

Declaration by Married and Lay Catholics preparatory to the Synods of 2014 and 2015

The following statement has been composed and edited by Dr Pia Matthews of St Mary's University College, London on behalf of a group of married and unmarried lay Catholics involved in academic research or teaching.

Responding to Pope Francis's call

We welcome the invitation from Pope Francis to reflect on the challenges to marriage and family life, recognising that people live complicated and often messy lives. We also recognise that this is not a new discovery or a feature of life unique to the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. It is evident in the conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:4-26). How the Church deals with this challenge has significance not only for the persons concerned and the family but also for the whole community. This also is evident from the impact of that encounter on the inhabitants of the Samaritan town of Sychar. This is why we further welcome the placing of this reflection in the context of evangelisation encouraged most recently by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*.

The family is experiencing a profound cultural crisis, as are all communities and social bonds. In the case of the family, the weakening of these bonds is particularly serious because the family is the fundamental cell of society, where we learn to live with others despite our differences and to belong to one another; it is also the place where parents pass on the faith to their children. Marriage now tends to be viewed as a form of mere emotional satisfaction that can be constructed in any way or modified at will. But the indispensable contribution of marriage to society transcends the feelings and momentary needs of the couple. As the French bishops have taught, it is not born "of loving sentiment, ephemeral by definition, but from the depth of the obligation assumed by the spouses who accept to enter a total communion of life" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 66).

Overcoming false dichotomies

In the light of this invitation and faced with the current state of society and of marriage and family life, it is tempting to look back and position ourselves on old battlegrounds, taking a stand on the side we think we want to be associated with, aligning ourselves with right or left, liberal or conservative. However, we should go beyond false dichotomies. Instead we look both back and forward, honouring the tradition which has always been alive and creative, and which includes the Second Vatican Council and the teaching of all the post-Conciliar popes. We find inspiration both from clergy and religious, from Blessed John Paul II and Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, and also from the writings and witness of lay married Catholics from the likes of Elizabeth Anscombe and G.K. Chesterton.

Celebrating the richness of the Church's teaching

We live in a society where those who defend a traditional understanding of marriage are dismissed or derided. However, a purely negative view of Church teaching on marriage and sexuality as unhelpful, unrealistic, or even discriminatory, does not do justice to those who, in articulating that teaching, have taken time to reflect deeply and pray about what God wants for his people. Such a negative view of the Church's teaching ignores all positive steps made towards developing more profound understandings of the human person as a sexual and

relational being. It is a matter of great sadness that so many of our contemporaries, even including other Catholics, dismiss out of hand the rich and foundational aspect of marriage as a good and natural expression of God's plan of salvation elevated as a sacrament reflecting the bond of Christ and his Church.

Facing the pastoral challenges

Every Catholic, married, celibate, religious, or lay, has an interest in 'the pastoral challenges of the family in the context of evangelisation'. This interest can be expressed in terms ranging from the purely sociological and the political to the theological and the building up of the Kingdom. Every Catholic, whether married, celibate, religious, or lay, also merits a voice: married life is not simply a private affair.

For some, married life may not be stable and it may be subject to poverty, violence, infidelity, resentment. In such situations it is hard to see how marriage can be a building block for a stable society. For others married life is where a couple deepen or even rediscover their faith even through times of challenge. It is also where the couple look beyond themselves to become a family. The family is the place where the next generation first hears about and sees in action the faith. Those who actually live out married life, who experience the rough and the smooth, have a vital and specific contribution to make to the conversation, as do those who see their own parents or relatives deal with commitment, the promise, the complexity of relationships, forgiveness. The celibate priest, a son and perhaps brother, also has a contribution to make because he has given up this great good of marriage for the sake of pointing out our eternal destiny: not only friendship with others but friendship with God.

The need of education, understanding and guidance

We also acknowledge, alongside the need to attend to experience, the need to understand, and to be educated and informed. This includes most importantly education in the faith and the informing of conscience. Dwelling simply on description of the current state of things does not move us forward. Marriage is a call to virtue and married life is a path to holiness. This requires our thoughts and efforts, but can only bear fruit with the help of grace and with the support and guidance of the Church to help us live out that vocation.

We urge the synods to reaffirm the positive teaching of married life as a fully human, total, faithful and fruitful love.

We ask the synods to support those who are derided or face discrimination because they acknowledge the meaning of marriage as a matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, and which is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring.

We look for the development of pastoral strategies which will affirm the dignity of every person, both male or female, including those who may experience same-sex attraction, and which will at the same time help each person hear the call to holiness according to his or her state of life.

We pray that the synods, and the teaching that emerges from them, will draw upon the wisdom of the tradition and the experiences of family life to help show us, in practical ways, how our families can best become schools of virtue and places of evangelisation.

Signatories

Professor James Arthur, Head, School of Education, University of Birmingham, UK

Stephen Barrie, Anscombe Bioethics Centre, Oxford, UK

Dr Ashley Beck, Programme Director Foundation Degree in Pastoral Ministry, St Mary's University College, Twickenham, UK

Professor Joseph Boyle, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, University of Toronto, Canada

Professor Christian Brugger, Professor of Moral Theology, St John Vianney Theological Seminary, Denver, USA

Dr Stephen Bullivant, St Mary's University College, Twickenham, UK

Leonora Butau, St Mary's University College, Twickenham, UK

Christopher Coope, University of Leeds, UK

Professor Dr Eduardo Echeverria, Professor of Philosophy, Sacred Heart Major Seminary, Detroit, USA

Professor Robert Fastiggi, Professor of Systematic Theology, Sacred Heart Major Seminary, Detroit, USA

Professor Anne Gardiner, Professor Emerita of English, John Jay College, City University of New York, USA

Professor Robert George, McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence, University of Princeton, USA

Professor Jozef Glasa, Slovak Medical University, Bratislava

Professor John Haldane, Professor of Philosophy, University of St Andrews, UK

Professor James Hanink, Professor of Philosophy, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, USA

Dr Michael Jarmulowicz, Chair of Governors, Anscombe Bioethics Centre, UK

Dr Gavin Jarvis, University Lecturer in Veterinary Anatomy, University of Cambridge, UK

Professor David Albert Jones, Director, Anscombe Bioethics Centre, UK

Professor Christopher Kaczor, Professor of Philosophy, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, USA

Professor Dr Daniel Keating, Associate Professor of Theology, Sacred Heart Major Seminary, Detroit, USA

Dr Pia Matthews, Programme Director Foundation Degree in healthcare Chaplaincy, St Mary's University College, Twickenham, UK

Professor Dr Anselm Mueller, Distinguished Visitor, University of Chicago

Professor Martin Nemoianu, Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, USA

Dr Michael Pakaluk, Professor of Philosophy, Ave Maria University, Florida, USA

Professor David Paton, Chair of Industrial Economics, University of Nottingham, UK

Professor Thomas Pink, Professor of Philosophy, King's College, London, UK

Dr Joseph Shaw, Fellow of St Benet's Hall, University of Oxford, UK

Professor Mary Shivanandan, Professor of Theology, John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family, Catholic University of America

Professor Janet Smith, Fr Michael J McGivney Chair of Life Ethics, Sacred Heart Major Seminary, Detroit, USA

Professor Christopher Tollefsen, Professor of Philosophy, University of South Carolina, USA

Professor Patrick Toner, Associate Professor of Philosophy, Wake Forest University, Winston, Salem, USA

Professor Nicholas Tonti-Filippini, Institute Associate Dean and Head of Bioethics, John Paul II Institute for Marriage and the Family, Melbourne, Australia

Dr Ryan Topping, Fellow Thomas More College of Liberal Arts, Merrimack, NH, USA

Professor Michael D Torre, Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of San Francisco and President of the American Maritain Association, USA

Dr Helen Watt, Senior Research Fellow, Anscombe Bioethics Centre, Oxford, UK