

Archbishop Quinn: The Synod Was Act of Faith

My Dear Brother Bishops,

It is just a little more than two weeks since the conclusion of the Synod. The four of us who took part as your delegates thank you for making it possible for us to share in a great experience of faith and episcopal collegiality. We also want to thank the priests and lay men and women who accompanied us from the U.S. and whose valued assistance we acknowledge with utmost gratitude. And while he is included in the acknowledgement, I believe it appropriate to single out special thanks for Mr. Russell Shaw who put in long hours assisting the bishops and in assisting the American as well as the international press during the weeks of the Synod.

It was truly a profound and moving experience to witness and be a part of the very real catholicity of the Church dramatized each day before our eyes in the synod hall. That catholicity was geographical, cultural and historical. The bearded Patriarchs and Metropolitans of the ancient biblical and apostolic sees were a living reminder of the searing doctrinal and pastoral crises in which their great predecessors like Athanasius and Cyril defended and preserved Catholic truth and morality often against the powerful tides of public opinion, often in the face of fearful and threatening divisions among their clergy and people. The Black cardinal and bishops of the youthful African churches were a living reminder that Catholic Faith is authentically at home in every culture, a stranger to none. The bishops of the silent churches were also there, wearing the chains of persecution in the spirit of the apostles who rejoiced that they were counted worthy to suffer something for the sake of Christ. New worlds and old were there, and there was Peter without whom the Church is neither one nor Catholic, without whom there is no guarantee of continuity in the apostolic tradition and apart from whom there is no collegiality. The Synod was not a meeting. It was an experience of the Catholic Church, an experience of Faith in the service of truth and love.

In addition to the 205 bishops, participants in the Synod included some women religious and superiors general of religious orders and congregations, as well as approximately 40 lay men and women from all parts of the world. Some of these lay participants spoke during two general sessions devoted completely to them. All of the lay participants were members of the small language groups and made a rich and significant contribution to the discussions and to the formulation of the conclusions of the group sessions which were in turn passed on to the general body of the Synod for final vote and incorporation into the proposals at the end of the Synod.

While some of the lay participants were experts in medicine, education, psychology and related fields, others were ordinary married couples sharing with the Synod their experience and insights into marriage and family life.

The presence of Mother Teresa, of course, was a special grace for the Synod. She is a constant reminder to the whole Church of the truth that God's foolishness is wiser than man's wisdom. With complete and unaffected simplicity her weakness has been the theater of divine power and her work of service and love flourishes through faith as a clear sign of divine benediction. And so her presence was a daily proclamation that there is for the Church no real service to humanity which is not rooted in humility and holiness of life. For the Church, all other things will follow where the search for holiness is genuine and sustained. Incomprehensible to an unbelieving world, but so understandable to Catholic faith was the dramatic plea to the Pope and bishops in the Synod hall: "If you want to do something for families, give us holy priests."

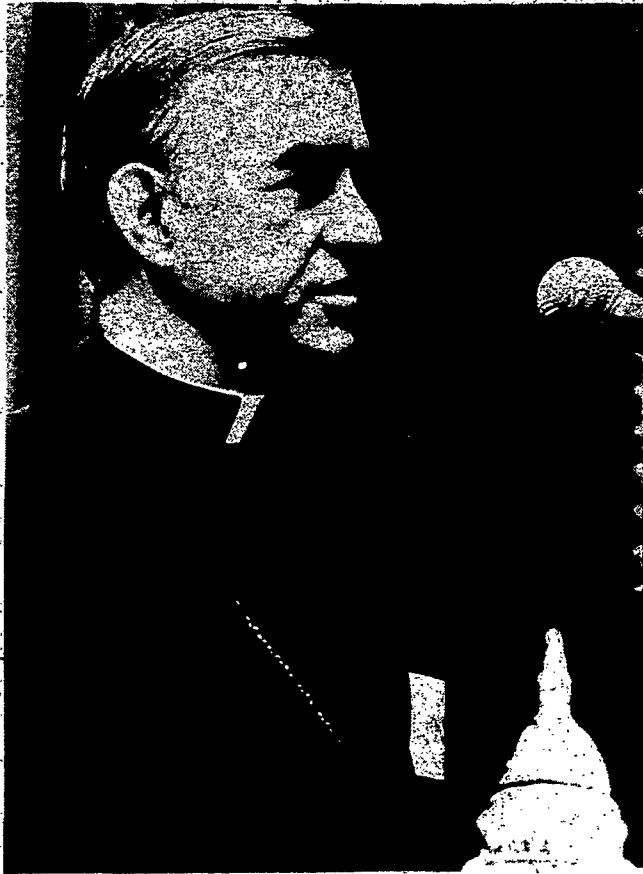
The discussions in the general sessions as well as in the small groups were consistently marked by frankness and candor. This was a great tribute to the Holy Father who, with one or two exceptions, was present at all the general sessions and who created a relaxed atmosphere characterized by openness. In his closing address, the Holy Father himself noted this. He said,

"It is evident how rightly and clearly there were manifested in it (the Synod) both freedom and responsible concern... (and) among the labors of the Synod of the greatest fruitfulness must be considered the accurate examination of doctrinal and pastoral questions which certainly needed such scrutiny... Although these were not the only things treated in the Synod discussions, (they) nevertheless had a special place there, insofar as their consideration was undertaken in a very sincere and free manner."

The discussions also revealed a broad understanding by national conferences and the synodal bishops of the real situation facing families in the world today. Accompanying this clear sense of the problems and opportunities of our times was a deep and frequently repeated sense of solidarity and compassion for married couples and families in today's world. Many conferences including our own had prepared carefully for the Synod by extensive consultation with families and with experts in a variety of fields.

As you know and as we fully anticipated, a certain amount of reporting on the Synod created the impression that it dealt with only one or two issues such as contraception or divorce. Here certainly recognition must be given to the many fine journalists who covered the Synod from the U.S. and from all over the world. And, it is necessary for us all to be aware of the sometimes impossible pressures of deadlines and other factors they confront in an often thankless job. Still it is important to bring into relief the fact that 21 major topics were treated in the Synod which resulted in the formulation of 43 major proposals or resolutions which were both doctrinal and pastoral. Among the doctrinal issues treated by the Synod were:

- The "Sensus Fidei"
- The theology of the sacrament of Matrimony
- The relationship of Faith to sacramental marriage
- The indissolubility of marriage
- The moral doctrine concerning the transmission of the gift of life



Archbishop John R. Quinn, former president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops and the United States Catholic Conference, delivered the following address at the opening of the recent meeting of the U.S. bishops in Washington, D.C.

• The value of consecrated celibacy and virginity, and its relationship to the support and strengthening of the values of marriage and family life.

Pastoral issues included such timely concerns as:

- The preparation for marriage, its length and its content
- Family spirituality
- Support for the new family movements in the Church
- The special needs of couples and families in mixed marriages
- The need for a new impetus in the pastoral care of the divorced who attempt a second marriage
- The pastoral care and special needs of military families and of refugee and migrant families
- The special needs of women in light of the profound changes in the role of women in many societies today

Making up almost 30 percent of the Synod membership, the Asian and African bishops brought a special richness to the deliberations and heightened for all of us the important problem of inculturation. This was particularly stressed in connection with the discussions on marriage preparation and on marriage rites. Thus far from being confined to one or two issues, the Synod actually covered a considerable field of great importance to married couples and families in our times.

The key to understanding the Synod lies in the fact — and this must be repeatedly emphasized — that it stands within the context of the Second Vatican Council as well as in the context of the Synods of 1971, 1974, and 1977. It is impossible to understand what this Synod is saying if it is detached from this context. It is in organic continuity with its conciliar and synodal origins.

By an overwhelming vote the Synod Fathers on Oct. 24 approved 43 resolutions or proposals which emerged from both the general sessions and the small group discussions. These proposals or resolutions have been placed in the hands of the Holy Father with the request that he prepare a document for the universal Church on the role of the Christian Family in the Modern World, and this document will be one of the major fruits of the Synod.

But there are already many far reaching results of this Synod. Not, probably, the kind of results the world of advertising accustoms us to expect. For instance, you use detergent "A" and presto! the rings disappear from your shirt collar. No, the results of the Synod respond to much more mature expectations and evoke much broader horizons.

For example, there is already moving through the whole body of the Church a new and heightened consciousness of the family, of the vital importance of the family, and of the family's vital role in the Church and in the Church's service to the world. Then, too, there are new and newly appreciated depths in the Catholic theology of Christian marriage and new and deeper insights into Christian anthropology, a greater consciousness of the value of cultures in the life and growth of the Church and the Church's need to relate more effectively to the manifold cultures of the world always, of course, in fidelity to the Gospel and not destroying or suppressing cultures, but transforming and energizing them through the power of divine revelation as a tangible witness of the enduring attribute of catholicity. There is also evident a new enthusiasm in all levels of the Church for strengthening, healing, sustaining and encouraging all families,

a new sense of the central importance of our parishes as true centers of total family ministry to families, for families, by families.

Finally, there is the overarching ecclesiological dimension of the Synod. The Synod, of course, stood before the tribunal of public opinion. Some of it was positive. Some negative and even cynical. Reflection on all this leads, I believe, to two very important questions: First, whom do we have in mind and whom should we have in mind when we seek credibility? Just what kind of credibility does the Church want? Popularity and authentic credibility are not often the same for the Church for whom the only credibility worthy of the name is found in fidelity to the truth and in fidelity to Him Who is and Who remains the sign of contradiction.

Certain positions reaffirmed by the Synod Fathers admittedly do not conform to the views and ideologies of some commentators and observers of the Synod. But to assert that a representative body of the world's bishops was forced into a given position or acted in sheer hypocrisy is an explanation both uncivil and untrue. It is thus enlightening to recall the experiences of Newman who wrote,

"I am defending myself here from a plausible charge brought against Catholics... that I, as a Catholic, not only make profession to hold doctrines which I cannot possibly believe in my heart, but that I also believe in the existence of a power on earth, which exists at its own will imposes upon men any new set of 'Credenda' when it pleases, by a claim to infallibility; in consequence, that my own thoughts are not my own property... and that the necessary effect of such a condition of mind must be degrading bondage; or a bitter inward rebellion relieving itself in secret infidelity... and of mechanically saying everything that the Church says."

The bishops believed and sensed that they were following one of the most sacred functions of their episcopal office. They believed and trusted in the presence of the Holy Spirit. They revered and were united with the successor of Peter, and their common enterprise was a work of Faith. As the psalm puts it, "I believed, therefore I spoke." Where that faith is not shared, its dynamic cannot be adequately appreciated.

A second important question which reflection on the Synod suggests is "Who sets the agenda for the Church?" Just the spirit of the world? Just the spirit of the times? This question, like the foregoing, does not emerge out of any hostility, but it must be constantly raised if the Church is to be true to itself. Thus a group of this country's finest scholars jointly declared a little over five years ago,

"The renewal of Christian witness and mission requires constant examination of the assumptions shaping the Church's life. Today an apparent loss of a sense of the transcendent is undermining the Church's ability to address with clarity and courage the urgent tasks to which God calls it in the world. This loss is manifest in a number of pervasive themes. Many are superficially attractive, but upon closer examination we find these themes false and debilitating to the Church's life and word. Among such themes are (that)

• Modern thought is superior to all past forms of understanding reality, and is therefore normative for Christian faith and life.

• The world must set the agenda for the Church.

Peter Berger, commenting on this declaration of which he is one of the signatories, noted,

"Through most of history the basic legitimations of both social institutions and individual lives were derived from this transcendence... It is precisely this type of legitimation that has lost credibility in recent history. This loss is the heart of the process called 'secularization.' Both social institutions and individual lives are increasingly explained as well as justified in terms devoid of transcendent referents. Put differently: the reality of ordinary life is increasingly posited as the only reality. Or, if you will: The common sense world becomes a world without windows."

The Church, then, must ultimately set its own agenda and must do so, of course, ultimately out of the sources of faith. And while this does indeed involve a process of discerning the signs of the times in the light of, and on the basis of, the Gospel as handed on in the Church, it can and not infrequently does require the Church to be "against the world for the world," that is, to take positions and insist on truths which the spirit of the times finds unacceptable or incomprehensible. True, nothing should be spared to remove such barriers to understanding and acceptance, but in the end only Catholic faith can bridge the gap.

The bishops of the Synod, then, in full awareness of the problems created by many of the ideologies and attitudes of the world around us but in equally full awareness of the realities of faith and the exigencies of hope, concluded their work with a message of hope and encouragement for the families of the world. The tone of the final message of the Synod comes clear in these words,

"In our discussions of family life today we have found joys and consolations, sorrows and difficulties. We must look first for the good things and seek to build on them and strengthen them, confident always that God is present everywhere in his creatures and that we can discern his will in the signs of the times. We are encouraged by the many good and positive things we see."

And so this Synod has been another seed of life and grace planted in the field of the Church. There is no doubt that the Father, whom Jesus called "The Farmer," through His Son, in Holy Spirit, will water and tend that seed and bring it to a rich harvest for the Christian Family in the Modern World.

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