

THE FORTHCOMING SYNODS ON THE FAMILY
AND THE *SENSUS FIDEI*

I thank you for inviting me to speak at this SPUC National Conference. But much more importantly, I thank you, the members of SPUC, for all you do to promote the value of human life, to oppose abortion, and to care for pregnant mothers. All these efforts are exactly congruent with the mission of the Catholic Church in those fields. The title of this paper is ‘The Forthcoming Synods on the Family and the *Sensus Fidei*’ and in it, I intend, first, to explore why Pope Francis has called not one but two synods on the theme of the family; secondly, to examine how the Synods might modify Church teaching and discipline; and thirdly, to express some of my own hopes for these Synods. Although speaking from a Roman Catholic perspective, I do so with a critical awareness of the challenges put to the Catholic Tradition, yet hopeful that what is said will resonate favourably both with those who belong to other Christian communities and religions, and indeed, with anyone and everyone of good will.

1. The Forthcoming Synods

An ‘ecumenical council’ (Gk. *oikoumene* ‘the inhabited world’) means a gathering of all the Church’s bishops, with and under the pope, in order to make important decisions about doctrine and discipline. In history, there have been twenty-one ecumenical councils, the most recent being the Second Vatican Council, held in Rome from 1962-1965 and attended by most of the Church’s then three thousand bishops. Ecumenical councils are rare; by their nature they have a unique authority and significance. Indeed, because they seek to revitalise the life of the Church, they tend to stir up deep waters. This has been true particularly of Vatican II, in part because of its radical nature – literally, *radix* ‘the roots’ – but also in part because the Council coincided with the latter half of the twentieth century, a period of explosive historical, social and technological upheaval, that still continues today. Taking account of this, Pope Paul VI at the time decided to establish a new instrument of Church governance, the Synod of Bishops.

A ‘synod’, from Gk. *syn-hodos* (a ‘road together’), is a smaller gathering of bishops. Synods have been held since the early Church, that is, gatherings of bishops from across a region or a province. But with this new instrument, Paul VI wanted to convene at regular intervals representative bishops from across the world, to advise him and to deal with aspects of ecclesial life needing attention.¹ The first of these Synods of Bishops took place in 1967 and since then, they have occurred at generally three-yearly intervals. They now follow a process laid down in the 1983 *Code of Canon Law*, with a permanent secretariat in the Vatican under a General Secretary appointed by the pope.

¹ A synod is “a group of bishops who have been chosen from different regions of the world and meet together at fixed times to foster closer unity between the Roman Pontiff and bishops, to assist the Roman Pontiff with their counsel in the preservation and growth of faith and morals and in the observance and strengthening of ecclesiastical discipline, and to consider questions pertaining to the activity of the Church in the world” *Code of Canon Law* n. 342

In preparation for a synod, the secretariat sends out to bishops' conferences a 'scoping' document called the *Lineamenta*, with questions for deliberation; the responses are then sent back to Rome and collated, and from these, the secretariat creates the working document or agenda, in Latin, the *Instrumentum Laboris*, that will be used as the basis for the synodal discussion. The Synod of Bishops is not a deliberative but an advisory body. The pope himself usually takes part in the discussions and at the end receives the final recommendations, but eventually, it is he himself who will finalise and promulgate the final document, called an 'apostolic exhortation.'

The Synod of Bishops has dealt with a wide range of topics from evangelisation (1974) to the formation of priests (1990) and the Bible (2008). There have also been special synods on specific geographical regions, such as the Synod on Asia of 1997, as well as two extraordinary synods, called to deal with pressing concerns. The last extraordinary synod was held in 1985 to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council; one of its outcomes was the publication of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Extraordinary synods are attended by the pope, the Vatican congregations and the heads of the bishops' conferences, whereas ordinary synods comprise a much wider membership of bishops from across the world.

Now the synod on the family, to be held in Rome this October, is an extraordinary synod. It has the title 'The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelisation.' It is unusual in two ways. First, it will be followed in 2015 by an ordinary synod on the same subject, with the title 'Jesus Christ reveals the Mystery and Vocation of the Family'. In other words, there are to be two interrelated synods on the family² and the apostolic exhortation from this year's synod will take the form of the *Instrumentum Laboris* or working document for next year's. In this way, it is envisaged that this year's synod will ventilate the issues, and next year's synod will move towards proposing definitive pastoral responses and solutions.

A second unusual feature of this synod is that the 39 questions in the *lineamenta*, at the request of the holy father, were circulated widely throughout the Church. This was to enable not only the bishops but priests and faithful from dioceses across the world to contribute to the process, to share their experiences, concerns and suggestions. Cardinal Lorenzo Baldeseri, the General Secretary of the Synod, has had the almost impossible task of collating thousands of responses into the *Instrumentum Laboris*.

Why did the pope choose the family as the synod's theme? He announced it after the World Youth Day in Rio in July 2013. Asked in an interview about the pastoral care of the divorced and remarried and whether God's mercy might enable them to be readmitted to Holy Communion, he replied that these days

“people often get married lacking maturity; they get married without realising that it is a life-long commitment; they get married because society tells them they have to get married. And this is where the pastoral care of marriage ..

² The 2015 Synod will take place in Rome in September, after the tri-annual World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia, to which Pope Francis has indicated his intention to attend. For the history of the World Meeting of families, see <http://www.worldmeeting2015.org> (September 2014).

comes in. And then there is the legal problem of matrimonial nullity. This has to be reviewed, because ecclesiastical tribunals are not sufficient for this.”³

In another interview, given on the return flight from his visit to the Holy Land in May 2014, he added:

“today, as we all know, the family is in crisis; it is in crisis worldwide. Young people don’t want to get married; they don’t get married or they live together. Marriage is in crisis, and so the family is in crisis.... The pastoral problem of the family is complex, very complex.”

Again he was asked about annulments and the situation of the divorced and remarried. o this he replied that “the Synod

will be on the family: both the rich reality of the family and the problems faced by families. Solutions, annulments, all of this: this problem too, but as part of a larger picture.”

The media often underline this issue of the admittance to Holy Communion of the divorced and remarried. Yet Pope Francis has frequently insisted that the topic of the Synods is much broader than this. What is at issue is the Christian vision of the family. Interestingly, he believes the topic is the work of the Holy Spirit:

“The post-synodal commission ended up speaking about the family. I am sure that it was the Spirit of the Lord guiding us .. to the choice of this title. I am sure of it, because today the family truly needs so many forms of pastoral assistance.”⁴

In other words, the Synods will be about the family because the family is in crisis. Moreover, because the problems of sexuality, marriage and family-life are today so deep and so complex, the topic needs two Synods to give it more adequate treatment.

The *Instrumentum Laboris* is a remarkable document, not least for the way it synthesises the responses, but because it seems to express all the everyday pastoral issues that arise in relation to sexuality, marriage and family life.⁵ It does unambiguously restate traditional teaching on the usual issues such as abortion, contraception, same-sex unions, the nature and indissolubility of marriage. Yet at the same time it insists throughout on God’s mercy and the need to show that mercy to those who have fallen short. It candidly acknowledges that many of the faithful and even many clergy have not taken on board the Church’s vision. This malaise stems in part from a lack of faith and sound catechesis, but also from the corrosive pressures of contemporary culture that often oppose the Gospel.

The first of its three parts deals with the vision, what it calls the ‘gospel of the family’ according to the teaching of the Church. Many Catholics are either ignorant of this or at odds with it (1-19). The language of natural law, whilst valid, is perplexing for

³ For the text of this interview, which Pope Francis gave on the return flight from Rio, see http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/july/documents/papa-francesco_20130728_gmg-conferenza-stampa.html (September 2014)

⁴ For the complete text, see: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/may/documents/papa-francesco_20140526_terra-santa-conferenza-stampa.html (September 2014)

⁵ The text of the *Instrumentum Laboris* can be found at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20140626_instrumentum-laboris-familia_en.html (September 2014)

many today (20-30). New gender roles, the ability to keep lifelong marriage promises, polygamy, same-sex unions and contraception: all these issues obscure the ideal of Christian family life and authentic personhood (31-49).

The second part discusses the pros and cons of the various pastoral responses to current challenges, such as better marriage preparation courses and the role of family prayer (50-60). In the Western world especially, there is a crisis of faith, which has led to a crisis of relationships and marital breakdown, even violence and abuse (64-69). Families are often under enormous pressure from work, migration, poverty, a highly sexualized culture, consumerism and individualism. Added to this are counter-signs and scandals within the Church (70-75). The document then discusses cohabitation (i.e. where couples live together without intending marriage), divorce and remarriage, one-parent families, teenage pregnancies, the complexity of the annulment process, and the fact that so many Catholics are not practicing (80-120). This second part ends with a discussion of same-sex unions (110-120), suggesting that a new theological study of homosexuality in dialogue with the human sciences is needed and as well as a study of the theological meaning of being male and being female (117).

The final part deals with two issues: the upbringing of children (132-157) and openness to life (121-131). The *Instrumentum* refers to the “prophetic teaching” of Paul VI in his 1968 encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae* that sexuality is ordered to marriage and that sexual intercourse is an integral act for love and for life, and that these two aspects of sexuality – love and life - cannot be divorced⁶. Many today fail to understand this teaching and its rationale. On the other hand, there are some who have appropriated this teaching, not least because of advances in the techniques of natural family planning and fertility awareness.

In its summary, the *Instrumentum Laboris* poses three main areas for reflection:

- how to communicate the Church’s teaching on the family more effectively;
- how to respond more mercifully to those in difficulty; and
- how to support parents in bringing up children and to be more open to life.

2. The Crisis of the Family and the Synod’s Response

A word about the crisis of the family. In Britain the crisis in family life is intrinsically bound up with the crisis of faith, since religion and spirituality are the deepest aspects of the human person, forming a dynamic infrastructure that underpins a family and its *mores*. In his book *The Death of Christian Britain*, the sociologist Callum Brown argues that, whilst church-going and religion in general had been gradually declining through the 20C, a catastrophic collapse in church membership occurred in 1970s, after the ‘60s with their far-reaching cultural, social and sexual revolutions: youth-culture, the contraceptive pill, the music of the Beatles (1962), the legalisation of abortion and homosexuality (1967), the women’s liberation movement (1968), easier

⁶ For a concise summary of the Church’s teaching, see *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [henceforth CCC] 2331-2400

divorce, and so on.⁷ The so-called ‘Swinging Sixties’ gave both expression to, and new impetus to the collapse of the traditional family. A sexual revolution got underway that ushered in new gender roles for women, and in the family, Brown argues, women generally uphold religious traditions and moral values.

In Britain, the eclipse of Christian faith and demise of the traditional family has been facilitated by the rise of secularism. Secularism is a philosophy, attitude or way of living that seeks to improve life in this world by material means, through human reason and through a code of behaviour formed explicitly without the ‘sacred canopy’ of religion. Secularism separates Church and State; it seeks to drive religion out of public and political debate and to treat it as private spirituality. It ‘ring-fences’ religion and dissolves the foundations of ethics, thus depriving society of its moral compass. The result is moral relativism: my truth is not your truth, and yours not mine. Nothing is solid. This is why alternative anthropologies are emerging, different understandings of what it means to be human, with divergent accounts of what is morally acceptable regarding the dignity and value of human life, the embryo and the unborn child, the nature of sexuality and the family, and the care of the terminally ill.

To return to the Synods, it is no secret that many progressively-minded Catholics are expecting fundamental changes in doctrine and discipline. Pope Francis’s desire to have a “frank, open and civilised discussion,”⁸ his emphasis on mercy and the desire to show pastoral care of those on the margins has given further traction to this. Yet it is also worth recalling, as Newman shewed in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, that Catholic teaching tends to develop organically, even when there is the appearance of abrupt change. A favourite image for this is an acorn growing into a tree or to use an image from Newman himself, the “fledged bird .. from its rudimental form in the egg.”⁹ If the Synod fathers were to propose seemingly radical departures from traditional doctrine and discipline, the challenge would be to demonstrate their authenticity by showing how, despite any inherent discontinuities, the proposed developments do not vitiate previously held positions. Doctrine develops rather than changes, and new doctrines, according to Newman, always exercise a ‘conservative action upon the past.’¹⁰ Moreover, because the truth is one and doctrine forms an integral whole – the *nexus mysteriorum inter se* or ‘connection of the mysteries among themselves’¹¹ – authentic developments in doctrine or discipline must be logically consistent. To take the example of the desire to find a pastoral solution for the divorced and remarried, would a way forward be found in re-examining the grounds for nullity and reviewing canonical processes?

In history, the Church has experienced some major controversies: in the early centuries over the nature of Christ and the Blessed Trinity, in the high Middle Ages

⁷ C. Brown *The Death of Christian Britain* (London, Routledge: 2001)

⁸ Cardinal Baldisseri used these words in an interview with the media in July 2014: see <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/1403095.htm>

⁹ See John Henry Cardinal Newman (1845) *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (ed I Ker University of Notre Dame Press, 1989) 173.

¹⁰ See *Essay* 199f.

¹¹ Vatican I explored this in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith *Dei Filius* (DS 3016)

over the sacraments, at the time of the Reformation over the nature and authority of the Church. Today, the issue is anthropology, that is, the Christian understanding of what it means to be a human being, created, fallen yet redeemed. There is no instant solution to controversies, since the Church comprises human beings who exist in history. It may take a long time before the theological debate proposes a solution that conserves the Tradition yet develops it authentically to meet the new needs arising.

The title of this paper mentioned the *sensus fidei* ('sense of the faith'). Forgive a brief excursion into Roman Catholic theology, but the *sensus fidei* is the belief that the Holy Spirit endows each member of the Church with a supernatural capacity or sensitivity for the truth of faith. In other words, every baptised person has an instinct for the truth of the gospel, which enables them to recognise authentic Christian doctrine and to reject falsehood. As with human memory, they know if something jars or does not fit. Of course, the authentic operation of the *sensus fidei* will depend on conditions.¹² The *Instrumentum Laboris* for the Synod recognises that many Catholics may not presently know or accept Church teaching on aspects of sexuality, marriage and family life, such as contraception. Does this mean, then, as some propose, that the Church should modify these doctrines?

Newman, in another of his essays, *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine*, argues that the Tradition of the Church is a living reality entrusted to every sector of the Church, but there have been occasions in Church history, he avers, when many of the bishops, theologians and leading thinkers failed to support the orthodox position. It was the ordinary faithful who passed on the Tradition, which is why what the faithful believe and practice needs to be taken into account when the Church wishes to determine the true faith. Like others in the Church, they should be 'consulted,' not in a democratic sense, but in the way a barometer is consulted to check the weather.¹³

There are two points here. First, Newman is inferring that at times many of the clergy or the faithful can be wrong, especially on highly controverted issues. The truth is not dependent on majority opinion. Today's culture is highly secularised; immigration has planted a supermarket of religions on every street; the mass media are hugely influential, and modern education encourages people to make personal choices. Is it surprising that many ordinary Christians find themselves going with the flow, rather than being counter-cultural? It is easy to lose the way, to take the easy option, to be persuaded by what the majority think rather than by the Bible and the Church's Tradition and teaching.

But secondly, as Newman himself discovered, in a dispute about doctrine such as the *fracas* of Arianism in the Early Church over the nature of Christ, the orthodox

¹² Recently, the International Theology Commission produced a document, authorized by the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Müller, precisely on this topic: see *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church* (2014), available online at www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20140610_sensus-fidei_en.html (September 2014)

¹³ See John Henry Newman *On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine* (ed. J. Coulson, Collins Liturgical Press, London: 1986) 54

position that the Church eventually upheld was not a *via media* or middle-ground between two extremes.¹⁴ It was in fact one of the extremes, held by a minority. This is often the case. Many people think that truth lies somewhere in the middle, yet it may not be. To take the example of contraception: some accept the teaching; others reject it. Yet this does not mean that an intermediate common-ground position – ‘Accept it if you can’ or ‘It’s up to your conscience’ - is the doctrine Christ wills for His Church. The truth of a doctrine is not necessarily the balanced view: it is the *true* view.

3. Personal Hopes for the Synod

There is much more to say, but I would like to end by expressing two personal hopes for the forthcoming Synods.

First, that the outcome will be a fresh, attractive, inspiring and easy to understand re-presentation of the ‘gospel of the family’, that is, the beautiful Christian ideal of sexuality, marriage and family life.¹⁵ The Synods need to help dioceses find new ways of celebrating and supporting engagement, the Rite of Marriage itself, parenthood and also significant anniversaries. They need too to share wisdom and good practice in parenting skills, in bringing up children, in creating a happy home, in honouring grandparents and relatives, and in living as a family the routines of being ‘the domestic church.’¹⁶ I would wish the Synod request from the pope a comprehensive teaching document on theological anthropology, a presentation of the Christian understanding of birth, sex and death. Such a document might explore the theological meaning and value of being male and being female, as well as the vocation and mission in the Church of persons of homosexual orientation. All this would greatly assist religious education in schools as well as the development of effective marriage preparation programmes that are at once spiritual, theological and practical.

The *Instrumentum Laboris* draws attention to the prophetic nature of Pope Paul VI’s encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae*. His argument that the use of contraceptives would lead to a contraceptive mentality, with catastrophic consequences for society and culture, has surely been proven. Almost fifty years on, the side-effects are visible in the trivialisation of sexual intercourse, the trafficking of people for prostitution and pornography, broken family relationships, the sexualisation of children, and the explosion of addictive behaviours leading to despair, shame and guilt.¹⁷ Catholic Christians believe in the natural way of life, that the purpose of intercourse is to express the love between a man and a woman, a love which, within the permanent commitment of marriage, is open to life.¹⁸ This is the way to true happiness and fulfilment, even if chastity - that is, developing a mature and fully integrated sexuality, as a single person or as a married couple - involves a life-long struggle and

¹⁴ See John Henry Cardinal Newman *Apologia pro Vita Sua* (ed. Philip Hughes, Doubleday, New York: 1989) 218f.

¹⁵ Many would say that such a vision already exists in the teaching of Pope John Paul II on the ‘theology of the body.’

¹⁶ See CCC 1655-8.

¹⁷ See Paul VI *Humanae Vitae* (London, CTS 1968) 19-30

¹⁸ John Paul II *Gratissimam Sane (Letter to Families)* 7-8, available online at www.vatican.va (September 2014)

“apprenticeship in self-mastery,” assisted by Christ and the sacraments.¹⁹ I hope the Synods will find a new, effective way of communicating this vision.

In our own Diocese of Portsmouth, our newly-formed diocesan Marriage and Family Life team is led by a married couple with five other couples and a chaplain; it is currently setting up a new marriage preparation programme. I am actively considering the appointment of a married couple in every parish to be “Ministers of the Family”. We are also looking at a diocesan “Handbook for the Family” to support the Christian ethos of the home, with prayers, useful passages of Scripture and teaching, also helpful practices and activities related to the liturgical seasons, blessings for use at meals, and petitions for use on visiting family-graves or a cemetery. I am urging married couples not to use the word “partner” when talking of their spouses, but proudly to speak of “My husband” and “My wife”. And we are negotiating a visit to the diocese next summer of the relics of Blessed Louis and Zélie Martin, parents of St. Theresa of Liseux, as a focus for prayer and reflection between the two Synods.

A second personal hope is that the Synods will give attention to the situation of those who find themselves in ‘irregular unions’, an example being those who are divorced and remarried. Is there some way of affording them mercy, help and reconciliation? A typical example is when a non-Catholic wishes to be received into the Catholic Church but then finds themselves prevented by an irregularity in their own or their partner’s marital status. Interestingly, Pope Benedict suggested the need for further study of the connection between faith and the Sacrament of Matrimony.²⁰ Indeed, in my opinion, what marriage means in contemporary culture is often quite different from what Christians mean. Moreover, as the *Instrumentum* puts it, the reason “for much resistance to the Church’s teaching on moral issues related to the family is a lack of an authentic Christian experience, namely, an encounter with Christ on a personal and communal level, for which no doctrinal presentation, no matter how accurate, can substitute” (15). This is a crucially important point, for many drift away from Christianity because they fail to develop a personal relationship with Christ and a sense of vocation to discipleship. This is something central to our own efforts of new evangelisation in the Diocese of Portsmouth: helping people to pray, to find God, to meet Jesus, and to be transformed in His presence, especially in the Holy Eucharist. We need to discuss how our marriage preparation courses might include basic evangelisation as well as catechesis.

The *Instrumentum Laboris* concludes with the “Prayer to the Holy Family” written by Pope Francis in 2013 for the Feast of the Holy Family. The Prayer captures succinctly the Church’s aspirations for the Synod. It also expresses my own hopes. May it make, therefore, a fitting conclusion to this paper. Let us pray.

“Jesus, Mary and Joseph, in you we contemplate the splendour of true love,
to you we turn with trust.
Holy Family of Nazareth,
grant that our families too may be places of communion and prayer,

¹⁹ CCC 2339

²⁰ See *Instrumentum Laboris* 96

authentic schools of the Gospel and small domestic Churches.
Holy Family of Nazareth, may families never again
experience violence, rejection and division:
may all who have been hurt or scandalised find ready comfort and healing.
Holy Family of Nazareth,
may the approaching Synod of Bishops make us once more
mindful of the sacredness and inviolability of the family,
and its beauty in God's plan.
Jesus, Mary and Joseph,
graciously hear our prayer! Amen."²¹

²¹ *Instrumentum Laboris* 159