

Francis to families: Give prayer, help to October synod

Joshua J. McElwee | Feb. 25, 2014 NCR Today
Vatican City

Pope Francis has written a letter to the families of the world, asking for their prayers for an October meeting of bishops to address issues of family life -- and to assure them the meeting will involve not only prelates but "all the People of God."

The letter, released by the Vatican Tuesday, is simply addressed "dear families" and carries no official title. The pope begins by saying he wishes to use the letter to "come into your homes" to speak about the October event, known as a synod.

"In our day the Church is called to proclaim the Gospel by confronting the new and urgent pastoral needs facing the family," [the pope writes](#) [1].

"This important meeting will involve all the People of God -- bishops, priests, consecrated men and women, and lay faithful of the particular churches of the entire world -- all of whom are actively participating in preparations for the meeting through practical suggestions and the crucial support of prayer," he states.

Saying the synod is "dedicated in a special way to you, to your vocation and mission in the Church and in society; to the challenges of marriage, of family life, of the education of children; and the role of the family in the life of the Church," the pope asks to "pray intensely" for its success.

"May we all ... pray together so that through these events the Church will undertake a true journey of discernment and adopt the necessary pastoral means to help families face their present challenges with the light and strength that comes from the Gospel," Francis writes.

The pontiff's letter Tuesday refers to a synod to be held Oct. 5-19 at the Vatican on the theme "Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization." A second synod is to be held in 2015 on the same theme, and there is also to be a World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia in September 2015.

The focus of the pope on family issues has raised hopes among some Catholics that the church may revise its pastoral practices on some matters long debated by U.S. Catholics, such as Communion for divorced and remarried couples and contraceptive use.

In the fall, the synod office, led by Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri, sent a 40-question questionnaire to individual bishops around the world, asking them to distribute the questions "as widely as possible."

The 15 prelates who make up the synod's planning council have been meeting Monday and Tuesday to discuss more formal preparations for the October event and to coordinate the responses received to the questionnaire from around the world, said to be in the tens of thousands of pages.

Likewise, a special closed-door meeting of some 150 Catholic cardinals at the Vatican on Thursday and Friday

also discussed the synod.

Although the precise subject of those discussions is unknown, several cardinals outside the meetings said Francis was struggling to maintain dialogue on the issues. Speaking outside the session on Friday, [French Cardinal Paul Poupard said](#) [2] the prelates were hoping their meetings "help us find dialogue, without which we are in civil war."

Other cardinals have sought to downplay expectations that the church may be changing its sexual teachings.

Galveston-Houston Cardinal Daniel DiNardo said in an *NCR* interview Sunday the cardinals' discussions focused mainly on the broader issue of how to support new couples and not on hot-button topics like divorce and remarriage.

"If there was one thing that came out of the consistory, [it] was that we have to do more to accompany families, particularly the new ones," DiNardo said.

While released Tuesday, Francis' letter is dated Feb. 2, the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord.

In his text, Francis refers to the Gospel story of the presentation -- in which Mary and Joseph take the baby Jesus to a temple, where he is acknowledged as the Messiah -- saying Jesus "is the one who brings together and unites generations."

"In your journey as a family, you share so many beautiful moments: meals, rest, housework, leisure, prayer, trips and pilgrimages, and times of mutual support," states the pontiff. "Nevertheless, if there is no love then there is no joy, and authentic love comes from Jesus."

Ending the letter, Francis again asks for prayers for the synod, calling the prayers a "precious treasure." He also invokes a blessing on "every family," making no distinction, Catholic or otherwise.

Francis' letter, released in eight languages, is also accompanied by a separate letter from Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, the president of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for the Family.

"Families -- this is the intent of Pope Francis -- are not simply the object of attention," Paglia writes. "They are also the subject of this pilgrimage, as they are the main part of the church, and marked by the sacrament of marriage."

"With these brief words the pope suggests that the beautiful testimony of believing families is really like a letter 'written in our hearts,' meant to be 'read by everyone,' to touch deep in the hearts of many," Paglia writes.

[Joshua J. McElwee is *NCR* national correspondent. His email address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org [3]. Follow him on Twitter: [@joshjmac](#) [4].]

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