

**“PASTORAL CHALLENGES TO THE FAMILY IN THE CONTEXT OF
EVANGELIZATION”
Preparatory Document
Vatican City 2013**

RESPONSE TO QUESTIONNAIRE

Michael Whelan SM¹
On behalf of Catalyst for Renewal²

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the conversation that will assist the Church to develop further its teachings and attitudes to marriage and the family. When Pope Paul VI said, “we live in a privileged moment of the Spirit’ (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 75) I believe he was naming both a wonderful gift and an urgent task. The gift is the fulfilling of the promise in our day, “I am with you!” (Exodus 3:15; Matthew 28:20; John 14:16-19). The task is for us to respond concretely to the call of the Kingdom now. The fulfilment of that task will be a complex work of intelligence and faith, wisdom and love, honesty and courage, trust in grace and patience with human limitations involving an ongoing conversation with all the stakeholders.

Given the constraints of time, my response is mostly one of questions. But that is not a bad place to start – as indeed this “Preparatory Document” itself implies.

I. Synod: Family and Evangelization

- Is the starting point of this “Preparatory Document” too negative and too narrow?
 - Assuming it is fair to say – and I believe it is – that we are facing a “social and spiritual crisis,” (par 1) we should firstly acknowledge the Church and the world is experiencing a time of massive transition and that deep and serious transitions always involves crises – from the Greek word *krineo* meaning “a parting of the ways”?
 - For the Christian this is the norm, life is a constant dying to live, a never ending *metanoia*?

¹ Michael Whelan is a priest of the Society of Mary (Marist Fathers) in Australia. He was ordained in Sydney on May 18 1972. His first appointment was to the inner city church of St Patrick’s in Sydney. After four and a half years teaching in a high school in Burnie, Tasmania, he went to the United States to further his studies under the direction of Adrian van Kaam at the Institute of Formative Spirituality in Pittsburgh, PA. He gained a PhD there before returning to teach within the Sydney College of Divinity. In 1996 he travelled in Australia and abroad doing adult education, spiritual direction and giving retreats. In 2000 he took up his current position as Principal of Aquinas Academy Adult Education Centre in Sydney. He has always maintained a strong pastoral involvement over the past forty years. He is a co-founder of Catalyst for Renewal (1994) – a group dedicated to promoting conversation for the sake of renewal within the Catholic Church and beyond – and Spirituality in the Pub (1995), one of Catalyst’s forums for conversation. He is the author of four books and many articles in his field of spirituality. Michael is currently Executive Director of Catalyst for Renewal.

² Catalyst for Renewal is a group, founded in 1994 to promote renewal within the Catholic Church and beyond through conversation. Its mission statement is: “Our aim is to prompt open exchanges among the community of believers, mindful of the diversity of expression of faith in contemporary Australia. This springs explicitly from the spirit of Pope John XXIII and Vatican II. ‘Let there be unity in what is necessary, freedom in what is unsettled, and charity in any case’ (*Gaudium et Spes*, n.92).”

- As part of this transition, we are also seeing some good developments in the wider human family today – these need to be acknowledged?
 - Some of those good developments may in fact be causes – at least in part – of the very “crisis” we seek to address?
 - Recognising, affirming and, where appropriate, incorporating those good developments – no matter where they come from – must be part of the challenge too?³
- And if we speak of “today’s world” should we not include *the Church as part of “today’s world”* rather than consider the Church to be a reality outside of, perhaps even over against, “the world”?
 - The Church, the Christian life, marriage and the family are not ahistorical – being part of history, as both cause and effect, is of their essence?
- Might it not also be necessary, in fact, to speak of a “social and spiritual crisis” arising from *within the Church itself*?
 - The crisis within the Church has been generated – at least in part – by certain teachings and attitudes and behaviours *inside the Church*?
 - This internal crisis requires urgent attention with respect to the whole pastoral presence of the Church in the world as well as with respect to marriage and the family?
- Are we assuming that the Church’s current teachings and attitudes on marriage and the family are merely to be built on rather than changed?
 - Would we consider the possibility, for example, that mistakes have been made in the official teachings and attitudes of the Church and they – and their enduring effects – need to be redressed by the Synod?
 - For example, I find it jarring when I read in the current Prayer of the Church, “Because my body craves to sin” (Hymn for Readings, Saturday Week 3 in Ordinary Time), and for years we – men and women alike – said the hymn at Night Prayer – now removed but representative of an attitude that persists – which had us praying “Tread underfoot our ghostly foes, That no pollution we may know” and when I hear masturbation referred to as “Onanism” or even “self abuse”.
 - These examples cannot be dismissed as irrelevant, they are rather indicative of a fearful and repressive attitude to sexuality that has dominated our teaching and preaching and pastoral practice, especially with regard to marriage and the family;
 - And it is not a matter of “relaxing the laws” and thereby running the risk of promiscuity; as we shall repeat throughout this response, the focus has to shift from law and doctrine to *relationship* – relationship grounded in and expressive of the *community of relationships we call God*.
 - The terrible irony of the fearful and repressive approach to sexuality is that it tends to be counter-productive – it

³ In par 3 there does seem to be an acknowledgement of something positive by way of a reference to “the teaching on divine mercy”. But it is not clear to me what is being said here. There is a movement of ideas from the observation that “many children and young people will never see their parents receive the sacraments” to the claim that, “corresponding in a particular manner to this reality today is the wide acceptance of the teaching on divine mercy and concern towards people who suffer on the peripheries of societies, globally and in existential situations”. Perhaps this could be clarified.

- diminishes freedom and tends to preserve people in an infantile morality, it feeds scrupulosity and obsessive compulsive patterns of behaviour, but worst of all, far from promoting a liberated and joyful life in Christ, it tends to promote a fearful and repressive relationship with God who takes on the form of a judge who keeps an eye on us to see that we get it right;
- In the light of the foregoing, should we not revisit the Church's teaching on sexual intercourse and offer a more nuanced understanding of that act of human intimacy?
 - The focus of our teachings and attitudes on sexual intercourse should be *relationship*, which sometimes leads to the begetting of new human life but mostly, in the natural order, does not and, indeed, sometimes should not.

II. The Church and the Gospel on the Family

No comment

The Plan of God, Creator and Redeemer

- Biblical revelation and the ideals and vision emerging there must be central to our conversation concerning marriage and the family. But, again, this can never be considered as ahistorical, it is always demanding incarnation.
 - The Incarnation unites in the person of Jesus of Nazareth both the biblical revelation and the ideal and vision emerging there, *and* the historical reality.
 - We will be unfaithful to the biblical vision if we evade the tension between the possible and the ideal – with all the demands that tension places on us – because that is *essential characteristic of incarnation*.
- Whether we are explicit about it or not, our faith Tradition holds that God – in whose image and likeness we are made – is *a community of relationships*.
 - Relationship and community are central to our understanding of God.
 - They should also be central to our understanding of the human person.
 - Christian marriage, by the grace of God, is a participation in and bears witness to that eternal community of relationships.
 - Law and doctrine concerning marriage are thus born of this relational identity which is an expression of the Trinity.
 - Has law overshadowed, perhaps even displaced, the essential vision of Scripture and the Tradition for marriage and the family?
 - Law and doctrine concerning marriage have no particular meaning or validity except in terms of the relationship.
- We might ask further:
 - Can the relationship of two people in marriage die?
 - What are the implications of that?
 - In what way are the findings of social scientists, anthropologists, medical researchers and psychologists relevant to our understanding of the incarnational reality in today's world?
 - For example, can we expect the same of two people marrying within a tight knit (say traditional tribal) community and two people marrying within a liberal democratic (say secular Western) society?

- Indeed, we must ask in what sense we speak of “community” now in the Western world and what difference this might make to our understanding of marriage and the family.
 - Have historical, cultural, political and naïve medical knowledge influenced the Church’s thinking over time and perhaps obfuscated the biblical focus on relationship?
- In par 6-7 (“Jesus Christ restored the beauty of matrimony etc”) some very serious questions arise:
 - How much – and what – did Jesus actually teach concerning marriage?
 - For example in Mark 10:2-12 are we witnessing Jesus making a legal statement, defending the bond of marriage, or are we witnessing Jesus making a statement of vision and ideals that draw the focus back to the Trinitarian community of relationships, giving the woman equality with the man and therefore putting a radical new understanding of marriage before the disciples in a world where women had almost no rights?
 - How much – and what – did the Christian Scriptures, apart from the Gospels, teach concerning marriage and the family?

The Church’s Teaching on the Family

- I assume we would not be having this conversation if it was thought that the Church’s teaching on marriage and the family was all it should and could be.
 - It is fundamental to the Church, in its function as teacher, to constantly plumb the depths of the biblical vision and ideals, read the signs of the times intelligently and respond accordingly.
 - This process of inviting feedback from all the baptized is most encouraging – I hope it is taken seriously and becomes standard practice.

III. Questions

1. The Diffusion of the Teachings on the Family in Sacred Scripture and the Church’s Magisterium
 - a. Inadequately if not poorly.
 - i. If the quality of homilies at weddings is any indication I would say the clergy do not understand these things well.
 - ii. I would say little formation is given to our people on these and related matters.
 - b. I have been a priest for more than forty years and I would say it is rare that Catholics approaching the sacrament are well informed concerning the Church’s teaching. It is a special delight when it does happen.
 - i. Because the level of knowledge is so poor the true level of acceptance cannot be judged.
 - c. As above
 - d. As above
2. Marriage according to the Natural Law
 - a. In my experience the concept of the natural law – as applied to marriage or anything else – is little understood if at all by the Catholic faithful.
 - b. As above
 - c. As above

- d. I assume this refers to the instance of one party being a non-practicing Catholic or declared non-believer. I require those approaching the sacrament to do five pre-nuptial sessions, each of about one hour. I use the FOCCUS instrument as a basis for conversation. I also recommend, where appropriate that they attend the pre-nuptial sessions arranged by the archdiocese. Typically they appreciate this.
3. The Pastoral Care of the Family in Evangelization
 - a. No comment
 - b. No comment
 - c. No comment
 - d. No comment
 - e. No comment
 - f. No comment
 4. Pastoral Care in Certain Difficult Marital Situations
 - a. Cohabitation is probably the norm for those approaching the sacrament. It could be as high as 90%
 - b. No comment
 - c. Yes, separated couples and those divorced and remarried are a “pastoral reality”. Very much so!
 - d. In my experience people respond variously.
 - i. There are those who simply leave the Church because of it,
 - ii. those who continue as if they were in good standing with the Church and
 - iii. those – probably few in number – who continue to participate in the life of the Church but who refrain from going to communion.
 - iv. I believe it is generally a source of considerable pain in the life of the community, adding to the general disillusionment of Catholics with the Church at this time.
 - v. All Catholics I know who cherish their faith suffer deeply when they are forbidden from receiving communion.
 - e. The very presence of these people in our midst asks a huge question of the Church: why?
 - i. Are they excluded because including them would (allegedly) give bad witness?
 - ii. How do I know, for example, as a pastor, that this individual in an irregular marriage is not living as brother/sister with their “irregular” spouse?
 - iii. Notwithstanding the fact that an “irregular situation endures, I think it is a fair pastoral question to as how it is that the Church’s mercy and reconciliation can extend to the most destructive behaviours – for example, paedophilia – allowing a person to go to communion, but it does not extend to someone who is in every other respect a deeply committed Catholic but finds him/herself in an irregular marriage situation?
 - f. The current procedures for gaining a decree of nullity are pastorally problematic for a number of reasons and are regarded by many as a matter for scandal; rather than claim that a marriage of many years which has produced children is null, would it not be more honest to agree – where appropriate – that the relationship essential for marriage in the sacramental sense is no longer there?

- i. A simplification of canonical practice in recognizing a declaration of nullity sounds like a positive step to me. I would leave that however to the experts – who might consult other traditions, for example the Orthodox.
 - ii. How many people, at say 25 years of age, know enough about themselves, the world, sexuality, human relationships, the responsibilities associated with having children, to realistically commit themselves to a 60-70 year contract?
 - 1. Which raises another historical reality – people tend to live a lot longer now than they did in earlier times.
 - iii. Given that relationships require work and effort to thrive, what about those marriages where one party is not willing or not able to put in the work or effort and the relationship dies after a number of years?
 - 1. And the party who is willing and able to live the biblical vision of marriage meets someone else in a similar situation to themselves?
 - iv. Should we not take into account the current findings of anthropology, sociology and psychology concerning the development of human beings and the historical shift away from tight family/tribal influences which often keep the marriage “together”, towards a more flexible and loose social and cultural arrangement whereby the married couples are left more to their own resources?
 - g. Very good questions! As a pastor, it is extremely difficult to represent the Church to Catholics who have been excluded from the one thing that matters most to them – the opportunity to reach out for the Bread of Life.
 - i. Surely the Eucharist is the healing sacrament *par excellence*?
5. On Unions of Persons of the Same Sex
- a. There are laws in Australia recognising civil unions between members of the same sex.
 - b. No comment
 - c. I believe they should be given the same pastoral attention as anyone else.
 - d. If we want to speak of “transmitting the faith” we must first be convincing in our efforts to meet and deal with these people as human beings. Anything that might imply or suggest we do not care for them or resect them as human beings with their God-given longings to love and be loved, would be an insurmountable obstacle to evangelization, to say nothing of it being a terrible reproach on us who claim to be witnesses to the liberating love of God.
6. The Education of Children in Irregular Marriages
- a. No comment
 - b. They might begin by requesting the sacraments only but my experience of people is that they generally respond well when they are shown courtesy and respect, when they are taken seriously as human beings seeking the best for their children.
 - i. I believe it is possible to do this and also maintain the integrity of the Church’s role as a witness to the teachings of Jesus Christ.
 - c. No comment
 - d. No comment
7. The Openness of the Married Couple to Life

- a. For most practicing Catholics – more than 90% I would guess – *Humanae Vitae* means only one thing – the Church’s teaching against contraception – and most have refused to accept that particular teaching.
 - i. I doubt that many practicing Catholics have even read *Humanae Vitae*.
 - ii. In any case they simply do as most of the bishops’ conferences around the world advised forty years ago – consider the matter as a reasonable, seek advice, pray about it and make your decision as a responsible adult willing and able to live with the consequences of that decision.
 - b. See a. above. I believe that the aspect that poses the most difficulties in this matter is quite simply that most have stopped listening, or at least they have stopped uncritically regarding the Church as a credible teacher given what they have witnessed from the Church leaders and teachers over the past thirty or forty years.
 - c. No comment
 - d. Very occasionally it will arise in celebrating the Sacrament of Reconciliation. But I believe most people concerned with this issue have settled it in their own minds and do not regard it as a matter for the Sacrament.
 - e. No comment
 - f. I suspect the Church’s reputation and credibility on this matter of begetting and raising children has been so badly damaged – in the Western world at least – it is better if we do not try to speak about it for the time being.
8. The Relationship Between the Family and the Person
- a. Witness is the obvious way to communicate that “Jesus Christ reveals the mystery and vocation of the human person”. Married women and men who have a deep appreciation that they are participating in and expressing the Trinitarian relationships in their love for each other (see *Familiaris Consortio*, 11), will communicate the reality of Jesus Christ by their very presence before they say or do anything. Again, everything we do and say about Christian marriage – indeed everything we do and say about our lives as Christians – must bring the focus on to the very essence of our humanity as being found in and through loving relationships, which reflects our origins in the Trinitarian community of relationships.
 - b. There are a number of obvious “critical situations in the family today (that) can obstruct a person’s encounter with Christ”. I suggest two in particular:
 - i. Too much focus on Church doctrine and law at the expense of what should be the primary focus – ie relationships;
 - ii. The presence of a “fearful God”, one who is more interested in us measuring up to moral and legal prescriptions than opening up to liberating love – see Pope Benedict’s *Deus Caritas Est*, par 1, for a concise statement of what it means to be a Christian.
 - c. No comment
9. Other Challenges and Proposals
- No comment

Summary Statement and Conclusion

At a period of history when marriage is under the spotlight in many societies around the world, it is timely for the Church to promote an open conversation on its own teachings and attitudes towards marriage and the family.

We must resist the temptation to look for simple answers to what are in fact most complex and at times troubling questions. We should think in terms of together *living into* a mystery here, not by clearly enunciated laws but by the proclamation of an inspiring vision and an emphasis on the deepening of the Christian community of which marriage and the family is one part.

Both the faith vision –grounded in the best biblical scholarship and the best of the Tradition – and the incarnational realities, must be held in tension at the heart of this conversation.

The Church's teachings on and attitudes towards marriage and the family are uneven, a mixture of the very rich and creative on the one hand and the not so rich and not so creative on the other.

There are at least six points at which fruitful changes could be made to enhance the Church's teachings and attitudes in this matter:

1. An interpretation of key Christian Testament texts which recognizes that Jesus was not speaking as a law-maker but as a prophet, someone announcing a radical vision and issuing a challenge to live in accord with our origins in that communion of Love we call God;
2. A development of the Church's self-understanding which will include the possibility of recognising that the Church's teachings and attitudes have not always been for the best and therefore must embrace the willingness for redress;
3. A more relational way of thinking about sexual intercourse which shifts the focus from "an abstracted act" considered to be "intrinsically good/evil", to a normal expression of intimacy within the marriage relationship.
4. A healthier approach to sexual pleasure, moving beyond the Manichaeism that has persisted since St Augustine, towards an understanding of the body as part of our being made in the image and likeness of God and therefore central to our manifesting the community of relationship that is God.
5. A greater emphasis on the local Christian community and its responsibilities, particularly towards young married couples.
6. Promotion of the mystical heart of our faith which will, on the one hand, include preaching and teachings on the wonderful vocation of the baptized, divinization, our unity in Christ and the experience of God's liberating love and, on the other hand, will involve a definite move away from legalism, moralism and the portrayal of God as a judge to be feared.

Every reasonable effort must be made to include all the baptized in the ongoing conversation on this matter and to take their participation seriously.