

Catholic Review Column: Important Moment for Pope Francis, Church

The extraordinary Synod of Bishops to discuss the “Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization” began in Rome Oct. 6. The synod represents a key moment in the papacy of Pope Francis and in the life of the Roman Catholic Church, which is looking for more effective ways of communicating what it believes and teaches about marriage and family life, and of supporting those who wish to live according to church teaching and are struggling to do so in the face of contemporary challenges.

Pope Francis took the unusual step of calling for the synod last year. One of only three such gatherings to occur since the 1960s, this month’s synod brings together 184 bishops from throughout the world. They, along with 13 Catholic couples and other lay members of the church, priests, and women and men in consecrated life are set to discuss a number of issues, including cohabitation before marriage, divorce, artificial birth control and the impact of social and economic pressures on the family.

At the opening of the synod’s first session, Pope Francis urged participants to “speak fearlessly and listen humbly.” May the synod “be permeated by a new openness to the Spirit, by a method and a style of life and witness that guarantee unity in diversity, apostolicity in Catholicity,” he added.

Why did Pope Francis call for such a meeting? At the time the synod was announced, he said, “It is evident that the social and spiritual crisis of today’s world has an impact on family life and creates a situation of genuine pastoral urgency.” On Oct. 5, the pope spoke of the victims of an “individualistic culture that denatures and renders ephemeral the ties” that bind us as humans. “The Lord is asking us to care for the family, which has been from the beginning an integral part of his loving plan for humanity. The family continues to be the unparalleled school of humanity, an indispensable contribution to a society of justice and solidarity. And the deeper its roots, the farther out we are able to go, without getting lost or feeling estranged in any land.”

The family, society's most important social unit, is in crisis, threatened by any number of factors ranging from absentee parents to pornography and sexual addictions to social injustice, consumerism and poverty. "The family is almost the last welcoming human reality in a world determined near exclusively by finance and technology. A new culture of the family can be the starting point for a renewed human civilization," he added.

The family is also the most important structure through which the faith is transmitted from one generation to the next. And the role of the church in helping to strengthen families is changing in an increasingly secular society where religion and God are under consistent threat of being marginalized. The synod seeks to develop clear pastoral guidelines for helping Catholics and individuals live their Catholic faith more fully.

Many reports are likely to speculate on what will come of the synod, whose participants will begin a discussion of very complex issues in advance of next year's synod, which is expected to yield recommendations to the Holy Father.

In anticipation of this year's extraordinary synod, the Vatican issued late last year a 39-point questionnaire or "preparatory document" to Catholic bishops throughout the world. It sought discussion and input from the world's Catholics.

Here in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, we shared the entire document via our website and invited people to comment. More than 4,000 offered more than 60,000 comments and responses, which I submitted to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops for inclusion in the Conference's report to the Vatican.

Not surprisingly, the responses represented a range of opinions. However, it was clearly evident from the majority of responses that the church needs to improve how it communicates church teaching regarding issues related to marriages and families. The church also needs to be sure it is doing so in a spirit and tone that is consistent with the loving and pastoral example of Pope Francis. These findings, and those from dioceses around the world, were to be the foundation of the discussions occurring over the next two weeks.