

WHAT WAS THE SYNOD FOR ?

“Every man acts on account of some end.”

St Thomas Aquinas [*Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 1, a. 1 ; et in multis locis aliis]

There is a reason for everything, even human actions : *especially* human actions. We are entitled to ask, then, what was the Synod on the family for ? What was the end, or reason, of this meeting of bishops (October 4th to 25th, 2015) ? The theme was stated as “*The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and Contemporary World*”. But *we know* the vocation and mission of the family, to bring children into the world and make them fit for heaven. And *we know* the vocation and mission of the Church. Anyone who is ignorant of the details may find them spelled out in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. “The contemporary world”, *synecdoche* for modern man, is no different from the world *du temps perdu* save for its rather more vehement abandonment of God and the inevitable corollaries, a more comprehensive atheism, a more thorough-going moral depravity. The nature of man does not change, notwithstanding the ravings of academics.

So, what was the reason for the Synod ? On the face of things there was none, for there was no end, no good of the Church, it could serve.

The same lack of finality characterised Vatican II. H J A Sire, in his *Phoenix from the Ashes* [Kettering, Ohio, Angelico Press, 2015], remarks how “[a]ll previous councils of the Church had been called either to settle a doctrinal question or for pastoral reform... the Second Vatican Council was the only one in history... with no specific doctrinal or pastoral objects in view.” [p. 180] The tacit agenda of the Council was to adapt, or endeavour to adapt, Catholicism to the demands of Protestantism and the secular world. This distorted focus served as substitute for a Catholic focus, and it proved extraordinarily effective to the great cost of the Church and the faith. Catholic content, the wheat of doctrine, was infiltrated in every field of the Council's determinations with the darnel of Protestant and secular suppositions.

And similarly with this Synod. Of the ninety-four paragraphs of the *Final Report*, it seems ninety-one are a reasonable reflection of Catholic truth. The remaining three, however, nn. 84, 85 and 86, compromise that truth by deferring to Protestant and secular demands.

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Let us take a look at their texts in George Weigel's translation from the Italian.

84. The baptised who are divorced and civilly remarried should be better integrated into Christian communities in the various ways possible, avoiding every occasion of scandal. The logic of integration is the key to their pastoral accompaniment, not only so that they know they belong to the Body of Christ which is the Church, but so that they may have a joyous and fruitful experience in it. They are baptised, they are brothers and sisters, the gifts and charisms of the Holy Spirit flow into them for the good of all. Their participation can express itself in various ecclesial services : so the Church must discern which of the various forms of exclusion practised in liturgical, pastoral, educational and institutional life might be overcome. Not only should they not consider themselves excommunicated, but they ought to be able to live and mature as living members of the Church, experiencing her as a mother who also accompanies

them, who cares for them with affection, and who encourages them on the way of life and of the Gospel.

This integration is also necessary for the care and Christian education of their children, which is the most important consideration. For the Christian community to care for these people does not weaken [the Church's] faith and its witness to the indissolubility of marriage ; rather, in this care the Church properly expresses her charity.

85. St John Paul II has given a comprehensive criterion that remains the baseline for evaluating these situations : “Pastors must know that, for the sake of truth, they are obliged to exercise careful discernment of situations. There is, in fact, a difference between those who have sincerely tried to save their first marriage and have been unjustly abandoned, and those who through their own grave fault have destroyed a canonically valid marriage. Finally, there are those who have entered into a second union for the sake of the children's upbringing, and who are sometimes subjectively certain in conscience that their previous and irreparably destroyed marriage had never been valid” [*Familiaris Consortio* 84]. Therefore it is the duty of priests to accompany those concerned along the path of discernment according to the teaching of the Church and the guidance of the bishop. In this process it will be useful to undertake an examination of conscience, through moments of reflection and repentance. The divorced and remarried ought to ask themselves how they behaved towards their children when a crisis began in their first marriage ; whether they made attempts at reconciliation ; about the situation of the abandoned partner ; about the consequences of the new relationship on the rest of the family and on the community of the faithful ; and what example is being given to young people preparing for marriage. A sincere reflection can reinforce trust in the mercy of God, which is denied to no one.

Further, it cannot be denied that in some circumstances “[i]mputability and responsibility for an action can be diminished or abrogated” [*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1735] because of various conditions. In consequence, judgement about an objective situation need not lead to a judgement of “subjective imputability” [Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts, Declaration of June 24, 2000, 2a].

In certain circumstances people have great difficulty in acting in a different way. Therefore, while maintaining a general norm, it is necessary to recognise that responsibility for a certain action or decision is not the same in all cases. Pastoral discernment, while still taking account of a properly formed conscience in persons, must make provision for these situations. The consequences of acts are not necessarily the same in every case.

86. The process of accompaniment and discernment guides these faithful to an examination of conscience about their situation before God. Speaking with a priest in the internal forum contributes to the formation of a correct judgement about that which blocks the possibility of a fuller life in the Church and about the steps that can favour and foster that growth. Given that there is no graduality in the law [*Familiaris Consortio* 34], this discernment can never prescind from the Gospel demands of truth and charity proposed by the Church. So that this might take place, the necessary conditions of humility, discretion, and love of the Church and its teaching must be assured, in a sincere quest for the will of God and in the desire for a more perfect response to it.

That n. 84 is unsatisfactory in a Catholic document is an understatement. A seminary student producing it would be suspected of heterodoxy. Bland assertion and lack of distinction are followed by claims which are *prima facie* false. Even if the divorced and remarried have complied with the Church's demands as to *modus vivendi*, it is utterly inappropriate that they be permitted to participate in the Church's life as is suggested because of the possibility of scandal. The oblique assertion “the Church must discern” how they might be permitted to participate is the sort of nonsense one expects from a Protestant convocation. The involvement proposed, with its focus on the accidental at the expense of the essential, is characteristically Protestant. Absent the parties' repentance of their conduct in 'remarrying', it is quite impossible for the divorced “to have a joyous and fruitful

experience in [the Church]". They may be baptised, but "the gifts and charisms of the Holy Spirit" cannot "flow into them" while they live in a state of objective mortal sin. Any student of theology understands this. The appeal to the needs of the children (of one or other or of both the offending parties, it must be assumed) as "the most important consideration" misses the point. Children are innocent and their innocence remains even in appalling circumstances. It is otherwise for their parents living in sin.

The last sentence of the paragraph is false, its appeal to charity an attempt to invoke the 'mercy' enunciated by John XXIII in his *Opening Speech* to the bishops of Vatican II which confused that virtue with indulgence. "The condemnation of error," as Romano Amerio noted in criticising John XXIII's words, "is itself a work of mercy since by exposing error those labouring under it are corrected, and others are preserved from falling into it." (*Iota Unum, A Study of Changes in the Catholic Church in the XXth Century*, transl from the Second Italian Edition by Fr John Parsons, Kansas City (Sarto House), 1996, pp. 80 et seq.) Amerio went on to quote St Thomas : "Mercy is sorrow at another's misfortune accompanied by a desire to help him." (*Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 30, a. 1) Where the agent does nothing to aid the object of his concern to turn away from his grievous error there is no true charity.

Paragraph n. 85 is notable for the way it misleads by selective citing from *Familiaris Consortio* 84—this notwithstanding its avowal that John Paul II's teaching is the "comprehensive criterion" for judging the situations under consideration. The material quoted, silent on the moral attitude necessary to the parties, enables a Protestant interpretation. This duplicity is compounded by switching the focus of the burden of conscience of the parties from the fundamental issue of their decision to 'remarry' (and its consequences) to matters only accidental to that decision, and by failing to set forth clearly the circumstances in which imputability and responsibility for actions may be abrogated. By obscuring the essential in favour of the accidental, its proponents imply that the accidental was John Paul's focus. Its appeal to 'mercy' over the elements of this false focus repeats the error in n. 84.

Paragraph n. 86 is a machinery provision for applying the terms of nn. 84 & 85. While it is orthodox on its face, it is defective because it lends assistance to their errors.

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Let us take a look at some recent commentaries.

There were two pieces in Sydney's *Catholic Weekly* of 1st November 2015 which sought to allay fears that the Synod's determinations had altered Catholic teaching. In an interview with journalist Edward Pentin reprinted from the *National Catholic Register*, George Cardinal Pell, *quondam* Archbishop of Sydney, offered measured responses which might be said to support the status quo. He said (inter alia) : "There was massive consensus on 92 of the 94 paragraphs and there is nothing in the set of paragraphs that is heretical or opposed to current Church practice." This is a simplistic assessment.

In an opinion piece on the same pages headed *Despite media hullabaloo, Communion for divorced isn't mentioned*, American Catholic author, George Weigel, said this.

The teaching of John Paul II in *Familiaris Consortio* 84 is the operative and "comprehensive criterion" in these difficult and delicate pastoral situations. It was proposed in several *modi* (amendments)... that section 84... be cited in full in the Synod's final report ; ambiguities would have been avoided had those amendments

been accepted. But if *Familiaris Consortio* 84 is indeed the “comprehensive criterion” for pastoral and spiritual discernment in these circumstances, that “comprehensiveness” would certainly seem to include the following, which appears four sentences after the material cited in n. 85 [of the *Final Report*] above : *However, the Church reaffirms her practice, which is based upon Sacred Scripture, of not admitting to Eucharistic Communion divorced persons who have remarried. They are unable to be admitted thereto from the fact that their state and condition of life objectively contradict that union of love between Christ and the Church that is signified and effected by the Eucharist. Besides this, there is another special pastoral reason : if these people were admitted to the Eucharist, the faithful would be led into error and confusion regarding the Church’s teaching about the indissolubility of marriage.*

He proceeded to pour scorn on those who suggest that the three paragraphs amount to a tacit vindication of the proposal by Cardinal Kasper “in any of its various iterations—Holy Communion for the divorced and civilly remarried after a 'penitential path' ; devolution of authority over this to bishops' conferences ; an appeal to the rights of 'conscience'...” This misses the point, where his comment concerning ambiguities that could have been avoided does not. It is precisely *the ambiguities* that those in favour of relaxing the rigour of Catholic teaching desired to put in place so they could assert some authority for indulgence in the aberrations.

In an article penned for traditional blog site, roratecaeli.org, Bishop Athanasius Schneider, auxiliary bishop of Kazakhstan, offered a more realistic assessment.

In quoting the famous n. 84 of the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* of Pope John Paul II in n. 85 of the *Final Report*, the redactors censored the text, cutting out the following critical formulation : “[T]he way to the Eucharist can only be granted to those who... take on themselves the duty to live in complete continence, that is, by abstinence from the acts proper to married couples”.

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The text... not only omits unambiguously to convince divorced and civilly remarried persons concerning the adulterous, and thus gravely sinful, character of their life style, it implicitly justifies such a lifestyle by assigning the question ultimately to the area of individual conscience and improperly applying the moral principle of imputability to the case... In fact, the application of [this principle] to a stable, permanent and public life in adultery is improper and deceptive... [It] applies only where the partners have the firm intention to live in complete continence and make sincere efforts to that end. Whichever they intend to continue a sinful living together [imputability is suspended]. The *Final Report* implies that a public lifestyle in adultery – as is the case of the civilly remarried – is not a violation of the indissoluble sacramental marriage bond, or that it does not represent a mortal or grave sin, and [implies] moreover that the issue is a matter of private conscience. The approach manifest here defers to the Protestant principle of subjective judgement in matters of faith and discipline, and lends intellectual commitment to the erroneous theory of “fundamental option”, a theory already condemned by the Magisterium (cf. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, 65-70).

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The Shepherds of the Church and especially the public texts of the Magisterium must speak in the clearest possible manner since this is essential to official teaching. Christ demanded from all His disciples that they speak with the utmost clarity : “Let what you say be ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; anything more than this comes from the evil one” (*Math* 5: 37). *A fortiori* is this the case when the Shepherds of the Church preach or when the Magisterium speaks in a document. Unfortunately, the text... departs from this Divine command. While there is no plea in favour of the admission of the divorced and remarried to Holy Communion—the text does not even mention Holy Communion, or the Sacraments for that matter—by using ambiguous expressions such as “a more full participation in the life of the Church”, and “discernment and integration”, it obscures the true position.

By such obfuscating tactics the *Final Report* puts in place 'time bombs', and [allows] a 'back door entrance' for admission of the divorced and remarried to Holy Communion, leading to profanation of the two great sacraments of Marriage and the Eucharist, and contributing, at least indirectly, to the culture of divorce [and] the spread of the "plague of divorce" (*Gaudium et spes*, 47).

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The *Final Report* seems to leave the solution of the question of the admission of the divorced and remarried to Holy Communion to local Church authorities, "accompaniment[s] of the priests" and "orientations of the bishop". Such a matter is however connected essentially with the deposit of faith, i.e., with the revealed word of God [and to] ... the unchangeable truth of the law of the Catholic faith and, consequently, also of the law of Catholic liturgical practice.

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... The deliberate avoidance of mentioning and reaffirming this principle in the text... can be compared with the systematic avoidance of the expression "homooousios" by the opponents of the dogma of the Council of Nicea in the fourth century—the formal Arians and the so-called Semi-Arians—who went out of their way to invent other expressions in order not to have to confess directly the consubstantiality of the Son of God with God the Father.

Such a refraining from an open Catholic confession by the majority of the episcopate in the fourth century caused feverish ecclesiastical activity and frequent synodal meetings with a proliferation of new doctrinal formulae whose underlying spirit was a refusal to express the truth with clarity, namely, to use the term "homooousios". Likewise, in our own day the last two Synods on the Family have avoided naming and confessing clearly the principle of the entire Catholic tradition, that those who live in an invalid marital union can be admitted to Holy Communion only under the condition of a promise to live in complete continence and to avoid public scandal.

[That this is the effect] is proven also by the immediate unequivocal reaction of the secular media and by the reaction of the main advocates of the new un-Catholic practice... Cardinal Kasper, Cardinal Nichols and Archbishop Forte, for instance, publicly affirmed that, according to the *Final Report*, one can assume that a door in some way has been opened to Communion for the divorced and remarried. There exists as well a considerable number of bishops, priests and laity who have rejoiced because of the so-called "opened door" they found in the *Final Report*. Instead of guiding the faithful unambiguously and clearly, the *Final Report* provides teaching which is obscure, confused and subjective (the judgement of the conscience of the divorced ; the *forum internum*) and characterised by un-Catholic doctrine and discipline in a matter essentially connected to the deposit of faith transmitted by the Apostles...

The *Final Report* has to be read in its entirety. When that is done it is plain that *it is not* a Catholic document. The bishops who contrived at the defective paragraphs are culpable. But the 'orthodox' bishops who failed to refuse to allow their names to be associated with the document are, with due respect, just as culpable.

The refusal to take a stand, "to hide behind the mob", or, to put it bluntly, the syndrome of shepherds behaving like sheep, afflicted the majority of the fathers of the Second Vatican Council. And just as *their* refusal to continue to be a party to a Council that was teaching patent error (and the scandal their continued support gave) led to the great evils that befell the Church after 1965, so will the failure of the Synod bishops to take a public stand over the errors in the *Final Report* work great harm in the Church, particularly in a setting where we have a pope who has shown himself only too willing to compromise Christ's and the Church's teaching over the indissolubility of marriage. What the Catholic faithful want is a bishop who will behave publicly as St Paul did with St Peter, a bishop

unafraid to tell the Pope to his face that he is wrong [*Galatians 2 : 11*] and who ought to do so, as both St Augustine and St Thomas teach, because “fraternal correction is a work of mercy”. [cf. *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 33, a. 4].

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So, what was the Synod for ? The invitation to the faithful to answer questionnaires on marriage and the family (as if, like members of some Protestant sect, Catholics are able to vote on the Church's teaching by plebiscite) ; the preliminary synod with its scandalous interim *relatio* ; the needless attendance of bishops from around the world on two occasions to 're-consider' the Church's infallible teaching—these were, all of them, just window dressing. They were bargaining chips or so much persiflage in an ambit claim.

The purpose of the Synod was to establish some justification for breaching the wall of the Church's teaching on marriage and the family, and this is just what the three paragraphs, 84, 85 and 86 of the *Final Report* have achieved.

“There is,” as Hilaire Belloc remarked early in the XXth century, “one thing in this world that is different from all other. It has a personality and a force. It is recognised and, when recognised, violently loved or hated. It is the Catholic Church.” [Letter to Dean Inge, *Essays of a Catholic*, London, 1931] This 'thing' is different from all other because, notwithstanding that it is comprised of men, it is Divine, not human. Its Head is Jesus Christ (not the Pope) ; its soul is the Holy Spirit ; its end is God the Father Almighty, and union with Him of the faithful who endure the adversities of this life. The Church is infallible. She is the reason this latest episode in ecclesiastical stupidity will ultimately fail. Regrettably, great damage will be done to the institution of marriage in the meantime.

Michael Baker

18th November, 2015—*Dedication of the Basilicas of St Peter & St Paul*