

Background:

In late fall 2013, the Holy See released a Preparatory Document for the upcoming Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which will meet at the Vatican, 5-19 October 2014. The theme of this Third Extraordinary General Assembly is “The pastoral challenges for the family in the context of evangelization.” St. Joseph’s published this questionnaire in the November 24th edition of our Weekend Bulletin as well as on our parish website.

The General Secretariat of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCCB) forwarded the Preparatory Document to the Bishops of Canada, who were asked to consult with the clergy and laity in their dioceses with regards to the preparatory questionnaire. In the Archdiocese of Ottawa, an online survey of the preparatory questionnaire was created and each parish was asked to complete the anonymous survey online.

Given the pastoral ministry nature of the questions, St. Joseph’s enlisted feedback from the following areas of Parish Life: Family Ministry, LGBT Ministry, Marriage Ministry, Baptismal Preparation, Staff, Pastor, and the Chair of the Parish Council.

Each Diocese then submitted its own report to the CCCC, which is preparing a draft synthesis to be sent to the Holy See in preparation of the October 2014 Synod.

As noted when we published the Questionnaire in our bulletin, a process of reflection on these questions as a parish community during 2014 is being explored.

Note: The background paper published by the Holy See, along with the Questionnaire, is found at the end of this report.

1. The Diffusion of the Teachings on the Family in Sacred Scripture and the Church’s Magisterium

a) Describe how the Catholic Church’s teachings on the value of the family contained in the Bible, *Gaudium et spes*, *Familiaris consortio* and other documents of the post-conciliar Magisterium is understood by people today? What formation is given to our people on the Church’s teaching on family life?

The Catholic Church’s teachings on the value of the family is understood by the lived experience of its members. Most Catholics would not know of the aforementioned Church documents and would rely on the Western media, for better or worse, for synopsis and commentary if such a document made the news. The “odd” parish may offer multi-generational and ongoing faith formation. However, most of the rest of the Church in the West emphasizes a more limited instructive versus educational model of faith formation that is based on directives on the exercise of the intellect and will.

Most families have a “Grade Two” understanding or “First-Communion-preparation” understanding of church teachings, because that is usually the last time there is intentional and meaningful recognition of the family life or lay spirituality. In Grade Two, the questions and depth of these teachings can be easily made into a placebo to pass over the complexities of lives lived and their questions. Formation can’t take place if realities of family life, many of which are listed in the Bible — such as poverty, betrayal, sexism, rape, incest, divorce, same-sex relationships, jealousy, illness, abandonment, isolation — are not addressed openly, and the disciplines of loving, forgiving, being merciful and compassionate, and so on, are not part of our teachings. We have a tendency to hand out placebos (phrases, such as forgive and love your neighbour) without a deep understanding of what these mean, what their implications are, or the skills required to practise them. We don’t teach the skills and discipline of forgiveness or explain the difficulties in actually living such forgiveness. Instead, we teach the words in session courses in a superficial and desultory way that suggests that it is “easy” if one is a “real” Catholic/Christian.

St. Joe's Pastoral Ministry Response to the
Vatican Questionnaire in Preparation for the 2014 Synod on the Family – December 13, 2013

b) In those cases where the Church's teaching is known, is it accepted fully or are there difficulties in putting it into practice? If so, what are they?

There are several difficulties within the teaching of the family:

The current patriarchal structure of the Church is a challenge, since, in the West, men and women are seen as equal, at least by definition. There is a disconnect for many when the role of women in the Catholic Church is limited.

Another challenge is the Church's teaching that only one sexual orientation —i.e., heterosexuality — is valid, healthy and good; whereas, the structure of reality, or the natural law, truly reveals a diversity in both sexual orientation and gender manifestation. Thus, the parents of homosexual, bisexual, or transgendered children suffer this erroneous teaching, which disturbs and confuses parents and children, causing needless mental anguish; the homosexual, bisexual or transgendered children suffer the mental and emotional cruelty of this teaching; their siblings suffer, and the larger family (aunts, uncles, grandparents) suffers. The parish community also suffers, for many good people and families leave the Church or persist in their faith with bitterness, anger and distrust of the Church.

The difficulties about the teachings on family do not reflect the reality of family life and so they do not touch the heart. When the teachings don't touch the reality lived, then there is no engagement, no trust, no investment. The head can say the teachings, and know them at an intellectual, recitative level, but without the heart, they are merely a loud gong. Further, some question whether the teachings are, in fact, being articulated and promulgated accurately by the Curia and the Church hierarchy generally. There is a view that some teachings are inaccurate reflections of the Church's compassion and love for all peoples, the corporeal manifestation of God and Christ's ineffable unconditional love.

What are the specific practices that are not being accepted? 1) Marriage; 2) sex and creation; 3) women's place with the family and the Church.

As *FAMILIARIS CONSORTIO* notes, "Since God's plan for marriage and the family touches men and women in the concreteness of their daily existence in specific social and cultural situations, the Church ought to apply herself to understanding the situations within which marriage and the family are lived today, in order to fulfill her task of serving." (cf 4.8)

c) How widespread is the Church's teaching in pastoral programmes at the national, diocesan and parish levels? What catechesis is done on the family?

In our community, elements of this catechesis are prevalent in children's liturgy, publicly funded Catholic schools, youth ministry, marriage ministry, homilies and reflections at Mass, as well as catechesis and preparation for sacraments.

In general, however, catechesis on the family mainly happens in short, infrequent sacramental moments. We have created the milieu where the sacraments are carrots to be achieved. This does not encourage lifelong faith formation, discernment, and metanoia.

d) To what extent — and what aspects in particular — is this teaching actually known, accepted, rejected and/or criticized in areas outside the Church? What are the cultural factors that hinder the full reception of the Church's teaching on the family?

The emerging understanding of the failings of a patriarchal and clerical model and the recognition of the economic role and equivalence of women consistently influence the culture, and challenge those of the Church's teachings on the family that are based on a no-longer accurate or relevant model of shared male and female economic freedom and social maturity.

Regarding the need to be married, though the dynamics of love and the thirst for belonging are unchanged, young couples increasingly feel that they do not need their relationship validated in a faith community. Even faith-filled

couples may believe that a formal marriage is unnecessary, since God who sees and knows all in the hearts of humans already knows the love and commitment they give each other.

Due to the overwhelming and disheartening extent of the Church's sexual abuse scandal, the Catholic Church's creditability and role of teaching family and moral values has been eroded considerably. Those who remain within the Church find themselves in constant defence of the lived value and gift of participation in the faith community.

For the most part, the teachings on marriage, having children and divorce are known, but there is more of a sense of irrelevance than there is of any strong need to accept or reject. The main sense is that the teachings and the Church are irrelevant and sometimes hypocritical. Some of the cultural factors that produce this sense of irrelevance include an educated population that seeks deeper meaning, as well as women who are still leaders in family education yet who disengage from the Church because of sexism.

The effect of the Church's sex-abuse scandal cannot be overlooked as adding to the rejection or perceived irrelevance of the Church's moral teaching of the protection of the family and the sacredness of children.

2. Marriage according to the Natural Law

a) What place does the idea of the natural law have in the cultural areas of society: in institutions, education, academic circles and among the people at large? What anthropological ideas underlie the discussion on the natural basis of the family?

In Canadian society in general, the concept of a detailed, rationalized Natural Law plays no significant role; rather, a sense of "right or wrong" prevails. Discrimination against people in a minority, including homosexual persons, is perceived as wrong.

While the natural law can be arrived at by unaided reason, the vast majority of people are merely informed of the conclusions of these investigations, without the underlying rationale. Deviations from the true path, whether based on anthropological studies or reports on commonalities between man and brute animals, therefore hold equal sway with natural law.

A truly Catholic Christian anthropology should reflect the diversity proper to nature: of sexual orientation (heterosexual, homosexual and bisexual) and of gender manifestation (as distinct from sex) and of the sexes (female, male, intersex).

The world has a more open mind because of its vast experience. The Church denies the experience of many of its members as well as others, and therefore limits itself to a celibate, philosophical, head-oriented perspective. When the Church does not touch the heart, it becomes irrelevant.

Power, patriarchy, property and control are the underpinnings of what the church calls Natural Law.

b) Is the idea of the natural law in the union between a man and a woman commonly accepted as such by the baptized in general?

Many years ago, the union of a man and a woman was the only socially acceptable form of conjugal relationship. More recently, however, the perceived injustice of depriving a minority of their civil rights has changed the viewpoint of a majority of the baptized, and Canadians in general.

Yes, union between man and woman is commonly accepted, as is same-sex union/marriage.

It is commonly accepted that two people loving each other is the norm, though love needs to be explored in its broadest context as many unions take place because of necessity, cultural arrangements or the wedding pressure.

c) How is the theory and practice of natural law in the union between man and woman challenged in light of the formation of a family? How is it proposed and developed in civil and Church institutions?

The weak foundations upon which the concept of natural law rests in the mind of the ordinary person mean that natural law is ignored, rather than challenged. Moreover, the teaching role of the magisterium is rather devoted to the Divine

Law, rather than the natural.

For the most part, the theory and practice of natural laws are seen as arcane and simply dismissed, ignored. In the formation of couples and families, this teaching is not broached as it cannot be developed in a relevant and meaningful way.

d) In cases where non-practising Catholics or declared non-believers request the celebration of marriage, describe how this pastoral challenge is dealt with.

The immediate definition that a Catholic is either practising or not practising enacts an immediate barricade of pastoral practice and engagement. The efficiency of celebrating the sacraments with only those who meet certain requirements is why many chose to disengage in participating in the life of the Catholic faith community. If the first question a couple asking for marriage is asked from the parish turns out to be, "Are you registered?" we are missing the essential opportunity to engage this couple in a discernment process and faith formation journey that may not otherwise ever be offered to them. Marriage inquiries, like baptisms and funeral celebrations, are to be considered moments of evangelization. We must forgo our efficiency for authentic pastoral practice.

Every Catholic, by his or her baptism, has a right by Canon Law to be married in the Church (Canon Can. 1058). We engage them in an open-ended conversation, honouring their spiritual journey and their authentic search. But with limited resources, we offer to meet people where they are, and if they still want to participate, there is a cost, either through participation or stipend. We invite conversation; we try to create moments to engage through liturgy, through volunteering, through listening and warm hospitality when they call, when we meet. The pastoral challenge comes when a sacrament becomes a carrot and its denial, a stick, and the time of formation becomes something to complete for the prize or to avoid ostracization. In a culture of wedding fantasy and consumption, the efforts of spiritual formation compete with the goal of a wedding, not the marriage.

On another front, many are already living together and have faced the challenging and complex life decisions of a married couple, even the gift of children, before their commitment in marriage. The Church treats this as irregular and thus the formation becomes false at the beginning. A false beginning creates a relationship of lies or denial between the Church and the couple.

3. The Pastoral Care of the Family in Evangelization

a) What experiences have emerged in recent decades regarding marriage preparation? What efforts are there to stimulate the task of evangelization of the couple and of the family? How can an awareness of the family as the "domestic Church" be promoted?

For many, and we hope for most parishes, marriage preparation has evolved from priest-centered instruction to a fuller process involving a multi-layers approach. Many parishes utilize parishioner couples who are willing to authentically share their own blessings and challenges of marriage with those engaged couples. Such experiences of marriage preparation must involve the engaged couples themselves entering into deep discussion and discernment, and not merely being told about marriage. Creating habits of communication and prayer set the foundation.

In our community, we provide marriage preparation and utilize the FOCCUS pre-marital inventory. Through this process, there is usually discussion of the family as "domestic Church." More follow-up could be provided, including linking engaged or newly married couples with established couples in our community.

We also promote the World Wide Marriage Encounter program.

It is evident that the definition of marriage in a faith context needs to evolve and reflect the reality that most marriages have already begun well before the sacrament, and that many end in divorce, and that marriage is not always forever. Formation of the married life is a continuous effort and should be given the same rigour and support as that given to clergy. Retreats, sabbaticals, conferences should all be offered annually to the married. Less effort should be extended to the pre-married, and more on the married.

St. Joe's Pastoral Ministry Response to the
Vatican Questionnaire in Preparation for the 2014 Synod on the Family – December 13, 2013

b) How successful have you been in proposing a manner of praying within the family that can withstand life's complexities and today's culture?

Providing a variety of prayer guides can be helpful, since different families have different ebbs and flows.

Prayer is a discipline that the Church does not teach, The Church tends to teach the what of prayers — rather than the why or how. Thus prayers in family life tend to be more relevant with young children and their parents, while prayer in other areas of life tends to take place when needed or a crisis emerges. But pastoral workers do respond regularly with resources when asked. Prayer is taken for granted, but not taught nor appreciated.

c) In the current generational crisis, how have Christian families been able to fulfill their vocation of transmitting the faith?

We are not convinced that there is such a thing as a generational crisis. The fact that one generation has chosen, in large part, not to transmit the faith like the generation before them may not be a crisis but an opportunity to evaluate what is expected to be transmitted in the first place. A faith that is based on a reward and punishment model is not a faith that has been internalized.

Parents are forming amazing spiritually strong children who question, reflect and seek justice. However, the Church does not engage in dialogue, and thus the transmission of a faith tradition struggles and often loses out to more authentic engagement.

d) In what way have the local churches and movements on family spirituality been able to create ways of acting that are exemplary?

We continue to explore family ministry and how it can support and engage the families within our community as well as impact the larger society and culture. We have begun to utilize a Facebook page to allow families to engage with one another and the parish programs and resources.

When children are received into the church as full participants and can take on roles like lectors, Eucharistic ministers, cantors and other leadership roles at a Sunday liturgy, they engage as equals – which they are by their baptism. Having opportunities to meet with parents for ongoing formation in areas of forgiveness and reconciliation, on Eucharist, gratitude, stewardship — in these and other areas they can share the relevant day-to-day challenges of their lives. Parents need the time and space to ask questions and work on the techniques in areas of discipline and understandings of forgiveness, prayer, etc. These allow them to respond to their current lived experience.

e) What specific contribution can couples and families make to spreading a credible and holistic idea of the couple and the Christian family today?

We are heartened by the use of terms such as “credible” and “holistic.” These are the only real signs of true spirituality and pastoral practice.

Spiritually strong couples and families could contribute by being mentors/facilitators within the parish for programs concerned with family life. Training would probably have to be offered to them. The willingness to openly share the role of spirituality in their marriages and family life would also be a viable contribution.

The Church can form a council on the family made up of parents, grandparents, couples and singles who would be the creators of Church teaching, the voice of Church teaching and the authority of Church teaching on the family. This would be the most credible way of lending voice to the teachings on the family.

f) What pastoral care has the Church provided in supporting couples in formation and couples in crisis situations?

Worldwide Marriage Encounter is effective for disillusioned or burdened couples, while Retrouvaille is designed for those facing separation, substance abuse or other serious issues.

However, this is mainly left to paid professionals.

4. Pastoral Care in Certain Difficult Marital Situations

a) Is cohabitation ad experimentum a pastoral reality in your particular Church? Can you approximate a percentage?

We would assume that 75-85% of couples preparing for marriage are cohabitating. We do not experience a high number of common-law marriages within our community.

Our culture does not promote covenantal relationships nor does our Church model this very effectively. If we were a true covenantal community, no one would be ostracized or expected to live “outside” of the faith community fold. Without prior experience of covenantal relationships, even in our faith community, how can we expect those of any age to say yes to the covenant of marriage? So with no experience of covenant, for some, it is easy to look to cohabitation as a means of “trying out” a committed relationship.

b) Are separated couples and those divorced and remarried a pastoral reality in your particular church? Can you approximate a percentage? How do you deal with this situation in appropriate pastoral programmes?

Yes, both separated couples, as well as those divorced and remarried, are a pastoral reality. We attempt to treat all individuals within our community as just that. We do not make distinctions based on their marital status. Because of our tradition of being a welcoming community without exception, people know of this and invite others to participate here, knowing that they will be welcomed.

c) In all the above cases, how do the baptized live in this irregular situation? Are they aware of it? Are they simply indifferent? Do they feel marginalized or suffer from the impossibility of receiving the sacraments?

Given the hardship and pain that comes from separation and divorce, these couples and individuals do not need the added scrutiny of their faith community. These couples and individuals need to be supported and welcomed. When couples do ask about their situation, we invite them into a discussion, validate them if they come with feelings of suffering or marginalization, and, most importantly, welcome them into full participation in the life of the parish. Others trust their own hearts and faithfully continue their faith practices and discipleship. Some friends of people who have experienced divorce and rejection from faith communities seem to be most engaged in trying to invite their friends back to church.

Couples who are married outside of the Catholic Church may also suffer from feelings of marginalization.

As stated above, we attempt to treat all individuals within our community as just that. We do not make distinctions based on their marital status.

d) What questions do divorced and remarried people pose to the Church concerning the Sacraments of the Eucharist and of Reconciliation? Among those persons who find themselves in these situations, how many ask for these sacraments?

Very few have asked questions in these areas, and if they did, it was more to share their dilemma and discernment process to obtain feedback. We promote the importance and primacy of an informed conscience.

e) Could a simplification of canonical practice in recognizing a declaration of nullity of the marriage bond provide a positive contribution to solving the problems of the persons involved? If yes, what form would it take?

YES! There are many issues, including cost and length of time, for the current nullity process. Some who have participated in this process have felt embarrassed and belittled. Some remarked that they would have never gone through such a process if they knew what they know now.

Some question the very premise that a marriage needs to be proved to be invalid from the beginning. The declaration of nullity could also include factors that arise after the marriage vows are taken, not only issues preceding the marriage, which is currently the case with annulments.

Marriage as a sacrament needs to be reviewed. Is marriage for life? A modified process of nullity without the legal court processes could promote healing, growth and formation, which can take place to create stronger Christians versed in love, forgiveness and reconciliation.

f) Does a ministry exist to attend to these cases? Describe this pastoral ministry. Do such programmes exist on the national and diocesan levels? How is God's mercy proclaimed to separated couples and those divorced and remarried, and how does the Church put into practice her support for them in their journey of faith?

We do not have a specific outreach for separated, divorced and/or remarried couples or individuals. Our pastoral approach does not highlight these "irregular" situations and these individuals and couples are integrated into the life of the community. The best pastoral approach seems to be holding them close within community while they suffer and heal.

5. On Unions of Persons of the Same Sex

a) What is the attitude of the local and particular churches toward both the State as the promoter of civil unions between persons of the same sex and the people involved in this type of union?

In Canada, the State does not promote marriages between persons of the same sex. It merely permits, and recognizes, such unions.

While the Church in Canada opposed, and still opposes, such unions, their existence is now regarded as a *fait accompli*. However, some ecclesial bodies in Canada — for example, the United Church of Canada — permit congregations to have their ministers witness the sacrament of holy matrimony between persons of the same sex. There is growing acceptance in churches other than the Catholic Church of marriage between persons of the same sex.

For our community on the whole, the state's acceptance of same sex unions would be received positively.

b) What pastoral attention can be given to people who have chosen to live in these types of union?

The Church in Canada recognizes that a bishop is responsible to God for the souls of all living in his diocese and therefore must provide pastoral care, without, however, necessarily approving or even condoning such relationships. This would require that the spiritual needs of these persons be addressed. To hold the attention of these persons requires an attitude of mercy, sympathy and love, not condemnation.

We attempt to treat all individuals within our community as just that. We do not make distinctions based on sexual orientation or marital status. There should also be acceptance in concrete ways, i.e. a safe space to meet to discuss relevant issues and spirituality and acceptance by the Church as whole people welcomed in all aspects of the work of the church, including sacraments.

We find it un-Christian to deny support for same-sex couples with the same human struggles and the same potential for fruitfulness as heterosexual couples. The distinction that the love of same-sex couples is not sacramental does not stand the test of honest observation. Faith-filled people giving their lives freely to each other have a sacred quality that cannot be denied.

c) In the case of unions of persons of the same sex who have adopted children, what can be done pastorally in light of transmitting the faith?

First, it must be recognized that persons in same-sex relationships may have biological as well as adoptive children, and even in the case where children are adopted, the adoption may have taken place in a previous heterosexual relationship. The care given these children should be the same as to those whose parents are in other "irregular" relationships. Withholding baptism as a means of enticing the parent to enter a more conventional relationship amounts to withholding the freely given grace of God.

We don't make a distinction. As with any couple seeking assistance in transmitting the faith, they are welcome, expected to participate in the life of the community, and be active agents in the lives of their children.

6. The Education of Children in Irregular Marriages

a) What is the estimated proportion of children and adolescents in these cases, as regards children who are born and raised in regularly constituted families?

As many as there are divorces, add 10 per cent for single parents and another five per cent for those raised in same-sex households.

b) How do parents in these situations approach the Church? What do they ask? Do they request the sacraments only, or do they also want catechesis and the general teaching of religion?

We don't make a distinction between families. All families are welcome. Any family asking to celebrate the sacrament of Baptism, for example, is expected to be active in the life of the faith community. Approximately the same percentage of parents as those in "normalized" marriages seek catechesis and faith formation for their children.

Families are respectful to the Church teaching and climate, even though it is hurtful to them, and they approach humbly and with total vulnerability, and often in expectation of refusal. Parents in these situations are making a brave spiritual decision in the face of great adversity, so they tend to participate fully in catechesis and all elements of community with gratitude.

c) How do the particular Churches attempt to meet the needs of the parents of these children to provide them with a Christian education?

We provide the same resources, programs and support to all our parents in the same way.

d) What is the sacramental practice in these cases: preparation, administration of the sacrament and the accompaniment?

We provide the same sacramental processes and celebrations to all our families in the same way.

7. The Openness of the Married Couple to Life

a) What knowledge do Christians have today of the teachings of *Humanae Vitae* on responsible parenthood? Are they aware of how morally to evaluate the different methods of family planning? Could any insights be suggested in this regard pastorally?

Even the invitation to encourage adults "morally to evaluate the different methods of family planning" seems like a new notion in light of the assumption of many that there is no evaluation required, just adherence to the Church's law.

The Catholic Church has been perceived by some as completely ignoring the role of the discernment of the couple in the area of family planning. The Church has not called adults to active inquiry and discernment in this area, and this has led to many ignoring any wisdom the Church has shared. In its lack of trust of the adult in this basic area, the Church has lost its credibility and influence.

b) Is this moral teaching accepted? What aspects pose the most difficulties in a large majority of couples accepting this teaching?

Not by most. Most adult Catholics were and are not given the invitation to discern these important decisions, and such decisions are made by social and science norms. The Church has lost credibility in this area and is virtually ignored.

c) What natural methods are promoted by the particular Churches to help spouses put into practice the teachings of *Humanae Vitae*?

Methods of Natural Family Planning are shared as part of our marriage preparation process, but since the Church has lost much credibility in sexual and ethical areas, these are not considered very seriously by most couples. The main challenge may be that the Catholic Church is the institution that has been highlighting these methods. If these same methods were to be embraced by the ecological/environmental/economic and cultural influences, these methods would be on the rise.

This is a tragedy since there is a beauty and naturalness of the message, which should resonate within certain sectors of society – those desiring a chemical-free lifestyle and valuing a back-to-the-land lifestyle.

d) What is your experience on this subject in the practice of the Sacrament of Penance and participation at the Eucharist?

We do not experience any relationship in these areas.

e) What differences are seen in this regard between the Church's teaching and civic education?

There is a huge disparity between the Church's teaching and civic education. And even though the Church has, as part of her foundation, a holistic view of the human person and human sexuality, the pastoral practice and application of transmitting these values has been abysmal. NFP is about respect for your spouse. Civic teaching is often about protection of self. The Church does not make this very clear and has all but lost any influence in this area.

f) How can a more open attitude toward having children be fostered? How can an increase in births be promoted?

We do not believe that having more children for the sake of having more children should be promoted. The value and faith of a family is not quantified by the number of children, and parents seem to be taking a responsible approach to having children in light of their own capacity to parent and the pressure that over-population places on creation.

8. The Relationship Between the Family and the Person

a) Jesus Christ reveals the mystery and vocation of the human person. How can the family be a privileged place for this to happen?

Families need to be aware of the importance of prayer in their family life. This will help families to see the Christ in each other and to accept one another in a healthy way.

The family is a privileged place, for it is in relationship and the daily discipline of loving, forgiving, and growing that sanctuary is created for those around them and within. Families can be supported in this through homilies, through the teachings of forgiveness, through training in dialogue, through formation in theological reflections.

b) What critical situations in the family today can obstruct a person's encounter with Christ?

The family faces many challenges, including consumerism, busy-ness, ecological disconnect, abuse, sexism, poverty in liturgy that excludes members of the family or the family experience.

c) To what extent do the many crises of faith that people can experience affect family life?

Family life affects a faith crisis more than a crisis of faith affects the family. Both interact, but the Church has become irrelevant in many family decisions, or even guidance, because of its disconnect with lay life.

9. Other Challenges and Proposals

What other challenges or proposals related to the topics in the above questions do you consider urgent and useful to treat?

- The restored order of initiation sacraments (children should receive communion at baptism)
- The family and their love and care of creation
- Teaching skills of mercy
- Lay voices need to have a publicly mandated voice with authority
- Women must become equal in the church in all aspects.
- The narrow definitions of the family, including households of single person.
- Pastoral care for blended families

SYNOD OF BISHOPS III EXTRAORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY

PASTORAL CHALLENGES TO THE FAMILY IN THE CONTEXT OF EVANGELIZATION

Preparatory Document Vatican City 2013

I. Synod: Family and Evangelization

The mission of preaching the Gospel to all creation, entrusted directly by the Lord to his disciples, has continued in the Church throughout history. The social and spiritual crisis, so evident in today's world, is becoming a pastoral challenge in the Church's evangelizing mission concerning the family, the vital building-block of society and the ecclesial community. Never before has proclaiming the Gospel on the Family in this context been more urgent and necessary. The importance of the subject is reflected in the fact that the Holy Father has decided to call for a Synod of Bishops, which is to have a two-staged itinerary: firstly, an Extraordinary General Assembly in 2014, intended to define the "*status quaestionis*" and to collect the bishops' experiences and proposals in proclaiming and living the Gospel of the Family in a credible manner; and secondly, an Ordinary General Assembly in 2015 to seek working guidelines in the pastoral care of the person and the family.

Concerns which were unheard of until a few years ago have arisen today as a result of different situations, from the widespread practice of cohabitation, which does not lead to marriage, and sometimes even excludes the idea of it, to same-sex unions between persons, who are, not infrequently, permitted to adopt children. The many new situations requiring the Church's attention and pastoral care include: mixed or inter-religious marriages; the single-parent family; polygamy; marriages with the consequent problem of a dowry, sometimes understood as the purchase price of the woman; the caste system; a culture of non-commitment and a presumption that the marriage bond can be temporary; forms of feminism hostile to the Church; migration and the reformulation of the very concept of the family; relativist pluralism in the conception of marriage; the influence of the media on popular culture in its understanding of marriage and family life; underlying trends of thought in legislative proposals which devalue the idea of permanence and faithfulness in the marriage covenant; an increase in the practice of surrogate motherhood (*wombs for hire*); and new interpretations of what is considered a human right. Within the Church, faith in the sacramentality of marriage and the healing power of the Sacrament of Penance show signs of weakness or total abandonment.

Consequently, we can well understand the urgency with which the worldwide episcopate is called upon to gather *cum et sub Petro* to address these challenges. For example, by simply calling to mind the fact that, as a result of the current situation, many children and young people will never see their parents receive the sacraments, then we understand just how urgent are the challenges to evangelization arising from the current situation, which can be seen in almost every part of the "global village". Corresponding in a particular manner to this reality today is the wide acceptance of the teaching on divine mercy and concern towards people who suffer on the periphery of societies, globally and in existential situations. Consequently, vast expectations exist concerning the decisions which are to be made pastorally regarding the family. A reflection on these issues by the Synod of Bishops, in addition to it being much needed and urgent, is a dutiful expression of charity towards those entrusted to the Bishops' care and the entire human family.

II. The Church and the Gospel on the Family

The good news of divine love is to be proclaimed to all those personally living this basic human experience of couples and of a communion open to the gift of children, which is the family community. The teachings of the faith on marriage is to be presented in an articulate and efficacious manner, so that it might reach hearts and transform them in accordance with God's will, made manifest in Jesus Christ.

The citation of biblical sources on marriage and family in this document are essential references only. The same is true for documentation from the Magisterium which is limited to that of a universal character, including some texts from the Pontifical Council for the Family. It will be left to the bishop-participants at the synod to cite documents from their own episcopal assemblies.

St. Joe's Pastoral Ministry Response to the Vatican Questionnaire in Preparation for the 2014 Synod on the Family – December 13, 2013

In every age, and in the many different cultures, the teaching of the Pastors has been clear nor has there been lacking the concrete testimony of believers — men and women — in very diverse circumstances who have lived the Gospel of the family as an inestimable gift for their life and their children. The commitment for the next Extraordinary Synod is inspired and sustained by the desire to communicate this message with greater incisiveness, in the hope that “the treasure of revelation, entrusted to the Church, more and more fill the hearts of each person” ([DV](#), 26).

The Plan of God, Creator and Redeemer

The beauty of the biblical message on the family has its roots in the creation of man and woman, both made in the image and likeness of God (cf. *Gen* 1:24-31; 2:4-25). Bound together by an indissoluble sacramental bond, those who are married experience the beauty of love, fatherhood, motherhood, and the supreme dignity of participating in this way in the creative work of God.

In the gift of the fruit of their union, they assume the responsibility of raising and educating other persons for the future of humankind. Through procreation, man and woman fulfill in faith the vocation of being God's collaborators in the protection of creation and the growth of the human family.

Blessed [Pope John Paul II](#) commented on this aspect in *Familiaris consortio*: “God created man in his own image and likeness (cf. *Gen* 1:26, 27); calling him to existence through love, he called him at the same time for love. God is love (cf. *1 Jn* 4:8) and in himself he lives a mystery of personal loving communion. Creating the human race in his own image and continually keeping it in being, God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the vocation, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of love and communion (*Gaudium et spes*, 12). Love is therefore the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being” ([FC](#), 11).

The plan of God the creator, which was disrupted by original sin (cf. *Gen* 3:1-24), has revealed itself throughout history in the events of the chosen people up to the fullness of time, when, with the incarnation of the Son of God, not only was the divine will for salvation confirmed, but also the redemption offering the grace to follow this same will.

The Son of God, the Word made flesh (cf. *Jn* 1:14) in the womb of the Virgin Mother, lived and grew up in the family of Nazareth and participated at the wedding at Cana, where he added importance to the festivities with the first of his “signs” (cf. *Jn* 2:1-11). In joy, he welcomed his reception in the families of his disciples (cf. *Mk* 1:29-31; 2:13-17) and consoled the bereaved family of his friends in Bethany (cf. *Lk* 10:38-42; *Jn* 11:1-44).

Jesus Christ restored the beauty of matrimony, proposing once again the one plan of God which was abandoned because of the hardness of the human heart, even within the tradition of the people of Israel (cf. *Mt* 5:31-32; 19:3-12; *Mk* 10:1-12; *Lk* 16:18). Returning to the beginning, Jesus taught the unity and faithfulness of the husband and wife, refuting the practice of repudiation and adultery.

Precisely through the extraordinary beauty of human love — already celebrated in a heightened manner inspired by the *Song of Songs*, and the bond of marriage called for and defended by the prophets like Hosea (cf. *Hosea* 1:2, 3.3) and Malachi (cf. *Mal* 2:13-16) —, Jesus affirmed the original dignity of the married love of man and woman.

The Church's Teaching on the Family

Even in the early Christian community the family appeared as the “domestic church” (cf. *CCC*, 1655): In the so-called “family canons” of the Apostolic letters of the New Testament, the great family of the ancient world is identified as the place of a profound solidarity between husbands and wives, between parents and children, and between the wealthy and the poor (cf. *Eph* 5:21-6:9; *Col* 3:18-4:1; *1 Tim* 2:8-15; *Titus* 2:1-10; *1 Pt* 2:13-3:7; cf. also the *Letter to Philemon*). In particular, the Letter to the Ephesians recognized the nuptial love between man and woman as “the great mystery”, making present in the world the love of Christ and the Church (cf. *Eph* 5:31-32).

Over the centuries, especially in modern times to the present, the Church has not failed to continually teach and develop her doctrine on the family and marriage which founded her. One of its highest expressions has been proposed by the [Second Vatican Council](#) in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, which, in treating certain pressing problems, dedicated an entire chapter to the promotion of the dignity of marriage and the family, as seen in the description of their value for the constitution of society: “the family, in which the various generations come together and help one another grow wiser and harmonize personal rights with the other requirements of social life, is the very foundation of society” ([GS](#), 52). Particularly striking is its appeal for a Christ-centered spirituality in the spouses' life of faith: “Let the spouses themselves, made to the image of the living God and enjoying the authentic dignity of persons, be joined to one another in equal affection, harmony of mind and the work of mutual

St. Joe's Pastoral Ministry Response to the Vatican Questionnaire in Preparation for the 2014 Synod on the Family – December 13, 2013

sanctification. Thus, following Christ who is the principle of life, by the sacrifices and joys of their vocation and through their faithful love, married people can become witnesses of the mystery of love which the Lord revealed to the world by his dying and his rising up to life again”(GS, 52).

After the [Second Vatican Council](#), the successors of St. Peter enriched this teaching on marriage and the family, especially [Pope Paul VI](#) with the Enyclical [Humanae vitae](#), which offers specific principles and guidelines. Subsequently, in his Apostolic Exhortation [Familiaris consortio](#), [Pope John Paul II](#) insisted on proposing the divine plan in the basic truths of married love and the family: “The only ‘place’ in which this self-giving in its whole truth is made possible is marriage, the covenant of conjugal love freely and consciously chosen, whereby man and woman accept the intimate community of life and love willed by God himself (cf. [Gaudium et spes](#), 48) which only in this light manifests its true meaning. The institution of marriage is not an undue interference by society or authority, nor the extrinsic imposition of a form. Rather it is an interior requirement of the covenant of conjugal love which is publicly affirmed as unique and exclusive, in order to live in complete fidelity to the plan of God, the Creator. A person's freedom, far from being restricted by this fidelity, is secured against every form of subjectivism or relativism and is made a sharer in creative Wisdom” ([FC](#), 11).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church gathers together the fundamental aspects of this teaching: “The marriage covenant, by which a man and a woman form with each other an intimate communion of life and love, has been founded and endowed with its own special laws by the Creator. By its very nature it is ordered to the good of the couple, as well as to the generation and education of children. Christ the Lord raised marriage between the baptized to the dignity of a sacrament [cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, [Gaudium et spes](#), 48; *Code of Canon Law*, 1055, 1]”(CCC 1660).

The doctrine presented in the *Catechism* touches on both theological principles and moral behaviours, developed under two separate headings: *The Sacrament of Matrimony* (nos. 1601-1658) and *The Sixth Commandment* (nos. 2331-2391). An attentive reading of these sections of the *Catechism* provides an updated understanding of the doctrine of faith, which supports the Church's work in the face of modern-day challenges. The Church's pastoral ministry finds inspiration in the truth of marriage viewed as part of the plan of God, who created man and woman and, in the fullness of time, revealed in Jesus the completeness of spousal love elevated to the level of sacrament. Christian marriage founded on consensus is also endowed with its own effects such as the goods and duties of the spouses. At the same time, marriage is not immune from the effects of sin (cf. Gen 3:1-24), which can cause deep wounds and even abuses to the dignity of the sacrament.

The recent encyclical of Pope Francis, [Lumen fidei](#), speaks of the family in the context of a reflection on how faith reveals “just how firm the bonds between people can be when God is present in their midst” ([LF](#), 50). “The first setting in which faith enlightens the human city is the family. I think first and foremost of the stable union of man and woman in marriage. This union is born of their love, as a sign and presence of God's own love, and of the acknowledgment and acceptance of the goodness of sexual differentiation, whereby spouses can become one flesh (cf. *Gen* 2:24) and are enabled to give birth to a new life, a manifestation of the Creator's goodness, wisdom and loving plan. Grounded in this love, a man and a woman can promise each other mutual love in a gesture which engages their entire lives and mirrors many features of faith. Promising love for ever is possible when we perceive a plan bigger than our own ideas and undertakings, a plan which sustains us and enables us to surrender our future entirely to the one we love” ([LF](#), 52). “Faith is no refuge for the fainthearted, but something which enhances our lives. It makes us aware of a magnificent calling, the vocation of love. It assures us that this love is trustworthy and worth embracing, for it is based on God's faithfulness which is stronger than our every weakness” ([LF](#), 53).