

Survey responses show diverse feelings on Church

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THE Synod in Rome on Marriage and the Family last year and the projected session in October this year has aroused considerable interest among people, particularly on the issues of marriage and reception of the sacraments.

Pope Francis has been keen to involve the wider Church in the discussions, both on the level of prayer as well as consultation. Recently, the people in our Diocese had the opportunity to Offer their opinion and conviction about matters relating to marriage and the family in a survey form of some 38 questions, adapted from a list of such questions sent out from Rome.

All Australian Catholics had the same opportunity through an on-line form or printed copy to participate in the survey. This survey was not a plebiscite but rather an initiative of Pope Francis to garner opinion and see the pressing issues for Catholics about marriage and the family.

At the invitation of our Bishop I had the opportunity to read all the survey responses and then make a synthesis of the main ideas and themes in a report which was submitted with other similar reports from other Australian dioceses to a central body in Canberra.

A synthesis of these responses received from the Australian Church is then to be sent to Rome, to assist in the preparation for the next phase of the Synod later this year. Catholics have had the opportunity to speak. Before proceeding to a general summary of the survey now, I would like to say what a privilege it has been to read all these responses.

I would like to assure those who submitted responses, both on-line and hard copy form, that I have read all the responses carefully and respectfully.

The general outline of the Sandhurst Diocese response to the survey was as follows.

Some 95 submissions were received across the Diocese. 89 on-line and 6 written. Unfortunately, 56 of the on-line submissions were incomplete, that is, apart from identifying age group and parish details, no responses were made to any of the questions.

In total, then, 39 submissions were read and the results collated. The majority of the submissions came from 9 principal parishes in the Diocese, that is, from large rural centres.

The principal identification of those who responded (some 73.5%) was as lay person and parishioner. Of those who responded 71% identified themselves as married, 14% as single, and 9% as widowed. In terms of age groups, the most responses were submitted by persons in the 46-85, and in this group the most numerous was from the 66-75 bracket. We received 15 responses in total from the 18-45 age group.

We received responses to all 38 questions of the survey, some attracting greater interest than others. As anticipated, a wide spectrum of opinions about the questions was revealed.

Some thought that Modernism has destroyed the Church and is responsible for the present

problems.

Others thought the Church was irrelevant to most people's needs anyway.

People clearly welcomed the opportunity to respond, whatever position of belief and practice they occupied in the Church.

Some used the survey as the opportunity to dump on everything. It was clear to me that those who did respond fell passionately about the Church and its future, about marriage and the family.

Very few responses indicated a satisfaction with the way the Church was handling issues of marriage, commitment and the family.

A consistent concern was that the conceptual language of the survey, and indeed of many official Church pronouncements on marriage and related topics of commitment, was in language and a way of thinking out of touch with ordinary people and their daily concerns.

Some of the main points and opinions expressed in the survey could be summarised as follows:

- The language of the survey and, at times, Church language itself needs to be expressed more simply and clearly. Some ventured the opinion that the language of the Church was at times derogatory, exclusive, arcane and belittling, for example, "irregular unions".
- All persons should be accepted, where they are and who they are, and not judged.
- The role of the Catholic school in educating for faith and in supporting families was questioned.
- The Church's message was not really being heard in the modern world.
- Treat people as adults, that is, assist, support and respect their choices.
- The value of quality time in relationships, both for couples and for families, needs more recognition.
- Strong support for the enduring values of love, truth, hope and faithfulness in human relationships, and recognition that the strongest counter-value to marriage and family life is materialism.
- Strong support for changing the process of annulment of marriages, for example, a speedier, more respectful process that is also offered free of charge by the Church.
- Affirm families and parenthood in all aspects of Catholic Church life.

My thanks to all who participated in this survey. Let us continue to work and pray for the Synod in Rome later this year.

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