



The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and Contemporary World

**Response by the German Bishops' Conference
to the Questions Aimed at a Response to and an In-Depth Examination
of the *Relatio Synodi* in the Preparatory Document
for the XIV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops of 2015**

The German Bishops' Conference explored the *Lineamenta* for the XIV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (4 to 25 October 2015) in detail at the meeting of the Permanent Council that was held on 26/27 January 2015 and at its spring full assembly held in Hildesheim from 23 to 26 February 2015. Both the *Relatio* and the questions were published on the websites of the dioceses in order to give the faithful and the parishes the opportunity to make a statement to their bishopric. The Central Committee of German Catholics (ZdK), the German Conference of Superiors of Religious Orders (DOK) and the Faculty Association of Catholic Theology were also asked for their statements.

The fact that the People of God was also consulted in the preparation for the Ordinary Synod of Bishops 2015 received a very positive echo in the dioceses and associations. The faithful are grateful for having been asked, and consider this to constitute an intensification of the dialogue within in the Church. Having said that, many of the responses complain of the wording contained in the questions, which is characterised by the use of specialist theological terms, by redundancy and by abstract formulations, in which many faithful were unable to recognise their experience of marriage and the family. Therefore, frequently not all the questions were answered, and as a whole fewer faithful participated than when responding to the questionnaire preparing for the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops in the previous year. It should be mentioned here that, in addition to the short timeframe, the new questions also do not seek a description of the current situation of marriage and the family, but aim to develop new pastoral responses. The fact of being consulted twice has led to considerable expectations among many faithful with regard to the Synod of Bishops, which they expect to provide a further development of the Church's teaching and pastoral care in questions related to marriage and the family.

The consultation between the bishops also took on board the statements of the experts from the dioceses for pastoral care of marriage and of the family, from family training centres, and in several dioceses also included the votes of the episcopal advisory bodies (Presbyteral Council, Diocesan Pastoral Council, Spiritual Council). Additionally, there has been intensive discussion of the questions relating to the pastoral care of marriage and of the family since the

Synod of Bishops was announced in the Catholic press, as well as in specialist theological journals and publications.

After having consulted the People of God, the German Bishops' Conference is pleased to present its answers on the pages below, which are implicitly intended to set the thematic emphasis. This follows the "pastoral approach initiated at the Extraordinary Synod which is grounded in Vatican II and the Magisterium of Pope Francis" (*Lineamenta*, p. 26), and implicitly supports a "pastoral activity that is characterised by a "culture of encounter" and capable of recognising the Lord's gratuitous work, even outside customary models, and of confidently adopting the idea of a "field hospital", which is very beneficial in proclaiming God's mercy" (*Lineamenta*, p. 21).

Regarding the Preliminary Question Applicable to All Sections of the Relatio Synodi

Contrary to the explicit intention and wording with which the questionnaire begins, namely to start with "life's periphery" and go on to develop the teaching of marriage and the family, the *Relatio Synodi* and the wording of the questionnaire still focus too much on an idealised image of the family which fails to do justice to the social realities in Germany. There have been complaints that the idealisation of marriage and the family fails to make an inviting impression on many people, but on the contrary goes towards causing many to refrain from concluding a sacramental marriage. Correspondingly, a large number of faithful would like to see clearer steps being taken towards overcoming the "divide between the reality practiced in families in our parishes and associations and the Church's teachings" that was already described in the run-up to the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops (2014). There is also criticism of the perception of the Catholic background, which still has too much of an inner-ecclesial focus in view of the reality of an increasingly multireligious and multicultural society in which the number of people with no religious reference point is also increasing, and of the lack of a really appreciative language for forms of relationship which neither conform to the Church's ideal nor take marriage and the family as an exclusive orientation. For instance, the number of marriages that are concluded between a Catholic partner and one who has no religious affiliation, and who frequently has a distanced attitude towards faith, has been increasing for several years. The difficult question arises here of how the Church can support the Catholic partner in his/her efforts to practice their faith and pass it on to the children without weakening the marital community and community of love. Criticism was voiced that the discussion of the situation faced by people with a homosexual orientation is discontinued as soon as it is practiced in a partnership, and also that there is no discussion of contraception methods – unlike in the questionnaire prior to the Extraordinary Synod –, this being named as one of the main causes of the divide between the Church's teachings. Responses from the associations furthermore recall the considerable significance attaching to marriage and the family for human cohabitation in society, which is not sufficiently covered in the *Relatio Synodi*. It is expected that greater attention be paid to these topics in the Ordinary Synod of Bishops in addition to the certainly necessary encouragement of Christian families.

Part I

Listening: The Context and Challenges of the Family

The Socio-Cultural Context

Re questions 1-6

Pastoral care in Germany can rely on large numbers of analytical tools and findings in terms of social science and the humanities which range from demographic analyses through demoscopic surveys, social environment studies and psychological studies to social research evaluation studies with regard to individual pastoral offers.

As was shown by the responses to the questionnaire in preparation for the III Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops of 2014, the sociocultural situation in which the Church's pastoral care of the family currently takes place is characterised by a clearly-observable dichotomy. On the one hand, one can identify a longing for successful relationships as well as a high level of appreciation of partnership, parenthood and the family in broad sections of society. This is however countered by the fact that the number of state and church marriages has fallen considerably in recent years, the number of civil divorces continues at a high level and several aspects of the Church's teachings on sexuality, partnership and marriage are hardly understood, even among church-going Catholics, and are also not practised.

One also finds a similarly dichotomised situation in civil society when it comes to marriage and the family. On the one hand, there is respect for the spheres of life that are constituted by partnership, marriage and the family, which at times appears exaggerated, whilst on the other hand one finds in the economy and at work a strong trend towards marginalising family life, which is relegated into marginal times and the burdens of which are privatised. This dichotomy between great expectations of life in the family on the one hand, and unfavourable circumstances on the other, evidently constitutes a major obstacle for young people when it comes to entering into marriage and forming a family at all. This is also reflected in the demographic situation in Germany, a country with one of the lowest birthrates in the world. This dichotomy challenges us to proclaim the Gospel of the family anew, and in this context to take account of the experiences and moral convictions of families and pastors. There is also a need here to take a more self-critical look at our own proclamation and pastoral practice, to rid ourselves of arrogance in all respects and to find a sensitive, humble language which people find helpful, especially those who find themselves in difficult situations.

Part II:

Looking at Christ: The Gospel of the Family

Looking at Jesus and the Divine Pedagogy in the History of Salvation

Re questions 7-10

A proclamation of the Gospel of the family "with renewed freshness and enthusiasm" (*Relatio Synodi*, No. 4) starts by taking an attentive look at people in their individual lives. The reality

of their lives, their joys and needs, but also their values and their longings, must be met with appreciation. The family is regarded as one of the highest values in our society. And there is also a common denominator, a consensus connecting them with regard to the values lived in marriage and the family: love, faithfulness, trust, mutual assistance and support – also in times of prolonged sickness or need –, security and reliability, appreciation and respectful acceptance are named again and again as central values in marriage and the family. A majority of young people would like to have children one day and to live in a stable family. Linked to this is a longing for life-long faithfulness, for unconditional acceptance, true friendship and personal community. People's longings and values are countered by many experiences of risks and fragility, as well as by related fears and anxiety which must be taken seriously by anyone wishing to proclaim the Gospel.

Church pastoral care and catechesis for marriage will meet with a warm welcome if they can offer people support in making their lives successful in their relationships as couples and in their families on the basis of their respective circumstances, longings and specific everyday struggles. Good examples in this sense include the programmes for strengthening communication between couples “EPL – A partnership learning programme” and “KEK – Constructive marriage and communication”. Pastoral care of marriage and of the family can commit to the pastoral care of the relationship long before a marriage is concluded in order to accompany the process of maturing, and can also help clarify whether a friendship and partnership can lead to marriage. It should see itself as a companion helping people on their way through the various phases of their lives and offering them both a religious interpretation and strengthening and accompaniment if they wish to shape their lives in a relationship with Jesus' message.

The Biblical ideas and perceptions of a kind God, of the shepherd, of the loving and merciful Father who loves people unconditionally, regardless of how they perform, removes from couples the burden of any exaggerated idea of perfection, both with regard to the relationship and to the partner. This deburdening divine and marital mercy can be experienced as a blessing. For instance, couples can learn to admit mistakes to one another, to forgive one another and hence to grow by their own weaknesses and those of others.

Central significance within catechesis for marriage attaches to the example of married couples. This relates first and foremost to the example of one's own life. The path which a married couple takes together through highs and lows, and the respectful way in which the family members treat one another, have a major impact and conviction in most cases – for instance when it comes to the question of what holds relationships together through a lifetime and makes them strong. In particular older married couples who have been married for a long time can have a convincing impact in the parish in this regard.

Married couples should however also be encouraged, beyond the witness of their own lives, to recount their experiences. It is for instance part of the tasks of pastoral care to support married couples in enabling them to speak out and relate their experiences and give witness to the experience of the fullness of life in marriage and the family. For the development of the

Church's pastoral care of marriage and of the family, it is proposed to qualify more and more married couples as players and multipliers in the pastoral care of the family, so that in the long term not only individuals, but also married couples, can take over the pastoral and catechetical guidance of married couples and families.

The formation and expansion of networks is recommended so that married couples and families can accompany, support, inspire and strengthen one another. Family or house groups, for instance at parish level, have proven to be a helpful networking tool here which however have difficulty reaching young couples.

Re question 11

The significance of the Sacrament of Marriage and its relevance for everyday life in marriage and the family will need to be opened up anew and more profoundly. A central point of reference here is the profoundly human experience of the conjugal community of life and love as the most intimate and intensive form of community between two people. Most married people experience their marital relationship as the most valuable, most important relationship in their lives, also and particularly when it comes to not avoiding crises and conflicts in marital relationships, but deliberately experiencing and overcoming them. The conjugal relationship of love is experienced as a gift which one cannot "make" oneself. At the same time, married people experience the long-term success of their marriage as potentially endangered and fragile. Trust in God's blessing and guidance here can give tranquillity, and faith in His presence in the marital bond as well as His faithfulness to the Covenant can bring hope and confidence.

The experience that the community of conjugal life and love consists of ups and downs, of harmony and of conflictive dialogue at the same time, and that this constitutes its very intensity and fullness, makes people receptive to the message of the revelation that the relationship between man and God is also particularly manifest in marriage, and that a marriage between Christians is therefore a place of real encounter with Jesus Christ. Couples can learn by His example that Christian love also involves doing without and making sacrifices. Conjugal love demands a renewed decision every day and a constant development of the relationship. Married couples can experience the Sacrament of Marriage as a source of strength for the daily decision for love and as a challenge to continue on the path.

The significance of the Sacrament of Marriage only becomes evident in faith. The catechesis for marriage must therefore always be incorporated in a general Christian catechesis which seeks to serve the growth of a living relationship with Jesus Christ and with God as a merciful and loving Father.

The Family in God's Savific Plan

Re question 12

See re question 11 above.

Re questions 13-14

The Sacrament of Marriage is closely connected with the sacramentality of the Church, in the community of which it is incorporated. In the ecclesial community, the family will need to come to be perceived even more as a church on a small scale and as the subject of evangelisation. As the smallest form of church *communio*, the family can become a place of proclamation of the Word of God, of service towards neighbours and of the celebration of the faith. Christian married couples and families are responsible for transmitting the faith to their children and grandchildren. At the same time, they are important sources of life and strength of the parishes and make the Church present in the midst of society. Particularly in the diaspora, Christian families come into view as a witness to practical faith, and hence as places in which the Church can be experienced.

The life witness of couples and parents is decisive for the effectiveness of the family in the mission and in evangelisation, and this takes place quite naturally in everyday life. Families need to be helped to realise that they are already doing missionary work through the way in which they live together. When parents comfort their children, when generations help one another, when families attend religious services and celebrate Christian rituals in a domestic setting throughout the church year, then people bear a witness of faith to one another, and through their love for one another make Jesus Christ visible as the love of God made man. Life in marriage and the family takes place through taking responsibility for one another in the world. Families which shape their lives on the basis of the Christian faith are hence missionary per se. Marriage itself acts as a witness, given that it portrays the Covenant of Christ with His Church (cf. *Eph* 5:35). If the life witness of Christian families is noticed, talk frequently turns towards faith as a matter of course.

The awareness of the family as a "domestic church" is not very prevalent in Germany. The Synod should therefore give further theological consideration to the term "domestic church" as used in *Lumen gentium* 11. There is a need for pastoral care which regards families as a major resource of practiced faith which radiates into the Church's parishes and into the respective social environment. Families should certainly not be left alone, and they need support if they are not to be overtaxed in this role. Given the fact that a large share of the faithful in the parishes are married, it is a matter of strengthening the pastoral care of the family and especially the pastoral care of marriage as an element of pastoral care in parishes. There should be more discussion in the parish catechesis of the question of the degree to which faith is significant not only for the individual, but also for the success of relationships between couples, marriages and families. All in all, marriage should be more present as a topic in the parishes, such as in the sermon, in prayers and intercessions, but also in special services, including for wedding anniversaries, in blessings of married couples and families, as they have become customary in many places on Valentine's Day, or by the special celebration of festivals of sainted married couples. Not lastly, the external perception of the Church as an

institution also has an impact on families and society. Missionary and family-friendly action becomes the standard for the credibility of the message, particularly in the economic sphere within social policy, such as in the way the Church acts as an employer.

The Family in the Church's Documents

Re questions 15-16

People who are called upon to live in marriage and the family must be encouraged to find their vocation and to recognise it as such. In this context, there is a need for a self-critical reflection of the doctrine and proclamation as to whether the devaluation, originating from previous centuries, of the conjugal form of life as against one lived in celibacy has yet been adequately dealt with, or whether such images and convictions continue to be characteristic.

Since the conjugal form of life constitutes a separate form of following Christ, there is also a need to strengthen, promote and develop a specifically conjugal and family-friendly spirituality providing help to spouses from the source of mercy of the Sacrament of Marriage to fulfil their mission in the Church and in the world. There is first of all a need to attentively follow what is already being experienced in co-habitation in marriage and the family in terms of spirituality. The awareness of this must be awakened and deepened so that also the diaconic acts in the family (helping and supporting one another, being there and caring for one another, listening to one another, bringing up the children, caring for older or sick family members, or those with disabilities, etc.) takes on a profoundly spiritual dimension, given that Jesus Christ has qualified service to one's neighbours as a primary place in which to meet with Him (cf. *Mt 25*). The interpretation of love between spouses, as well as between parents and children, as an image of God's love of people could be an opportunity to open up to families their own spirituality which is already present, and to develop it.

It is not easy to bring everyday life into a connection with faith in our secular social context. Additionally, joint rituals of living faith in everyday life are made more difficult by socio-political frameworks, so that frequently no meals are eaten together, and time spent together as a family becomes a scarce asset. Families hence need suggestions and help as to how to shape their everyday lives at home in religious terms: different forms of communitisation, exploring God's Word, times of prayer and religious service in suitable forms. Diverse assistance services in this area, as well as offers of family pastoral care at parish level, are also offered by Catholic institutions and family training facilities, which for instance offer exercises, pilgrimages, spiritual weekends or other events specifically for families. Useful suggestions for a practiced spirituality in families are also provided by the series of booklets entitled "Hot spots of life – spirituality in the family" which is published by the Working Party on Catholic Family Formation (AKF).

The Indissolubility of Marriage and the Joy of Sharing Life Together

Re questions 17-19

See questions 7-10 above.

The Truth and Beauty of the Family and Mercy Towards Broken and Fragile Families

Re questions 20-22

As a matter of principle, pastoral care should also adopt an appreciative attitude towards those who do not, or do not yet, live up to the demands of the Gospel. There is a need to develop pastoral care which above all stresses the nature of being a Christian as a path in respect of marriage and the family. It is to be examined here whether the law of graduality or the early Christian teaching of the “*logoi spermatikoi*” can be applied to the relationship between sacramental marriage and other types of living arrangement. Pastoral care for those who live together in a civil marriage or without a wedding certificate, and for homosexual faithful, is commented on in detail in the sections regarding questions 32-39.

Part III:

Confronting the Situation: Pastoral Perspectives

Proclaiming the Gospel of the Family Today in Various Contexts

Re questions 23-27

At all times and in view of all external conditions, the pastoral care of the Church is subject to the requirement to always recall the essence of the Christian message anew: The Good News of Jesus Christ of the coming dominion of God which is already among people, finally and unsurpassably witnessed by His death and His resurrection from the dead. The Church must proclaim this Gospel to people as a liberating message. Pastoral care must strengthen people in their efforts to recognise themselves as helping to build the Kingdom of God and to take part therein with repeatedly new courage, to draw on the sources of the community of the faithful, to specifically experience the salvation and freedom that is gifted therein in their everyday lives and to pass on this experience. This is the overall context in which we find pastoral care of marriage and of the family. The areas of life constituted by relationships between couples, marriage and the family have considerable significance for people in today's German society which remains unbroken and which in some respects has grown even further. Also and particularly in these so highly estimated areas of life, people are invited, called and demanded to act as players in building God's Kingdom. Drawing from the sources of faith, this however initially means repeatedly seeking the good for others, accepting the people who have been entrusted to one and realising together with them a piece of “God's domestic community” in the midst of the complexity and dynamic of a modern structure of relationships. It can however be possible in this strength to not close oneself up in self-loving and in egocentricity, but again and again to overcome personal egotism and take up a loving fundamental stance towards our fellow humans.

This challenging invitation must be constantly offered anew by the pastoral care of marriage and of the family, and support provided. This can only be successful in open communication

which takes place on an equal footing and which is honest and inviting at the same time. All in all, pastoral care of marriage and of the family hence requires an appreciative fundamental orientation which, on the basis of human longing, first of all looks at what steps have already been taken on the path towards consciously and responsibly living in love and faithfulness, and then submits from the Gospel offers for orientation and strengthening on this path. This also applies with regard to lone mothers and fathers, unmarried couples, patchwork families and marriages which find themselves in crisis. In particular, pastoral care must ensure that open, unprejudiced and non-moralising communication is also engaged in towards those who regard themselves as Christians and Catholics but who do not or cannot live in full congruency with the teaching of the Church in questions that are related to marriage and the family. It is a matter of permitting, in love and with sympathy, each individual to take their personal path (also of seeking God) and of ensuring that this process is accompanied by giving advice, but is not patronising. This manner of approaching people borne by the positive message of the Gospel is desired and expected from the pastoral care of their Church by Catholics in the German bishoprics, as is shown with considerable unanimity in the feedback, in some cases vehemently. It is hoped to see, particularly from representatives of the Church, an attitude which places the inviting, attentive aspect of communication with people clearly above that of defining clear boundaries. Only a small minority here consider the drawing of boundaries and compliance with them as uncompromisingly as possible as a particularly submitted concern because they fear a loss of clarity in teaching.

Having said that, communication that is open, and not moralising, judging and deprecating, certainly does not mean that the principles are renounced. One might initially regard the individualisation of ways of life which is highly indicative of the current age above all as being connected to the problem of the relativism and increasing pluralisation of the environments in which people live. In this individualisation, people however experience first and foremost the opportunity to live their lives more according to their own ideas than used to be possible. This naturally frequently also leads to challenging or overtaxing situations. This in turn makes orientation and re-orientation all the more significant. The Church is faced in these developments by the challenge of re-illuminating the relationship between objective norms by the community of the faithful and the Church's Magisterium, on the one hand, and the subjective conscience-based convictions of the faithful on the other. The significance and orientating power of the Church's teaching may not be drawn into the relative and arbitrary here, nor may the significance of the individual conscience be weakened or indeed circumvented as the final subjective decision-making instance of the individual. In this tension, it is necessary to make the doctrine of the Church, in the sense of a responsible formation of conscience, repeatedly newly known but also comprehensible. The Magisterium is faced here by the challenge of repeatedly verifying, honestly and self-critically, whether the teaching really can be imparted to people in all aspects and differentiations. As was already the case with the questionnaire in the run-up to the Extraordinary Synod of 2014, the feedback from the dioceses once more points clearly here to the fact that, in particular, a number of sexual ethical aspects of the Church's teaching are neither understood nor any longer accepted. On the other hand, it is stressed at the same time that central aspects of the Church's teaching on marriage and the family remain highly significant. Explicit mention is made here

of the broad acceptance of monogamy among the population, of the high level of appreciation of marriage as a community of love, of the considerable recognition of faithfulness as a value in the relationship and of the connection between marriage and desired fertility. Finally, it is still the case that there is a high degree of unanimity among church-going Catholics in their rejection of abortion.

Since pastoral care is undeniably at a crossroads here and must do its job at this crossroads, a constant process of relinking to its fundamental mandate is needed: inviting people to interpret their lives on the basis of faith, to orientate their actions by it and to travel the path together as God's pilgrim people.

When it comes to pastoral care of marriage and of the family in Germany, it can be observed in this respect that, firstly, much is already being done, and many people, and that initiatives and institutions are active, but that, secondly, much remains to be done, and many aspects have not yet become as effective as would be necessary. Particularly in the training of pastoral workers, and especially of priests, a sensitivity for the family sector needs to be promoted. Work experience in family-related fields is a way which has been reported about positively here. An appreciative approach towards the realities of life and love in the family enables those in training for the priesthood to live and grow in, with and from families.

Guiding Engaged Couples in Their Preparation for Marriage and Accompanying Married Couples in the Initial Years of Marriage

Re questions 28-31

The Church in Germany is committed at various levels and in many ways to providing pastoral care in preparation for marriage, accompanying marriage, encouragement to transmit life, promotion of families and strengthening upbringing skills, but frequently more isolatedly than universally. One clear observation can be recorded here: In all places where church institutions make offers in partnership, marriage and the family, these are appreciated if it is made clear that these are offers that are honest and well secured in factual terms, aiming to support people in their situations in partnership, marriage and the family and to provide them with an orientation in achieving the abovementioned goals. In this regard the marriage, family and life counselling that has been developed at a professional standard in many German dioceses, or the KESS child upbringing courses ("cooperative, encouraging, social, situation-orientated") which are offered in many places by the Working Party on Catholic Family Formation (AKF), as well as many other offers of Catholic family formation and pastoral care of the family, are appreciated. The same also applies to well-established, high-quality family-related offers at parish level. Nonetheless, the present situation of marriage and the family requires a new approach of amplified and concerted engagement in these fields. Particularly in preparation for marriage and in accompanying young married couples and families, it is shown that there are both courses and seminars with falling numbers of attendees, whilst at the same time there are interested couples who do not find any suitable offers. It is in particular highly problematical when couples turn to church agencies when preparing for marriage but do not find helpful support there or an answer to their faith-related questions.

Greater attention should be given as a whole to preparation for marriage, as well as to marriage guidance services, in the German dioceses.

It can be observed with regard to the feedback from the dioceses that there are a number of existing elements and models of contemporary pastoral care of marriage and of the family which need to be examined as to the conditions under which they can be amplified and their impact broadened. It is important to communicate on possibilities and methods of pastoral care of marriage and of the family, as well as on the willingness in the dioceses, associations and movements to learn from one another. Knowledge in terms of social and science and humanities of the potential for development of and risks to relationships between couples, as well as of parent-child relationships, can be made to serve the purpose of the further development of pastoral care of marriage and of the family. There will be a greater need in the future of good coordination between the German dioceses since it does not make sense for each diocese to develop concepts for itself as well as to organise the further and advanced training of pastoral workers. At the same time, there is a need to clarify that the dioceses must taken on their own responsibility and that there cannot be one single course model for preparation for marriage or for accompaniment of couples and families. The methods, approaches and offers of pastoral care of marriage and of the family require a certain level of diversity against the background of a joint central concern in an environment that is typified by an enormous plurality of circumstances.

Pastoral care which starts in the promotion and release of people's own resources in the light of faith, despite all its presence particularly in the crisis phases of life, will always also consider the aspect of preventively enhancing individual skills. This is self-evident when it comes to pastoral care of marriage and of the family. Courses to promote communication within couples and a willingness to commit to relationships, as well as individual counselling for married couples and families, should be given a stronger profile in preventive terms which strengthens relationships than from the point of view of crisis intervention. Particularly from Catholic marriage, family and life counselling, there are repeated indications that, if they are commenced in good time, counselling processes can have a major effect in many cases in terms of supporting marriage and relationships. Similarly, also for communication and commitment training, it can be evaluatively proven that these make a clear contribution towards promoting the quality of relationships.

With regard to accompanying young families through their first years, it is revealed that kindergartens, of which there are roughly 9,200 managed by the Catholic Church in Germany, are becoming increasingly significant for children up to school age. This particularly applies where they are developed with a commitment to become family centres and also integrate concepts such as assistance for parents, as well as parental education and educational counselling. The opportunity exists here to establish in particular low-threshold offers which especially can also be taken up by families with a more distanced attitude towards education. In this context one should also refer to the Catholic family formation facilities, which frequently concentrate particularly on this low-threshold approach.

Pastoral Care for Couples Civilly Married or Living Together

Re questions 32-34

Most couples live together for several years prior to a civil and church marriage, and regard marriage as a further, and certainly significant, stage in their lives together. The decision to have children is frequently a reason for marrying. In addition, there are many Catholic couples who are only civilly married; these include many who were unable to marry in church because for instance one partner is civilly divorced. The question of how to deal suitably with these living arrangements in pastoral terms therefore had a major echo in the responses.

Pastoral care that regards such unions as sinful pure and simple and accordingly calls for conversion is not helpful as it contradicts the positive experience that couples have in such living arrangements. Values such as love, faithfulness, responsibility for one another and for the children, reliability and willingness to reconcile are also practiced when people live together and in civil marriages, and these deserve recognition in a Christian context. Pastoral care should be provided to young people in particular, and this must appreciatively support and accompany their various attempts to enter into and practice relationships.

The positive experience of love and the longing of many couples for a lasting and reliable bond may form the basis on which the additional benefit of a sacramental marriage can be made clear. To this end, a theology of marriage is needed which takes up people's experience and longing, and pastoral care is needed which appreciates people's experience in loving relationships and is able to awaken a spiritual longing. The Sacrament of Marriage is primarily to be proclaimed as a gift which enriches and strengthens marriage and family life, and less as an ideal which is to be brought to fruition. The model and the witness of Christian spouses is hence indispensable. It is a matter of developing pastoral care which above all stresses the character of being a Christian as a path with regard to marriage and the family.

This kind of pastoral care requires an evaluation of the various living arrangements that is differentiated in terms of moral theology, and not lastly a further development of the Church's sexual morals in the context of a theology of love. This entails an enhanced appreciation of individuals' ability to shape their lives in following Christ on their own responsibility and to form a personal conscience-based judgment.

In view of a societal situation in which the institutional aspect of the relationship between a couple is frequently neglected, the Church's evaluation of a civil marriage in which the partners take responsibility for one another and for their children in a legally-binding manner needs to be reconsidered. Greater attention should therefore be attached in theology, in the Church's law and also in pastoral care, to the phenomenon of a "civil marriage".

Caring for Wounded Families (Persons who are Separated, Divorced and Not Remarried, Divorced and Remarried and Single-Parent Families)

Re question 35

People who are old and sick, and those with disabilities, particularly rely on support from their families. Where those with and without disabilities, the sick and the healthy, the young and the old live together, it is possible for all family members to experience love, acknowledgement, confidence and joy. An increasingly important task of pastoral care of the family will consist of supporting families in such a way that they can shoulder their responsibility. Families frequently feel overtaxed by the care of the old and sick and of people with disabilities carried out over a number of years. They need both economic and psycho-social as well as spiritual support from other families as well as from the parish. In the public debate too, there is a need to increase the awareness of the significance of stable family structures, particularly for people in difficult stages of life and in crises. In a time in which the social ligatures are becoming weaker, the significance of the ties resulting from family structures cannot be overstated. It is important to reduce the influence exerted by “market logic” on families and on family policy.

Several responses point to the economic, social and pedagogical challenges faced by lone mothers and fathers. They frequently need greater practical and spiritual support from the parish, and should naturally be integrated into parish life.

Some families are at risk of poverty, even in a country as rich as Germany. This particularly applies to lone parents, to families with many children and to migrant families, as well as to families in which the parents have been unemployed for a long time.

Re question 36

There is no doubt that the local churches agree “*cum Petro et sub Petro*” in dogmatic questions regarding marriage and the family. Referring to social and cultural differences, some of the responses favour regional agreements on pastoral guidelines at local church level. The basis could also be formed by diocesan discussion processes on the topic of marriage and the family the outcome of which would be discussed with other local churches. This would be conditional on all concerned being willing to engage in a dialogue.

Re questions 37-38

The question on pastoral care for civilly divorced and remarried Catholics was answered by everyone, and in most cases also in a very detailed manner. It is a concern for many faithful, far beyond the group of those whose marriages have failed. There can be no doubt that this remains a pivotal issue for the credibility of the Church. There is a very high expectation among the faithful that the Synod of Bishops will open up new paths for pastoral care in this respect. It comes to note here that the statements of the People of God by no means follow an undifferentiated call for mercy, but contain arguments which are theologically nuanced.

The breakdown of a marriage is a painful process accompanied by feelings of guilt. The faithful expect the Church to guide people whose marriages have broken down with assistance

and understanding and not to push them out to the margins of the community. Rather, they should be encouraged to play an active role in the parish (cf. a. *Familiaris consortio*, No. 84). From this perspective, there is also an ongoing discussion on the question of possibly admitting Catholics who are civilly divorced and who have remarried to confession and sacramental communion. The sacraments are above all understood as a means of salvation through which Christ comes to the aid of the weak and those who have sinned. Exclusion from the sacraments, above all when it is permanent as with remarried divorcees, contradicts the conviction of faith held by the vast majority of Catholics that God forgives all sin, opens up the chance for conversion and makes it possible to have a new beginning in life.

With regard to receiving the sacraments, the majority of the faithful do not expect pastoral exceptions carried out in secret, but wish to see structural solutions. This is not a matter of undistinguishing admission to the sacraments, but of admission that is bound by criteria. Only a small number among the faithful reject admission of remarried divorcees to communion as a matter of principle because they fear that this might weaken the Church's witness to the indissolubility of marriage. The vast majority of the faithful do not share this fear.

The Resolution of the Permanent Council of the German Bishops' Conference of 24 June 2014 on "Theologically-responsible, pastorally-appropriate ways of assisting remarried divorcees", which is annexed to this statement, has therefore had a highly-positive echo among the People of God. We proposed in our resolution to admit civilly-divorced and remarried faithful to the sacrament of penance and to communion if life together in the canonically-valid marriage has definitively failed, the obligations from this marriage have been clarified, remorse was expressed as to the guilt for the breakdown of the marital union, and the honest will existed to live the second civil marriage out of faith and to bring up the children in the faith.

It is furthermore proposed to rethink the failure of a marriage in terms of ecclesial law, teaching and pastoral care, and to develop liturgical forms in which the pain of separation and complaining of hurt or humiliation, as well as the hope of a new beginning, are articulated before God. There is a need to clarify the relationship between faith and the Sacrament of Marriage in terms of the theology of the sacraments.

Several dioceses and associations consider it to make sense to give greater consideration to the practice of the Orthodox Churches. This would not entail simply adopting their practices, but also opening up analogous paths in the Catholic Church. There is however still some theological clarification to be carried out here. In this context, it is also proposed to consider blessing a second (civil) marriage, which should however be quite distinct from a church marriage in liturgical terms.

Streamlining the nullity procedure, in particular when it comes to accelerating the procedures and reducing the costs (particularly for the expert reports), is certainly welcome. Some experts propose dispensing with generally submitting cases to a second instance since it generally confirms the first-instance judgment and having the first-instance judgment handed down by

of a body of judges instead of by a judge sitting alone. There is also a need to consider whether the legal presumptions in marital law should not be re-examined.

Streamlining the procedures however does not solve the problem as a whole. The number of those who engage in such proceedings is very small in comparison to the large number of those concerned. This number is unlikely to increase much even were the procedure to be simplified. What is more, simplifying the nullity procedure is not to be misunderstood as a renunciation of the indissolubility of marriage. It is hence important not to overemphasise such measures.

Re question 39

In more than 40 % of church marriages where one partner is Catholic, the other partner belongs to one of the other Christian denominations, as a rule to the Protestant denomination. What is more, the number of marriages between a Catholic partner and one with no denominational affiliation is increasing. Hence, considerable attention is attached to the question on pastoral guidance.

The faithful expect the conjugal and family life of partners who belong to different denominations to be supported by the Church (within the meaning of can. 1128 *CIC*) and that the non-Catholic partner is invited to take part in parish life. The way in which a family shapes its faith life is however to be left to the two partners.

Considerable scope is attached in the responses to the question of the possible admission of the non-Catholic partner, particularly of a Protestant partner, to sacramental communion. The exclusion from communion of the partner who belongs to a different denomination is regarded as an obstacle particularly for the Christian upbringing of the children and of the faith life of the family. In theological terms, it is pointed out that the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio* (1981) clearly expresses an appreciation of inter-denominational marriages (No. 78), whilst at the same time stressing the significance of the Eucharist as “the very source of Christian marriage” (No. 57). In the interest of strengthening sacramental marriage, and when it comes to the Christian upbringing of the children, the question thus needs to be asked as to how the non-Catholic spouse is to take part in the life of the parish and under what circumstances he/she can in fact be admitted to communion. Do inter-denominational marriages which are bound by the dual sacramental tie of baptism and marriage not constitute a grave spiritual need permitting the admission of the non-Catholic partner in an individual case (cf. can. 844 § 4 *CIC*; Encyclical Letter *Ut unum sint* of 1995, No. 46; Encyclical Letter *Ecclesia de eucharistia* of 2003, No. 45 and 46)?

Pastoral Attention towards Persons with Homosexual Tendencies

Re question 40

Homosexual living arrangements have a legal status in Germany that is distinct from that of marriage (“civil partnerships”). Their recognition is based on a broad consensus within society which, as was shown amongst other things by the responses to the first questionnaire

in preparation of the Extraordinary Synod, is also shared by a majority of Catholics.

As a matter of principle, the faithful expect everyone to be accepted both in the Church and in society, regardless of their sexual orientation, and that an atmosphere of appreciation towards all be promoted in the parishes. Almost all responses concur with the view that is put forward in the human sciences (medicine, psychology), namely that sexual orientation is a disposition that is not selected by the individual and that it is unchangeable. It is therefore confusing for the questionnaire to speak of “homosexual tendencies”, and this is considered to be discriminatory.

Only a small number of respondents fundamentally reject homosexual relationships as constituting a grave sin. The vast majority expects the Church to carry out a differentiated moral theological evaluation which takes account of pastoral experience and of the findings of the humanities. Most Catholics accept homosexual relationships if the partners practice values such as love, faithfulness, responsibility for one another and reliability, but they do not thereby place homosexual partnerships on the same footing as marriage. It is a matter of appreciating whilst at the same time stressing differentness. Some of the statements also favour a blessing for such partnerships which is distinct from marriage.

Pastoral care that accepts homosexuals requires a further development of the Church’s sexual morals which incorporates recent findings from the humanities, as well as from anthropological, exegetic and moral theology.

The Transmission of Life and the Challenges of a Declining Birthrate

Re questions 41-44

The declining birthrate is a subject that has been repeatedly discussed in Germany for many years. A central problematic factor is considered to lie in the fact that many more young people would like to have a family and children than actually do so in the ensuing years. There are many reasons for this, ranging from the problem of finding a suitable spouse through the too long period which is needed to establish a livelihood, to resignation in the face of excessive demands in terms of successful parenthood. Appealing to the responsibility to transmit life in the sense of a moral imperative proves to be relatively unhelpful in this situation. Wanting a child is a highly-personal concern for two people who love one another. This decision cannot be replaced by the State or indeed by the Church. Pointing to the serious consequences of demographic change also does not lead to influencing the way in which individuals actually lead their lives. There is however a need to take up and strengthen young people’s longing for a family of their own and for children of their own, and above all to act to reduce the obstacles in socio-political terms which stand in the way of such a lifestyle. Catholics in Germany play an active role in promoting greater child- and family-friendliness in Germany through the many types of family-supporting initiatives and institutions within the Church, as well as the family-policy commitment of Catholic associations, as primarily of the Catholic Family Association (FdK).

The German Bishops' Conference continuously and strongly advocates the protection of unborn life in political and societal contexts, such as through declarations and statements or the annual week for life. There is also a considerable degree of unanimity among church-going Catholics in Germany when it comes to rejecting abortion. At a direct practical level, in addition to the pregnancy counselling provided by specialist Catholic institutions and associations, in particular Caritas and the Social Service of Catholic Women (SkF), there are further initiatives and foundations in many dioceses offering assistance to pregnant women in need.

Upbringing and the Role of the Family in Evangelization

Re questions 45-46

Cf. on questions 28-34 above.

The Catholic Church in Germany enjoys considerable repute as an institution supporting families in their upbringing task. Toddler groups, kindergartens, schools, colleges and universities for educational science, family training facilities, training courses, letters for parents, handouts and much more besides can be named here forming elements of a significant field of action by the Church. Religious instruction, family catechesis in preparation for first communion and many religious pedagogical offerings for families, support families in transmitting the faith. It is however necessary to repeatedly ask as to the contemporary forms and the possibilities for support that suit age groups. Concepts which bear fruit once do not unrestrictedly apply to the future. The concern of giving children an orientation when they start out into life is highly tangible among families, but is frequently linked with uncertainty as to how this concern can be brought to fruition.