

# SYNOD ENDS ON BALANCED NOTE

The Synod of Bishops ended their two weeks of discussion affirming Church teachings on marriage and the family. The bishops also held out the prospect of making some changes when the Synod convenes again next October. The pope will then offer his own thoughts on the subject.

The final report, which was released on October 18, differed from the interim report that had been issued earlier in the week. The bishops failed to reach a consensus on the subject of divorced and remarried Catholics, as well as the proper response to homosexuals. Regarding the former matter, it was agreed that it deserves further study.

On homosexuality, a proposal to commit the bishops to “welcoming” gays did not pass. Instead, the wording was changed to “pastoral attention to persons with homosexual orientation.” Gone, too, was any mention of the “positive” aspects of civil unions and cohabitation.

The interim report was the occasion of much controversy. It tried to walk a delicate line between embracing the Church’s traditional teachings on marriage while at the same time extending a welcoming hand to those in irregular relationships.

For example, it spoke of “the value and consistency of natural marriage,” maintaining that “unions between people of the same sex cannot be considered on the same footing as matrimony between man and woman.”

On other hand, it said, “Homosexuals have gifts and qualities to offer to the Christian community,” and that the Church needs to recognize “the positive reality of civil weddings and...cohabitation.”

This puzzled many Catholics. To be exact, it was not at all

clear what “gifts” homosexuals (or heterosexuals for that matter) bring and to whom. While the data on civil unions are scarce, the same is not true for cohabitation: in most instances, the data show that couples that cohabit before marriage have a higher divorce rate than those who do not. This made many wonder why “shacking up” might be considered a plus.

The lack of clarity was the source of confusion. Catholics from all walks of life contacted us seeking guidance. We offered some key points for consideration.

- Media coverage focused heavily on remarks made about homosexuals, though in the daily Vatican briefings that preceded the release of the report on October 13 there was almost no mention of gays. Indeed, there was only one major speech on this subject out of a total of 265.
- The interim report was not approved by the synod or the pope.
- Almost none of the bishops were even asked to approve the report.
- The report was leaked to the media behind the back of the bishops.
- Three of the 191 synod fathers, or 1.6 percent of the entire body, were mostly responsible for the report. Six new members have since been added to prepare the final report.
- As soon as the report was leaked, it was criticized by 41 bishops.
- Criticisms focused on the failure to support traditional Church teachings, the heightened sense of false expectations, and the moral confusion the interim report has engendered.

By the end of the week, the working groups of bishops expressed their dismay at the false impression that was given

by the interim report. This was understandable given that almost none of them were consulted about it. This explains why they took the opportunity to say that the midterm report “does not express a univocal opinion shared by all the Synod Fathers.” When the synod ended, Cardinal Wilfrid Fox Napier of South Africa said that the midterm report was the work of only “one or two people,” thus misrepresenting the body.

The interim report was deficient, the bishops said, in not addressing such issues as adoption and the challenges to the family presented by biotechnology and the Internet. They also said that greater attention should be given to the plight of women and children who are being sexually exploited.

On the subject of homosexuals, the bishops accepted the need to respect their dignity “without however implying that this may indicate a form of approval, on the part of the Church, of their orientation and way of life.” By explicitly calling attention to the “way of life” of homosexuals, the bishops were clearly speaking of the gay lifestyle.

Moreover, the working groups counseled against giving “the impression of a willingness on the part of the Church to legitimise irregular family situations.” Thus did they reject the interim report’s embrace of the “positive” aspects of cohabitation. On the issue of divorced and remarried Catholics, there was a clear split between those who want to perfect current practices and those who want to amend them.

Over the course of the second week, 278 articles appeared in U.S. newspapers and wire stories. The media obsession with homosexuality was evident. Here is the breakdown of the coverage:

- 80 percent mentioned gays or homosexuals
- 65 percent mentioned divorce or divorced
- 47 percent mentioned cohabitation

- 19 percent mentioned contraception

Over the next year, the final report will be the subject of much discussion. Next year we can expect that the final outcome will be somewhere between the recommendations of the interim report and the final document that was issued at the 2014 synod.