

African cardinal: Synod will be flexible with regional family situations

By Michael Swan

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ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia – One of the leading voices among Africa's bishops predicts a new flexibility in Catholic teaching at this October's Synod of Bishops on the family, which he predicts will allow bishops in different parts of the world to adapt church teaching on the family to the region's culture, political landscape and economic situation.

"The Catholic Church is a universal institution, both human and divine," said Cardinal Berhaneyesus Souraphiel of Addis Ababa. "It is not a European church, it is not a Canadian church or a U.S. church. It's different. The issues families are facing in some parts of the world would be different than in other parts of the world."

While Europe and North America face problems such as how to respond pastorally to state-sanctioned same-sex unions or divorced and remarried Catholics, families in other parts of the world face issues that arise from economic globalization or rapid urbanization.

"For us in Ethiopia, the big issue will be poverty," said Cardinal Souraphiel. "If you are not sure if you can continue providing sustenance for the family, food and so on – not only rent, but food – if you don't have this (basic economic stability) you might find the husband working somewhere else, the wife working somewhere else. The family separates. And then the children suffer."

With more and more Ethiopian women finding work abroad in Arab states as domestic workers and Ethiopian men landing jobs in mines or on large-scale industrial farms, Ethiopia's rapidly expanding economy is making it hard to keep a family together, the cardinal said.

"We feel here the issue is, how can the church contribute to the alleviation of poverty?" he said.

Bishops' conferences should play a role in helping individual bishops adapt the teaching of the synod to their country or region, the cardinal said.

"The episcopal conferences have been sent, not to replace or to change the teaching

of Our Lord Jesus Christ or the teaching of the church, but to see that the teaching of the Gospel is inculturated, is put into the life situation of the particular country or particular society," Cardinal Souraphiel said. "For the moral issues that are coming up around the family, probably the next synod will say, 'Let us see them in context. Let us allow the conferences to come with suggestions.' It could be done that way." The cardinal emphasized the Second Vatican Council's teaching on subsidiarity - the idea that responsibility for solving a problem lies not with the highest possible authority but with the people who have the problem and must live with the solutions. "What the family can decide, let not the society or the municipality or the local government interfere. What you can do as a family - how many children should I have and so on - if you can decide on your level, let's respect that," he said. "They give that also to the bishop, the local bishop."

There's sometimes a tension between individual bishops and their conferences of bishops, which have their own staffers, programs and priorities, said the cardinal.

"Is that a healthy tension or a negative tension? History will tell," he said.

The cardinal predicted Africans will make their voices heard at the synod.

"The African message for the synod is family is life. So let us give importance to life. Let us stand for life," he said. "You know life and values are tied. Things will change. Many things are changing. But there must also be values which remain. Love between husband and wife, respect between children and parents, respect for elders should remain, should endure. What should be changed or should endure? This is, of course, the big question in our lives."

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