Inside the Vatican Synod on Family: An Expert Evangelical's View as a Fraternal Delegate

Collected blogs October 4 – 25 on Christian Post
by Thomas Schirrmacher

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Editor's note: The Christian Post has arranged with noted evangelical Dr. Thomas Schirrmacher, an expert on and friend of The Catholic Church, to provide exclusive and rare coverage of the World Synod of the Catholic Church scheduled for October 3-24, 2015. This Vatican Synod is generating great interest among Catholics and Evangelicals alike as Pope Francis continues to make overtures for increased cooperation with Evangelicals to protect religious freedom in a world of increased persecution of Christians.

Schirrmacher is president of the International Council of the International Society for Human Rights und Ambassador for Human Rights and executive chair of the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance, the largest evangelical association in the world.

Only one evangelical was invited to this year's three-week synod: Dr. Schirrmacher. Below is his exclusive CP blog post from this historic meeting:

Inside the Vatican Synod on Family: An Expert Evangelical's View as a Fraternal Delegate (Day 1)

By Thomas Schirrmacher, CP Guest Contributor
Published October 4, 2015|11:08 am

October, 3, 2015

It is the Saturday before the official opening of the Vatican Synod on the Family with a mass in St. Peter's Cathedral. So most delegates arrive today. The so-called fraternal delegates stay in the Comunità San Pietro Canisio, where Jesuits' stay during their time in Rome. It is only three minutes walking distance from the Vatican and two minutes from the office of the Pontifical Council for Propagating Christian Unity which hosts the fraternal delegates.

Fraternal delegates have nearly all the rights of Catholic delegates with the exception of voting rights. They can apply to speak for three minutes in the discussions (as all others), take part in the small group discussions, the language groups, and there is really nothing hidden from them. The
fraternal delegates sit in the 4th and 5th row of 25 rows in the left block and thus have a better seating than most archbishops and bishops; only Cardinals and members of the Curia sit up front. It is amazing how openly the Vatican handles the fraternal delegates, whose role thus is much different from typical 'observers' from other churches and denominations visiting international church gatherings or conferences.

Tomorrow at 9 am the ten fraternal delegates will be taken through the masses of people here in Rome to special seating near the altar and the Pope and by the Catholic delegates, who all will be dressed alike. The Pope's sermon could be a first signal where he is heading with the synod.


Inside the Vatican Synod on Family:
Pope Francis Delivers Bible Reading on Love (Day 2)

By Thomas Schirrmacher, CP Guest Contributor
Published October 5, 2015|7:11 am
October 4, 2015

Today the Pope opened the Vatican Synod with a service in St. Peter's Church. The more than 300 delegates came in order of rank – all covered in green robes. They were seated in a huge semi-circle around the altar. Only three fraternal delegates showed up, representing the Baptists, the Anglicans and the Evangelicals. The ordinary Bible reading happened to center on love and on family. This is why the Pope preached on one of those texts, 1 John 4:12, stating, that if we love, God stays in us and his love will be fulfilled in us. The Pope stressed that humans have not been created to live in isolation. Nevertheless, despite globalization, wealth and independence, the number of people who feel lonely is growing. God's major answer has been in Adam's time and still is: marriage and family. It is the truth that marriage is made for fidelity and without a time line. But this truth has to be said and acted out in love again and again. By pointing to the complementarity of truth and love, the Pope spelled out the central challenge of the Synod, which is not only true for the Catholic Church, but has to be thought through again and again by Evangelicals and all Christians, too: The truth states the ideal, but reality and the hardened heart of humans destroy those ideals. So again and again we have to speak in love, act in love and prove that Christianity is not only a religion of truth and order, but also of forgiveness, new life and love for God and one another.

Typically synod openings are not the type of services that draw millions to Rome, thus St. Peter's Church was rarely filled and not all parts of St. Peter's Square were filled, as it was a much lower number compared to other events like Easter or the elevation of saints. Having visited a lot of masses in the Vatican already, it probably was my first time to just hear the regular liturgy without
extras; only the sermon mentioned the synod. To compensate the visitors outside the church, that only followed the service on the screen, the Pope went out and gave an extra message on family to those waiting there.

I instead took the chance to meet many old friends among the delegates, e.g. Patriarch Gregory III Laham from Damascus, Patriarch of the so-called Melkite Catholics, that is those 15 percent of Catholics – mainly in the Middle East – who do not follow Roman/Western liturgy and church law, but Byzantine/Eastern liturgy and church law. Patriarch Gregory III Laham's heart is heavy, as he is responsible for nearly all Catholics living in those areas of the Middle East where persecution is exploding. But even though he speaks up on this and challenges all Christians with the call to evangelize the Muslim world, he has an exceptional love for Muslims, including those who are persecutors.

Monday morning will see the start of the first plenary discussion. The Pope has, at the last minute, strengthened the small discussion groups. Their results will be recorded and collected and made public, so that a clear picture evolves about what the delegates think – something new here in Rome.


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**Inside the Vatican Synod on the Family:**

**How Pope Francis Synods Are Different (Day 3)**

By Thomas Schirrmacher, CP Guest Contributor

Published October 6, 2015|2:17 pm

October 5, 2015

The opening day was a really busy day. I had my first short meeting with Pope Francis, had to prepare my own first short speech, which has to be given to the synod's office beforehand, as they check the length, and had to listen, listen, listen. Why?

The Catholic Church is the oldest existing institution (and by far the largest that ever existed) and has a lot of very ancient laws and habits. One is that, for documents to become valid they have to really be read aloud.

I remember once to have listened 1.5 hours to a final statement of a symposium, which had to be read again, as major changes were made. But do not forget, reading texts loud is still important in many cultures and was the habit in New Testament times.

This is the reason most churches read several passages of Scripture (often from the Old Testament, the letters and the Gospels) aloud in the service. The two longest texts were the results of the last synod and the results of the discussion project between the synods. These will be the only texts that will be available on the internet, from now on no text will be published and it is forbidden to quote people by name. So I cannot report in the future who said what, as everyone should have the freedom to speak frankly, boldly and without public notice. Nevertheless, there will be much that can be reported.
There is a huge difference between synods under the last pope and the ones under Pope Francis, because Pope Francis is there the whole time and can be talked to in pauses or on his way in and out. Pope Benedict always was covered up by his bodyguards, came in at the last, when the session had started and was the first to leave.

Pope Francis came long before the beginning and greeted most delegates at the entrance, like a host greeting his guests to his home. This gives the whole synod a much more familiar character and colors all other relations.

And as always, beside the programs, it is the building of relations and friendships that count here. Since the cardinals and bishops of the Catholic Church often do not know each other — how could they, if one resides in Malawi and one in New Zealand? — they rarely have as much time together as they have in a synod of 3 weeks.

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Inside the Vatican Synod on the Family: Evangelicals Support the Vatican in its Commitment to Traditional Marriage (Day 4)

By Thomas Schirrmacher, CP Guest Contributor
Published October 7, 2015|12:10 pm
October 6, 2015

In December 2014, shortly after the last Vatican Synod on the Family, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith conducted a three-day colloquium on the "Complementarity of Man and Woman" in cooperation with three pontifical councils (the Pontifical Council for the Family, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity). Speakers from 23 countries and almost all larger religions invoked the model of lifelong marriage between the two sexes and children. The colloquium took place in the very facilities we are using now for the synod.

Representatives from not only all the large, well known world religions, such as Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam, but also representatives from regional religions in India and Japan, including Sikhs, Jains (followers of Jainism), and Shintoists, and extending to Latter Day Saints (Mormons) in the USA, were speakers together with Christians from many denominations. They underscored the importance of family built upon lifelong marriage between the two sexes.

It became clear — and that was the intention of the entire thing — that the large majority of humanity still retains the ideal of the classical family consisting of a father and a mother and children where the father and the mother remain together for life.
On one of the scholar's panels I noted that the closer cooperation between the Pontifical Council for the Family and WEA family experts, which was only agreed upon between the Holy Father and the World Evangelical Alliance also in December, was finding expression at the colloquium.

This is what I said: "The largest contingent of plenary speakers, apart from the moderating cardinals and archbishops, came from all five continents and from the Catholic Church and Evangelicals within and outside of the World Evangelical Alliance. Of note were the American pastor Rick Warren, the leading Anglican Archbishop of Nigeria, Nicholas Okoh, the former Bishop of Rochester and WEA advisor on questions relating to the Islamic world, Michael Nazir-Ali and Dr. Russell D. Moore, president of The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, and Jaqueline Cooke-Rivers, an African-American university professor hailing from a Pentecostal church. Additionally, there were other Protestants from the conservative end of the spectrum, for instance the head of Bruderhof, Johann Christoph Arnold. Understandably, representation from the spectrum of liberal Protestantism was largely missing."

Today I spoke with Gerhard Ludwig Cardinal Müller, who organized the symposium, and with Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, president of the Pontifical Council of the Family, in depth about the growing Catholic-Evangelical cooperation to defend marriage and family. Directly after the synod, the Italian Evangelical Alliance invited me as a speaker to a Catholic-Evangelical family day in Sicily, which will be attended by 4,000 people. Thus I will stay a day longer in Italy than planned.

Müller is the Prefect of the Congregation of the Faith, the position Pope Benedict had before he became Pope. It is the most important Papal Council and the Equivalent to the Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) and the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. It is with humor that I realize both the Catholic Church and the WEA have asked Germans to lead their theological team, even though German theology has, in part, done much harm to the Church.

Gregory III Laham is from Damascus, whom I introduced to you the first day (see picture in St Peter's Church). Those members all did their doctorates at German universities and have decided to be part of the German discussion group.

We also have an impressive list of Cardinals related to the Vatican. Reinhard Cardinal Marx (the "Cardinal" always is added between the Christian name and the family name) is the head of the German Bishop Conference and one of the ten Cardinals forming the advisory body that Pope Francis invented just after his election; Christoph Cardinal Schönborn is the head of the Austrian Bishops Conference; Kurt Cardinal Koch is a Swiss bishop and president of the Pontifical Council for Propagating of Christian Unity, which is looking after us as fraternal delegates while we are in Rome. He plays an important role in the growing Catholic-Evangelical cooperation. Gerhard Cardinal Müller is the chief theologian of the Vatican, the role Pope Benedict had before he became Pope. Müller is prefect of the Congregation of the Faith, which is responsible for all theological declarations of the Vatican, but also oversees all cases of discipline (e.g. all cases of priests misusing minors) and of marriage annulments.

This Congregation of the Faith uses a large historic Italian "palazzo" with two entrances, one into the Vatican beside the Synod aula, and one around the corner toward Italian territory. The congregation originally was founded as the "Inquisition" in the 16th century to combat Protestantism and only in 1965 received its current name. Some Cardinals made jokes that the place where they persecuted Protestants once and even held some in prison, is now a place where I take part in discussions of a Vatican Synod. And actually we meet in the central room, in which weekly Cardinals forming the Congregation make major decisions, somehow the court room of the Vatican.

Source URL: http://www.christianpost.com/news/vatican-synod-on-family-147320/

**Inside the Vatican Synod on the Family:**

**Pope Francis Moves Synod Toward More Openness Among Delegates, Public (Day 7)**

By Thomas Schirrmacher, CP Guest Contributor

Published October 12, 2015|2:29 pm

October 9, 2015

The Pope started the day spontaneously, even before the morning prayer, by remembering the Christians in the Middle East, those who are martyred, those who have fled, and those who have stayed.

After the morning prayer, the plenary, which have not met for two days, heard the reports of the 13 small language groups, whose results were read and afterwards published. This is new for the Synod. Previously the reports went to a team that edited the texts and only they knew what other groups had decided. This time everything is available to all delegates and even the wider public. Step by step, Pope

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Picture 6: Pope Francis talking to delegates at the Vatican Synod on the Family on Friday, October 9, 2015. Fraternal delegate Thomas Schirrmacher, who is reporting daily from the Vatican exclusively for CP, notes how accessible Pope Francis is before and after plenary sessions compared to the previous pope. (Photo: Thomas Schirrmacher)
Francis is moving the Synod toward a real discussion in which every Synod father has to play a role.

Some of the small groups were still quite soft in their statements and critiques of the existing texts. The major criticism coming from most of the groups, was and is, that the approach to family is too negative. Always the church should start with the fact that millions and millions of couples love each other, parents work hard for their children, and that a lot of things are improving, e.g. the number of children starving is in decline and the number of educated girls is on the rise. Together, with the blessing God has given upon marriage and love, only then may the problems be researched and stated.

The rest of the day the second of three parts of the existing document will be discussed, which contains the church's teaching on marriage and family. Tomorrow it will be the right time to discuss the issue that while Evangelicals and Catholics can agree in a common fight for marriage and family, yet there is one specific teaching of the Catholic Church, the sacraments, which creates most of the difficult questions for the synod.

Note: For the photos today I have chosen some photos I took when walking with Pope Francis. It shows that he comes earlier, stays in the pauses and speaks to everyone around. Even though there are two official photographers, no one stops one from taking private photos. What a difference from the Synod of 2012!


Inside the Vatican Synod on the Family: The Sacrament of Marriage (Day 8-9)

By Thomas Schirrmacher, CP Guest Contributor
Published October 12, 2015|2:53 pm
October 11, 2015

This Sunday was a free day for delegates. Some European delegates traveled home to their dioceses, many went sightseeing in Rome or Italy (I visited Pompeii, Naples and the volcano Vesuvius.), and some just slept or relaxed.

Earlier on Saturday late afternoon, in one of the rare sessions with open speaking for one hour, for the first time the two sides on marriage clashed within 10 minutes. One bishop stated that it is the smell of the devil even to discuss any changes on how to adapt the Catholic teaching on marriage to difficult situations. Interestingly what sounded very Catholic actually is a very direct attack on the Pope! Just after him one bishop reported about couples that have been remarried for decades and cannot go to mass because they were married in the church before, and their grown children never developed a real relation to the church because they did not take the Lord's Supper either. Another bishop reminded the delegates of the
situation when priests break their promise when becoming a priest – a sacrament in the Catholic Church – and return to become lay people yet can receive forgiveness and go to mass for the rest of their life. Why could not something similar be made possible for remarried couples?

What is at stake here? For non-Catholics this is difficult to understand. The Catholic Church distinguishes between a natural, civil marriage, and a marriage as a sacrament celebrated in and by the church. Only the latter is under church law and cannot be dissolved. So if you divorce a marriage that never became a sacrament, this is one thing and you are free to marry again under civil law. But if the sacrament was added to your marriage, you cannot dissolve this sacramental marriage. If you have problems, you might separate for some time or forever. If you get divorced anyway, all civil questions follow civil law, e.g. the question who is responsible for the children etc., but the original sacramental marriages stays on – you live in ongoing adultery. You cannot be prevented from a second civil marriage, but you will never get a second marriage sacrament, if your spouse did not die or the marriage is not annulled (which only means that the church decides that you never were under a marriage sacrament, not that your civil marriage was not valid). But then if the original sacramental marriage holds and you are living together with a new spouse, you are living in ongoing sin and are destroying the original marriage sacrament. Therefore you cannot take part in any other sacrament including the mass. Got it? Don't be disappointed, if not; it is a complicated matter. But perhaps you now understand why the priests that give up the sacrament of becoming priests are used as an example. They destroy a sacrament (because once a priest, always a priest), yet are forgiven and not kept from the sacrament of the mass.

The non-Catholic churches do not have marriage as a special sacrament. What they have is a special ceremony of blessing a civil marriage by and in the church, stressing that here you vow that you see marriage as a covenant given by God to be fulfilled in faithfulness and love. Non-Catholic churches might discuss whether you might remarry, but they talk about a further civil marriage after you ended the earlier civil marriage.

Behind the discussion on the synod lies another question, which is a question all Christian churches have to deal with. How do we apply laws, ideals and principles to specific and difficult situations? No one at the synod questions that marriage is a sacrament. Non-Catholic views of marriage do not play any role here. But those bishops asking for exceptions for remarried couples argue that the church law has to be applied in wisdom and in a way that people can understand, e.g., they argue that telling you that you stay in the church and are called to participate, yet you cannot receive the Lord's supper, is a contradiction that wishes for a pastoral solution to be found.

We will see how this debate develops and how Pope Francis will take it up.

Inside the Vatican Synod on Family: Evangelical Catholics? (Day 10)

By Thomas Schirrmacher, CP Guest Contributor
Published October 14, 2015|1:54 pm

Today I had the privilege to contribute a paragraph on the covenant character of marriage, showing that God's grace always comes first and that a Christian marriage always relies on the promise and grace given by God, that especially becomes activated when we humans reach our borders, but the Holy Spirit helps us to overcome our weaknesses.

The German group applauded and sent the paragraph, together with others, to the final editing team. How is this possible? Why is the relationship between Catholics and Evangelicals improving, even though Evangelicals speak out loud when in Rome? Why does the Vatican want to hear the opinion of Evangelicals?

Timothy George once wrote: "Catholics and evangelicals are the two largest faith communities in the body of Christ." (Christianity Today, June 2013, p. 65).

Vatican experts, the most outspoken being John Allen (biographer of all recent popes and seen as one of the best Vatican journalists in the USA), distinguish three wings of Roman Catholic Church, the traditional, the liberal and the evangelical. They say that the latter one grows because the last two popes belong to it and because the majority of people added to RCC by mission work in the Global South belong to it. The traditional wing is stable but not growing, while the liberal wing is decreasing. One can disagree here, but this is a matter of research and discussion, again not a matter of dogma.

Of course we Evangelicals might object to the use of "evangelical" here, but it is a fact that Catholics use this term, and Evangelicals have to wrestle with it. And it is beyond doubt, the present Pope belongs to the evangelical wing.

But you only can understand the Vatican's move towards Evangelicals on the background of a growing worldwide split of conservative Christians, who hold to the historic facts of Christianity and to historic Christian moral standards (especially related to marriage and sexuality), from liberal Christians. Presently any improvement of ecumenical relations globally at the same time is influenced by the debate over homosexuality. It is a split going through the World Council of Churches, the Anglican Church, the Lutherans, and many other groups. It has not really split WEA so far, though this could happen one day.

It is no wonder that Orthodox Churches are loosening their relations to liberal Protestant churches constantly, but at the same time they are meeting more frequently with Evangelical Protestant churches.

There are three global Christian bodies: the Catholic Church, World Council of Churches (WCC), and the World Evangelical Alliance. The Catholic Church has 1.2 billion members, the WCC has 560 million members in its churches, that is Orthodox and mainline Protestant churches, and the WEA has 600 million members in its Evangelical and Pentecostal member churches.
It is this background that explains why for the Vatican, the WEA more and more becomes a major body to relate to.


Inside the Vatican Synod on Family: Is Pope Francis the Antichrist? (Day 11)

By Thomas Schirrmacher, CP Guest Contributor
Published October 15, 2015|10:12 am
October 14, 2015

After having discussed Part I of the synod proposal, that studies the present situation worldwide, and after discussing Part II, stating the teaching of the church on marriage and family, the best part is yet to come from tomorrow on, Part III on pastoral applications of Part II to the situation of Part I.

The open discussion is growing, the different positions are stated strongly, even though they do not lead to any kind of political parties at the synod. And many bishops here are conservative concerning one topic and liberal concerning another.

Also the divide is more by continents. Often, by just listening to speakers you can tell from which continent they come, even if you did not see their name and country.

Meanwhile there is a scenario in the air which no one expected. The final text of the synod will not get the necessary two thirds vote because language and style of arguing are of such bad quality that constant changes may not be able to repair this. Conservatives and liberals alike could vote against the document.

The Pope is not bound in any way to the document, if he does not choose so, but if no text is accepted, it will be the Pope, even more so, who has to find a solution for the discussed problems.

This is also part of the synod: A strong, conservative and private letter to the Pope was published in an Italian newspaper including the names under the letter. Half of the people suddenly denied that they signed the letter. Only the Australian cardinal Pell, somehow the speaker of the conservative line, admitted that he passed on the letter to the Pope.

But we Evangelicals have our own media circus.

A lot of blogs comment on what I am doing here in Rome. One Italian blog claimed that Pope Francis is the Antichrist. Of course, several cardinals and bishops asked me immediately what I thought about it.
My answer was, that reading 1 John 2:18; 2:22; 4:3; 2 John 1:7 and Revelation 13:17-18 proves to me that the Pope is not the Antichrist and that I believe in sola scriptura.

The antichrist is the one who "denies that Jesus is the Christ" and denies "that Jesus Christ came in the flesh." Is this an honest description of the current Pope? I think not.

Pope Benedict wrote three volumes on Jesus, the Christ, God incarnate. The central descriptions of the antichrist in all the texts by John are the opposite of what the Pope stands for.

Indeed, it is 1 John 4:2,3 that makes me think we have to talk with the Pope and most Roman Catholic leaders in a very friendly manner, expecting that the Holy Spirit is active in their lives, even if we disagree with very important and well-known themes in their teaching.

"This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world."

If you look for an Antichrist that fits these words, Islam would fit much better, as do other religions and worldviews. No Evangelical exegetical commentary on the market sees the Pope in the mentioned verses. If scripture does not say it, I do not care that some of my theological heroes used the term Antichrist for the Pope. Luther would praise me for applying sola scriptura. The Bible counts, not Martin Luther's — often harsh — words. For more on this topic, check out this blog post that my friend Thomas K. Johnson helped me to write:

http://www.thomasschirrmacher.net/blog/is-the-pope-the-antichrist-not-according-to-sola-scriptura/
http://wrfnet.org/articles/2015/10/two-wrf-members-debate-whether-pope-antichrist#.V4uiPFeFylw


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**Inside the Vatican Synod on Family: Where Are the Votes on the Final Document? (Day 12-14)**

By Thomas Schirrmacher, CP Guest Contributor

Published October 16, 2015|2:35 pm

October 16, 2015

The synod is on time. Because of discipline in timing of the three minutes speeches and interventions we even will have an unexpected free Saturday afternoon, which led to big applause.

Out of the 270 "synod fathers," 146 choose to speak and one to write. Then there were several small sessions of one hour in the evenings, 6 to 9 pm, for free interventions of 4 minutes each, on average, 12 speakers per evening. Virtually all of those who spoke had given an intervention already; some spoke three to four times. That leaves more than 100 synod fathers that choose not to speak.

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Picture 10: Dr. Thomas Schirrmacher at the Vatican Synod on the Family on Thursday, Oct. 15, 2015. (Photo: Thomas Schirrmacher)
Delegates choose to speak on the three chapters of the text for discussion (Latin: "Instrumentum labor" = tool to work with) more or less evenly, the first describing the present world of families globally ("see"), the second summarizing the church's teaching ("evaluate") and the third discussing the pastoral application ("act").

Yet the lowest attendance was 256, the highest 266. That is far more than in normal synods or state parliaments.

We are now in the middle of the three minute interventions of the experts, auditors and fraternal delegates. As we had three of the sixteen couples presenting their life story already, that leaves 13 of them. They split the 3 minutes among them as they wish, so far the wife started with the longer part and the husbands just added some final words to it.

Beside the plenaries we spent approximately 27 hours in 13 small group discussions according to languages.

The groups each produced one two-page report per chapter, which were read in the plenary. That is 39 altogether!

The groups proposed in the average 50 changes to the text (from changing words to exchanging or adding long paragraphs), called "modus," or "modi" for the plural, in Latin. That is far more than 500. The text of those modi taken altogether is longer than the original text.

Back to the 146 interventions. It is impossible to give any numbers according to any positions.

I would say that there were three groups overall: one third were on the middle ground, or the interventions did not touch "hot" topics; one third leaned to the "no changes" side; and one third leaned to the side called "progressive" here or "liberal" in the media, the latter term being both a wrong description and not loved by any of the progressives.

It is not possible to give any hint where the majority for certain topics lies. (And do not forget: it could be that people vote against the final document for other reasons than that it does not reflect their position, e.g. that they think the language is not good enough, a feeling that all sides have so far.)


Inside the Vatican Synod on the Family:
Pope Francis Urges No Behind Closed Doors Discussion (Day 15)

By Thomas Schirrmacher, CP Guest Contributor
Published October 19, 2015|10:57 am
October 18, 2015

We just celebrated 50 years of the Vatican Synod.

In a Catholic "Council," all Catholic bishops meet to discuss and decide together. The final documents are seen as totally binding on the Church, if the Pope agrees to them.
Between the Council of Trent in the 16th century, reacting to the Reformation, and the First Vatican Council 1870, which decided that the Pope is infallible if he teaches something from his chair in Rome ("Ex cathedra"), there was no council.

The 1870 council was more something dismissing the power of a council, even though only once a Pope chose to use the "ex cathedra" power, when in 1950 Paul XII announced the direct bodily assumption of Mary into heaven.

It was the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), with more than 2,700 bishops, that gave the chance for a broad discussion and major changes. The Catholic Church accepted and proclaimed religious freedom, called lay people to read the Bible, and changed the liturgical language from Latin to the vernacular languages.

In line with this, in 1965 Pope Paul VI installed the Synod of Bishops, which meets whenever the Pope calls for it. It is a mix out of senior staff in the Vatican, delegates invited by the Pope, and, the larger part, bishops elected by the national conferences of bishops.

Even though it officially only counsels the Pope, it was nevertheless a giant step, insofar as even the Cardinals hardly knew each other.

Pope Francis stated in his book, Evangelii gaudium, that the collegiality of bishops, which the Second Vatican Council called for, has not really been approved under his two predecessors — one of those amazing honest words of the present Pope. So it is no wonder that he not only has called in a synod twice, but made major changes. Evangelii gaudium, and the synods, discussed the same topic and included research worldwide — thus there obviously was a lot of debate between the two synods.

He also urged the bishops to state their opinions and to really discuss. He strengthened the small language groups and gave them much more influence in the synod. And it is obvious here in Rome that in the last fourteen days delegates are getting more and more used to their role.

Now in his speech at the 50th anniversary of the synod the Pope insisted on broad discussion and theological debates in the open, not behind closed doors, as belonging to the nature of the church, and that he will search for even better ways to make it work.

Of course non-Catholics still have to get used to the idea that even the results of two synods of up to three hundred people discussing for weeks only produce texts that are offered to the Pope as propositions. Nevertheless, a synod is the right way.

Cardinal Schönborn of Vienna, who presented a major lecture at the jubilee, reminded the church of Acts 15: When there was heated discussion and division in the church, the apostles did not leave it to private discussions or local animosity; they called all together. They did not just discuss sterile theological concepts, but first of all they reported on what God was doing and how the church on the spot looked in reality.

A Cardinal giving a Bible study as the main speech for a Catholic synod is in line with what many delegates here have been calling for: That the Bible is used more to argue in favor of marriage and family and is not only used to quote commandments, as if it were a judicial text, but that it is quoted to show the wealth of faith and experience we can have, if we trust God.

Inside the Vatican Synod on the Family:
ISIS Genocide of Christians (Day 16)

By Thomas Schirrmacher, CP Guest Contributor
Published October 20, 2015|2:33 pm
October 19, 2015

Upon the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Vatican Synod, I, the World Evangelical Alliance's representative at the Synod, called upon the international Christian community to demonstrate more solidarity with persecuted Christians in the Middle East and around the world.

I published a statement as to why I speak of, among other things, the genocide of Christians, Yezidis, and Mandaeans.

In my address to the plenary session of the Synod the day before, I directed the following words to the Pope, who was able to follow my German language address without a translation:

After several patriarchs from the Near East have spoken about the topic of the persecution of Christians in Syria and Iraq, I simply cannot fail to add a word, since it is the topic that is my body and soul and because I am convinced that there is a genocide of Christians, Yezidis, and Mandaeans occurring in the Near and Middle East in the sense of the UN definition:

There has to be a jolt that goes through the international Christian community in order to produce a demonstration of a heretofore unequalled level of solidarity with persecuted Christians in Syria and Iraq, Pakistan and Bhutan, Nigeria and Sri Lanka, Vietnam and the Maldives, in China and India, and in many other countries. We need joint public prayer for the persecuted church on the part of the highest church leaders.

The International Institute for Religious Freedom of the World Evangelical Alliance, which works on the topic of the persecution of Christians and provides information for states, researchers, and churches, needs a partner in Rome! For that reason, I want to express the humble wish to the head of the Catholic Church to afterwards be allowed to again address him in a personal conversation.

Please give us the name of a particular contact individual for the topic of the persecution of Christians. Or better still, please create an institution in Rome which will take on this topic and with whom our specialists can directly work.

Here is my declaration on genocide:

Genocide in the Near East: Declaration made at the Vatican Synod

The murder of Christians, Yezidis, and Mandaeans, and the systematic persecution, rape, and enslavement of these ethno-religious groups in Syria and Iraq, clearly and without doubt fulfill the offense of genocide. It is not a matter of some sort of over-dramatization but rather of a simple application of the definition of genocide by the UN.

Article II of the 1948 United Nations definition of genocide reads as follows:

"In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: a) Killing
members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group."

In what sense would this not apply to the persecution of Christians, Yezidis, and Mandaeans? One element would suffice, but four of them (a, b, c and e) have been adequately documented. Indeed, for each of them there are pieces of evidence from propaganda films by the Islamic State. Only d) is not so easy to demonstrate.

Christians, Yezidis, and Mandaeans are systematically killed, driven out, or forced to convert. The children of Christians, Yezidis, and Mandaeans are killed or subject to forced reeducation. Women and girls are raped, forced into prostitution, and forced into marriage with IS Muslims. As a result, the minorities are prevented from being able to procreate (UN definition, point d.). It is to be pointed out that this genocide is announced and planned, and it is actually being implemented accordingly.

Why do so many church leaders, researchers, and politicians beat around the bush when it comes to genocide?

Now regarding the possible counterarguments.

Question: Are not all people in Syria and Iraq affected by the civil war and are not almost all people in the position of becoming victims of IS?

With respect to genocide, it is irrelevant that there are also other victims or that there are also other victims among the majority population. The genocide committed by the Germans under Hitler against the Jews and against Roma and Sinti was accompanied by war against many nations and people groups and, last but not least, the Nazi terror conducted against the German people as a whole. Despite this, the genocide committed against Jews and Roma and Sinti remains genocide.

Question: Isn't IS also fighting Shiites and Sunnis who are not in agreement with their version of Islam?

If one goes on the assumption that the IS also seeks to kill and eradicate Shiites as a defined population group or kill and eradicate Sunnis who think differently as likewise apostate, then one additionally has to view that as genocide. But the fact that non-Islamic ethno-religious minorities are the target of genocide from the side of IS is not changed by this discussion at all!

I am aware that the assessment that the situation is a matter of genocide also has consequences in international law. However, that is an additional, if necessary step, which I would prefer to leave to the specialists.

10 Reasons Evangelicals Should Talk to Catholics

By Thomas Schirrmacher, CP Guest Contributor
Published October 21, 2015|7:57 am

Here are my ten reasons for talking to Catholic leaders, including Pope Francis.

1. I want every Christian leader worldwide to know Evangelical positions, not from hear-say or the media, but first hand out of the mouth of an Evangelical.

   Sometimes the result is that things do change, but in the main it ends false conceptions about us and adds to understanding, which even can lead to an end of discrimination against us.

2. I want to hear firsthand what other Christian leaders and churches stand for and have to say. I do not want to follow hear-say or the media.

   Thus, I learn a lot. Sometimes I learn that the other side is farer away from us than I thought. But more often, I learn what we have in common, that I have to listen more carefully or that I can learn a lot from them.

3. We need an ongoing dialogue on central theological questions, to get together wherever possible, and to have a clear grasp of where we disagree, why we disagree and how we want to handle those disagreements.

   If we do not do this at the top level, we leave it to the street fight!

4. Friendship is a better place to discuss deep differences in theology than hatred or never to talking to each other at all.

   This I learned from the namesake of our seminary, the Reformer Martin Bucer, who practiced this even in Reformation times, in the midst of very emotional language about each other.

5. I want Evangelical theology to be present wherever theology is adopted or discussed on a global level.

   We need to be in the middle of the mess! This is true for Christian meetings worldwide, religious meetings, academic conferences and UN events. This strategy does not weaken our theology and conviction, but the opposite: it refines our ideas as we often have to give a clear description, particularly when we are weak in our arguments.

6. For decades I campaigned for a greater solidarity of the church at large with discriminated and persecuted Christians.

   I do this especially with the top leadership of all churches and confessions. This was my recent message to the Pope in the plenary session of the Vatican Synod!

   Persecution and martyrdom is the wrong place for discussing our differences. We have to cooperate as much as possible to combat persecution. This includes, of course, speaking openly about cases.
where Christians persecute Christians! The Pope has helped us in several cases in which this was the case against Evangelicals.

7. The Catholic Church has 1.2 billion members. The churches belonging to the member alliances of WEA have 600 million members. Together we make up three quarters of world Christianity.

We can add the World Council of Churches with the same size. Thus we run into each other every day worldwide, in politics, in academics, in economics, in social matters, in academic theology, in consultations. How could we not talk to each other? The world expects us to talk!

8. There are major moral and socio-political questions where Catholics and Evangelicals stand together against evils in this world, sometimes with many others (e.g., human trafficking, corruption), sometimes being the only big ally of the other (e.g., abortion or same sex marriage).

To combat those evils together we need to talk.

9. And after all: We cannot give up the unity of the Church, even though for us it first of all is a unity in faith, not in organizational issues.

Unity is a long way to go and probably unachievable, but nevertheless we cannot omit a command by Jesus just because we think it will not work. The World Evangelical Alliance was founded for this very reason and cannot settle down with what we have achieved so far.

10. Last but not least, the New Testament commands us: "Live with all people in peace, as long it is on your side."

This does not exclude anyone.


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**Inside the Vatican Synod on the Family: Homosexuality, Remarriage and Church Child Abuse (Day 17)**

By Thomas Schirrmacher, CP Guest Contributor
Published October 21, 2015|2:50 pm
October 20, 2015

We just received the text of the speech Pope Francis gave Wednesday to 700 ill visitors, among them many children, within the Audience Hall and then later to the masses waiting at St. Peters square. He said that it is a scandal if babies and children are not loved and all too often the Church was involved in this scandal.

The Pope apologizes for something different nearly every month. He apologized to parents, for instance, whose unbaptized children could not be
buried properly, because the church did not accept them to be believers. (They were buried outside the church cemeteries.)

Having experienced personally several of his apologies, I only can tell you — he means it.

He is deeply convinced that not only the "sons of the church" sinned (this is Pope John Paul II's constant wording), but the church itself sinned and needs to ask its members for forgiveness.

This is a major step for a Church that never asked for forgiveness as the Church. Only Pope Benedict started this carefully (e.g. when writing about the misuse of minors by priests and bishops in Ireland). With Pope Francis, it is in the open now.

There are Catholics out there who do not like this. They think that the Pope does not win anyway, but loses people no longer confident in a holy and infallible church.

I think that Pope Francis does not consider the results but apologizes from the depths of his heart. He has preached this all his life, and now he just goes on to do the same as the pope.

Some people say that Pope Francis never shifts theology or church law. This is a major swing in how you see the Catholic Church. By moving the marriage annulment court from the Vatican, where it was for centuries, so to speak "forever," down to the local bishops (announced September 8; effective December 8, 2015) is a major change in church law and in theology also.

What's up at the synod beyond this?

The small language groups finished their work on the third and last part. Today the 13 papers were read in the plenary that summaries their discussion, wishes and text proposals. The delegates have one and a half free days now in which a small team of editors review all the suggestions made and has to propose a text that will be discussed in plenary again, and then, probably after more changes, will be voted on.

One can say that the synod, in the main, is in agreement in many topics around strengthening marriage and families. The church is a real advocate of those institutions seen as created by God even before State and Church existed.

The disagreements are, not by surprise, those two topics that no one wanted to become the center of the synod, but which alone count for 90% of all strong statements in one or the other direction, and where the language groups still disagree: the question of remarried people taking the mass (can there be exceptions for those who repent and live a life of faith and church?) and homosexuality (not so much whether it can be a positive thing, but in how far to stress non-discrimination, non-criminalization, etc.).

Most groups had a large majority for those topics in one or the other direction, though some were not able to find consensus and could only describe both sides. For my perspective, some of the paragraphs written by the groups for the final document could really bring a solution, but we will have to wait to see whether any of those makes it into the final draft.

Inside the Vatican Synod on Family:
3 Questions about Catholics and Evangelicals (Day 22)

By Thomas Schirrmacher, CP Guest Contributor
October 27, 2015\1:48 pm
October 25, 2015

Here are three final questions on a set of three totally different issues regarding differences between Catholics and Evangelicals, which I have been asked again and again.

What is the most obvious difference between Catholics and Evangelicals from your experience at the Vatican?
That is easy to answer: Prayers to Mary.
They are very much a part of the daily fabric of prayers. When praying together in private, the Catholic leaders and even the Pope will not pray to Mary when Evangelicals are present. But it is so much interwoven into the small and larger liturgies of the day, that this politeness cannot concede for liturgical prayers, and the best known prayer to Mary, the so called "Angelus" (angel), is prayed often during the day, e.g. after meetings or meals. It is called "Angel," because the first words mention the angel approaching Mary announcing the birth of Jesus.

Prayers to the Saints shows up much less in liturgical format and you normally need to know Latin or Italian well to realize it. Even in a standard Papal Mass, if you leave aside for the moment the different view of communion and there is no special topic involved, such as the elevation of a saint, it can happen that you cannot object to the words, if you are not against liturgy as such.

But you see a huge picture of Mary left of the Papal seat and altar all the time and in the end, there will be prayers to Mary; and when everything is over, the Pope will have some short minutes praying before the large picture of Mary.

Is the result of the synod a real move or just a big media event?
History will tell.

The Catholic Church is like a very large tanker. It is hard to move, but if you only move it a bit, in the long run you move millions of people and a small move finally can get the tanker into another direction.

It is not easy to understand that the Catholic Church does not change just by voting for something new, but tries to find a way that proves that the new was there always or at least was the thing really meant in earlier times.

So in our German group the major source and argument for being more open to remarried couples whose first marriage was a canonical marriage, was Thomas Aquinas from the 13th century. Evangelicals are often on the opposite extreme. You are somebody if you are founder and president of an entity with a totally new idea and you might secure a trademark for it.
History will tell whether this was a major breakthrough or just a media event. My feeling is that it is the first, if the Pope stays in office long enough to see to its implementation.

What would a man or woman from the street feel is most different from real life at the Vatican Synod?

You get into a world which does not exist elsewhere.

Among Evangelicals, I often feel old (I am 55). Here I am a youngster.

All delegates are male and most of them beyond or far beyond retirement (in normal jobs). In most of the sessions they are dressed in colorful church robes, something you otherwise would see in Hollywood movies on historic events only. Everything is in strict and liturgical order, everyone has his fixed seat, a fixed time of 3 minutes to speak, a fixed calendar etc.

To be frank: Most Evangelicals would get nervous and either go outside to talk or try to take the floor anyway. You need to have some experience and openness to see the often friendly people and relations behind this. We are all just humans longing for communion.

It is even more amazing that Pope Francis has brought so many changes to the normal rituals in this ceremonial event.