



*Italy - October 2015*  
*The Synod's Final Report on the Family*

The concluding text of the *Synod on the Family* was voted on October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015, and it was published the day after in the CEI (Italian Episcopal Conference)'s newspaper *Avvenire* (pp. 15-22).

The Synod began on 4 October 2015 and the final report was put together by an *ad hoc* Commission, on the basis of 1355 amendments (*modi*) made to the working document (*Instrumentum laboris*), which was produced during the course of the three weeks of meetings by the language-based discussion groups (*circuli minores*). A first draft of the document was presented to the Synod Fathers on 22 October, when it was subject to further amendments. Then, the Commission tried to “integrate” as much as possible these latest observations.

The President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, Peter Kodwo Appiah Turkson, said that the Commission had in any case produced a “watered down” report in order to secure a broad consensus. This explains not only the fact that the final document respects all the different points of view, but also the fact that it touches on strong points without forgetting the collegiality of bishops from around the world (who had been gathering in the Vatican for the past few weeks). In addition, one of the cardinals clarified that, unlike what some media said, he didn't get the impression there were “two opposing blocks”.

The 2015 Synod gave 51 “brief” speeches and all of them expressed their warm thanks and admiration for the work done by the Commission, because the text was far more ordered and satisfying. The aim of the speeches was to introduce further improvements. In fact, at the end of last year's Extraordinary Synod, the Pope decided to publish both the final report and the outcome and the voting results. He has decided to do this again this year. It must be noted that a number of speeches focused on the complex relationship between conscience and moral law. In this sense, the 2015 final report definitely tries to take into serious account the situations of a variety of countries, nations and cultures, as well as the conscience of people in the different contexts.

So far as the family is concerned, the Synod Fathers voted paragraph by paragraph on the final text, and at the end of the vote the text was presented to the Holy Father. All 94 points received the required two-thirds majority vote. While not specifically mentioning the controversial proposal of a path toward full reconciliation and Communion for the divorced and civilly remarried, members of the Synod handed Pope Francis a report emphasising an obligation to recognise that not all Catholics in such a situation bear the same amount of blame.

The 94-paragraph report highlights the role of pastors in helping couples understand Church teaching, grow in faith and take responsibility for sharing the Gospel. It also emphasised

how “pastoral accompaniment” involves discerning, on a case-by-case basis, the moral culpability of people not fully living up to the Catholic ideal. It should be noted that the paragraph dealing specifically with leading divorced and remarried Catholics on a path of discernment passed with only one vote beyond the necessary two thirds.

In this case, it is important not to forget what Austrian Cardinal Christoph Schönborn said. In his opinion, the key word in the document’s discussion of ministry to divorced and civilly remarried people is “discernment”. In particular, he invited the members of the Synod to remember that in this matter there is no simple black or white. The situation of each couple “must be discerned,” which is what was called for by St John Paul II in his 1981 exhortation on the family. The Synod’s final report, Schönborn said, proposes priests help divorced and remarried couples undergoing conversion and repentance so that they recognise whether or not they are worthy to receive the Eucharist: such an examination of conscience – he added – is required of every Catholic each time they prepare to approach the altar. In other words, priests must accompany interested people on the path of discernment in accordance with the teaching of the Church and the guidance of the bishop.

As Pope Francis said at the beginning of the Synod, Church doctrine on the meaning of marriage as a lifelong bond between one man and one woman open to having children was not up for debate. The final report strongly affirmed that teaching as God’s plan for humanity, as a blessing for the Church and a benefit to society. While insisting on God’s love for homosexual persons and the obligation to respect their dignity, the report also insists same-sex unions could not be recognised as marriages. Moreover, the final report denounces as “totally unacceptable” governments or international organisations making recognition of “marriage” between persons of the same sex a condition for financial assistance.

The Synod’s report also spoke specifically of the changing role of women in families, the Church and society, single people and their contributions to the family and the Church, the heroic witness of parents who love and care for children with disabilities, the family as a sanctuary protecting the sacredness of human life from conception to natural death, and the particular strain on family life caused by poverty and by migration.

Francesco Alicino  
LUM “Jean Monnet” – Casamassima, Bari, Italy  
University of Bari – Italy  
LUISS “Guido Carli” – Rome