

## “Pope views Evangelicals as exemplary” A comment by Thomas Schirmmacher

*The Family Synod has shown that Pope Francis regards Evangelical Christians as exemplary for Catholics. For conservatives, the final document offers cause for both satisfaction and disappointment.*

As the only Evangelical at the Synod, I must begin with great praise: No Protestant church where I have been a guest had so instantaneously taken me into ongoing discussions and treated me as an equal interlocutor as the Vatican did. We ‘Brotherly Delegates’ were not ‘observers.’ We were in no way inferior to the other delegates except as regards the right to vote. We likewise had three minutes in the plenary speeches, were present at all internal workings, and discussed in the language groups without any restrictions. This included text proposals for the final document. The fact that I additionally had a short daily conversation with the Pope did not apply to everyone and is certainly owing to the special situation between Catholics and Evangelicals in questions relating to marriage and family.



The Synod itself was much better than its written result. The intensive three-week discussion, often conducted on a high level, especially in the 13 small groups with self-chosen leadership, is only partially reflected in the document. The document does not describe the opposing positions but seeks a consensus in the middle. Above all, it addresses requests to the Pope and deliberately leaves open possibilities for him to respond. That the large majority decided this, however, indicates that opponents of a cautious opening in line with the Pope, that is, those who contrary to all conditions had vocally gone to the public with warnings in recent days, have not prevailed.

Overall, the language of the final document is much more positive than that of the initial document. While in the initial document the warning of the end of marriage and family and all kinds of other developments were in the foreground, now, first of all, many marriages and families are in the foreground as well as the full support of those individuals who stand up for each other in adverse circumstances – for instance in circumstances including civil war and poverty. It is also much more strongly emphasized that God not only founded marriage but made it possible and sustains it.

### **The Synod was different from what was portrayed in the Media**

It will be interesting to see what the Pope will make of it. However, Francis has already made it clear in his closing address that he is continuing to think in the direction of decentralization. This is due to the fact that the Synod had shown everyone that many of the problems were very much related to the respective culture and could only be solved adequately within the limits of these cultures. At the Synod,

as a first consequence, the Pope dissolved the old three councils for the family, for the laity, and for the Pontifical Academy of Life. They were replaced by a new congregation, a kind of authority for the family, the laity, and life. This greatly enhances the topic of the family but also the laity since councils have nothing to do with the leadership of the Catholic Church. On the other hand, a congregation corresponds to a ministry in a government.

Contrary to what is often portrayed by the media, the Synod did not simply fall into two camps. If this had been the case, the large number of delegates would have been in the middle. On the contrary, the situation varied for each topic: Those who were 'conservative' on one topic were able to be 'progressive' on the next.

On the other hand, continents' specific problems were very much superimposed upon each discussion. Africans, for example, do not form automatic alliances with Asians, since both deal very differently with questions of polygamy, arranged marriage, or the fact that a church wedding is delayed for a long time because the money for an expensive wedding and the dowry must first be saved.



## **The Catholic Church is an Oil tanker, not a Yacht**

I would like to say something about the issues the public has been waiting for: The Catholic Church is not a sleek yacht which, as might be the case with Evangelicals, sometimes turns for the good, admittedly sometimes hastily, adapting to the people who are to be reached for the Gospel. Rather, the Catholic Church resembles a mighty oil tanker that can only be cautiously reoriented. In the process, it tries to give the impression that it is only a matter of undertaking minor course corrections. But since it is a tanker, even small changes will result in huge changes over time.

The topic of homosexuality did not come up very frequently, although it was made a central topic by the media. The logic followed by most delegates was that the synod was about family and that homosexuality had nothing to do with it. Many people thus expected that the topic would simply be ignored or that a very brusque statement would be made. But now there is an amazingly friendly statement in paragraph 76, which also comes mainly from the mouth of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. It says that the human dignity of homosexuals must be preserved and that discrimination must be rejected in every form. Same-sex marriage is clearly rejected, which nobody expected to be otherwise, but it is briefly stated that real care for each other can also occur among homosexuals. There were also only half as many dissenting votes, such as on the question of the communion of remarried people, with over 80% having voted in favour.

## Where Hardliners are disappointed

The final document regarding participation in communion by those divorced and remarried church mates remains deliberately vague. However, it calls for a very thorough distinction to be made between the different situations that exist. The Pope is asked to find a solution for those cases where it cannot be comprehended why active Catholics are allowed to participate in all ecclesial life except communion. After all, these people are not excommunicated. The hardliners will not be pleased with this, who did not even muster a third of the dissenting votes.

Surely there are also disappointments. Most groups had demanded that polygamy, arranged marriages, marriages of different religions and marriages of different denominations were not simply to be listed as problems in one sentence. Moreover, the sentence makes it sound as if the non-Catholic partner is automatically to blame for problems in marriages where different denominations are involved. Nevertheless, this sentence has remained unchanged.

After all, further back in the final document there is a very substantial and to some extent progressive section on marriages involving different denominations, which in line with Pope Francis assumes that here two Christians are married to each other. The indication for thought to be given to the non-Catholic, believing partner being able to exceptionally take part in communion is already astonishing for the Catholic Church, even if this is already reality for Orthodox but not for Protestant partners.

## Will Evangelicals now become Catholic?

One more word about the concern some fellow evangelicals have that tomorrow we would convert in droves to the church of this nice Pope. Every day, thousands of Catholics in Latin America and in the Global South convert to Pentecostal churches and evangelical congregations. No counter-development has been recognized. Today we above all conduct serious doctrinal talks, and the desire from the side of the Vatican is that we clearly formulate and introduce our view clearly. However, the difference today is the following: The Pope views Protestant Christians as fully-fledged believers and speaks openly that the active Christianity of Evangelicals and Pentecostals in prayer, sanctification, and witness is exemplary for Catholics.

You have to look at all the differences in teaching that we are currently working on very intensively in dialogue: In the practical fight against injustice, we have far too many topics where we have to be on the ball together with others (e.g. human trafficking and corruption). In other cases, it even looks like we are



only left with each other for the most part, namely on the topics of abortion and lifelong marriage. After all, Protestants and Catholics together account for almost two billion people. One can clearly feel that the Pope sees much greater similarities with us than with what were Evangelical state churches. Additionally, these state churches of course only play a major role in the West. Outside of the West, the majority of Protestants are often Evangelicals. In a country like Korea, for example, the number is ninety percent.

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- Article „[Einsatz für Lebensrecht und Ehe, Gemeinsamkeit zwischen Katholiken und Evangelikalen](#)“ [‘Commitment to the right to life and marriage; common ground between Catholics and Evangelicals’]
- Article „[Wie Papst und Evangelikale die Familie retten wollen](#)“ [‘How the Pope and Evangelicals Want to Save the Family’]