

Bishop Stafford: Families Can Renew Neighborhoods

Bishop J. Francis Stafford delivered the following address to the assembled bishops of the U.S. during their recent meeting in Washington, D.C.

These past 18 months have been a time of extraordinary interest and concern for the family. I will report on three of these.

1. Progress report on the Bishops' Plan for Family Ministry. There is very good news. According to a CARA study on the implementation of the plan through 1979, 77 percent of the 133 dioceses responding reported that a diocesan family life committee or planning team had been named to develop a plan for family ministry. Moreover, the publications of the USCC in support of the bishops' plan have been widely used. Most dioceses indicate that they have begun a process of listening to what families are saying about themselves and their world.

The USCC Commission on Marriage and Family Life has projected and begun implementation of five successive areas of development for the Family Decade of the 80s in realizing the vision of the bishops for family ministry. These stages are described in the newly published, "Families in the '80s: Family Decade Resource for Community, Diocese and Parish."

Besides these, the commission also plans the following projects for 1981:

- convocation of a national forum of family-related organizations and movements;
- conference on family values and family social mission;
- a study to develop a model diocesan program for preparation for mixed marriages;
- a symposium on human sexuality.

Because of USCC budget cuts, we will be depending on Catholic institutions, including the National Institute on the Family, and diocesan offices to be responsible for most of the resource work, training programs, and consultative services.

Only experience will tell us whether the very limited USCC staffing and budget will be adequate to realize the promise of this excellent beginning.

2. I was appointed in July 1979, as one of the 40 members of the National Advisory Committee for the White House Conference on Families. It has been very time consuming and a difficult undertaking. You have the final document of the committee, "The Report: Listening to American Families," and will find that, among many excellent recommendations, two of the most important governmental commitments to the support of American families are included: full employment and adequate income.

There remains for me an unsettling issue which surfaced during these meetings. Two of the national conferences were unable to reach an explicit consensus on the meaning of family. There is no question that family structures are changing; the form the family will take in the future is very unclear. The conferences did not show any explicit consensus on the ethical and philosophical presuppositions necessary to sustain family life. In my judgment, this reflects a genuine crisis in the American family.

Even though there was no agreement covering an explicit definition of the family at the White House Conferences (with the exception of the one at Minneapolis), there appears to be an operational definition at work in many of the recommendations which reflect the values of the traditional family. A clear and strong exception to that is the support for legalized abortion found in the Los Angeles and Baltimore recommendations. A less explicit exception is to be found under the Housing Issue in which discrimination is outlawed "against families... with other characteristics... including sexual preference."

3. The 1980 Synod of Bishops. I wish to thank you for the privilege of representing you at this Synod. It was an unforgettable, complex and unrepeatable experience. Would that more bishops had an opportunity to attend one! During our discussions and interventions, bishops and others from every social and economic system on earth, were able to develop a consensus on many issues, including the social role of the family, the changing roles of men and women in marriage and family life, the transmission of life, and the sacramentality of marriage. To address such issues is to speak of the most profound concerns of life and existence. It is no wonder that our discussions provoked some controversy.

The really exciting message from the Synod is that something very important is happening in Christian households in every area of the world, something unplanned and still quite small. God is using families to serve others and He is calling the Church to assist them in this ministry. In a frequently hostile culture, Christian families need support. They are very vulnerable because they don't belong to any large power structure. Kenneth Kenniston has described for us the powerlessness of American families in the Carnegie Council's Study on Children. Families are very vulnerable because they are on the edge of things — where people touch other people, and where they can help one another make sense of the present and give hope for the future.

The message of the Synod makes sense. Such marginal little groups really are essential because Christ is most present to those who recognize their need most. We must families with a

beautiful inner poverty. One couple from war-torn Lebanon wondered at one time in their marriage whether they could tell their children that there would be a worthwhile future. They were tempted in their suffering to see nothing but disaster even in new and growing things. Yet, in this uncertainty, they were able to confess their confidence in God whose providence disposes all things. In marginal and powerless households, Christian families are pulled away from all supports and are ripe for a spiritual turn-about, a conversion to Christ.

The Synod had the working hypothesis — the operational wisdom — to see that in tiny groups people can be helped in ways that institutions cannot help. Just by their presence, Christian families and small groups of families can renew whole neighborhoods and villages in their hope in the living God. This is the privileged role of the Christian community according to the third chapter of the letter to the Hebrews. It needs to begin in households as it did in the household of Cornelius (Acts 10) and Prisca and Aquila (Romans 16:3). The Synod cleared the way for families to know more fully the blessedness of poverty and purity of heart and the fruits of the Holy Spirit. The Synod taught that what is peripheral in the eyes of the world is central to the plan of God.

Another message from the Synod is that we are to speak the truth with compassion.

During our discussions in Rome, the words of D.H. Lawrence came to mind more than once: the length and breadth of human wisdom in matters of sexuality "is all in the traditional consciousness of the Church." In sharing this treasure of sexual imagery and action, the Synod spoke in words that were pastoral and prophetic. I'm not sure that many are prepared to hear a prophetic voice today. A national Catholic weekly, in a recent editorial, listed the characteristics it was looking for in the Synod; included were "encouragement, compassion, respect, forgiveness and love." I honestly believe that the Synod reflected these. But we included another characteristic which the editorial writer did not look for — and that is the search for and speaking of the truth in matters of sexuality, family and marriage. And the Synod spoke the truth on these issues.

The problem confronting us pastors in an Anglo-Saxon culture is that moral norms are unconsciously converted by our people into the equivalent of penal laws. Alexander Solzhenitsyn spoke of this in his Harvard Commencement address in 1978. Ethical norms carry a terrifying weight in an Anglo-Saxon culture. St. Augustine, one of our fathers in the faith, was less sure that a fallen nature could bear such a weight. When countering the icy legalism of the Anglo, Pelagius, he wrote: "Many sins are committed through pride, but not all happen proudly... They happen so often through ignorance, by human weakness — many are committed by men... weeping and groaning in distress."

The Synod called Christian couples to go from faith to faith, from glory to glory, from conversion to deeper conversion. I heard the Synod call married people — gradually but insistently — to a more inclusive maturity through conjugal chastity. The Christian married couple's journey together is to be an experience of moral growth under the law of forgiving and strengthening grace. This is the high vision of the Church's teaching in Gaudium et Spes and Humanae Vitae. It requires an emotional and spiritual maturity which may be reached by some couples only after years of living the Paschal mystery, of dying into life.

The beautiful, consoling and strengthening wisdom of the Catholic Church is that the ever-present tension between what should be and what is can only be resolved under the law of grace whose source is the faithful love of God. The Synod teaches that married couples realize the freedom described by St. Paul in the seventh chapter of the letter to the Romans only when they regain a sense of sin and its inseparable correlative — forgiveness.

In insisting upon the truth in marriage and family life always taught by the Apostolic See, the Catholic Church also insists upon this beautiful piece of wisdom from the song of Zechariah at the birth of his son: "To give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins."

The process of the Synod of Bishops is worth reflecting upon. Many Americans, including journalists and other media people, come to Rome expecting to find an assembly operating according to the dynamics of American congresses. Our American experience conditions us to perceive discussions in such gatherings as confrontational and developing a protagonist/antagonist dialectic.

The Synod of Bishops had very open, frank, free and, at times, tension-filled discussions. But its process is primarily directed toward building consensus among the members. This may account for some of the misinterpretation of the Synodal discussions by the American media.

I found another contrast between American and Roman gatherings. On the one hand, for example, the meetings held by the White House Conference on Families were lacking in a consensus on societal values necessary to carry on public discourse. On the other hand, members of the Synod were united by faith in Christ, by a common history and tradition. Our teaching about life-taking, sexual relations, marriage, and relations between parents and children are not easily inferred merely from the axioms of moral theory. In a community of faith, moral norms are found to be reasonable insofar as they cohere with one another to form a way of life with its characteristic virtues and vices. Moral norms are persuasive when they fit together with the vision we have about what kind of people we are or should be. Concretely, this was experienced in the Synod when we spoke of the coherence of the teachings on the dignity of human life in Populorum Progressio and Humanae Vitae, the coherence of Catholic teaching on social justice and the transmission of human life.

Finally, we knew the blessedness of trust among the Synodal members and between the Holy Father and ourselves. We sensed that the power and serenity of Pope John Paul's pastoral witness are rooted in humility — a great lesson in the exercise of our own Christian authority.

I rejoice every day — a hundred times over — for this Synod — for what it will mean for the Church and especially for Christian families.

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