

POPE FRANCIS'S DECISION, announced in October 2013, to call an Extraordinary Synod of Bishops focused on the family, to be held in Vatican City from 5 to 19 October 2014, has inspired many initiatives. INTAMS has taken up this opportunity in various ways, including the publication of this special issue of the *INTAMS review*.

The Pope has again amazed many of the faithful with his extraordinary gift at being able to open the Church to the concerns of the “wide global village”. Throughout this pontificate, many people from all parts of the Church, men and women, lay and ordained, spouses and celibates, priests and bishops, have felt encouraged by his message and his inspiring initiatives such as his call for “a poor church for the poor”, his gestures in liturgies and public appearances, and his pastoral trips. Not the least among these were his first encyclical, *Lumen fidei* of June 2013, and his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* last November. Pope Francis has opened an authentic path that the whole human race can follow and embrace.

Shortly after the announcement of the synod in October, the Vatican asked national bishops' conferences worldwide to conduct a wide-ranging poll of Catholics, asking for their opinions on the Church's teachings on marriage, family life, contraception, same-sex unions and divorce. Although relatively complex, and with a rather short time frame, this survey has been greatly appreciated throughout the Catholic world.

Many bishops eagerly and openly sought parish-level input for this Vatican questionnaire. Some set up an online process of response. Others organized discussion groups. Others encouraged the parishes to meet together to discuss the issues, and reports were composed based on these discussions. Many lay faithful took great interest in the questionnaire and spent the time and energy, both individually and in the organized groups, to respond. They did so in a grateful spirit of collaboration in thinking through these important issues for the Church today.

Some bishops' conferences, however, preferred to respond to the questionnaire without much lay involvement, putting together responses by the clergy alone. This is especially regrettable given that the synod's topic so directly affects the lives of couples and families. Other dioceses simply did not respond to the questionnaire. Finally, quite a few lay people would have been eager to respond, but unfortunately found out about the questionnaire only after the imposed deadline.

We are very thankful to the Belgian Bishops' Conference for their trust and the spirit of cooperation with which they have accepted and supported the quantitative survey which the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies at the Catholic University of Leuven and the *INTAMS Chair for the Study of Marriage & Spirituality* have carried out in the Flemish part of Belgium in addition to and complementary with the Vatican questionnaire.

From the moment of its founding 25 years ago, INTAMS has given special attention to how we can bring together the tradition of the Church and the challenges of

contemporary society. How can we, baptized faithful, married or unmarried, honestly choose and act so as to meet today's challenges in a way that is authentically Christian? In the spirit of the Second Vatican Council's *Gaudium et spes*, we seek to understand today's culture and bring out the best in it. This also involves asking difficult questions about the situation of couples and families. How can people live their marriage as a praise of God, live a kind of marital spirituality? What kind of family life authentically lives the Christian tradition in today's society? How do new forms of living together complement or challenge old certainties? None of these are easy questions to answer. The authentic following of Christ means a journey of continual questioning and making choices in order to find the way. Not making choices turns us into victims of circumstance. Hildegard of Bingen said once: "When humans do not question, the Holy Spirit cannot answer".

INTAMS's review was founded twenty years ago to pursue these questions. Published twice a year, the review has sought to provide a platform where serious academic theology, spirituality, and pastoral reflection can explore areas of current theological interest and enter into an international and interdisciplinary dialogue on a variety of topics in the field of marriage and the family. As in other fields, we have discovered that a merely abstract approach to the issues is not sufficient. Only a theology and spirituality that begins from the actual situation of lived married life, and that responds to current concerns, can shed light on the difficult questions raised today. This approach does much better service to the needs of the whole spectrum of our readership: academics, pastoral workers, those preparing couples for marriage and accompanying couples throughout their married life, and reflective people engaged in the ordinary business of family life. It is in the spirit of our continual desire to bring lived situations to academic reflection that we publish this special issue exploring the impressions that many specialists and lay people throughout the world have had of the unique process of preparation for the upcoming extraordinary synod, and their experience and involvement in the dialogues surrounding the questionnaire.

The preparations for the synod raise the hope of a generally collaborative endeavor, of a Church where clergy and laity together reflect on issues that touch the deepest aspects of human life. It reflects what Pope Francis, in his address to the bishops of Brazil in Rio de Janeiro on 28 July 2013, said in the light of the story of Emmaus (Lk 24,13-15): "We need a Church capable of walking at people's side, of doing more than simply listening to them; a Church which accompanies them on their journey; a Church able to make sense of the 'night' contained in the flight of so many of our brothers and sisters from Jerusalem; a Church which realizes that the reasons why people leave also contain reasons why they can eventually return. ... Jesus warmed the hearts of the disciples of Emmaus." In this sense we hope that this coming synod will call all the faithful, married or unmarried, clergy and lay, to journey together as brothers and sisters, to move forward together to the next Ordinary General Assembly in 2015.

We need a Church that is more merciful and forgiving, following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, attuned to the everyday needs of the people. It is in the local Church that the fullness of Christianity is realized, in the small Church, with modest resources, local communities that stand with rich and poor alike, a Church that listens to, understands, and responds to the complex reality of relationships today. Only if this listening and understanding can give birth to a fresh and authentic voice of the

Christian tradition can the Church win back the trust of the growing number of sceptics. This takes real *kenosis* (Phil 2,7; 1 Cor 1,17; 9,15; Rom 4,14), an institutional self-emptying in which the Church walks with the people on the real roads they travel, where bishops and priests engage in dialogue and understanding with the people whom they lead and serve. In this light, particular attention needs to be given to the unity of the Church. Our one baptism has always been a mandate to overcome differences (1 Cor 12). Yet today we are torn by many divisions, both within Christian communities – clergy and lay, male and female, conservative and progressive – and in the broader ecumenical communion. Our hope is that the upcoming synods can be a step towards a genuine overcoming of at least some of these divisions towards a real invigoration of Christian reflection on marriage.

A serious *metanoia* and a reconsideration is needed in order not be tempted to paralyze the gifts and talents of the faithful but instead to encourage the people of God to live out their kingly, priestly, and prophetic vocation. This would help the Church of Christ in a better way. In the end, what matters are not our own projects and designs: that would be constructing a statue of bronze with feet of clay that will break into pieces (Daniel 2,32-45). What is needed is a genuine opening to the Spirit so that the vitality of marriage and family can shine forth, grounded in our one baptism.

This special theme issue of the *INTAMS review* contains a collection of articles from various countries in Latin America, North America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Australia. Twenty specialists, selected on the basis of their academic and pastoral expertise in the field of marriage and family studies, were invited to contribute to this volume. Each contribution consists *grosso modo* of three parts: a *descriptive part* (how was the announcement of the synod/the questionnaire received and followed-up in the respective country/region/diocese?), an *analytical part* (what has the announcement of the synod and the ensuing consultation process revealed about how the church in the respective country/region/diocese deals with issues of marriage and family life?), and an *outlook*: what expectations does the local church have for the upcoming synod?

We have included in this issue also two articles which make a specific contribution to the theme of the synod and are written by, as it were, “in-house” authors of *INTAMS*: *Annemie Dillen* and *Thomas Knieps-Port le Roi* report on the results of the quantitative survey that was carried out in the Flemish dioceses of Belgium by the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies and the *INTAMS Chair for the Study of Marriage & Spirituality* at the KU Leuven in response to the Pope’s announcement of the synod. *Basilio Petrà* offers a theological and pastoral proposal for the thorny issue of divorce and remarriage that, after Cardinal Walter Kasper’s most widely noted speech at the Consistory of Cardinals in February of this year, will certainly be among the top priorities of the synod.

May this upcoming synod become a true “together on the road,” an expression of our identity as pilgrim church. As Gregory the Great said: “My honour is the strength of my brothers and sisters in Christ.”