

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

April 22, 2014 at 6:00am

This imperfect Catholic family

by Dennis Coday

NCR Today

I have to make one more, and I hope the last, correction to the series of articles we ran on the survey of Catholics called for by the Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops in preparation for the global meeting of bishops on the family in October.

We were negligent for not reporting that the Dubuque, Iowa, archdiocese provided the survey instrument online and printed it in its newspaper, *The Witness*. The archdiocese received about a thousand responses. We know that because Archbishop Michael Jackels wrote a report about the responses received and then offered his reflection on what he had read. Jackels' report took up two full pages in *The Witness* of Jan. 12.

Jackels, like other bishops who responded to their people's input, notes that "the responses reflected positions relative to marriage and family that were varied and opposing." He reports hearing a range of opinions about birth control, divorce and remarriage, same-sex marriage, and other issues. Here's a great line: "Sometimes it seemed like people were wielding their responses like dueling banjos: one trying to play louder and faster in order to be heard over the other."

He doesn't give any idea of how many people felt one way or the other on these topics, and that would have been helpful to understanding these issues. But at least the people of northeast Iowa know that their bishop heard what they had to say and didn't outright dismiss them, even when it's apparent that his thinking doesn't match theirs. Here's one of Jackels' major takeaways:

The Church is a lot like a family, which is never perfect, often not pretty, sometimes dysfunctional, and a source of frustration, even the cause of anger. And yet we still identify with it, claim membership in it, and how dare anyone to try and say otherwise. In

the Church family we always hold out hope that other members or things in general will change for the better. And what "better" means varies from family member to family member.

The full report is here.

I also heard from several pastors and diocesan staffers and even a couple of bishops, who wanted me to know that though they didn't have the survey online, they did what they thought they could get done in such a short time. Let's be honest, pulling together a decent consultation in under two months (let alone two months that include Thanksgiving, Advent and Christmas) is a daunting task.

We know that online surveys may not necessarily be the best way to explore these topics. A consultation with a group of honest, knowledgeable and engaged Catholics that represents the various demographics of a diocese could very well prove more useful than poring over written responses to printed questions. Dioceses that did that deserve more credit than dioceses that put a survey online but did little to promote it.

The two things I have learned from this exercise that I would like to share with bishops and their staff as they prepare for the next round of consultations for the synod on the family is this: People desperately want to be able to talk about these issues, and they want just as desperately to hear what others are saying. That means they want to hear back from the data collectors.

I think I speak for the majority of American Catholics when I say, bishops, sending a report to the national bishops' offices or to the Vatican is only half the job. We want to know what you heard and what you think about it.

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