church's teachings about marriage and the family."

Continuing, the Japanese offer a small critique of the questionnaire itself, stating it has "been developed with the mindset of Christian countries in which the entire family is Christian."

"For example, religiously mixed marriages seem to be considered a problem," they state. "However, in Japan, the overwhelming majority of marriages involve mixed religions."

"In this context, we must ask what a Christian household and family mean," they continue. "The increasing number of people who do not marry, the increase in single parent families, the situation of the elderly and the ageing of society, the problems facing the children of the elderly are all problems that face family life today that were unimagined in the past."

Stressing the traditional role family has played in their society, the Japanese state that "the Church must make use of this."

"The Church often falls short in this, presenting a high threshold for entry and lacking hospitality and practical kindness," they state. "As Hebrews 13:2 teaches us, 'Do not neglect to show hospitality, for by that means some have entertained angels without knowing it.'"

"The Church must be a refuge for those worn by the journey of life, and ceremonial occasions are places where they can experience that refuge," the Japanese conclude their response.

That Vatican office for the synod, led by Archbishop Lorenzo Baldisseri, sent the questionnaire to bishops' conferences around the world in October, asking that they distribute it "immediately as widely as possible to deaneries and parishes so that input from local sources can be received."

Asking for answers to nearly 40 inquiries, the questionnaire touches on topics that have sometimes have sharply divided the 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 young people choosing to live together before marrying.

Like the Japanese, the German bishops' conference released a blunt report in response to the questionnaire, showing a clear divergence between what the church teaches on marriage, sexuality and family life and what German Catholics believe.

The Japanese survey, dated Jan. 15 and released by the Japanese bishops' conference, says the bishops sought responses to the Vatican survey from bishops and major superiors of religious men and women, which were then sent to lay and clerical experts for comment.

Recent studies have estimated there to be approximately 509,000 Catholics in Japan, which has a total population of some 128 million people.

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