

**Marriage and the Family Today: Pastoral Challenges and Hopes in Light of the Extraordinary Synod on the Family**  
**Panel Discussion, 13 October 2014,**  
**Rome, Lay Center**

**Short statement by Martin M. Lintner, Brixen/Bressanone**

Ladies and gentlemen, first of all I'd like to thank you for the invitation to attend the panel this evening.

It was very interesting to see how many people worldwide wanted to respond to the questionnaire in preparation of the synod. This is not only interesting and exciting, but has to be understood also as a sign of the time. Many people are still interested in their church, though many others aren't any more. At least in my personal experience I met many faithful people who have lost the trust that their church will change for the better, that the church is willing to be reformed. The new archbishop of Cologne, Rainer Maria Woelki, some days ago in a public discussion stressed that the Church has to change for the better; that the church is an *ecclesia semper reformanda* and the current status is not the best one. As said, many people have lost their trust that the Church will change and be reformed. But I think that the high participation of the faithful in responding to the questionnaire shows that the people still hope that there will be changes within the church. While there have been voices warning that some or even many of the expectations won't be realized, I would prefer to see the expectations as expressions of hope. If there is no more hope, there will be no more expectations.

As next step I'd like to not refer to the contents of the different expectations. It is openly clear, that there are different expectations that are in contradiction to one another. Some hope that the pastoral practice of the Church in regard to particular situations of married or non married couples will change; others hope that even some doctrinal points will be at least reviewed, maybe even changed – or better – developed further. Others stress the continuity of the Church's doctrine and its immutability. Newspapers and journalists spoke about "war of theologians," a kind of "inner-theological culture fight".

I think that before entering into questions of content, it is very important to clarify first what dialogue means, what the rules, possibilities, and also the borderlines of a dialogue are. A dialogue makes sense only if all those who are involved in a procedure or touched by a certain topic have the right to participate and to express their free opinion. Especially in the field of marriage and family ethics the criticism against the Church is that the bishops who define the ethical rules for marital and family life are celibates or unmarried men.

Paul VI was aware of this problem and he consciously wanted the married persons as well as couples to take part in the commission he formed to help in the formulation of a papal statement on population and fertility, for the document that ended up as *Humanae Vitae*. It is well known that the big majority of the members of that commission, including all the married people and the couples that formed part of it, proposed to the pope a different position in regard to the question of artificial contraception that we find now in *Humanae Vitae*. There is no doubt that for Paul VI it was a difficult decision and that it was a truly and authentic decision of conscience for him. It is not up to me to

judge whether the decision was right or not. But I'd like to underline one point: even though the pope was deeply convinced that the Church has to respect the primary competence of those who live the reality of marriage and family, the joyful moments as well as the difficulties, and who witness in their everyday life the values of marriage and family, at the end he didn't follow the majority conviction. Surely he was also afraid that the Church would lose its credibility by reversing past teaching.

So I think that we have to reflect on this issue: it is of course a question that enters in the concept of the *sensus fidelium*. We know that the *sensus fidelium* is not a simple question of majority opinion, but rather a question of *trust in the Holy Spirit*: to trust that the Holy Spirit enables the virtuous faithful to reflect upon life and experiences in the light of the faith in order to understand on what one has to do ethically.

We have to rediscover this form of personal reflection of the faithful as a genuine *source of moral knowledge*. The concrete experiences and the reflection on them in the light of faith are a source of moral knowledge; not only the reflection on an abstract essence or nature. In this sense it should be asked if it is enough that the role of the faithful in the formulation of norms is purely on the consultative level. Moral norms are always the result of both reasoning and reflecting on experiences, they are fruit of ethical reflections on human experiences of many people from many generations. The human experiences are also the test field of norms: Are they really helping to overcome and resolve moral problems? Are they an answer to the very ethical dimension of moral conflicts? Do they help to find out more and more the deep human sense of life and all its complex challenges?

As theologians and as church we have to listen to the people who live in marriage and family and who struggle every day to be faithful to basic Christian values. We also have to listen very carefully to those who have different experiences or who live in situations that don't correspond to the Church's doctrine, because also they are struggling for the best and may show to the Church a deeper insight of the human reality. So it can be possible that the experience of couples can challenge the church to enhance, develop further and maybe even change some moral doctrines. To do so, we have of course to reflect on two more issues, the Hierarchy of Truths and the distinction between questions of doctrine of the faith and the moral doctrine. But to go into this in detail would take us too far afield.

Lastly, I would like to name one more thing: By listening to the people the Church will not only know the real hopes and problems of couples and families, but also their deep concerns and questions. Sometimes they say: The Church gives an answer, but what is the question? It is better to listen to the questions first in order to give helpful answers.