

## WILL THE TRUE SYNOD PLEASE STAND UP?

In October 2015, I participated in the Synod on Marriage and the Family, as the representative of the Belgian bishops. I listened to the bishops both in the auditorium and in more informal settings, heard all the speeches, and took part in the group discussions and the drafting of *modi* for the final decree. How do I feel following the publication on 15 March 2021 of a ‘responsum’ through which the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has issued a prohibition on blessing the relationships of ‘persons of the same sex’? Bad. I feel ashamed on behalf of my Church, as a government minister said yesterday. But above all, I feel intellectual and moral incomprehension. I want to apologize to all those for whom this ‘responsum’ is painful and incomprehensible: faithful and committed Catholic homosexual couples, the parents and grandparents of homosexual couples and their children, pastoral workers and counsellors of homosexual couples. Today, the pain they feel in the Church is also my pain.

The present ‘responsum’ lacks the pastoral care, scientific foundation, theological nuance, and ethical precision that were present among the synod fathers who approved the final conclusions. A different decision- and policymaking procedure is at work here. I would like to mention only three elements by way of example. First, the paragraph which states that in God’s plan there is absolutely no possible similarity or even analogy between heterosexual and homosexual marriage. I know homosexual couples who are legally married, have children, form a warm and stable family, and moreover, actively participate in parish life. A number of them are employed full-time in pastoral work or ecclesial organisations. I am immensely appreciative of their contributions. In whose interest is it to deny that there is no possible similarity or analogy with heterosexual marriage here? During the synod, the factual inaccuracy of this position was emphasized repeatedly.

Second, the concept of ‘sin’. The final paragraphs employ the heaviest moral artillery. The logic is clear: God cannot condone sin; homosexual couples live in sin; so the Church cannot bless their relationships. This is precisely the language that the synod fathers sought to avoid, both in this and other cases referred to as ‘irregular’ situations. This is not the language of *Amoris laetitia*. Why? Because ‘sin’ is one of the most difficult theological and moral categories to define, and therefore one of the last to be applied to persons and their relationships. And certainly not to general categories of people. What people want and are capable of, at this precise moment in their lives, with the best intentions for themselves and for others, face to face with the God they love and who loves them, is not an easy puzzle to solve. Indeed, classical Catholic moral theology has never dealt with these questions in such simple terms. *O tempora, o mores!*

Finally, the concept of ‘liturgy’. As a bishop and theologian, this disappoints me even more. Homosexual couples are unworthy to participate in a liturgical prayer for their relationship, or to receive a liturgical blessing of their relationship. From which ideological backrooms did this statement concerning the ‘truth of the liturgical rite’ come? This was likewise not the dynamism of the synod. There were frequent discussions about appropriate rituals and gestures to include homosexual couples, including in the liturgical sphere. Naturally, this occurred with respect for the theological and pastoral distinction between a sacramental marriage and the blessing of a relationship. The majority of the synod fathers did not choose a black and white liturgical approach or an all-or-nothing model. On the contrary, the synod offered impulses wisely to seek hybrid forms that do justice both to the particularity of these persons and to the particularity of their relationships. Liturgy is the liturgy of God’s people and homosexual couples also belong to that people. Furthermore, it attests to little respect to approach the question of the possibility of blessing

homosexual couples based on the so-called ‘sacramentalia’ or the ‘*Order of Blessings*’, which also includes the blessing of animals, cars, and buildings. A respectful approach to homosexual marriage can only occur within the broader context of the ‘*Order of Celebrating Matrimony*’, as a possible variant of the theme of marriage and family life, with an honest recognition of both the factual similarities and differences. God has never been parsimonious or moralizing in bestowing his blessings on people. He is our Father. That was the theological and moral mindset of the majority of the synod fathers.

In short, the present ‘responsum’ contains none of the substantial concerns of the 2015 Synod of Bishops on Marriage and the Family as I experienced them. This is a great pity for faithful homosexual couples and their families and friends. They do not feel as though the Church has treated them according to justice and truth. Reactions are already forthcoming. It is likewise a great pity for the Church. Despite all the fine words about synodality, this ‘responsum’ is not an example of undertaking a journey together. The document undermines the credibility of both the ‘synodal path’ that Pope Francis has championed, and the working year with *Amoris Laetitia* that had been announced. Will the true synod please stand up?

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