

What happened at the Extraordinary Synod?

Matthew McCusker, Rome 8 May 2015

Earlier this year *Voice of the Family* was honoured to host His Eminence Raymond Cardinal Burke, who gave a lecture on “Remaining in the Truth of Christ on Holy Matrimony” at a meeting in Chester in the north of England.

During his address His Eminence was kind enough to praise *Voice of the Family*’s work and, in particular, he thanked us for *communicating accurately* the work of the 2014 session of the Synod of Bishops.

This phrase of Cardinal Burke’s identifies what is perhaps the most essential element of *Voice of the Family*’s work, the communication of the truth, both the truth of the Church’s teaching on issues relating to human life, marriage and the family *and* the truth about what is taking place in the Church today. Apprehension of the truth is the foundation of all prudent judgement and all prudent and efficacious action.

In this presentation I intend to give a brief overview of events before and during the Extraordinary Synod held in October 2014.

On the 17th March 2013, four days after his election as Pope and during his first Angelus address in St Peter’s Square, the Holy Father drew attention to a recently published book by Walter Cardinal Kasper and strongly praised it. He said:

“In these days I have been able to read a book by a Cardinal – Cardinal Kasper, a talented theologian, a good theologian – on mercy. And it did me such good, that book, but don’t think that I’m publicising the books of my cardinals. That is not the case! But it did me good, so much good.”

Cardinal Kasper has for many years advocated a change in the Church’s teaching on the reception of Holy Communion by the divorced and “remarried” and the book in question is *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to the Christian Life*, advocates many gravely problematic positions, which underlie his advocacy for such a change.

These include, but are not limited to, Kasper’s understanding of the nature of justice and mercy, his theology of justification and, most grave of all, his very understanding of the nature of God.

It caused great concern to many Catholics that Pope Francis should speak of Kasper and his new book in such terms.

On 8th October 2013 the Holy Father announced that two synods would be held to discuss “The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelisation”. The synods were to be organised by the General Secretariat of the Synod led by Lorenzo Cardinal Baldisseri. On 26th October the Secretariat sent a questionnaire to all bishops’ conferences inviting

Catholics at all levels of the Church to submit their opinions on matters relating to marriage and the family.

Just three days earlier, on the 23rd of October, the Prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, His Eminence Gerhard Ludwig Cardinal Müller had published a lengthy article in *L'Osservatore Romano*, entitled “Testimony to the power of grace: On the indissolubility of marriage and the debate concerning the civilly remarried and the sacraments”.

This article defended the irreformable teaching of the Church that a ratified and consummated sacramental marriage cannot be dissolved by any power on earth and that divorced persons who have contracted a civil union cannot receive the sacraments of Penance and Holy Communion without true repentance and amendment of life.

This article by Müller is a clear indication of his concerns about the direction of the synod at this very early stage.

Sure enough, Reinhard Cardinal Marx, Chairman of the Bishops Conference of Germany and a member of Pope Francis’ inner circle of nine cardinals asserted that Cardinal Müller would not be able to “stop the debate”, that at the synod “everything will be discussed” and that “at the moment it is not possible to say what the results of the debate will be.”

These are very early indications that the issue of Holy Communion for the divorced and “remarried” was on the agenda of the synod.

All doubts however were removed on 20th February 2014 when Cardinal Kasper addressed a consistory of Cardinals that been specifically called to prepare for the upcoming synod.

In his speech he advocated for the readmission of the divorced and “remarried” to Holy Communion without amendment of life, proposing a number of potential justifications for the practice. He said that he did not “rule out that the last word will be given at the Synod, in agreement with the Pope.”

Reports indicate that there was substantial opposition to Kasper’s proposal from the other Cardinals present. Cardinal Ruini, Vicar Emeritus of Rome, is said to have claimed that 85% of those present argued against Kasper’s position.

Kasper then had opportunity to respond to his critics and he made it very clear that he was not acting alone or on his own initiative. He told the consistory that he was grateful to the Holy Father “for his confidence in having entrusted to me this report.”

Fr Lombardi, the Holy See spokesman, told the press that the Holy Father had told the cardinals that the problem of Holy Communion for the divorced and “remarried” must be dealt without “casuistry”. Fr Lombardi continued by saying that Kasper’s speech was “in great harmony” with the words of the Pope.

The next day Pope Francis praised Kasper’s address in very strong terms. He said:

“Yesterday, before falling asleep, though not to fall asleep I read, or re-read, Cardinal Kasper’s remarks. I would like to thank him because I found a deep theology; and serene thoughts in theology. It is nice to read serene theology. It did me well and I had an idea; and excuse me if I embarrass Your Eminence, but the idea is: this is called doing theology while kneeling. Thank you. Thank you.”

When Kasper’s address was published in book form less than a month later these words of the Pope appeared as an endorsement on the back cover.

However, if Cardinal Kasper thought that the Pope’s public support would prevent serious opposition to his proposals he was very much mistaken.

In the weeks and months that followed a number of significant publications appeared addressing his proposals; the most significant being a book co-authored by five Cardinals and four other scholars. The book, entitled *Remaining in the Truth of Christ: Marriage and Communion in the Catholic Church*, is a systematic refutation of the arguments put forward by Cardinal Kasper.

Kasper himself conducted an extensive campaign in favour of his position, giving numerous lengthy interviews to the religious and media.

And throughout he made it very clear that he was acting in agreement with the Pope.

For example on 26th September 2014 just before the Synod opened Kasper gave an interview to *Il Mattino* in which he said:

“I agreed upon everything with him. He was in agreement. What can a cardinal do, except be with the Pope?”

Later in the interview he confirmed again:

“I agreed with the Pope; I spoke twice with him. He showed himself content”

The Holy Father himself has given clear indications of his views. In an interview with an Argentinean newspaper shortly before the Synod he was asked about *Remaining in the Truth of Christ*. The interviewer asked if he was “worried” by the book; putting it to him that the book was, and I quote, “critical of your positions”.

The Holy Father did not reject the suggestion that he agreed with Cardinal Kasper rather he replied “Everyone has something to contribute. I even enjoy debating with the very conservative, but intellectually well-formed bishops.”

He continued:

“The world has changed and the Church cannot lock itself into alleged interpretations of dogmas.”

In his opening sermon at the Synod Pope Francis denounced:

“evil pastors [who] lay intolerable burdens on the shoulders of others, which they themselves do not lift a finger to move.”

He went on:

“Synod Assemblies are not meant to discuss beautiful and clever ideas, or to see who is more intelligent.”

The first session of the Synod was held on Monday 6th October and it quickly became clear that events were proceeding according to a pre-arranged agenda.

Indeed, we had been forewarned about this possibility. On 20th September journalist Marco Tossati had reported in *La Stampa* that an unnamed Cardinal had been heard explaining how the Synod was going to be manipulated to achieve a change in the Church’s teaching on the issue of Communion for the divorced and “remarried”.

Tossati explained the three elements of the plan:

Firstly, to ensure that all written presentations were handed in well in advance. This had already been accomplished by the time Tossati’s article was published.

Secondly, to read all of the presentations carefully and to arrange that, before a speech deemed “problematic” be delivered, that another synod father speak first in order to respond to the points that were about to be made.

Thirdly, to actually prevent some synod fathers from speaking on the grounds that they had run out of time.

We don’t know precisely what was said in the synod hall because, for the first time in recent synods, the interventions of the synod fathers were kept secret. All communication between the synod fathers and the public was conducted by means of daily press conferences and briefings organised by the Holy See press office.

Members of the Voice of the Family team attended all of them and we would agree wholeheartedly with the assertion of Cardinal Burke that

“the information is manipulated in a way so as to stress only one position instead of reporting faithfully the various positions that were expressed”

This manipulation became most evident in the *relatio post disceptationem*, which was released halfway through the synod. This interim document, supposedly based on the contributions of the synod fathers was, in the words of George Cardinal Pell “tendentious and skewed” and in the words of Wilfrid Cardinal Napier, Archbishop of Durban, the document was “virtually irredeemable” and “not what we’re saying at all.”

This interim *relatio* made it clear that the goal of the radicals was not just the admission to Holy Communion of a certain group but rather an assault on the whole edifice of the Church’s teaching on questions of life, marriage and the family.

An extensive discussion of this document is beyond the scope of this presentation but the situation was summarised well by Cardinal Burke who said that the synod:

“found itself addressing, in a confused and sometimes erroneous manner, practices which contradict the Church’s constant teaching and practice regarding Holy Matrimony. I refer to practices which would give access to the Sacraments to those who are living in a public state of adultery, and which would condone, in some manner, conjugal cohabitation outside of the Sacrament of Matrimony and sexual relations between persons of the same sex.”

He went on to describe the interim report as “a manifesto, a kind of incitement to a new approach to fundamental issues of human sexuality in the Church.”

George Cardinal Pell expressed a similar view. There were, he said, “radical elements” within the hierarchy who were using the issue of Holy Communion for the divorced and “remarried” as, in his words, “a stalking horse”. What they really want, said Cardinal Pell, is the acceptance of cohabitation and same-sex unions.

No wonder then, that the world’s media reported the document as a “revolution” within the Church.

There was however significant opposition towards the document amongst many synod fathers and this manifested itself when the synod fathers separated into small groups to discuss the text. Each of these small groups produced a report suggesting amendments.

On the morning of Thursday 16th October Cardinal Baldisseri announced that the reports of these small groups would not be made public, which was another break with precedent. His announcement caused fury to erupt on the floor of the synod hall. Reports indicate that a significant number of synod fathers, led by Cardinal Pell, demanded publication of the reports, which was granted, it is said, by a nod of the Holy Father’s head after a period of around fifteen minutes.

Cardinal Burke explained why the publication of the reports was so necessary:

“It was critical that the public know, through the publication of the reports, that the *relatio* is a gravely flawed document and does not express adequately the teaching and discipline of the Church and, in some aspects, propagates doctrinal error and a false pastoral approach.”

The publication of the reports of the small groups ensured that significant amendments had to be made in the final report of the synod. The final *relatio synodi* contained many restatements of Catholic teaching on some, but not all, of the key issues.

For example, the interim report had said, “unions between people of the same sex cannot be considered on the same footing as matrimony between man and woman.”

This statement could clearly be interpreted as saying that there is some footing on which they could be considered legitimate.

The final report on the other hand quotes previous Church teaching when it says: “There are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God's plan for marriage and family.”

While such changes are clearly very positive *Voice of the Family's* view is that the both documents have essentially the same underlying problems and that the *relatio synodi*, for all its improvements, remains unacceptable.

We know, because Cardinal Baldisseri has confirmed it, that the Holy Father both read and approved all the documents produced at every stage of the synodal process.

I will be discussing the *relatio synodi* in more detail in my talk at Rome Life Forum tomorrow morning.

The Extraordinary Synod on the Family closed on Saturday 18th October. In his final address to the synod fathers Pope Francis condemned what he called:

“a temptation to hostile inflexibility, that is, wanting to close oneself within the written word, the letter, and not allowing oneself to be surprised by God, by the God of surprises, the spirit; within the law, within the certitude of what we know and not of what we still need to learn and to achieve. From the time of Christ, it is the temptation of the zealous, of the scrupulous, of the solicitious and of the so-called – today – “traditionalists” and also of the intellectuals.”

He then moved onto to criticise the faults of those he termed “so-called progressives and liberals” whom he accused of “binding wounds without first curing them” and of treating the “symptoms and not the causes and the root” of people’s problems.

However he then moved his focus back to those who, and I quote, “transform the bread into a stone and cast it against the sinners, the weak, and the sick, that is, to transform it into unbearable burdens.”

It is understandable, given the context of his remarks and the content of the debates during the synod, that many have interpreted the Holy Father’s words as criticism of those who defended Catholic doctrine against the threat posed by the radical agenda advocated by Cardinal Kasper and other senior prelates.

I will close with a short reflection from Cardinal Burke taken from an interview His Eminence gave to the Catholic News Service shortly after the synod ended:

“...in a short period of time how much we have descended and gone away from the truth of our faith and the truth of the moral law in society in general. But the fact that these kinds of questions are being seriously discussed in the church should shock us all and awaken us to the need today to give an heroic witness to the truth of the indissolubility of marriage from attacks from within the church herself.”

He continued:

“...the very fact that these matters were being discussed and questioned by the presidents of the conferences of bishops, by the heads of the dicasteries of the Roman Curia, and by other special appointees of the Holy Father to the synod caused a tremendous confusion and could even induce the faithful into error with regard to the teaching about marriage and other teachings.”

Since the end of the synod the confusion in the Church has only deepened and threats facing the family have expanded. I would therefore like now to hand over to *Voice of the Family's* manager Maria Madise who will give a brief overview of an area which is now causing us particular concern.