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Synod reports point to poor understanding of family teachings

by Patricia Zapor by Catholic News Service

Synod on the Family

Washington — A handful of U.S. bishops have released some results of public responses to a survey for the Vatican in preparation for the upcoming synod on the family.

Several U.S. bishops wrote short reports for the public giving a general sense of the responses. The material was to be submitted to the Vatican by the end of January.

Among the comments in common with many of the brief reports was that Catholics admit to a poor understanding of the church's teachings on the family.

Father Dennis Gill, director of the Philadelphia Archdiocese's Office for Divine Worship and coordinator of the project, told CatholicPhilly.com, the archdiocesan news website, that the church has its educational work cut out for it. He said the nearly 900 responses to the survey showed poor knowledge of Catholic teaching.

"One thing we did learn was that we have to be much more proactive," he said. "We cannot just depend on church teaching filtering through the cracks. We need to have an evangelical (aggressiveness) to putting on the table just what we believe on all these issues."

What is needed, Gill said, is not simply a renewed effort to present church teaching in the same ways. "Somehow the Gospel has to be presented in a way that is compelling, engaging, insisting on a response," he said.

In one of the more thorough reports, Bishop Robert N. Lynch of St. Petersburg, Fla., posted a detailed

blog with highlights and put on his diocesan Web page an 18-page summary of the results of more than 6,800 responses from the public.

Among Bishop Lynch's observations in his blog were that it "is impossible to share in a medium such as this is all of the 'free-form' comments which I would characterize as serious, lacking in polemics, sincere, and reflecting little of the polarity which exists in the church today. I am very proud of what was said, how it was said and who said it."

Even before the October extraordinary Synod of Bishops on the Family, Lynch said, "there are pastoral results from the survey which we can attend to and I hope we will."

For instance, he said, "I have made it known that I will not tolerate any discrimination or anything which smacks of the punitive to children of same-sex couples. I think all representatives of the church's many ministries can be kinder, gentler, more welcoming and less judgmental of those who find our praxis and preaching on marriage and family life to be at odds with their experiences."

Lynch said that it's clear the church needs to help people understand "that divorce itself is not something which bans a person from reception of the sacraments and that annulments do not 'illegitimize' children born of previous marriages." Addressing such issues can help the process of healing for many within the church, he said.

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All bishops around the world were asked to complete the 39-item questionnaire and encouraged to seek input from the people of their dioceses about the responses. In some dioceses, that resulted in the survey itself or a reworked version of the key questions being posted online for public response.

The Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales, for example, put the whole questionnaire up for public participation, using the online SurveyMonkey site.

While many dioceses in the U.S. encouraged the public to weigh in on the questionnaire, fewer have released more than limited explanations of the results. Lynch's posts and a similar-sized report by Pittsburgh Bishop David A. Zubik were among the most detailed. Some individual bishops and some entire bishops conferences said they would not be releasing details at the request of the Vatican.

In both the Pittsburgh and St. Petersburg dioceses, the largest number of responses came from people who are over age 50, married and who attend Mass weekly or more often.

In his introduction to the report published online and in the Pittsburgh Catholic newspaper, Zubik said the bottom line he took away from about 3,000 responses was "we must throw open the doors, windows, websites and all means of modern communication to connect with all families and truly listen to their hopes and hurts. It is important that we, with greater intensity and intentionality, support families in these challenging times. God created the family. He loves every member of every family. We must do no less as the church."

The Pittsburgh report observed that the church's teaching on the family is "known by few and therefore not put into practice by the vast majority of Catholics."

It said some of the difficulties are cultural, for instance that children and parents are involved in separate activities that limit common experiences of prayer, meals, recreation and dialogue.

"Catholic parents and children are often isolated from one another not only in the family home but in the community as well because Catholic families do not often interact with other Catholic families," the Pittsburgh report said. "Catholics who live and practice the faith have become a minority in the United States even within the wider Catholic community. There is a greater need to foster family peer ministry: family-to-family faith sharing, service activities and prayer."

Bishop Paul G. Bootkoski of Metuchen, N.J., also had a big response to the online survey, with nearly 6,000 participants, he said in a letter of thanks to people for answers that "went the extra mile."

"Your responses were thoughtful, honest, forthright, detailed and personal," Bootkoski said. "I assure you that your voices were heard!"

He said he was moved and inspired by "the personal accounts of suffering and pain -- as well as joy and fulfillment -- that many of you shared," including "some of your most intimate life experiences and critical encounters with the church and her people."

Bootkoski said that in addition to helping the universal church at the synod, he believes the insights generated by the survey will have a long and lasting local impact.

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Matthew Gambino in Philadelphia contributed to this story.

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