

Were There Two Synods in Rome?

Archbishop Michael J. Sheehan, *People of God*, December 2014

My friend, Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York, was at the recently concluded synod in Rome. He had some interesting comments to make at the November meeting of bishops in Baltimore. He said that it seemed that there were two synods, the one that he and the cardinals and bishops participated in and the other synod which was the one reported by the news media. He said that the synod fathers were honest in sharing their concerns about marriage and family in our present world. He pointed out that everyone agreed that there was indeed a crisis for marriage brought on by the sexual revolution, by the large number of divorces, and the reality of cohabitation and adultery, and now same-sex marriage. The media concentrated on describing the synod as very controversial and that there was a great deal of heated disagreements on issues such as giving communion to those who were divorced and remarried outside the church and a more tolerant view of same-sex marriages. The final report denied that there was any new church doctrine regarding these and other issues. We still have a year to go before the second synod that will take place next year in Rome.

Certainly there were different views and the pope wisely warned of the temptations that can sidetrack healthy dialogue; hostile inflexibility on the one hand and do-goodism that can be destructive and the transformation of spiritual substance, abandoning the will of the Father for the sake of the expedient and exploiting the deposit of faith or ignoring complicated realities for self serving ends.

Surely, we need to hear from lay people in happy marriage as well as those who have had a failure of their marriages and yet look for ways to return to the sacraments.

One of the important issues that will be discussed is the matter of simplifying the marriage annulment process in a realistic way to help many couples get back to a valid marriage and the reception of the sacraments of the church. It is important to point out again that nothing in the church doctrine has changed and the final statement from the synod has no doctrinal force. The real work will be between now and the end of the synod next year.

I believe that the annulment process in our marriage tribunals can indeed be simplified; and the pope has established a special committee to work on making this happen. The bishops at the synod were in favor of this and so are the members of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. I attended the annual meeting in Baltimore in November and there is strong support for a simplification of the marriage tribunal process so that the wait for a decision will not take years like it often times does now. And it can also be a painful process.

I think that some people have just presumed that changes have taken place because the secular media has written about the synod in a way that appears that this is so. We have had a number of calls and letters from people who believe that this is what happened, but as Cardinal Dolan pointed out, the real synod that he was a part of made no such changes in doctrine or sacramental practice regarding divorce and remarriage on the one hand or the approval of same-sex unions.

It must be stated clearly that we love and respect our lesbian and gay brothers and sisters but approving of sexual activity of this kind is clearly against the teachings of the Catholic church.

Before the synod this past October, I discussed the preliminary document on the synod with our Archdiocesan Pastoral Council members and also with our Presbyteral Council. We will again have the opportunity throughout the church to have discussions on the recent final report of the synod this year. We pray that God will bless these efforts to both show mercy to our people as well as remaining faithful to the teachings of Jesus and the church. I ask all of you to pray for the process as it moves forward to the synod taking place in October of next year.