

A promise of trial as well as hope

October 19, 2014 by Daniel J. Bauer

Commentators in the media are expressing generally positive views on the cautious first steps that nearly 200 Catholic bishops, priests and lay persons have taken in recent days at what is shaping up to be a ground-breaking meeting in Rome, called a synod. The steps involve lengthy discussions, followed by straight from the shoulder feedback from participants representing a wide gamut of personal, theological, and social views on the concept of family.

Pundits however are not the only ones talking about the synod. Friends of mine, missionaries here in Taiwan not usually addicted as I sometimes am to tracking current events, appear to also have their eyes almost glued to recent newspaper headlines.

No one anywhere (especially in Rome) is assuming official Catholic teaching will change much on subjects such as divorce and remarriage, cohabitation (such a chilly word, that one), sexual behavior, and sexual orientation. Suddenly, however, Catholics and non-Catholics alike are sensing the opening here of a few stuck and hard-to-budge old windows, and the letting in of some badly needed fresh air. What might all this be about?

Perhaps I am wrong, but I think we are sensing here a great change in something called “attitude.”

Now, I might have hung quote marks around a special term or two above (synod, for example, or family) but I did not. No Madame, and no Sir. I am choosing to highlight one word alone at the beginning here.

Attitude is so very vital to helping all of us, regardless of our backgrounds, to open eyes and hearts so that we might better see others as they truly are, and to feel with them what their lives feel like to them. Attitude enables us to treat others not merely with the decency, but, in the case of the Christian family, with the care and (dare I say the word?) the love that they deserve. The more we ponder our fundamental attitudes, the more we realize how much they influence our ways of responding to people who in some ways may be different than we are.

What will happen over time as a result of the discussions in Rome about family and such will

influence not only members of the Catholic flock, but all of us who call ourselves Christians. I say “all of us” by design. I am sorry, but I’ve simply run out of patience over the very prevalent language error that occurs in the Taiwanese-English media and among some good, but uninformed local friends. Catholics are followers of Jesus, too, and are entitled to be called Christians along with our Protestant brothers and sisters. History, corruption on the Catholic side, and human frailty all around divided us in the 15th century. Nevertheless, we should all be humbly proud to be members of the one Christian family. How frustrating to hear “I am not a Catholic. I am a Christian.” Catholics are also Christians.

Numerous reports say some bishops and others at the synod are arguing for a more inclusive view of people who technically belong to the Catholic family, but have been treated historically not merely as poor and unwanted cousins, but as outcasts.

What a nasty word. Is “outcast” to describe divorced and remarried Catholics too strong a term? The church’s refusal to share communion at Mass with persons in unapproved 2nd marriages, or with persons who share the joys of sex with a partner to whom they are committed, but not married, invites the use of harsh language. And how do we make people feel if we say “no” to baptism for children of non-traditional families, or deny the positive witness of loving and committed homosexual relationships? We in the church may not have wanted to treat others as outcasts, but we may have made them feel that way. More is the pity that millions of them are our personal friends or members of our nuclear families.

The road ahead of dialogue and prayer over extraordinarily sensitive issues will be rocky. Learning how to embrace members of our spiritual family who we have caused to feel estranged in the past will not be easy.

Yet it is we Christians who claim to believe in the One who called us the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Isn’t he the same who also commanded us to treat others as we want others to treat us? (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points :

1. You may not be a Catholic, but still know that the attitude of the official Catholic church has in the past been "hard" on divorced and remarried people, on homosexuals and some other groups. Do you know much or little about the Catholic "official teaching" on these matters?
2. Now the church is discussing a possible change of view about people in these "special circumstances." Why do you think the official teachings of the church may now change? Do you agree or disagree with the possible changes?
3. Do questions about divorce, "different kinds of families," homosexuality and sexual behavior touch your life now as a student at Fu da? Do these situations feel close or far away? Why?

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