

**A PRIESTS' VOICE OF HOPE AND JOY
WITHIN OUR PILGRIM CHURCH
REGARDING PASTORAL MINISTRY TO FAMILIES**

**A report from
the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests (AUSCP)
based on a Survey of its priest members and other priests in the U.S.
and their responses to the 46 questions
prepared by the Secretariat for the Synod of Bishops
in anticipation of the 2015 Ordinary Synod on
*The Vocation and Mission of the Family
in the Church and in the Contemporary World***



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INTRODUCTION

The Association of U.S. Catholic Priests (AUSCP) delighted in Pope Francis' call for an Extraordinary Synod of Bishops to discuss *The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization*. When the Final Report of that Synod was released, the AUSCP delighted further in his call for broad conversation and consultation about that report through response to 46 questions (and numerous sub-questions) derived from it in preparation for a 2015 Ordinary Synod on "The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and in the Contemporary World". The Secretariat made the Report and Questions together the *Lineamenta* for the 2015 Synod. They were publicized to help stimulate deeper reflection and wider consultation within the Church on the topics raised by the 2014 Synod.

This Report is a contribution prepared by the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests (AUSCP) from responses to those questions by Catholic priests in good standing the United States.

Though the *Lineamenta's* questions were found by many to be complex, lengthy and difficult to address, AUSCP judged it important to provide input from priests to those specific questions. We undertook to prepare what we hope will be a positive and constructive contribution as the church struggles "to find the road to truth and mercy for all." (2014 Synod Report #62)

We first asked priests of our Association and beyond which questions they judged most appropriate and important for them to address based on their experiences of pastoral ministry. We then invited the participating priests' to write their responses to all the questions. This report is based on their ranking and the written responses they submitted. The written contributions were extensive, richly reflective of priests' pastoral experience, and practical.

Because the focus of the 2015 Synod is the Vocation and Mission of the Family in Church and World, and because a preponderance of the questions start with "how can ...", our summaries accent the practical pastoral advice offered by U.S. Catholic priests.

THE SURVEY & ITS RESPONDENTS

AUSCP's Survey used the 46 questions (with sub-questions) as sent by the Secretariat.

The Association sent the Survey first to AUSCP members only, of which there are 1130 spread across the United States in 108 dioceses. Of those, 428 or 37.61% responded. A second round was sent to 7000 priests whose e-mails were available from the P.J. Kenedy *Official Catholic Directory*. Of those, 144 or 2.1% responded.

Altogether 572 or 1.5% of the 39,000 U.S. Catholic priests participated. Seventy-five percent of the respondents are members of AUSCP, 25% are not. All respondents are Catholic priests in good standing.

Noteworthy is the pastoral experience of these priests. The cumulative years of pastoral service by the 230 priests attending AUSCP's 2014 National Assembly amounted to 8500 years or 37 years per priest. On that scale, the responses of 572 priests reported here reflect 21,139 years of pastoral experience.

Over 50% of participants either were not consulted by their bishops or didn't know whether their bishop had consulted with priests.

The Survey asked first that each question be rated on a seven point scale from "not important" to "essential." The ranking of the questions reported in the QUANTATIVE section below resulted from the cumulative averages derived from that scale.

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Following that rating of importance, respondents were invited to add their comments in response to the questions in 200 or fewer words. Three thousand one hundred and thirty-four (3134) comments were received. The QUALITATIVE section below is a summary of the points made in the responses to the 11 questions rated most important for priests.

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

The results from both Phases I (AUSCP members only) and II (Kenedy Directory list of 7000 priests) of the Survey manifested a surprising congruence of the questions considered most “important/essential” for priests to answer. This report is drawn primarily from the top 11 questions. In descending order using average computations, those eleven questions are: **20, 40, 38, 37, 46, 35, 7, 5, 6, 15, 3.**

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

A. QUESTIONS JUDGED ESSENTIAL FOR PRIESTS’ RESPONSE

In this report we summarize respondents’ written responses to those top 11 questions. The preponderance of questions start with “**How can ...**” We take that to mean that the Secretariat for the Synod is looking for **practical advice, what the Church can do** to respond pastorally to God’s people.

Our summaries of the responses are organized in bullet point style and phrased as clearly stated and doable action steps in direct response to the questions. We hope this style will facilitate their value to and use by the Secretariat. The suggestions come from priests providing direct pastoral service to the faithful, most of them for decades. (AUSCP’s membership consists largely of priests ordained two decades or more.) We hope the Secretariat will find their recommendations credible contributions to the *Instrumentum Laboris* it will prepare.

B. QUESTIONS IN ORDER OF IMPORTANCE (for Priests) WITH SUMMARY OF RESPONSES

Q.20a. How can people be helped to understand that no one is beyond the mercy of God?

- By grasping that people will understand the mercy of God when they experience the mercy of the Church
- By showing mercy to be a top emphasis in everything we say and do – in ALL situations, at ALL times
- By giving people experiences of **our** mercy and understanding; beyond words, show it so it is felt
- By removing obstacles to mercy-giving ministry
- By becoming a “field hospital” for our wounded and fragile families
- By judging not, but healing, avoiding practices that make people feel judged.
- By welcoming rather than rejecting and discriminating against the divorced/remarried, gay/lesbian Catholics
- By not presuming we in the Church are the righteous and those outside are in the wrong
- By never closing doors
- By revising antiquated canonical processes to make them instruments of pastoral ministry, including enabling internal forum solutions
- By being open and hospitable to diversity
- By referencing the saints as examples of God’s mercy received (Peter, Augustine) and teachers of mercy (Faustina & John Paul II)
- By offering private masses with those on the periphery to heal and reconcile them with the Church

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- By helping clergy understand
- By showing mercy in the confessional
- By respecting conscience in resolving moral dilemmas

Q.20b. How can this truth be expressed in the church's pastoral activity toward families, especially those that are wounded and fragile?

- By being open, honest, caring, loving, respectful and merciful priests & bishops
- By being honest and realistic in our dialogues with people
- By encouraging mercy, forgiveness and strengthening vs. punishing people for mistakes
- By watching what we say and do: supporting people in process and acknowledging we are *all* moving toward the full ideal to which God calls us
- By using "us all" – 'died for *all*' etc. in English Eucharistic prayers (vs. 'for many')
- By presenting the fullness of truth in a loving, even challenging way
- By opening the eucharistic table to all believers – lifting the communion ban
- By not threatening hellfire
- By preaching mercy, using Jesus & marriage examples, and acting like Jesus
- By ending legalism, adjusting Church law from exclusive to merciful, from legalistic to spiritual, accenting mercy
- By insisting that every person is made in the image and likeness of God, belongs to God, is a masterpiece of God and is broken.
- By publicly celebrating convalidated marriages
- By enabling witness of healed families and spouses in open parish meetings
- By discussing openly how failed marriages can be annulled and second marriages blessed

Q.40a. How can the Christian community give pastoral attention to families with persons with homosexual tendencies?

- By non-judgmental attitudes: love, respect & embrace without condoning
- By being non-judgmental in assumptions regarding behavior or motivations
- By acceptance, patience, understanding, welcoming and love
- By providing a new, healthy theology of sexuality based on fruitfulness
 - By bringing to bear good biblical scholarship and understanding of the social sciences regarding sexuality and sexual orientation/identity
- By appreciating the value of gay civil unions
 - The current Synodal language and the assumptions in it are loaded against gay people and committed gay unions
- By relaxing our paralysis on all sex having to be procreational
- By seeing and treating homosexual persons as normal human beings, brothers and sisters equally loved by God, with same desires for love, commitment, care for children
- By accepting science and knowing the experience of LGBT persons
- By using up-to-date terminology: 'homosexual tendencies' is better referenced as 'homosexual orientation'

Q.40b. What are the responses that ... are considered to be most appropriate?

- By listening attentively to families
- By admitting we don't know how to deal with their situations
- By mercy and compassion
- By changing our language – 'disordered' is offensive

Q.40c. ... How can such persons receive pastoral care in these situations in light of the Gospel?

- By being open and inviting communities

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- By affirming them as part of the church, part of creation
- By showing that the Church cares
- By having every parish develop a pastoral plan for such care
- By using USCCB's *Always Our Children*
- By establishing a distinct ritual for same-sex unions

Q.40d. How can God's will be proposed to them ...?

- By helping all Catholics to discern God's will for themselves
- By sharing with them God's love and God's principles re traditional marriage
- By challenging the assumption that God wills only man/woman model

Q.38 – With regard to the divorced and remarried, pastoral practice concerning the sacraments needs to be further studied ...

a. What are the prospects in such a case?

- Currently closed

b. What is possible?

- Accepting and living the tension between “the ideal” and “the realities”
- Promoting the ideal of indissolubility while responding compassionately to real situations of brokenness and persons' God-given desire to “begin again”
- No longer refusing communion (as punishment) but allowing it as nourishment for living faithful and committed lives of love by couples in a new marriage

c. What suggestions can be offered to resolve forms of undue or unnecessary impediments?

- By resolving cases on the local or individual level
- By simplifying the law and making it more flexible, entrusting determination of validity or nullity to pastors
- By using the internal forum – interior discernment before the Lord
 - By authorizing priests and pastors on the parish level to assist couples in determining whether grounds for annulment are present and allow them to return to the reception of the Eucharist
 - By acknowledging that the ultimate judge of whether a marriage was a sacrament has to be the two adults who attempted to enter into a sacrament
- By adopting the Orthodox approach which is more practical and compassionate, especially as regards second marriage of long duration

Q.37 – How can the procedure to determine cases of nullity be made more accessible, streamlined and possibly without expense?

- By accepting the reality that couples fail and accepting their life situation without imposing ‘legal’ burdens
 - By positing that if love dies the marriage was not sacramental
- By focusing the process on pastoral healing
- By making the process more clear and more expedient, more pastoral and less legal
- By letting pastors make a strong determination, write up the canonical reasons he finds thru limited testimony, and have Tribunal endorse his judgment
 - By entrusting cases to an independent decider, not the pastor who is an interested party
 - By entrusting to specially trained and travelling diocesan personnel (especially in large dioceses); having a counselling background can be helpful
- By letting spouses who know they are in a sacramental marriage with another decide the matter (with guidance)
- By abbreviating the length and reducing the tediousness of the process, which many find overwhelming
 - By requiring decisions to be reached within six months and declaring marriage automatically null if not
- By eliminating the mandatory second review of Tribunal decisions
- By eliminating involvement from Rome by training and trusting priests

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- By making the process authentic, non-discriminatory and just
- By reframing all the rules, deciding on a diocesan basis, with primary emphasis on ‘irreconcilability’
- By not insisting that couples ‘prove’ that God is no longer present in their commitment/union (as we don’t insist on *proof* when we witness their marriage)
- By admitting insufficient preparation as grounds
- By positing that merely civil and failed Protestant marriages are not sacramental
- By placing the burden of proof on the Defender of the Bond rather than the Advocate
- By removing or greatly reducing any cost, welcoming a donation if parties are able to afford
- By simplifying and charging nothing, eliminating the appearance of simony

Q.46 – How can parents and the Christian family be made aware that the duty of transmitting the faith is an intrinsic aspect of being a Christian?

- By reverencing and celebrating the vocation of married life
- By including prayers of the faithful that reference marriage as a vocation
- By emphasizing the significance of parents exemplifying faith, hope, charity and involvement
- By educating parents to their responsibility and about conscience through Baptismal preparation, Marriage Encounter, small groups, adult faith formation
- By stressing the family as the basic social unit and acknowledging the assisting role of other family members and community support from church, civic leaders, and others
- By emphasizing and reinforcing parents as the first place of evangelization and the primary catechists and role models for their children
- By stressing whole parish involvement in sacramental preparation and transmission of the faith – we are a missionary people
- By encouraging Catholic schools for the education of their children
- By aligning parents’ version of being Christian with science and people’s experience of the world today so they do not seem ‘out of it’ to the dismay of their children
- By enabling parents to have access to good materials and witness through up-to-date communications systems and adult faith formation
- By focusing on mission and formation for mission in parish life
- By preaching the Gospel, helping them know God and Jesus, not “about” them
- By encouraging rather than blaming
- By enabling families to celebrate the Eucharist and other Sacraments in their vernacular (vs. a stilted Latinized translation)
- By reviewing discipline of the sacraments for divorced and remarried Catholics
- By enabling communal penance services
- By learning from the Mormons and Evangelicals
- By getting bishops out of their episcopal environment

Q.35a. Is the Christian community in a position to undertake the care of all wounded families so that they can experience the Father’s mercy?

- No. More tools and resources are needed.

Q.35b. How does the Christian community engage in removing the social and economic factors that often determine this situation?

- By reaching out, respecting and engaging with wounded families
- By understanding the stages of growth and human development of couples and families
- By addressing quality of life issues with the help of professionals

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- By the bishops calling for social justice
- By urging government assistance to provide child care, education, and help for people to find decent housing, jobs, affordable health care, etc. in light of the economic pressures upon marriage and family life
- By changing church attitudes
 - Using the word “wounded” seems negative and suggests blame

Q.35c. What steps have been taken and what can be done to increase this activity and the sense of mission that sustains it?

- By having leadership that breaks through outdated theological, psychological and sociological theories
- By making the hierarchical structure of the Church more functional
- By bringing Church policies closer to Jesus’ gospel
- By making worship the center of parish life out of which comes social and political activity seeking justice
- By using the internal forum to resolve problems
- By imitating the practices of the Eastern Orthodox churches

Q.7. – How is the teaching from sacred Scripture utilized in pastoral activity on behalf of families? To what extent does ‘fixing our gaze on Christ’ nourish a pastoral care of the family that is courageous and faithful?

- By applying the Scriptures to the realities of families living in today’s world where often the nuclear family model has fallen apart
- By preaching less the rubrics and more the meaning of Scripture
- By imitating Jesus who would be less condemning and more empathetic to families struggling to keep the family together
- By realizing that the Church’s dogma regarding marriage and family is too narrow and rigid
- By learning from Protestants who do a better job of applying scriptural values to family
- By being less condemning and accusing of sin re issues of marriage and family
- By presenting church as a model for how families can continue to evolve and grow
- By accenting the importance of personal and family prayer for success in marriage
- By fitting pastoral care approach to the demography of the local situation
- By reaching beyond the traditional family (man, woman, child) in our ministry (though some still see that as the only ‘vibrant, vital, creative form of family’ and see only that as the domestic Church and a visible sign of God’s plan)
- By moving away from convoluted theological terms and abstract, irrelevant appeal to ‘natural law’

Q.5a. How do Christian families bear witness for succeeding generations to the development and growth of a life of sentiment?

- By regular participation in the Eucharist
- By accenting positive messages about marriage and family and relationships
- By putting in leadership persons who model what is asked of family members, who understand human love, dating and relationships; who understand the difficulties and can frame the questions and offer meaningful solutions
- By identifying and engaging persons who
 - have a realistic, holistic and broad understanding of marriage, healthy living, maintain bonds of love and standards of raising and nurturing children
 - can apply critical thinking skills to the Scriptures and
 - have reflected on their own family life experience
- By accompanying couples from marriage preparation through the early formative years with children through peer-to-peer ministry
- By engaging great involvement of lay people in catechesis and ministry

Q.5b. How might the formation of ordained ministers be improved? What qualified persons are urgently needed in this pastoral activity?

- By making sure seminary faculty have pastoral experience
- By training seminarians to actively **listen** to the needs and concerns of people before reacting and proposing solutions or citing doctrine and morals
- By assuring that those being ordained understand that they are not thereby qualified for pastoral activity regarding marriage
- By training ministers to refer families/couples to professionals for serious problems
- By exposing seminarians and clergy who need to grow in pastoral skills to married couples trained to help them grow
- By training in pastorally effective ways of teaching and relating
- By providing courses in down-to-earth psychology, sociology, counselling and ongoing personal development toward maturity
- By making sure seminarians understand the ongoing cycles of human development
- By improving seminary training so candidates understand and empathize with the struggles of lay families and persons
- By including time with and work with families during seminary training, prior to ordination
- By reducing accent on cultic priesthood projecting priests as above and apart from laity
- By assuring that seminarians know our Catholic history
- By attacking every manifestation of clericalism
- By ordaining married men as priests and married women as deacons who might be better able to minister effectively to families

Q.6a. To what extent and by what means is the ordinary pastoral care of families addressed to those on the periphery?

- Most pastoral care is not focused on the periphery at all; priests at least are consumed with ministering to those active and in the core of the parish and feel that should be their focus
- Most ordained have no clue about those who live on the periphery

Q.6b. What operational guidelines are available to foster and appreciate the ‘desire to form a family’ planted by the Creator in the heart of every person, esp. among young people, including those in family situations that do not correspond to the Christian vision?

- If they exist, they are not promoted and readily available
- We don’t assist them in any real way

Q.6c. How do they respond to the church’s efforts in her mission to them?

- Our indifference is met with their indifference
- As efforts are minimal, few respond

Q.6d. How prevalent is natural marriage among the non-baptized, also in relation to the desire to form a family among the young?

- The meaning of “natural marriage” must be clarified: in U.S. terms, does it reference mere common law marriage or civil marriages (before a state but not a religious official)?
- Civil marriages are common
- Mere living together is becoming still more common
- Common law marriages (neither religious or civil but lasting a certain number of years) are not infrequent
- A preponderance of couples today seem to try natural marriage/living together before marrying whether civilly, religiously, or sacramentally

Q.15. How can a familial spirituality be developed and how can families become places of new life in Christ?

- By translating magisterial teaching into language that connects with people's lived experience of God and church
 - By using language that "shares the vision that galvanizes the heart"
- By having those with lived experience bring out the concrete ways the rhythms, cycles and events of married life reveal the Paschal Mystery
- By engaging the assistance of trained lay people
- By improved adult faith formation
- By family-centered catechesis
- By family service projects
- By priests' participating in family events, listening with the heart and speaking from it
- By being inclusive of diverse family structures and faiths, including same gender and non-Christian partners

Q.3. – Beyond proclaiming God's word and pointing out extreme situations,

Q.3a. How does the church choose to be present 'as church' and to draw near families in extreme situations?

- By relating to such families with welcome, respect and dignity, affirming their value
- By eliminating our tendency to judge and condemn, seeing persons in such situations as 'sinful'
- By leading with relationship to the persons rather than legal terms and magisterial teaching
- By increasing the number of ministers, including and especially married couples and laity, available to go out to such families
- By supporting them practically, beyond that provided by Catholic Charities – inviting to communion, helping with annulments, validating marriages
- By adopting the concept of 'gradualism' to the following of Christ by persons and families
- The church too often chooses to be exclusionary rather than welcoming and does not draw near. This repels people.

Q.3b. How does the church seek to prevent these situations?

- By focusing on relationships that exist and helping them grow toward the ideal
- By not trying to fit loving and life-giving relationships into the church's doctrinal template

Q.3c. What can be done to support and strengthen families of believers and those faithful to the bonds of marriage?

- Build and strengthen community
- Multiply resources available to strengthen them
- Broaden and deepen our understanding of marital relations

COMMENTS

The responses of U.S. priests reported above reflect the deep compassion for and commitment to the people they serve as they face the challenges of married life. The comments also reflect deep support for the ministry and initiatives of Pope Francis based on the priority of gospel mercy. Listed below are select comments from the Survey taken.

"Given that mercy is God's essential characteristic and that the Church is [to be an instrument of] God's presence in the world, if the Church is not exercising mercy she has no reason to exist. That means mercy in ALL situations and at ALL times."

"Pope Francis is making mercy a constant theme of his papacy as an essential role for the Church in pastoral situations. ... But the institutional Church raises up lots of obstacles to 'mercy-giving' ministry."

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“The mercy of God sustains us. God does not expect perfection in how we live. We live with our strengths and weaknesses. We make mistakes. Grace is the mercy of God that surrounds us with forgiveness and strength to move in a direction that draws us closer to God. We need to encourage this movement rather than punish people for not reaching perfection!”

“... The compassion of Christ comes before the laws of the Church. Not everyone can live the ideal; mercy should always be shown.”

“Pastoral care for wounded families and individuals should be the defining focus of Christian discipleship, it is Essential. How it is applied will demand listening before action, prayer before decisions, and ongoing discernment thereafter.”

“The Church needs to focus much more on relationships that exist, ... (and on) how to help them. The Church needs to stop condemning relationships that are loving and life giving because they somehow don’t fit the template of RC church doctrine.”

“Our present procedures re determining nullity need to be dramatically reformed. We are pushing people out of the Church.”

“Many have been lost to the faith because of the present system [re nullity].”

“Church policies seem so distant from Jesus of the gospel.”

“Many priests believe that they are qualified to counsel couples and individuals based on the fact that they have been ordained to the priesthood, [having been] taught nothing about the social and moral constructs of growing as a person and as part of a social group, ignorant about the idea of growth throughout the life cycle.”

“The Christian community must have a leadership that breaks through the chains of outdated theological, psychological and sociological theories.”

“Our initial outreach cannot be couched in legal terms and magisterial teachings – it must be done as Jesus did it – offering encouragement, challenge, and understanding of the brokenness in our society and culture.”

“Pastoral Care would be wonderful if it really dealt with assisting people to mature, to belong, to survive, to cope, and to meet Christ in their day-to-day lives.”

“What is needed is a greater and growing understanding of Church as family, as a model for how families today can continue to evolve and grow. ... This is necessary for us to grow as children of the world and children of God.”

LIMITATIONS OF THE REPORT

The AUSCP does not pretend to speak for all priests in the United States. The number of respondents to our survey is modest and 75% of them are members of our Association. Neither does this report attempt to speak to all 46 questions posed, only to those which priests themselves judged most important and worthwhile for them to address. The report does not reflect all that the priests offered in their comments and reflections. It

concentrates on those *practical pastoral actions* priests believe can and should be taken to better minister to families in a way that reflects “truth and mercy for all,” “truth in charity.”

Those limitations notwithstanding, we believe that the suggestions in this report reflect the pastoral experience and wisdom of priests in the United States gained by decades, indeed millennia collectively, of ministry to families.

FINAL REMARK

The AUSCP submits this report to the 2015 Synod on *The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and in the Contemporary World* in hope that it will be a helpful contribution to the Spirit-led work of our bishops in Synod. We have sought to honor Pope Francis’ call for us all “to be courageous in faith and humbly and honestly to embrace the truth in charity.” (#62 of final Report of the 2014 Assembly)

We pray with Pope Francis that our report will help “the collegial journey of the bishops and (that) with the involvement of the people of God, the Holy Spirit will guide us in finding the road to truth and mercy for all.” (#62)