

Vocation and Mission of the Family

Archbishop Eamon Martin reflects on his experience of the Synod on the Family

As the days progressed at the Synod on the Family, my copy of the *Instrumentum Laboris* (Working Document) got more grubby and pen-marked. I had crossed out paragraphs, amended sentences and written more and more notes in the margins. It was becoming clear that the *Relatio Finalis* (Final Report) would be more dynamic and positive than the ‘martyr text’ with which we began. Although, in the end, some of the final paragraphs might have benefited from further editing, the *Relatio* accurately reflects the mood of the Synod and a convergence of opinion that some had doubted was possible.

Every morning on my way to the Synod Hall, I reminded myself of the theme of this extraordinary assembly of bishops from all over the world - the ‘Vocation’ and ‘Mission’ of the Family in the Church and in the contemporary world. I often wondered, ‘What does it mean to talk about the VOCATION of, or to, the family?’ Just as we sometimes speak about a ‘crisis’ of vocations to the priesthood and to the consecrated life, might the same be true of a sense of ‘vocation’ to the family?

In response to the decline in vocations to the priesthood and religious life across parts of the western world, much reflection has taken place and



Archbishop Eamon Martin preparing for the closing Mass of the Synod of bishops with Pope Francis, which he offered for all the families of Ireland.

many strategies devised. These tend to include at least three key main elements: firstly, a very clear, positive and challenging vision of the priesthood/religious life; secondly, the development of effective networks of support and encouragement for those who express an interest in these vocations; thirdly, a solid foundation of prayer for vocations and for those who choose to respond to the call.

It is my hope that the conclusions of the Synod on the Family, bolstered by whatever exhortation or messages are added by Pope Francis, will encourage a resurgence of the sense of ‘vocation’ of, and to, the family. This might happen in three similar ways to the above:

Firstly, the Synod has produced a clear, positive and challenging vision of the Catholic vocation to marriage and the family. The first chapter of the *Relatio* outlines the pastoral challenges to such a vocation. The second chapter presents the beautiful and prophetic vision of God’s plan for marriage and the family, deeply rooted in scripture and in the tradition of the Church. It is a vision which appears increasingly counter-cultural in many parts of the world, but one which is nonetheless achievable and hugely fulfilling, with the help of God’s grace.

Secondly, the Synod facilitated sharing, by bishops and others from around the world, of initiatives, ideas and resources to support the vocation to marriage and the family. We heard of movements, associations, basic Christian communities and many other

networks offering support and encouragement to guide and nourish the family ‘vocation’. At the heart of these initiatives is the conviction that it is primarily families who minister to other families, married couples who minister to other married couples. In this way the family itself becomes the locus – both the object and the agent – of family ministry and new evangelisation. This is the most important learning point that I have taken home to Ireland from the Synod.

Finally, it is clear to me that the ‘vocation’ of, and to, the family shall not be heard, or responded to, without a determined apostolate of prayer in, and for the family. During the Synod, Pope Francis led us in prayer every day for the family, always conscious of the reality of violence, rejection and division which, sadly, many families experience. The Holy Family of Nazareth remains our icon of family communion, love and prayer. The Eucharist, the Rosary, Grace before meals, the Angelus, the Word of God, Morning and Night Prayers remain as precious moments and opportunities for prayer and awareness of God in the family. The Synod acknowledged, however, that many young families need prayer guidance and support.

The Church is called to accompany all families as they persevere through the ups and downs of everyday life. Looking forward to the World Meeting of Families in Dublin 2018, a recovery and nourishment of the sense of ‘vocation’ to, and of, the family would be a good beginning.