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Synod cardinal to chair forum focused on listening to families

by Joshua J. McElwee

NCR Today

Synod on the Family

Last fall, Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri directed bishops around the world to distribute a questionnaire concerning Catholics views on controversial issues like birth control, same-sex marriage, and divorce and remarriage "as widely as possible."

The request, made in preparation for a worldwide meeting of bishops at the Vatican this October on the subject of family life, was seen as remarkable: Baldisseri did not just ask for bishops to respond with their views, but to hear and respond with the views of their people.

Explaining the request in an *NCR* interview months later, the cardinal said he wanted the bishops to gather information from the "grass roots" of the faithful.

Now, it seems Baldisseri is following his own advice. The cardinal, who leads the Vatican's office for the Synod of Bishops, is to chair this weekend a forum on struggles facing Catholic families around the world.

To be held at Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University Friday and Saturday, the forum is titled "Listening to the family. Uncertainty and expectations," and is open to all. The Gregorian, the first university founded by the Jesuit order, is even offering babysitting services for families who want to attend together.

The forum features talks on issues ranging from sociology, family therapy, and parenting as a couple, but is also to have study group sessions for families to discuss issues together and then present their ideas back to the larger group.

It's an event, organizers say, where scholars and married couples "will join together in an exercise of listening to the reality of marriage and family, to start a reflection 'from the base' that can provide the tools for a theoretical and interdisciplinary reflection."

The first day of the forum, Friday, is to focus on sociological and therapeutical perspectives of family life. It features talks about studies of family relationship and co-parenting. The second day, Saturday, features testimonies from married couples on parenting and spirituality.

Pope Francis has called the fall meeting of bishops, known as a synod, for Oct. 5-19. The meeting will focus on "Pastoral challenges to the family in the context of evangelization."

Baldisseri leads the office responsible for planning the Synod. As part of the preparations he sent a four-page questionnaire to bishops' conference around the world last October.

The questionnaire asked the individual bishops' conferences to question their populations on topics that 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.

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Responses to the questionnaire have varied around the world, with some bishops making their findings public and others deciding to keep the answers private. Baldisseri's Vatican office has been compiling those responses, said to be in the tens of thousands of pages.

The prelate, who was made a cardinal by Francis in February, previously served in a number of Vatican diplomatic posts, including as the Holy See's ambassador to Haiti, Paraguay, India, Nepal, and Brazil.

Among the speakers at this weekend's Rome forum:

- Ivo Germano, a researcher in sociology at the southern Italian University of Molise, who teaches courses on the sociology of the family;

- Emilia Palladino, a lecturer on the Gregorian's faculty of social sciences;
- Capuchin Br. Giovanni Salonia, a noted Italian psychologist and psychotherapist;
- Maria Cruciani, a Catholic religion instructor at the secondary school level;
- Msgr. Sergio Nicolli, who has served as the head of the family life office for Italy's Trent archdiocese and of the family life office for the Italian bishops' conference.

Participation at the forum free, but requires online registration beforehand.

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