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# THE PRESENCE OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCHES AND THE EASTERN-RITE CATHOLIC CHURCHES IN THE III EXTRAORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS

## INTRODUCTION

For Pope Francis, the state of the family remains an incredibly important topic for the church to deal with. For this season, the Third Extraordinary General Assembly (5th-19th October, 2014) discussed the question of *Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelization*. In addition, at the Fourteenth Ordinary General Assembly (4th-25th October, 2015) a similar question, *The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and in the Contemporary World*, was discussed.

When I received the preparation material for the conference *Theology Between East and West* in Warsaw, I immediately started looking for a topic that would be a good fit for my background in moral theology, while exploring the given theme of East and West. It was with little difficulty that I found a variety of topics relating to family synods. Prior to preparing for the conference I had already explored and become acquainted with a range of sources that intersected Eastern Orthodox and Western theological themes in relation to the topic of families. This was in large part due to the powerful media coverage of the well-known fact that many Orthodox Churches allow divorcees to remarry and to receive the sacraments. Many wished to see this effect of the synod's work. It led me to decide to deal with the topic of the inclusion of the Eastern Catholic Churches *sui iuris* in addition to Orthodox presence and references. It is also worth mentioning that at the 2014 preliminary, extraordinary assembly there was only one Hungarian representative (at the ordinary assembly there were three). The Relatore Generale of the assembly was His Eminence Péter Erdő, the Archbishop of Esztergom-Budapest. Before that he was also the president of the Hungarian Bishops' Conference in 2014.

This study will deal primarily with the participants of the general assembly of the synod, what they did during the assembly and how the published documents referenced Eastern Orthodox practice and theology.

Although the main points of my work originated from the question of remarriage, it quickly became evident that the general assembly offers many more insights. It gradually became clear to me that the Orthodox Churches and Churches *sui iuris* of the Eastern Catholic Churches have already added and can add more richness not only to the topic of families, but also to other theological topics between the East and the West.

Lorenzo Badisseri's (secretary of the general assembly) three volume book on the two assemblies and the synodic memorial of the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council has been of invaluable help. These volumes are partially prose, partially summaries, statistics, registers and lists about the two/three events. These will be my main reference points.

The original aim was to introduce the two assemblies, but due to constraints of time and space the main focus of this work will be on the Third Extraordinary Assembly. Later, I will briefly discuss the Fourteenth Ordinary Assembly. Finally, a third part will concentrate on the comparison and analysis of both of these assemblies.

## OVERVIEW

In this study I will first discuss the legal background of the Synod of Bishops (Ordo), asking the question: Who can participate? The next step will be to chronologically examine the documents that were written as preparation (*Documento preparatorio – Lineamenta*) and were published at the press conference on 5th November, 2013 (Baldisseri, 2014, 29. p.). The questions of the preliminary survey can also be found here. The *Instrumentum Laboris* was finished in May 2014, and after having been translated into multiple languages was presented at the June 26th press conference in 2014 (Baldisseri, 2014, 30. p.). S.R.Em.ma Péter Erdő, Relator General's *Relatio ante disceptationem*, precedes the actual analysis of the synodic discussions. Before discussing that, however, I will make some minor comments about the opening homily, the greetings, and the other opening speeches. I talk about the events of the first week along with the document entitled *Relatio post disceptationem* (which was finished by the end of the first synod's workweek). Then I will move onto *circuli minores*, i.e. small group activities based on the summaries of the Sala Stampa. The assembly summarises the work together in the text *Relatio synodi* which forms the basis for the *Messaggio del Sinodo dei Vescovi al Popolo di Dio* version. This study thus overviews this period and these documents. In the summary I will draw together the topics of discussion.

### I. A Short Summary of Preparational Chronology

The preparations of the general assembly go back to November 2012, when the XIV Ordinary General Assembly was set to 2015, with respect to the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council (Baldisseri, 2014, 27. p.). In January 2013 the General Council of the Assembly proposed the following topic as the first item: Christology and anthropology with special respect to point 22nd of the *Gaudium et spes*, entitled *Christ, the New Man*. 13th February, 2013 saw the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI, and a month later Pope Francis was elected, who saw the general secretary S.E.R. Nikola Eterovic, at the meeting of the XIII General Council of the Synod on 13-14 of June. A new topic was raised at the next meeting on 4th July 2013, entitled: vocation of the person, and the human family. On 23rd August the Holy Father saw Nikola Eterovic, and the Pope decided to summon the Third Extraordinary General Assembly, naming the pastoral challenges to the family as its main topic. On 21st September, the Holy Father appointed S.E.R. Card. Lorenzo Baldisseri, who is 10 years senior to S.E.R. Mons. Eterovic, as new General Secretary. On 8th October the synod's title became: Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization (Baldisseri, 2014, 28. p.). This rather rapid change within one year is worthy of consideration.

## II. Legal Regulation with Respect to Participants

The Ordo regulating the synod first defines the purpose of the synods of the bishops and the three main types, and then it proceeds to tell the following about the participants (here we only refer to the relevant ordinary and extraordinary assemblies' protocol, the special order of the synod of bishops on different questions does not concern us): at an Ordinary General Assembly of a Synod the following participate (IV.c.5.art.1.§.1.a) Patriarchs, Major Archbishops, Metropolitans of the Metropolitan Churches *sui iuris* of the Eastern Catholic Churches or a Bishop, competent in the material to be treated at the Synod", designated by the above mentioned Churches' leaders. "b) Bishops elected by the Synod of Bishops..." At an Extraordinary General Assembly: "Bishops elected by the Council of the Hierarchy of the Eastern Catholic Churches or by the Synod of the Bishops."

Furthermore, "other participants" can be present at the Synod's meeting according to article 7: "1. Experts, Auditors" and "Fraternal Delegates, who represent Churches and Ecclesial Communities, which are not in full communion with the Catholic Church."

## III. Participants

The actual participants thus were (actual here is only pro forma, as there were instances of absenteeism due to health problems and other reasons):

Thirteen heads of Eastern Catholic Churches *sui iuris*, From the Coptic Catholic Church: S.B.R. Patriarch Ibrahim Isaac Sedrak; S.B.R. Patriarch Gregory III Laham, B.S. from the Melkite Greek Catholic Church. S.B.R. Patriarch Ignatius Joseph III Yonan from the Syrian Catholic Church. S.B.R. Cardinal Patriarch Bechara Boutros al-Rahi from the Syrian Maronite Church. S.B.R. Patriarch Louis Raphael I Sako from the Chaldean Catholic Church. S.B.R. Patriarch Nerses Bedros XIX Tarmouni from the Armenian Catholic Church. S.B.R. Major Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk from the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church. S.B.Em.ma Major Archbishop George Alencherry from the Syro-Malabar Catholic Church. S.B.R. Major Archbishop Baselios Cleemis Thottunkal from the Syro-Malankara Catholic Church. S.E.R. Mons. Bishop Miai Catalin Fratila from the Romanian Greek Catholic Church. S.R.Em.ma Cardinal Berhaneyesus Demerew Souraphiel from the Ethiopian Catholic Church. S.E.R. Mons. Archeparch William Charles Skurla from the Ruthenian Greek Catholic Church in the USA. S.E.R. Mons. Archeparch Jan Babjak, SJ from the Slovak Greek Catholic Church" (Baldisseri, 2014, 371-372. pp.).

Auditors/Experts: 2 *sui iuris* Catholic experts (A married couple: "Mr. Selim and Mrs. Rita Khoury, heads of the Office of Family Pastoral Care in the Maronite Catholic Patriarchate of Antioch (Lebanon)") (Baldisseri, 2014, 390. p.).

(Eastern) Fraternal delegates: Four delegates. H. Em. Athenagoras Belgian Ecumenical Patriarchate from the Eastern Orthodox Church. H. Em. Hilarion Patriarch, the chairman of External Church Relations of the Patriarchate of Moscow (Russian Federation). Metropolitan of Damietta, Kafr Elsheikh and Elbarari H. Em. Bishop of the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria (Egypt). H. Em. Mar Youstinos Boulos, Archbishop of Zhale and Bekau, Syriac Orthodox Patriarch of Antioch (Lebanon) (Cf. Baldisseri, 2014, 393. p.).

#### IV. Preparatory Documents

Here begins the discussion of the documents themselves.

The *Documento preparatorio* refers to “several new situations which demand pastoral attention and tasks of the Church. We can remember the topic of interfaith marriages or mixed marriages” (Baldisseri, 2014, 230. p.). Interestingly enough, the *Questionario* does not ask questions about mixed marriages (Baldisseri, 2014, 240. p.). This does not mean that the topic would not appear in the *Instrumentum Laboris*, the document that deals with the responses to the questions of the Preparatory Document. Before dealing with the actual references, it is worth spending some time on point 35 of the *Instrumentum Laboris* (IL). The text reminds us here that “a certain number” of responses emphasise the reflection of the Holy Trinity in the family. Then the IL refers to the words of Pope Francis, who, speaking at a General Hearing on 2 April, 2014, said that the family is the icon of the Holy Trinity, of God for us. What is interesting in this text is that it was not mentioned during the General Teaching of the Hearing, but in the greeting to the Middle-Eastern Arabic speaking pilgrims, when the Holy Father said: “Dear married couples! Remember that in your unity the Holy trinity is reflected and with Christ’s grace you are all living and true icons of God and His love.” Thus, the reference to the Holy Trinity icon connects our topic to the Eastern spirituality and tradition.

Part 56 of the IL talks about marriage preparations. Some responses point out that in certain areas, mainly in multi-faith areas, and areas inhabited by people of different denominations, some special views have to be taken into consideration, for example mixed marriages and the large number of people living in “disparitas cultus”. This makes it necessary to prepare priests and constantly accompany of these married couples. “In the Eastern-European dioceses we are again trying to establish dialogues with the Orthodox Churches, when preparing for mixed marriages.” (Baldisseri, 2014, 272. p.). There have been testimonies of the attendance of experienced couples at these preparations, who testify about Biblical culture and a life of prayer. Here we should mention that according to Baldisseri, the highest percentage (92) of responses to the *Questionario* came from the Eastern Church Synods

(Cf. Baldisseri, 2014, 29. p.). This is more than 30 percent higher than the number of responses coming from Bishops' Conferences. The IL talks about consumerism only in relation to the West, it only refers to poverty in eastern families (paragraph 73) (Baldisseri, 2014, 281. p.), but, as we will later see, according to mostly Eastern Church arrivals, in their lives earning a living and related migration are of utmost importance. Analysing difficult pastoral situations, we again meet "disparitas cultus", especially in Africa and in the Middle-East (paragraph 78). Although some responses acknowledge the richness of mixed couples to the Church, they also make us aware of the difficulties that appear in the Christian upbringing of children, chiefly where civil laws regulate the parents' religion in accordance with their sexes. In some cases, "disparitas cultus" is either a necessity, or a challenge to the proliferation of the Christian faith (Cf. Baldisseri, 2014, 283. p.). One of the difficult pastoral situations is divorce and remarriage in paragraph 95. It says that "some" recommend the possibility of a second or a third marriage with repentance, similarly to the Orthodox Churches. In connection with this it is also mentioned that in Orthodox majority countries this practice does not reduce the number of divorces. Some ask for a clarification whether it is a doctrinal or a disciplinary question (Cf. Baldisseri, 2014, 292. p.). Another question raised in paragraph 96 is the case in Orthodox majority countries when a Catholic remarries in the Orthodox Church according to its laws, and then this individual wishes to receive the sacrament in the Catholic Church. Yet another question aims at refining the practice in which an Orthodox individual who lives in a mixed marriage and is lawfully remarried with permission within their own Church wants to marry a Catholic. One more minor reference appears in minority Middle-East countries: the difficulties of passing on the faith and conveying it (Paragraph 137) (Cf. Baldisseri, 2014, 311. p.). Another related reference comes from the part that deals with the Sacrament of Confirmation, in which the experience of different ecclesiae and Eastern-Catholic Churches, where the sacraments of initiation happen at different ages. For instance, when confirmation happens at the same time as baptism, or Holy Communion (paragraph 151) (Cf. Baldisseri, 2014, 319. p.).

## V. Greetings and Homilies

As the second speaker of the First General Assembly, S.E.R. Cardinal André Vingt-Trois talks (Baldisseri, 2014, 22. p.) about the collegiality that can be realised between Bishops, the Synods and the Holy See. The Cardinal adds to this last category the following: "or I should say, as you say it with great accuracy: to the Bishop of Rome (i.e. collegiality)". In this small remark a very important point emerges: Pope Francis' image about his own Apostolic Creed, which is profoundly connect-



ed to synodality, which he emphasises in many earlier documents. “The Bishop of Rome” – this is how the Holy Father calls himself in paragraph 32 of the *Evangelii Gaudium*. When he connects the conversion of papacy to the decentralisation of the jurisdiction of the Bishops’ Conference towards collegiality, the Pope, similarly to “the ancient patriarchal churches” refers to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council (*Lumen Gentium* 23.). In the same apostolic encouragement Pope Francis has the following to say about ecumenical dialogue: “To give but one example, in the dialogue with our Orthodox brothers and sisters, we Catholics have the opportunity to learn more about the meaning of Episcopal collegiality and their experience of synodality” (Paragraph 246).

We can say that the synodality of the synod, i.e. the practice of how the whole synodic system works, namely with the preparatory questions, the two meetings and the method following it, it all happened with an eye to the ancient patriarchal experience, the process of which started at the Second Vatican Council.

It was S.E.R. Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri’s report that followed S.E.R. Cardinal André Vingt-Trois’ contribution. Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri first enumerated - as usual with most greetings - the 13 Eastern Catholic Churches *sui iuris* and he also welcomed the eight fraternal delegates (Cf. Baldisseri, 2014, 26. p.).

## **VI. *Relatio ante disceptationem* and the General Assemblies**

S.E.Em.ma Relator General Péter Erdő’s text, the *Relatio ante disceptationem* refers to paragraph 95 of the IL in the third chapter, in point f, talks about the practice of Orthodox Churches. Then it specifies that the IL relates that it is best to avoid any questionable interpretations and conclusions which are not sufficiently well-founded. In this regard, studying the history of the discipline of the Churches in the East and West is important. Possible contributions might also come from considering the disciplinary, liturgical, and doctrinal traditions of the Eastern Churches (Cf. Baldisseri, 2014, 55. p.).

Beginning with the Second General Assembly, the Holy See Press Office’s publication *Bollettino* also gives a detailed account of all the events. In it there is a reference to free speeches, the first among them is a message to encourage Iraqi families. The summary presents one final observation, as an invitation to the need to reflect on the priests of those Eastern Churches, who live in “family crises”, or who can even reach the stage of divorce (Cf. Baldisseri, 2014, 69. p.). Neither this nor the presence of married *sui iuris* Catholic priests are represented in the responses of the synod, as some have already pointed out when referring to the General Assembly (Petrà 2015).

The summary of the Third General Assembly refers to the reminder made at the beginning of the Assembly about the Ordinary General Consistory due to be held on 20th October 2014 on the topic of the Middle-East which would be attended by six Eastern Patriarchs and the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem. In the summary there is another reminder about the Holy Trinity, as the icon of the family (Cf. Baldisseri, 2014, 79. p.).

The summary of the Fifth General Assembly (IL 2nd part 2nd chapter) refers to the situation of the Middle-Eastern and African Churches where Christians do not get parity rights as Muslims do, and to the consequences of mixed marriages. There are more and more people living in a mixed-faith environment, the so called *matrimoni misti*. The task of catechism in this situation is to continue to help people in mixed marriages to practice their faith. They must not be left alone; the Church has to take care of them. The biggest challenge for people living in such marriages is that because of their marriage they have to convert to Islam: an appropriate solution must be given to this issue as well. This is not only an interfaith question, but at times it is an ecumenical one: they refer to cases, where someone cannot have their marriage annulled in the Catholic Church, and because of this they convert to another Christian denomination where remarriage is allowed. In many cases these people get into this sort of situation through no fault of their own (Cf. Baldisseri, 2014, 95. p.).

Among the topics of the Sixth General Assembly – in spite of the fact that many points in the IL refer to Eastern points of view – only one free speech towards the end mentions the Orthodox Churches. It is about the people who convert from one Christian faith to any other Christian faith, about the consequences of such choices, especially about the difficulty of validation, chiefly when the Orthodox Churches allow for divorce. We are reminded of the Ordinary Synod of 1980 about the “Christian Marriage”, and the major changes in international law since then. Participants are also made conscious of the fact that Catholic Universities regularly face these questions (Cf. Baldisseri, 2014, 103. p.).

At the Tenth General Assembly on 10th October the synod sent a message to those living in conflict. The main message is that fellow believers pray to the Lord for Iraqi and Syrian families, especially for those who belong to other ethnic or religious groups, who have had to leave everything behind or have to live in constant uncertainty because of their Christian faith. On this day the Fraternal Delegates of the seven different Christian denominations were listened to (the Moscow delegate’s testimony was presented the next day). They were all grateful for the invitation and they confessed their creeds on the family. They all agreed that the family is the basic pillar of society which is meant to be based on justice and truth.

In all Christian congregations the need for preparing for the marriage is a common theme, and the necessity of revising their views about marriages between believers and non-believers. Remarried divorcees can receive new hope from their acceptance into their church, inspiring them to have a more active social and family life. It is essential that we listen to their sorrows, turn to them with mercy and sympathy in all events, and it is important that the Church help the sufferers with an eye on the Holy Scriptures and on the problems of our age. They expressed the intention to listen to and understand homosexuals without any kind of judgement, while maintaining their views that marriage is defined as the unity of a man and a woman. About defenceless children in difficult situations and single women – as a common view among Christians – it was emphasized that vulnerable, powerless people, be they believers or non-believers, must be protected. The other central theme of the Fraternal Delegates' speech was the spreading of the Gospel. It is the family that serves as the first venue of faith where we can learn and share the good news which is the *evangelii gaudium*, they reminded everyone of Pope Francis' words.

There were some references to differences as well, such as birth control, underlining the freedom of conscience of believers always bearing in mind love and respect for the essence of marriage. The delegates of the Orthodox Church expressed their view about second marriages by describing them as forms of deviation. Although the second marriage is also celebrated, it can happen only after a designated period of serious church guidance during which a way of reconciliation is looked for. The Delegates of the Eastern Churches expressed their special gratitude for the prayers organised for peace in Syria, and in this context, they talked about the evangelistic responsibilities of Middle-Eastern Christian families in Islamic majority communities. They all expressed their best wishes for the efficiency of the Synod on the family with special regard to the 2015 meeting in Assisi (Cf. Baldisseri, 2014, 131-132. pp.).

## **VII. Breakout Sessions on *Relatio post disceptationem* and *Circoli minori***

The Eleventh General Assembly opened with the summary of *Relatio post disceptationem* by S.Em.ma Cardinal Péter Erdő and it was here that Pope Francis announced the Fourteenth Ordinary General Assembly. In paragraph 49, Péter Erdő talks about the problem of mixed marriages (*matrimonio misto*), a topic that is a recurring subject in the speeches of the synod Fathers. The differences in the matrimonial regulations of the Orthodox Churches create serious problems in certain contexts to which suitable responses have to be found in union with the Pope. The same applies to inter-religious marriages” (Baldisseri, 2014, 150. p.). Our present questions are not concerned with the summary of the responses to the *Relatio*.

Presenting the work of the *Circoli minori*: According to the summary of the Italian speaking group “B”, biased view in the synodic work must be avoided. This applies to suggestions about penitential processes, and also to agreeing with the practises of Orthodox Churches in the appropriate way. In order to see how, in what way the Orthodox practices can be employed in the Latin Church, effortful research and the seeking of a solution in the community must be undertaken, rather than a divisive depiction (Baldisseri, 2014, 165. p.). Group “A” led by Cardinal Péter Erdő talks about marriages torn apart by migration (Baldisseri, 2014, 195. p.).

The Fourteenth and the Fifteenth General Assembly voted for accepting each point in paragraph 62 of the *Relatio Synodi* and the message made from it, the *Messagio del Sinodo dei Vescovi al Popolo di Dio*. This latter does not contain relevant references to our subject.

Although paragraph 39 of the *Relatio Synodi* does not explicitly mention the Eastern tradition when talking about the sacraments, it emphasizes the connection between the sacrament of marriage and the sacraments of initiation. This is an internal reference to the different practises of the Eastern Churches *sui iuris* (Cf. Baldisseri, 2014, 344. p.).

Paragraph 54 about mixed marriages reflects the thoughts of the Italian language group “B” almost verbatim. The main difference is that it explicitly talks about due consideration from the point of view of ecumenism, and it also recommends analogous research in the dialogue with other religions with respect to interreligious marriages (Cf. Baldisseri, 2014, 349. p.). The vote on this point yielded 145 ‘yes’ votes and 29 ‘no’ votes. Comparing it with the item that received the highest number of ‘no’ votes, item 52, where there were 104 ‘yes’ votes and 74 ‘no’ votes, it gives us a percentage that is in the middle range as far as disapproval is concerned (Baldisseri, 2014, 354. p.). This point might have benefited from a little bit of extra elaboration.

## VIII. Summary

We have seen which points include references to Eastern traditions and the Orthodox practice: synodality, the time of receiving the sacraments, the situation of Christian education, marriage/family as the icon of the Holy Trinity, remarried couples receiving the sacraments, interfaith people practicing their faith, the question of changing denominations and the problem of those torn from their homes. These are all questions and suggestions that require further study. This is what was happening in the period between the two Synods and has been since then as well.

It may seem that I only dealt with a sub question when I raised the topic, but it should be obvious by now that there is no perfect harmony in the field of how

it is possible to reconcile Eastern and Western practices. This is not only a question of the theology of marriage or of its pastoral importance, it is also an ecumenical problem. Thus, it is a question of the validity of our testimony: “That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21).

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# THE PRESENCE OF THE ORTHODOX CHURCHES AND THE EASTERN-RITE CATHO- LIC CHURCHES IN THE III EXTRAORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS

## SUMMARY

The aim of this article is to analyse the events and documents of the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 2014 and Fourteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 2015 in which Orthodox representatives also participated. It is commonly known that the Orthodox Churches allow divorced individuals to remarry and for remarried people to receive sacraments.

In the present study we discuss who were present on behalf of the Orthodox Churches and sui iuris Eastern Catholics at the synod, what happened in relation to these denominations, and what references were made regarding Orthodox and Eastern practices and theology.

First we look at the so-called “ordo” of the synods. Then we examine the preparatory documents in chronological order. After that we analyse the “Instrumentum laboris”. Following the analysis of the introductory document, the “Relatio ante disceptationem”, we summarise the activity of the so-called “circuli minores” based on the briefing reports. The entire extraordinary synod is summarised by the “Relatio synodi”, upon which the “Messaggio del Sinodo dei Vescovi al Popolo di Dio” is based. Finally we categorised the various issues discussed.

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