

# The Roman Synod on Marriage and Family- Round Two

By Archbishop Michael J. Sheehan, *People of God*, April 2015

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The Vatican has again asked the people of God to respond to the challenges that traditional marriage and family life are facing these days. *Our original response was submitted after conferring with our Presbyteral Council and the Archdiocesan Pastoral Council. This time the questions were responded to by pastors (some who asked for assistance from their parishioners), and by our Archdiocesan Pastoral Council which is made of up lay representatives from all eight deaneries of the archdiocese. Fr. Timothy A. Martinez took the challenge of melding all responses together.*

There was the Extraordinary Synod that was held last October. This coming October there will be a follow-up Synod in Rome that will be made up of cardinals, archbishops, bishops and some lay people and others who will gather with Pope Francis to again look at how the church may assist marriage and family in our complicated secular world. There are many challenges that we face because of rationalism and secular humanism.

There are many non-practicing Catholics who do want to marry in the church and we must help them have a Catholic marriage and urge them to practice their faith. Many of our parishes have their own marriage preparation programs or connect with other parishes that do have programs. These would include Engaged Encounter, pre-cana programs, and involvement with married couples acting as mentors and the priests in their marriage preparation. It is very valuable to have the mentors for those who are preparing for marriage.

We have seen a great deal of cohabitation among our young people today. Perhaps 75% of couples who are preparing for marriage in the church have already begun to cohabit. They are told that this is not in accord with the teachings of the church, but they are still tempted to ignore the teaching. We urge the people who have been married before and who have entered a marriage outside the church to approach the marriage tribunal to have their first marriage annulled if possible so that they can enter into a Catholic marriage. We urge them to go to Mass and be active Catholics in every way possible even though they may not receive Holy Communion or forgiveness in the sacrament of confession. For older couples, we have found it realistic to ask them to enter into a brother/sister relationship and this has been a wonderful way to get other couples back into the Sacraments. They are not sexually involved with each other anymore given their age. Those who can't receive Communion do feel marginalized and feel badly. They also know that an annulment takes time and causes pain as well.

My hope is that the Synod meeting this fall in Rome will find a simplification of the process used at the marriage tribunal of recognizing the nullity of a marriage. We, of course, must respect the teaching on marriage that it is indissoluble but the process of a marriage annulment is indeed able to be simplified. Our Holy Father, Pope Francis, has already established a committee to work on ways for simplifying the annulment process. An important part of this change would be

to no longer require a Court of Second Instance that reviews the work of the First Tribunal. Presently, when a case is completed here in the Archdiocese of Santa Fe in the Court of the First Instance it must be sent to the Tribunal in the Diocese of Phoenix to be verified by the Court of the Second Instance. There are other ways in which the marriage tribunal processes can be simplified.

Much has been said about the pastoral care of families in the church. We urge people to pray the Rosary, meal prayer, participate in Sunday Mass as a family, take pilgrimages to our shrines throughout our archdiocese. The Legion of Mary exists in a number of parishes, home charismatic groups have meetings and retreats as well as the Cursillo and ACTs retreats are available. Some faith sharing groups meet regularly to discuss the Sunday readings. Some parishes have Advent wreath prayer that people are encouraged to use at home. In our archdiocese we have an active Family Life Office that deals with many aspects of promoting marriage and family spirituality.

It is important to keep in mind that not all marriages are in trouble! There are a very high percentage of happily married Catholics who deeply love their spouses, children and faith. We should look for ways to recognize the joyful and happy couples. In the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, I sign certificates of prayer and congratulations for couples celebrating their 25<sup>th</sup>, 50<sup>th</sup> and 60<sup>th</sup> marriage anniversaries and every five years after that if their pastor requests the certificate from or Family Life Office. The certificate is presented to the couple at a Sunday Mass by their Pastor. I believe we could encourage the couples to speak at the end of Mass about some of the joys they have experienced in their marriage. This would be a way to encourage all those present to see happy marriages that can be role modeled, appreciated and celebrated. We should have the Prayers of the Faithful at Mass include petitions for married couples, especially those experiencing difficulties.

I ask all of our people to pray for the success of the Ordinary Synod of Bishops this coming October in Rome. May God bless all of our Catholic families and help those who are seeking to marry in the church to be able to do so.