

5 points on contentious Vatican summit on family

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VATICAN CITY (RNS) The most significant and contested gathering of Roman Catholic bishops in the last 50 years formally ended on Sunday (October 25) after three weeks of debate and dispute.

The synod of 270 cardinals and bishops from around the world was the second in a year called by Pope Francis to address how and whether Catholicism could adapt its teachings to the changing realities of modern family life. Traditionalists had taken a hard line against any openings, especially after last October's meeting seemed to point toward possible reforms.

While the delegates made hundreds of suggestions on a host of issues, two took center stage, in part because they represented a barometer for the whole question of change: could the church be more welcoming to gay and lesbian churchgoers, and was there a way divorced and remarried Catholics could receive communion without an annulment?

The final document was a compromise intended to gain support from both reformers and hardliners and achieve as much consensus as possible.

The often vague language of the concluding report also left the door open for Francis to take further action to provide greater pastoral flexibility to local bishops and priests, as church leaders expect him to do.

Francis delivered a closing talk to the gathering on Saturday evening that denounced moral legalism in the church and declared that "the true defenders of doctrine are not those who uphold its letter, but its spirit."

Indeed, the synod process, the pontiff said, was about "laying bare the closed hearts which frequently hide even behind the church's teachings or good intentions, in

order to sit in the chair of Moses and judge, sometimes with superiority and superficiality, difficult cases and wounded families.”

Francis said the meeting showed that the church “does not simply rubber stamp” foregone conclusions.

“It was about trying to open up broader horizons, rising above conspiracy theories and blinkered viewpoints, so as to defend and spread the freedom of the children of God, and to transmit the beauty of Christian newness, at times encrusted in a language which is archaic or simply incomprehensible,” he said.

The lengthy final document contained 94 paragraphs on a range of issues related to challenges facing the family in contemporary society around the world.

Each of them received the two-thirds number of votes needed for official adoption by the synod, but the recommendations are only advisory; the synod asked the pope to issue a more definitive document in the coming months.

The final document did not offer any of the openings to gay and lesbian Catholics that had been raised during a preceding synod last October. It spoke only about respecting the dignity of people and rejecting “unjust discrimination.”

The document, as expected, also reiterated the church’s opposition to same-sex marriage and reaffirmed that marriage for Catholics is a lifelong sacramental union between one man and one woman.

Here are the key points:

1. Divorced and remarried Catholics made some gains.

The final report from the synod contained key phrases about individual Catholics in “irregular” situations—such as being remarried without an annulment—using the “internal forum” of their conscience, in consultation with a pastor, to consider their status in the church.

For decades the Vatican had effectively barred priests and penitents from using the “internal forum” in the remarriage context for fear it would be abused.

Also, the final document doesn’t mention communion explicitly, but it was clear—and numerous church officials confirmed privately—that the language refers

to the sacraments and, most important, it gives Francis an opening to take further action, which church officials expect him to do.

Moreover, if the three paragraphs (out of 94) in the final document dealing with the remarried were not problematic, why did so many bishops speak out so strongly against them in the final closed-door session before the vote? And why did those paragraphs get the fewest “yes” votes of all—in one case just one vote above the necessary two-thirds threshold for official passage?

“In the days ahead, conservatives may attempt to spin the final recommendations in a way that supports their position, but they cannot get away with that unless they answer the question, ‘then why did you so fiercely oppose these paragraphs?’” wrote Thomas Reese, an analyst for the *National Catholic Reporter*.

2. There was silence on LGBT people instead of harsh words.

The absence of any breakthrough language on LGBT Catholics was a tactical retreat by progressives who saw that they did not have the support in the synod to get close to a two-thirds threshold.

Even getting close to half would have been hard if not impossible, and would have revealed the deep divisions in the synod on the issue and left the pontiff with an unpalatable option of choosing one side or the other—those who spoke warmly about gay couples and others, such as Cardinal Robert Sarah of Guinea, a top official in the Roman Curia, who used harsh language against gay and lesbian people.

“It was better to leave the question open for further study and reflection than blocking it with bad paragraph or bad text,” Belgian bishop Johan Bonny, a point man for those favoring change, told reporters. “That is a point for next time.”

Bonny was in the same group as Cardinal Sarah; Bonny and others said sentiment against same-sex relationships was so strong that “there was no way of discussing it in a peaceful way.”

While Cardinal Sarah and others stood out for their blasts at gay and lesbian sexuality, other African churchmen said that their views were developing on this issue and were catching up with the more accepting attitudes in the West.

Conservatives, on the other hand, argued that the only satisfactory outcome was for the synod to reiterate current church teachings and practices and bar any future flexibility. That didn't happen.

3. The synod showed that the church can change, and has, changed.

That change can seem obvious when viewed from the perspective of history, but it's been a neuralgic point for those who fear that admitting to any evolution can lead to a slippery slope. Francis hammered home the need to change in closing homily at mass in St. Peter's Basilica on Sunday.

"A faith that does not know how to root itself in the life of people remains arid and, rather than oases, creates other deserts," he said.

Many cardinals and bishops welcomed what they said was an end to a judgmental church and the start of a more pastoral church that considers people first and rules second.

But change is never easy for the Catholic hierarchy.

"We are discombobulated: some defend the past, others dream of a different future," Cardinal Francesco Montenegro of Sicily, a strong supporter of the pope, said in explaining the reactions of some of his brother bishops. "The fact that there have been so many reactions is a sign that what he is proposing is something new and powerful."

4. The work continues.

This synod ended, but synodality—the ongoing process of dialogue, discernment, collaboration, and collegiality that leads to new approaches and possibly even doctrinal shifts— isn't over.

Francis made that clear in what was viewed as a landmark talk during the synod to mark 50 years since these meetings were begun after the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65). But synods had become routine, almost "rubber-stamp" affairs. No longer.

The pope said that the "church and synod are synonymous" and that the journey of discernment is ongoing. Church leaders were free to speak their mind, whereas in

past years they would have been silenced. Once the flock hears pastors disagreeing and speaking openly about, for example, the value of families led by same-sex couples or single parents, it's hard to "unring" the bell.

"The real takeaway from this synod is that Pope Francis has changed the way the church goes about reflecting on her pastoral ministry. That's no small thing," Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington, D.C., said on Sunday. "You had all this open discussion about issues that the church is struggling with. You're not going to be able to close that door in the future."

5. It's Francis' turn now.

As long as Francis is the pope, he makes the final call, and he is expected to take the suggestions he heard in this synod, last year's synod, and various consultations he has held since he was elected in March 2013, and use them as a launchpad for further, more concrete reforms.

Perhaps the biggest question is how long Francis has and how many like-minded cardinals and bishops he can appoint before he dies or retires. He turns 79 in December and openly acknowledges that his may not be a long papacy.

Vatican expert and author John Thavis last week crunched the numbers and found that Francis has appointed just 13 percent of the world's active bishops in his 31 months in office and 26 percent of the voting members of the College of Cardinals who would elect his successor.

At this pace, the pontiff would probably need six or seven more years to reach a tipping-point majority of cardinals and bishops.

Thavis wrote, "I'm sure the pope realizes that, for quite some time, he will have to work with an episcopate that may at times act as a check on his innovative pastoral proposals."

This article was edited on October 26, 2015, following a correction from RNS to the percentage of bishops appointed by Francis.