

Some US dioceses report results of questionnaire

Michael O'Loughlin | Mar. 11, 2014
Synod on the Family

Lay Catholics who were given the chance to respond to a Vatican questionnaire on family-related issues greeted the opportunity with relish, but it may be that laypeople in just over a third of the nearly 200 Catholic dioceses in the U.S. were given that opportunity.

NCR scoured websites and publications of U.S. dioceses looking for signs of how dioceses invited Catholics to respond to Pope Francis's October 2013 request to distribute "immediately" and "as widely as possible" a questionnaire on issues such as contraception, same-sex marriage, and divorce. The results from dioceses around the world will become input for the Synod of Bishops on the family in Rome in October.

NCR found 78 dioceses with clear, easily accessible information about what the survey was and how Catholics could participate, either through online surveys, direct consultations (a bishop in Alaska hosted a town hall meeting) or parish input. Some bishops announced they would be consulting priest councils or other diocesan structures to gather responses to the questionnaire.

Of those, about a dozen reported the results of their surveys and consultations publicly.

The questionnaire came from then-Archbishop, now Cardinal, Lorenzo Baldisseri, head of the Vatican office organizing the October synod, which carries the official theme of "pastoral challenges to the family in the context of evangelization." The instrument had 39 questions under nine topics.

According to *NCR* research, most U.S. dioceses do not provide any information about the synod or the questionnaire on their diocesan websites, but some may have sent a report to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, which is collecting the reports and sending them to Rome. A spokesman for the conference said he did not have data related to how many bishops sent reports.

In October, Msgr. Ronny Jenkins, general secretary of the U.S. bishops' conference, had asked that U.S. dioceses send the results of their consultations to the Washington office by Dec. 31, so that the documents could be forwarded to Baldisseri's office by February.

In Tucson, Ariz., a survey was sent to parish leaders and it was also made available online for lay Catholics. Bishop Gerald Kicanas said that the laity was excited about being asked to participate. "I think there was quite a bit of enthusiasm about it. It's a topic very important to people, and our society and culture," he told *NCR*.

That enthusiasm was evident in Spokane, Wash., too. Bishop Blase Cupich told *NCR* that many lay Catholics included comments expressing gratitude to Francis for the opportunity to participate.

"People felt encouraged that their opinion mattered, and that they were being asked," he said. "It was a success even to launch this questionnaire. It opened a new door to people, gave them a sense that they were participating in the synod process to some degree."

Information on many diocesan websites stressed that the questionnaire was not an opinion poll or a referendum on church teaching, but a tool to consult lay Catholics on whether or not they understand church teaching and to ask how the church might better provide pastoral care to families.

Survey results

An examination of the survey results that were made available online suggests that American Catholics have questions about the church's teachings on a range of family-related issues.

Bishop Stephen Blaire of Stockton, Calif., told *NCR* that he was not surprised by the results, a summary of which are available on his diocese's website.

"If you have your ear to the ground, you would have a sense of things that people are considering," he said. "A lot of people felt that the church's teaching on marriage and sexuality was not always accepted in a full and complete way. I think we knew that."

While a majority of respondents in Stockton look negatively on same-sex marriage, most also expressed concern "that no parochial outreach exists for persons [in same-sex relationships] to experience welcome and a place in the church," according to the diocese's report. Further, pastoral leaders "are encouraged to treat a same sex couple who has adopted children in the same manner as any heterosexual couple with children," the report said.

"Pain and brokenness are dominant and recurring themes" for Catholics who are divorced and remarried, the report said, and respondents lamented the "difficult and cumbersome" annulment requirements. Further, "the control of pregnancy is an acceptable value" in society, the questionnaire found.

The Honolulu diocese reported that church teachings on priestly celibacy, premarital sex, contraception, divorce, abortion and same-sex marriage are "almost universally rejected" by both Catholics and society at large.

More than 80 percent of respondents in Honolulu agreed that a "simplification of canonical practice" regarding annulments would benefit the church. Respondents reported difficulty in accepting the church's teaching against artificial contraception; the report quoted a layperson who said the teaching is "unrealistic and ill-informed."

The report cited divorce, financial pressures, child abuse, drug use and "secular values" as the biggest threat to families today. One priest, citing economic pressure on parents, said the church needs "to look at ways to allow families to have more time to enjoy one another."

Bishop Robert Lynch of St. Petersburg, Fla., reported that over 6,800 people responded to his survey (*NCR*, Feb. 28-March 13). Lynch said that there was "strong support" for marriage as defined between one man and one woman. Respondents also felt "the Church needed to be better prepared to respond to the reality of same-sex marriage" and "be kinder and gentler to those who identify as gay and lesbian, be less judgmental and more welcoming."

The respondents "felt very strongly" that "something needs to be done to reconcile and welcome back" divorced and remarried Catholics into the church.

In Iowa, Bishop Martin Amos of Davenport wrote a report based on the findings of the survey there. He noted,

"Secular media continues in its effort to promote a 'new normal' " at odds with church teaching. Amos also said that natural law is not discussed in modern society and that marriage is viewed "merely in secular terms."

Amos wrote that while many divorced and remarried Catholics are unaware that their "irregular" situation bars them from the sacraments, those who do abstain from receiving the Eucharist "often feel sadness and isolation." He noted that a majority of respondents, like those in Stockton and Honolulu, favor simplifying the annulment process, and that the "strongest" opinion was that "a person divorced and remarried should be allowed to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation, celebrate marriage in the Catholic Church" and then be admitted to the sacraments.

Regarding same-sex marriage, which is legal in Iowa, Amos wrote that the church should provide pastoral care to individuals in same-sex marriages and welcome them into the community while "not recognizing these unions as valid." On contraception, Amos wrote that Catholics reject the ban for "ideological and practical" reasons.

In Bridgeport, Conn., a summary of responses acknowledged that most lay Catholics reject the church's position on birth control. One respondent wrote that "the church has to realize that medicinal birth control is a reality that will never change and that it needs to be accepted" and another that it would be "helpful if the Church would recognize that this teaching has not been received by the Catholic population." Still, some expressed support for the church's ban on artificial contraception and suggested the church promote natural family planning more robustly.

Some dioceses reported on the number of participants but did not offer details about responses.

In the diocese of Scranton, Pa., 890 individuals completed an online survey and in Pittsburgh, where 2,811 people responded to the survey, Bishop David Zubik said in the *Pittsburgh Catholic* that the responses were "very honest and insightful."

In the Springfield, Ill., diocese, 75 percent of the 334 survey participants said that they did not fully understand the church's teaching on family.

Accurate data

Blaire of Stockton said any future consultations should rely on professionals to collect information.

Archbishop William Lori of Baltimore agreed, suggesting in an email to *NCR* that involving professional research organizations could "glean more accurate data." Nonetheless, he called the process "a step in the right direction toward an ongoing dialogue."

Jesuit Fr. Thomas Gaunt, executive director of Georgetown University's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), said that a process to collect scientific results could take several months, much longer than the eight weeks U.S. bishops were granted to collect information. A primary challenge, he said, would be creating "questions that any Catholic in the America can answer."

Kicanas noted that it is important for the church "to know what we're dealing with, the practices and attitudes of people around these areas of marriage, family and sexuality." He said that the church must "approach these complex issues, but deal with them in a way that is faithful to our teaching but responds to the signs of the times."

Blaire echoed this sentiment. "There are so many struggles in family life and so to give our attention pastorally to the family is extremely important," he said.

In recent weeks, some bishops have tried to rein in expectations about what the synod might accomplish, but Cupich said that the church "must allow the Holy Spirit to move us."

Citing the change in hearts of church leaders following the Second Vatican Council, he said that ordained leaders must take seriously the "joys, sorrows, heartaches, and challenges of laypeople."

[Michael O'Loughlin is a freelance writer based in Washington, D.C.]

Source URL (retrieved on 05/28/2017 - 10:16): <https://www.ncronline.org/news/accountability/some-us-dioceses-report-results-questionnaire>