



The Synod of the Family, Pope Francis and St Francis Xavier

Albano Fernandes

Holy Cross Bambolim Shrine, Goa

The synod of family that took place in Vatican on 5th to 19th October , with the focus on the theme “Pastoral challenges of the family in the context of evangelization” promises to bring about a revolution in the Church’s attitude and ministry to the family. Like Pope Francis, Francis Xavier did put family at the centre of his evangelization, particularly in India. His missiological methodology from the children to the family indicates how family was the locus of his evangelization. Bringing Jesus to the families meant for him bringing happiness to the them. Today, we have increasing number of unhappy families that are breaking apart or threatening to break apart.

That is why the Synod on Family dedicated to the challenges of the family is indeed a moment of Grace for the families. The divorced couples are on an increase, civilly re-married Catholic couples are growing, applications for annulment are growing day by day, co-habiting couples and those in same sex union are on the rise. The Church teaching on marriage, procreation, and family life is steadily losing its hold over the people.

Several members of the synod, was bridging back both spirit and letter of Vatican II. Through the synod the universal Church strove to dialogue with the family as it exists today in our world with its joys and anxieties. This authentic dialogue that was responsive to the joys and anxieties of the family can be also traced in the life and work of St. Francis Xavier. He strove to build families by evangelizing them and bring them in the church.

Looking back on the two weeks of family synod Pope Francis called it a ‘great experience’ and affirmed that he felt the power of the Holy Spirit, who constantly guides and renews the church. Francis Xavier was led by the Holy Spirit to reach out to the families through his ministry to the children. Observing the children in the power of the Spirit, he understood the plight of the family and was enabled to respond to the special needs of the family. The final report (*Relatio Synodi*) is divided into three parts :

- 1) Listening to the context and challenges of the families
- 2) The Gaze of Christ, the gospel of the families
- 3) Comparison and the pastoral perspective

St. Francis Xavier made his encounter with the children the entry point into the family, the synod and Pope Francis makes the context and the challenges that the families encounter as the entry point to the families. He says love is the measure of faith. How much you love manifest the depth of one’s faith.

Listening with Greater Sensitivity

The synodal bishops listened to the polyphonic voices of the families coming from different parts of the world and make to a common understanding that ‘growing danger

posed by an exaggerated individualism that distorts family ties and eventually considers every member of the family as an island, giving precedence in some cases, the idea of a person as absolute. (RS. 5). The synod attempted to listen to the crises that families are facing in varying degrees across the world and tried to draw a response that will be continuous in its responsive listening. Such a responsive listening was awakened in St. Francis Xavier by Ignatius of Loyola and we can trace how the ears and heart of St Francis listened to the struggles and pains of the families of his days particularly in south India. He continues this awakened and active listening even today from his resting place in Goa. Today steadily the institution of marriage has become 'residual Choice' as only few are getting married while others are choosing co-habitation as a way of life, especially in the west. We in India are steadily facing the tide increasing divorce and couple living in crises or separation. Voices for gay rights and marriage are also becoming louder in our society. Pope Francis and St. Francis Xavier are great models for us to listen with sensitivity and compassion to the pain and the struggle of our families in our societies. This will enhance the Christian heritage of mercy and can assist us to be responsive to wounded and fragile families in our days.

The Gospel of the Family

The gospel is not just directed to individuals and societies but the families at large. Pope Francis laments that the dying families of Europe has impoverished Europe as it becomes exhausted and does not promise any creativity. We are living in an aging Society both in Europe and Goa. Our societies are suffering the virus of contraceptive mentality that does not welcome children. Besides this, the girl child is not welcome in Indian

society from womb to the tomb. Hence, there is an urgent need of Gospel to the families. The compassionate and freeing

Pope Francis and St. Francis Xavier are great models for us to listen with sensitivity and compassion to the pain and the struggle of our families in our societies.

look of Jesus can certainly spring forth new life and vigour in our families. We need to inspire the laity to live the gospel of the family. The families of Pope Francis and St. Francis are effective bearers of the gospel of families. That is way we can find that the Gospel is effectively lived and proclaimed by the life of their sons give to the Lord. Catholic families have the vocation to be the gospel to the world. They need to embody the compassionate look of Jesus to the broken families as well as those who do not accept the very institution o family. There is great room for Christian families to become prophetic evangelizers of families in the world. St. Francis continues the mission of Jesus by inspiring the imagination of many even today. The life and work of Pope Francis continues to incarnate the presence of Jesus among us. Hence, we need to draw inspiration from these stalwarts and live the Gospel of the families to the fullest with profound love and joy and witness to the world that marriage is a beautiful and fascinating way of life.

Pastoral Responses

The Church continues to be concerned about the families across all religious persuasions. She firmly believes that

marriage and families are instituted by God , the creator. She cares for the families that are separated, divorced, not married , single parent families, and persons with homosexual orientation. The synod and the Pope urged called the Church to avoid any language and attitude of discrimination and even harassment. Everyone is to be accepted with respect, sensitivity and compassion. We in India and Goa are required to be sensitive to the social evils like alcoholism, dowry system, caste discrimination, extra-marital and pre-marital sex, pronography, domestic violence and lead the Catholics to grow and flowers as a domestic Church. St. Francis Xavier's prophetic struggles against the erring Portuguese officers and the Priests and the religious as well as the casteists Brahmins stand tall as an example of his compassion for the oppressed and the excluded. Hence, we are to draw profound inspiration from both St. Francis and Pope Francis so that catholic family becomes an effective vehicle of the gospel of the families today.

We can certainly notice how in complex situations Pope Francis and St. Francis Xavier continue to inspire us to make family the centre of our life. Family life is indeed, the most beautiful way of living a fulfilled human life. We need our family and our families need us. The very survival of humanity is dependent on the institution of family. Hence, it is important for the sake of humanity that we, protect and nurture our families. May God bless all families! 🌹