

CATHEDRAL PARISH SUNDAY GATHERING OF THE FAMILY SYNOD

Dear Friends,

Greetings as we begin 2015. I hope the Christmas season has brought you times of relaxation and refreshment.

I am writing in regard to the **Synod on the Family** that will be held in Rome in October this year. Pope Francis has encouraged us all to share our reflections on issues of marriage and family life in preparation for this synod. I am inviting people from around our diocese to express their views so that our diocese will make a helpful contribution to the synod.

I am attaching two documents. The first has been published by the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops in Rome. This document is made up of the final report from the synod that was held in October last year together with a series of questions that are meant to foster further reflection on issues raised at that synod. The second document gives a briefer series of 30 questions, in simpler language. These briefer, simpler questions have been prepared in Australia to encourage responses from a wide range of people in our communities. These 30 questions will provide a framework for gathering responses from Australia which can then form part of a worldwide response in preparation for this year's synod.

I would ask you to make these documents available to the people of your parish. They could be shared electronically. You might also make some printed copies available. I suggest you make at least a few copies of the first document available for people to consult. I suggest that you make multiple copies of the second document with the 30 questions.

People could respond to the questions personally or in a group response following group discussion. People might wish to make a response to all 30 questions or just to some of the questions.

I am sorry that the timeframe for responses is tight. The schedule is determined by the General Secretariat of the Synod in Rome which works on a northern hemisphere timetable, which is less suitable for us in the midst of our southern hemisphere summer. However, so that our contributions can be included in the worldwide material, **please send responses to the bishop's office by Thursday, February 12**. The email address is bishop@ballarat.catholic.org.au

Please send responses as email attachments in **Word format**. So that we can collate the material, please follow the numbering of the questions on the 30 questions document.

We will collate the responses from around the diocese and send these to the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference for inclusion in the response from Australia.

I thank you in advance for your contributions and I ask your prayers that God will bless us all through the process of the synod this year.

I conclude with a few words from Pope Francis. At a recent general audience, Pope Francis spoke of the importance of prayer. "I ask you to accompany this synodal journey until the next synod with prayer. May the Lord enlighten us. May he enable us to go forward toward

the maturity of what, as a synod, we must say to all the Churches. Your prayer is important in this.”

God bless you all.

Paul Bird CSsR
Bishop of Ballarat

Questions in preparation for the 2015 Synod on the Family

1. Does the final Synod Document offer an adequate account of marriage and the family or does more need to be said?
2. What is being done to help families cope in the midst of great social changes? What more could be done, especially in helping them to understand those changes? Need greater awareness of the changing nature what constitutes family.
3. What is being done to ensure that governments support marriage and the family in every way possible? What more could be done?
4. What is being done to support strong families? What more could be done?

Home educating families can be supported by the church better – how can we better cater for their needs? Sacramental preparation is one example of how this can be encouraged – it becomes a great test of tolerance. Home school education can be one expression of their being and becoming the domestic church, from the heart of the home going out to others.

5. What is being done to help families in trouble? How might troubles be prevented? How effectively is pastoral care being offered to families “on the periphery”?

The power of prayer must always be part of marriage for families.

The language being used in the synod document about the reality of marriage and family life is helpful, that Jesus is walking with us and the Holy Spirit will be at work so that if we use all that he has given us.

6. How can we help individuals and couples grow in affective or emotional maturity?

Instant gratification, no commitment all pervades the culture, so individuals need to develop emotional maturity before a relational commitment can take place.

Person of Jesus at the centre of our faith – need to keep close to Jesus as presented in the Gospel. To share the cause of our deep joy (a relationship with a person, not an idea)

7. What needs to be done to equip ordained ministers and others to work effectively in the area of marriage and the family?

Preaching!

For families to share their lives concretely.

8. Does the encounter with Christ shape pastoral care in the area of marriage and the family? How well is Scripture used in the pastoral care of couples and families?

9. What values are in fact most important in the area of marriage and the family in the eyes of young people and married couples? What counter-values are evident?

10. How can couples living together before marriage or in *de facto* relationships be encouraged to choose marriage?

11. What is being done to help people understand the greatness and beauty of the indissolubility of marriage? What more could be done?

12. How can we help people understand better the power of a relationship with God in marriage and of the grace of the Sacrament in their lives?

Renewal of sacramental vows in marriage at Sunday Mass together with other vowed commitments.

Young people being married – need good formation in the sacramental nature of marriage and what that means and the graces that are there to be received to strengthen them/ Some of the pre-marriage programs could be strengthened here.

13. How can we help people understand better that marriage is a key part of God's original plan and is therefore a way of fulfilment not confinement, joy not sorrow?

Keeping a check on the language and imagery of marriage that it is a positive way of honouring marriage and defending

14. How can the family be helped to become "the domestic Church" with a missionary vocation? How can we help develop a family spirituality?

This needs to be explored and celebrated!

Prayer as a family through all times – thanksgiving, intercession...

15. What can be done to provide an effective and comprehensive catechesis of marriage and the family, starting in early life and involving life-long formation?

16. Do we need to shape a new language in the area of marriage and the family? If so, how?

If the church is a living organism it will grow and evolve so the language will grow – there are many visions of marriage and family and understandings change – e.g. sacramental marriage.

New language in the area of family – more inclusive? Language can be alienating.

17. How effective is the marriage preparation that is being offered? How might it be more effective?

Appreciating the sacramental nature of marriage

Giving married couples the opportunity to witness to those preparing and ensure that it is not centred or reliant on the priest.

18. Do we need to do more to support couples in the early years of married life? If so, what?

Later years of marriage? Changes in what has happened in life, older couples need support also. Elderly couples / people are alone – what support are we giving to widowed, alone

19. What place do marriage and the family have in the RCIA?

Powerful when a whole family participates in this sacramental process.

20. What movements and associations are there in the area of marriage and the family? Can these contribute more broadly and effectively?

21. What are the challenges of mixed marriages and interreligious marriages? How can we meet them more effectively?

22. Apart from sacramental marriage, what can be done to foster appreciation of “natural marriage”?

23. How can we respond compassionately to people in irregular unions while remaining faithful to the teaching of Christ and the Church?

24. Does the process of declaring nullity need to be simpler, less difficult and less costly?

Yes.

25. How can we respond better to people of same-sex attraction and their families?

Distinguish the sin from the sinner. Is the Church ‘caving in’ to contemporary culture, how do we maintain our belief and extend mercy and forgiveness. The words of Pope Francis “Who am I to judge” is helpful.

26. How can we communicate more effectively the Church’s vision of married love and the beauty and dignity of parenthood as presented, for example, in *Humanae Vitae*?

It raises the bar and gives us a taste of the ‘whole lot’

Number of children in a marriage requires tolerance, for what constitutes a “full house.” There is so much diversity in the Church which needs to be welcomed and celebrated. The encyclical needs to be embraced as coming to bring life to the full!

27. What more can be done to promote a sense of parenthood as divine vocation? What more can be done to help parents in their educational mission, especially in transmitting the faith to their children?

Establish a parenting Sunday to reinforce this vocation.

Grandparents and carers need to be included in this and they must be considered. Baptism presents an opportunity to commence the transmitting faith to children and young parents need assistance. This needs to be followed up and the journey continued. Are we genuinely letting people know what is on offer every week in the Eucharist, re-igniting the passion and sharing that passion and pearl. Catholic schools are an important place for the transmitting of faith and for promoting the ongoing dialogue in families so that a new understanding and new language may emerge through continuing at home the dialogue that has commenced at school. Strengthening the partnership between home and school can build the sense of the domestic church through families.

28. How can we encourage adoption and foster-parenting as signs of fruitful generosity?

29. What more can we do to prevent abortion and foster a genuine culture of life?

30. How can we help all people see that no-one is beyond God’s mercy?

Christ has promised to be with us at all times and is with us through everything, suffering included.