

Vatican City, October 24, 2015, translation of Pope Francis' discourse at the conclusion of the Synod of Bishops on the Family

Dear Beatitudes, Eminences and Excellencies,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I would like first of all to thank the Lord, who has guided our synodal process in these years by his Holy Spirit, whose support is never lacking to the Church.

My heartfelt thanks go to Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri, Secretary General of the Synod, Bishop Fabio Fabene, its Under-Secretary, and, together with them, the Relator, Cardinal Peter Erdő, and the Special Secretary, Archbishop Bruno Forte, the Delegate Presidents, the writers, consultors and translators, and all those who have worked tirelessly and with total dedication to the Church: My deepest thanks!

I likewise thank all of you, dear Synod Fathers, Fraternal Delegates, Auditors and Assessors, parish priests and families, for your active and fruitful participation.

And I thank all those unnamed men and women who contributed generously to the labours of this Synod by quietly working behind the scenes.

Be assured of my prayers, that the Lord will reward all of you with his abundant gifts of grace!

As I followed the labours of the Synod, I asked myself: *What will it mean for the Church to conclude this Synod devoted to the family?*

Certainly, the Synod was not about settling all the issues having to do with the family, but rather attempting to see them in the light of the Gospel and the Church's tradition and two-thousand-year history, bringing the joy of hope without falling into a facile repetition of what is obvious or has already been said.

Surely it was not about finding exhaustive solutions for all the difficulties and uncertainties which challenge and threaten the family, but rather about seeing these difficulties and

uncertainties in the light of the Faith, carefully studying them and confronting them fearlessly, without burying our heads in the sand.

It was about urging everyone to appreciate the importance of the institution of the family and of marriage between a man and a woman, based on unity and indissolubility, and valuing it as the fundamental basis of society and human life.

It was about listening to and making heard the voices of the families and the Church's pastors, who came to Rome bearing on their shoulders the burdens and the hopes, the riches and the challenges of families throughout the world.

It was about showing the vitality of the Catholic Church, which is not afraid to stir dulled consciences or to soil her hands with lively and frank discussions about the family.

It was about trying to view and interpret realities, today's realities, through God's eyes, so as to kindle the flame of faith and enlighten people's hearts in times marked by discouragement, social, economic and moral crisis, and growing pessimism.

It was about bearing witness to everyone that, for the Church, the Gospel continues to be a vital source of eternal newness, against all those who would "indoctrinate" it in dead stones to be hurled at others.

It was also about laying closed hearts, which bare the closed hearts which frequently hide even behind the Church's teachings or good intentions, in order to sit in the chair of Moses and judge, sometimes with superiority and superficiality, difficult cases and wounded families.

It was about making clear that the Church is a Church of the poor in spirit and of sinners seeking forgiveness, not simply of the righteous and the holy, but rather of those who are righteous and holy precisely when they feel themselves poor sinners.

It was about trying to open up broader horizons, rising above conspiracy theories and blinkered viewpoints, so as to defend and spread the

freedom of the children of God, and to transmit the beauty of Christian Newness, at times encrusted in a language which is archaic or simply incomprehensible.

In the course of this Synod, the different opinions which were freely expressed – and at times, unfortunately, not in entirely well-meaning ways – certainly led to a rich and lively dialogue; they offered a vivid image of a Church which does not simply “rubberstamp”, but draws from the sources of her faith living waters to refresh parched hearts.¹

And – apart from dogmatic questions clearly defined by the Church’s Magisterium – we have also seen that what seems normal for a bishop on one continent, is considered strange and almost scandalous for a bishop from another; what is considered a violation of a right in one society is an evident and inviolable rule in another; what for some is freedom of conscience is for others simply confusion. Cultures are in fact quite diverse, and each general principle needs to be inculturated, if it is to be respected and applied.² The 1985 Synod, which celebrated the twentieth anniversary of the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, spoke of *inculturation* as “the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity, and the taking root of Christianity in the various human cultures”.³ *Inculturation* does not weaken true values, but demonstrates their true strength and authenticity, since they adapt without changing; indeed they quietly and gradually transform the different cultures.⁴

We have seen, also by the richness of our diversity, that the same challenge is ever before us: that of proclaiming the Gospel to the men and women of today, and defending the family from all ideological and individualistic assaults.

And without ever falling into the danger of *relativism* or of *demonizing* others, we sought to embrace, fully and courageously, the goodness and mercy of God who transcends our every human reckoning and desires only that “all be saved” (cf. *1 Tm2:4*). In this way we wished to experience this Synod in the context of the

Extraordinary Year of Mercy which the Church is called to celebrated.

Dear Brothers,

The Synod experience also made us better realize that the true defenders of doctrine are not those who uphold its letter, but its spirit; not ideas but people; not formulae but the gratuitousness of God’s love and forgiveness. This is in no way to detract from the importance of formulae, laws and divine commandments, but rather to exalt the greatness of the true God, who does not treat us according to our merits or even according to our works but *solely* according to the boundless generosity of his Mercy (cf. *Rom 3:21-30*; *Ps 129*; *Lk 11:37-54*). It does have to do with overcoming the recurring temptations of the elder brother (cf. *Lk 15:25-32*) and the jealous labourers (cf. *Mt 20:1-16*). Indeed, it means upholding all the more the laws and commandments which were made for man and not vice versa (cf. *Mk 2:27*).

In this sense, the necessary human repentance, works and efforts take on a deeper meaning, not as the price of that salvation freely won for us by Christ on the cross, but as a response to the One who loved us first and saved us at the cost of his innocent blood, while we were still sinners (cf. *Rom 5:6*).

The Church’s first duty is not to hand down condemnations or anathemas, but to proclaim God’s mercy, to call to conversion, and to lead all men and women to salvation in the Lord (cf. *Jn 12:44-50*).

Blessed Paul VI expressed this eloquently: “We can imagine, then, that each of our sins, our attempts to turn our back on God, kindles in him a more intense flame of love, a desire to bring us back to himself and to his saving plan... God, in Christ, shows himself to be infinitely good... God is good. Not only in himself; God is – let us say it with tears – good for us. He loves us, he seeks us out, he thinks of us, he knows us, he touches our hearts and he waits for us. He will be – so to say – delighted on the day when we return and say: ‘Lord, in your goodness, forgive me. Thus our repentance becomes God’s joy’.”⁵

Saint John Paul II also stated that: “the Church lives an authentic life when she professes and proclaims mercy... and when she brings people close to the sources of the Saviour’s mercy, of which she is the trustee and dispenser”.⁶

Benedict XVI, too, said: “Mercy is indeed the central nucleus of the Gospel message; it is the very name of God... May all that the Church says and does manifest the mercy God feels for mankind. When the Church has to recall an unrecognized truth, or a betrayed good, she always does so impelled by merciful love, so that men may have life and have it abundantly (cf. *Jn10:10*)”.⁷

In light of all this, and thanks to this time of grace which the Church has experienced in discussing the family, we feel mutually enriched. Many of us have felt the working of the Holy Spirit who is the real protagonist and guide of the Synod. For all of us, the word “family” has a new resonance, so much so that the word itself already evokes the richness of the family’s vocation and the significance of the labours of the Synod.⁸

In effect, for the Church *to conclude* the Synod means *to return* to our true “journeying together” in bringing to every part of the world, to every diocese, to every community and every situation, the light of the Gospel, the embrace of the Church and the support of God’s mercy!

Thank you!

¹ Cf. Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Grand Chancellor of the Pontifical Catholic University of Argentina on the Centenary of its Faculty of Theology, 3 March 2015.

² Cf. Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Fede e cultura alla luce della Bibbia. Atti della Sessione plenaria 1979 della Pontificia Commissione Biblica*, LDC, Leumann, 1981; SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, *Gaudium et Spes*, 44.

³ *Final Relatio* (7 December 1985), *L’Osservatore Romano*, 10 December 1985, 7.

⁴ “In virtue of her pastoral mission, the Church must remain ever attentive to historical changes and to the development of new ways of thinking. Not, of course, to submit to them, but rather to surmount obstacles standing in the way of accepting her counsels and directives” (Interview with Cardinal Georges Cottier, in *La Civiltà Cattolica* 3963-3964, 8 August 2015, p. 272).

⁵ *Homily*, 23 June 1968: *Insegnamenti* VI (1968), 1177-1178.

⁶ *Dives in Misericordia*, 13. He also said: “In the paschal mystery... God appears to us as he is: a tender-hearted Father, who does not give up in the face of his childrens’ ingratitude and is always ready to forgive (JOHN PAUL II, *Regina Coeli*, 23 April 1995: *Insegnamenti* XVIII, 1 [1995], 1035). So too he described resistance to mercy: “The present-day mentality, more perhaps than that of people in the past, seems opposed to a God of mercy, and in fact tends to exclude from life and to remove from the human heart the very idea of mercy. The word and the concept of ‘mercy’ seem to cause uneasiness...” (*Dives in Misericordia* [30 November 1980] 2).

⁷ *Regina Coeli*, 30 March 2008: *Insegnamenti* IV, 1 (2008), 489-490. Speaking of the power of mercy, he stated: “it is mercy that sets a limit to evil. In it is expressed God’s special nature – his holiness, the power of truth and of love” (*Homily* on Divine Mercy Sunday, 15 April 2007: *Insegnamenti* III, 1 [2007], 667).

⁸ An acrostic look at the word “family” [Italian: **FAMIGLIA**] can help us summarize the Church’s mission as the task of:

Forming new generations to experience love seriously, not as an individualistic search for a pleasure then to be discarded, and to believe once again in true, fruitful and lasting love as the sole way of emerging from ourselves and being open to others, leaving loneliness behind, living according to God’s will, finding fulfilment, realizing that marriage is “an experience which reveals God’s love, defending the sacredness of life, every life, defending the unity and indissolubility of the conjugal bond as a sign of God’s grace and of the human person’s ability to

love seriously” (*Homily for the Opening Mass of the Synod, 4 October 2015: L’Osservatore Romano, 5-6 October 2015, p. 7*) and, furthermore, enhancing marriage preparation as a means of providing a deeper understanding of the Christian meaning of the sacrament of Matrimony;

Approaching others, since a Church closed in on herself is a dead Church, while a Church which does leave her own precincts behind in order to seek, embrace and lead others to Christ is a Church which betrays her very mission and calling;

Manifesting and bringing God’s mercy to families in need; to the abandoned, to the neglected elderly, to children pained by the separation of their parents, to poor families struggling to survive, to sinners knocking on our doors and those who are far away, to the differently able, to all those hurting in soul and body, and to couples torn by grief, sickness, death or persecution;

Illuminating consciences often assailed by harmful and subtle dynamics which even attempt to replace God the Creator, dynamics which must be unmasked and resisted in full respect for the dignity of each person;

Gaining and humbly rebuilding trust in the Church, which has been gravely weakened as a result of the conduct and sins of her children – sadly, the counter-witness of scandals committed in the Church by some clerics have damaged her credibility and obscured the brightness of her saving message;

Labouring intensely to sustain and encourage those many strong and faithful families which, in the midst of their daily struggles, continue to give a great witness of fidelity to the Church’s teachings and the Lord’s commandments;

Inventing renewed programmes of pastoral care for the family based on the Gospel and respectful of cultural differences, pastoral care which is capable of communicating the Good News in an attractive and positive manner and helping banish from young hearts the fear of making definitive commitments, pastoral care which is

particularly attentive to children, who are the real victims of broken families, pastoral care which is innovative and provides a suitable preparation for the sacrament of Matrimony, rather than so many programmes which seem more of a formality than training for a lifelong commitment;

Aiming to love unconditionally all families, particularly those experiencing difficulties, since no family should feel alone or excluded from the Church’s loving embrace, and the real scandal is a fear of love and of showing that love concretely.

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