

December 22, 2013

Dear Archbishop Vigneron,

Our Parish Pastoral Council took the initiative to review the questions presented for the upcoming synod on pastoral care for marriages and families. In our discussion with one another we thought five areas in particular needed to be looked at and we sought wider feedback from the parish as a whole through a simple survey. We then discussed the results of the survey and tried to come to some consensus on these areas. That consensus is listed below. We ask that you take these ideas into consideration as you prepare the response of the Archdiocese of Detroit to the Synod questions.

TOPIC #1: SUPPORT FOR MARRIAGE

We found this to be a non-controversial area. We believe most Catholics do understand the Church's teaching on marriage, even if they find it difficult to live out. We believe much more effort needs to be put into supporting marriages through gatherings, events, and programs sponsored by the archdiocese, vicariates, and parishes.

TOPIC #2: MARRIAGE PREPARATION

We found that the type and quality of marriage preparation experienced by married couples has varied widely. It would be helpful if some objective measure could be looked at, correlating type of marriage preparation with results (still married after 5 years? 10 years? etc.) but we are not aware of any such studies. There is certainly support for strong marriage preparation, given the consequences of divorce. One suggestion is to pair all engaged couples with a sponsoring couple, whose marriage is clearly solid and stable. The best preparation will always be the experience of good, solid marriages growing up. However, we do believe much of the preparation, no matter how extensive, has minimal effect on couples who know they must go through the preparation in order to be married in the Church. Greater effort needs to be spent on getting the marriage message out to middle and high school age children. We need to emphasize with them the goodness and sacredness of marriage and the bond that it creates. They need to be aware of the indissolubility of marriage and the commitment, maturity and effort that needs to be put into any successful marriage, as well as the importance of choosing a marriage partner based on a whole set of shared criteria and not just on "falling in love". Whom one chooses to be married to has way more significance than any marriage preparation process.

TOPIC #3: DIVORCE

Divorce is unfortunately a common reality in our world today, though we wish it were otherwise. We need to be pastorally open to people who experience divorce and provide a welcoming home for them in our parishes, as well as more events and programs of support. Although there needs to be a clear communal sense of the goodness and sacredness of the marriage bond, there also needs to be a willingness to walk with those who experience divorce. Too many Catholics still believe that to be divorced automatically excommunicates them from the Church or excludes them from the sacraments and active roles in the parish. We need to make it known more clearly that divorce does not exclude someone from the Church or the sacraments of the Church. As with some other issues, we do not want to find ourselves so focused on upholding one teaching (for example, the sacredness and indissolubility of the marriage bond) that we lose

adults and families who find themselves in a different situation. Our pastoral care of those who are divorced can keep future generations of the family connected to the Church.

TOPIC #4: DIVORCE AND REMARRIAGE

We believe the complexity of the Church's teaching on divorce and remarriage, on annulments and what forms annulments take and their meaning, is such that most Catholics do not and will never really understand it. For example, many do not realize that a Catholic who is free to be married and who marries a divorced person who has not had a Church annulment has put himself/herself into a position of no longer being publicly invited to the sacraments. Many still believe that a Church annulment means their children from that marriage are being declared "illegitimate". Many believe they are officially excommunicated if divorced and remarried. Most importantly, the Church's current practice is viewed and experienced as punitive and makes it very difficult for families of divorced and remarried persons to stay connected to the Church. We often lose not just the divorced and remarried adults. We lose the children and future generations as well, who find themselves welcomed by neighboring, non-Catholic communities.

We do not want to see the Church's support for the sacredness and indissolubility of marriage lessened. But we also want the Church to be a place of welcome for those who find themselves in a situation of divorce and remarriage without an annulment. We think the annulment process needs to be simplified or made less daunting. We believe we need to state the Church's teaching clearly but accept the "on the ground" reality that many will not accept that teaching and make personal decisions of conscience that do not correspond to that teaching. We believe keeping such people integrated into the Church (including the sacraments if they make that personal decision) will pay dividends down the road for children in such marriages. Moreover, we are aware of situations where the goodness and grace of God is clearly at work in that new marriage and we want the Church to find a way to encourage the gifts of people in such situations to be shared with the community.

TOPIC #5 SAME SEX UNIONS

We realize that the Church's teaching does not allow for same sex unions to be recognized as marriages in the Church. But much of what was said about divorced and remarried Catholics applies here. Isn't there a way to maintain the Church's teaching, form Catholics in that teaching, and share that teaching with society, but still be accepting of same sex couples and their families within our parishes, if their personal decision of conscience leads them to be part of our parishes? We do not want to lose the gifts and energy of such couples and families. We do not want to lose the children who are adopted into such families. We realize the challenge this will be for pastoral ministry but believe there has to be a better way than simply public condemnation of such unions.

We offer these thoughts in support of the upcoming Synod. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Mr. John Sabina
Pastoral Council President

Fr. David A. Buersmeyer
Pastor