

Catholic Review Column: The 2015 Synod and the Mission of the Family

The Synod on the Family formally ended Oct. 24, but the discussion continues regarding what the bishops discussed and what Pope Francis may decide about the church's future response to increasing challenges facing Catholic families in the world today.

We certainly need time to digest and study the final document that formalizes the discussions held in the synod and we await further guidance from the Holy Father before fully understanding what this means for our church and for us as Catholics. In the meantime, we can focus on what we already know:

Marriage and family are really important! They are important not only for the Catholic Church, but also for society. It's pretty clear to me that the more strong, loving families we have in our society the more social problems we can "head off at the pass." The church can help bring about such stability in our society by encouraging family life and marriage.

To that end, we must look both at how we are supporting existing married couples and families and how we are encouraging young people to get married. We do this through catechesis as well as by helping them see and appreciate the many values of married life.

The church must also do more to encourage not only those married couples that are happily raising families and committed to living their vocation, but also those families that are struggling.

Parents, perhaps today more than ever, face tremendous challenges in raising and educating their children. The practical realities of finances and communication can often cause families to lose sight of the importance of faith in providing us the focus and meaning that can cause disarray and even emptiness in our lives.

Sadly, these challenges and others can take their toll on a marriage. Thus, the synod focused on the church's role when a marriage fails. Before that occurs, however, the church must be playing an active role in helping couples discern if their marriage can be saved and to accompany them on that journey of discernment. This can be done in myriad ways, including the consistent presence and spiritual support of a priest, the provision of pastoral resources and other forms of social support.

If prayerful discernment leads a couple to determine that their marriage is beyond sustaining, the Holy Father has opened a path by simplifying the process of annulment in some significant ways. As we await further direction on this matter from the Holy See, here in the Archdiocese of Baltimore we have already begun to look at how we might implement the Holy Father's directives, as well as what other measures we can take to support divorced and remarried couples.

The church must also respond to the pastoral needs of those who are cohabitating and to those, as referred to in the synod document, "in marital situations the church considers irregular." The call to discipleship requires the same of them as it does for Pope Francis, for me and all my brother bishops; for priests, religious and all the laity: a conversion of heart and mind, the kind of conversion that opens us fully to what God is teaching us, so fully that we begin to see that what he is asking us not as a burdensome, out-of-touch set of rules but as a path to true freedom and joy!

I pray that the work of the synod will help all of us to find that path of living the vocation of marriage and family joyfully and fruitfully.