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How we wrote the synod story

Dennis Coday | Mar. 11, 2014 NCR Today
Synod on the Family

What did the Vatican want when it sent a 39-question survey about family issues to the world's bishops in October? When *NCR* first reported the release of the document, we quoted a letter from Archbishop (now Cardinal) Lorenzo Baldisseri, secretary general of the Vatican's Synod of Bishops, that asked the national bishops' conferences to distribute the questionnaire "immediately as widely as possible to deaneries and parishes so that input from local sources can be received."

Now, we at *NCR* assumed that meant getting the question to the people in the pews, you know, the people who live in families, and ask them about contraception, same-sex marriage, cohabitation, marriage preparation and divorce, but we soon discovered that these instructions could and would be interpreted in various ways.

Famously, the bishops of England and Wales almost immediately posted the questionnaire online. The Canadian and U.S. bishops told the media they would follow the "usual process" for soliciting information as "Rome asks for this kind of consultation on a regular basis."

The "usual process"? A spokeswoman for the U.S. bishops told *NCR*: "It will be up to each bishop to determine what would be the most useful way of gathering information to provide to Rome."

So when I asked Michael O'Loughlin to look into how the U.S. bishops had responded to the Vatican's invitation, I really had no idea what he would find, but I wasn't too surprised when I read his story [1]. I had thought that we would be reporting on what bishops found when they took these questions to people in their dioceses. You will find that in O'Loughlin's report, but you'll also find something missing.

We are reporting that 76 dioceses out of nearly 200 publicly and actively sought some kind consultation with their people. Let me explain a little bit about how we came to that number.

We scoured diocesan websites and publications, looking for any references to the survey and any indication about how a bishop planned to gather the data. Many, as you can see in this chart [2], offered online surveys (or in many cases online access to a printed version of the questions). Some bishops informed Catholics of the questions and announced what groups they would be consulting to gather the data. Presumably, the members of those bodies would be open to hearing ideas from people who read or heard about the bishops' consultation plan.

This seemed like a reasonable approach: If a diocese wanted wide participation, how else does it achieve that without notices in these various modes of mass communication? If our trolling of the Internet didn't turn up evidence of surveys or consultations, we could reasonably question how public an individual bishop wanted to be.

Now, certainly, more than 76 dioceses could have turned in reports to the Vatican -- it doesn't seem logical that nearly two-thirds of U.S. dioceses wouldn't respond to a Vatican request for information -- but we don't know what that number would be. We also have no idea whom they consulted, let alone what they reported.

That not knowing is the story behind the story of the questionnaire.

And let me tell you, Catholics who didn't know that bishops were writing reports to the Vatican about these issues aren't happy when they do learn this. A parish recently asked me to speak about Pope Francis to an adult formation class, a talk I've done about a dozen times in the past year. As part of my presentation, I talked about the questionnaire. They stopped me mid-program, wanting to know more about this questionnaire and how they could participate. "Too late," I told them. "The results were to have been turned in by the end of December." A man, clearly incensed, asked me, "Why didn't we know about this?"

If your diocese is missing from our report, please send me an email at dcoday@ncronline.org [3], and we will update our findings.

If you want to delve more deeply into the bishops' reports to their people on the survey questions, here are links to the reports we found:

- Stockton, Calif. [4]
- Bridgeport, Conn. [5]
- St. Petersburg, Fla. [6]
- Honolulu [7]
- Davenport, Iowa [8]
- Boise, Idaho [9]
- Springfield, Ill. [10]
- Wichita, Kan. [11]
- New Orleans [12]
- Raleigh, N.C. [13]
- Pittsburgh [14]
- Scranton, Pa. [15]
- Providence, R.I. [16]

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Links:
[1] http://ncronline.org/node/72266
[2] http://ncronline.org/node/72421
[3] mailto:dcoday@ncronline.org
[4] http://www.stocktondiocese.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Answers-to-Synod-Questions.docx
[5] http://www.bridgeportdiocese.com/files/bishop/Holy-Father-Responses-Jan2014.pdf
[6] http://bishopsblog.dosp.org/?p=6014
[7] http://www.catholichawaii.org/media/249137/synod-survey-from-diocese-12-29-13-2-.pdf
[8] http://www.davenportdiocese.org/library/Bp%20Amo%20survey%20report.pdf
[9] http://www.catholicidaho.org/en/DiocesanOffices/CommunicationsICR/ICROnlineArchives/Documents/1-10-14%20ICR/PG%201%20JAN%2010.pdf
[10] http://ct.dio.org/item/3201-synod-questionnaire-draws-334-diocesan-responses.html

[11] http://catholicdioceseofwichita.org/diocesan-news/20288-diocesan-news-december-20-2014
[12] http://www.arch-no.org/article/read/2014-01-18
[13] http://www.dioceseofraleigh.org/news/view.aspx?id=2191
[14] http://www.diopitt.org/pittsburgh-catholic/more-2800-respond-family-life-questionnaire
[15] http://www.dioceseofscranton.org/parish-life-and-evangelization/response-to-the-vatican-synod-survey/
[16] http://www.thericatholic.com/news/detail.html?sub_id=6330