

The Synod on the Family

Nelson and Cory Villafania



An Experience of a Listening, Caring, Praying Church

“Only in the light of the madness and great love of Jesus will we understand the madness and gratuitous love between man and woman.”

This was one of the most beautiful statements we ever heard (as translated from Italian to English) in the XIV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on “The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and the Contemporary World”, held on October 4-25, 2015 at the Pope Paul VI Center, Vatican City. As auditors representing the Philippines in the Synod, we listened to all the plenary discussions, featuring interventions by each of the Synod Fathers on the three parts of the “Instrumentum Laboris “. This was the working document containing the collated results of the survey on the challenges and concerns of families all over the world made by the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops of 2014.

Listening to the Challenges of Family

We also had the honor of participating in the small-group discussions (“circuli minori”) where Cardinals, Archbishops and Bishops, in turn, listened to us and other auditors express in the concrete the chal-



lenges that faced us as spouses/parents and professionals/Church workers involved in the family ministry. They **listened** to our various experiences in raising our children, particularly special children (not as burdens but as gifts of God), the effects of migration on families, the exploitation of women and their struggle for equal human rights as men all over the world, the exclusion of the elderly in many parts, and the failure to recognize their wisdom and their special role in transmitting the faith to their grandchildren, as well as the debilitating effect of poverty on families. Our exchange also surfaced a disturbing reality:

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the general hesitancy of the youth to get married because of a strong sense of individualism, the perceived irrelevance of sacramental marriage, and a preferred mode of living together, namely, cohabitation.

Given all that, however, we saw together that while there were many challenges, there was also much to celebrate and be grateful for about family life, especially in countries where family traditions and gatherings have been sustained, and where families help married couples and other families. Family-centered foundations like Marriage Encounter, Retrouvaille, Couples for Christ, and other parish-supported organizations like the Basic Ecclesial Communities such as we have in the Philippines, LOAF especially in India, offer much hope in the accompaniment of married couples and families in the world.

Both in the plenary sessions with the Pope and in the “circuli minori”, we as one Church reiterated the sacredness of marriage as ordained by God from the begin-

ning, and stressed that the family is the community born from the marriage of man and woman. All were in agreement that because of the present challenges that threaten the family, there is a need for a more intensive preparation for marriage, and this preparation was to be the concerted effort not only of the pastors of the Church, but the pastors in partnership with married couples themselves.

Emphasis was made on every married couple’s vocation to witness to the beauty of marriage and family life, reflected in the celebration of wedding anniversaries, precisely to show “the madness and gratuitousness of the love between man and woman” that flows from “the madness and great love of Jesus.” In **our listening** to one another and in **our “journeying together” as Body of Christ**, regardless of race or culture, we saw that the appreciation of marriage as a sacrament, as well as of family life, comes from striving everyday to be faithful, and from cooperating with God’s grace, to **PROCLAIM CHRIST IN WORD AND DEED**.

The family, however, cannot be turned in on itself. Through our varied exchanges, we saw that while the primary mission of families is to proclaim Christ among the members, they are called to minister to other families, especially those in difficulty.

Lessons from the Synod

We learned from the Synod three basic things: **tenderness, inclusion, accompaniment**. These were mentioned in reference to a more involved, more intensified pastoral ministry, but we, the lay have realized that as co-workers in the Lord’s vineyard, we must reflect these in our own families first.

“**Tenderness** means to give joyfully and, in turn, to stir in another person the joy of feeling loved...Dealing with delicacy and respect means attending to wounds and restoring hope in such a way as to revitalize trust in the other...Tenderness in family relationships is the virtue which helps people overcome the everyday conflicts within the person and in relation with others.” (Instrumentum Laboris #70).

Inclusion, on the other hand, means following the Lord Jesus in accepting all persons

as brothers and sisters, no matter how different they are from us. They may not have the same views as we, or they may not live according to our standards of right and wrong, or they may be condemned by society for various reasons, but as Christians, we are called to include them in our circle of love and in our communities.

Accompaniment as stressed in the Synod, is a “walking with” and is an act characterized by both mercy and truth as in the Emmaus story. It is meant to be a “journeying with” a person or a family, at times through the path of conversion or repentance towards fuller communion with Christ and the Church.

Experiencing the Church in the Synod

There are so many more things that can be said about what transpired in the Synod. But more than what was talked about, our experience was really an experience of “**being Church**”, a listening, caring, praying Church not made up of the Pope, the Bishops and the Cardinals alone, but they and the lay faithful, as well as the fraternal delegates “journeying together” to find solutions to the many challenges to marriage and family life.

The process of giving each Synod Father and each auditor/auditor couple three minutes for their intervention on any of the parts of the Instrumentum Laboris was a very enriching and liberating experience. All the delegates could “hear” the sincerity of the listening. This was intensified in the small groups where both the clergy and the lay could speak freely, regardless of position or designation, and everyone was respected and acknowledged. We were especially struck by the **humility** with which some bishops of the West in our group would ask from time to time, “Is that just our reality in the West or is that universal?” or “Let me know if there is too much of me in the summary or if I missed anything vital that someone had said...”

It was an experience of **internationality**, the richness and wisdom of different cultures, made richer and wiser by the practice of the Gospel. The facet of family life that each culture shared deepened our appreciation for the gift and the treasure that is the family, the first school of humanity and

Christian values, the first school of faith and love.

It was, most of all, an experience of **the loving, merciful God** whom we have experienced in the person of Pope Francis himself, in the communal prayer that opened and closed every session, in every delegate’s sincere effort at making a contribution to the solution of the problems affecting families, and in the way the Holy Spirit has guided the entire Synod, leading all of us to His Truth in the midst of variety and diversity.

The synod concluded by saying that “Today’s families are sent forth as **MISSIONARY DISCIPLES**”, proclaiming **CHRIST** to other families, especially through the **WITNESS OF THEIR LIVES**. The movement is now from just being Domestic Churches to being called beyond our nuclear families, evangelizing the bigger family which is the world, or where the Spirit leads us.

To the Lord of all Families be the glory!





Love is our mission

Hung & Kim-Anh Vu



Vũ Đức Hưng (John), computer engineer and Vũ Nguyễn Kim-Anh (Teresa), optometrist, have been married for 25 years and have 5 children. They served as lead for Family Ministry with Đồng Hành CLC. They are involved in 34 Marriage Renewal Workshops in USA, Canada, and Vietnam. They are Đồng Hành CLC members since 1985.

The World Meeting of Families (WMOF) in Philadelphia was the highlight of our busy schedule this year. Returning home from Vietnam Marriage Renewal Workshop and Team Formation in July, we carried within our hearts the Lord's invitation to labor in his vineyard of family ministry and renewed sense of being sent on mission. In preparation for the WMOF we read and reflected on the catechesis: *Love is Our Mission: the Family Fully Alive*. How wonderful it was to reflect on God's Plan for the human race as it can be carried out concretely within the context

of marriage and family. We were reminded once again of the beauty of the marital covenant as it reflects profoundly the covenant between God and His people, between Christ and the Church. In fact, we feel that the catechesis lays down the Principle & Foundation for our life as in Ignatius's Principle and Foundation, only in different terminologies.

Arriving at the Philadelphia Convention Center, we were quite taken by the atmosphere of solidarity and enthusiasm of the 20,000 attendees from all over the world. We met delegates from all five continents with diverse backgrounds, but we were united by our Catholic faith. We were brought together

not only by our faith, but also by the values we have in regards to family and marriage. We were not alone but among a big family of God. Never before did we feel so proud to be Catholic! It was wonderful to see many families with young children. They were beaming with joy and excitement, even though it must be quite a sacrifice to bring all the children out of the comfort of their home. When asked about how they were feeling, one of the dads said, "we wanted the kids to experience what it means to belong to the universal Church, and to learn a thing or two about the Church's family values."

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There we also met many priests, religious brothers and sisters of all sorts of orders.

The schedule of each day was quite packed with wonderful keynote speakers, breakout sessions and liturgies. The speakers were very articulate

and they spoke with passion and deep conviction. Among our favorite keynote speakers were: Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle of the Philippines, Bishop Barron of the US, and Pastor Rick Warren from California. Cardinal Tagle's speech "*The Family: A Home for the Wounded Heart*" was particularly poignant and touched everyone profoundly. We enjoyed the many breakout sessions, each with its own messages from the speakers. The highlight of the day was the mass when everyone gathered to celebrate the Eucharist. The long procession of the many priests, religious brothers and sisters, bishops and cardinals was a sight to see. It was a blessing to see so many who are committed to the religious vocation and we felt edified in our own marriage vocation.

Pope Francis' long-awaited arrival was "icing on the cake" as he presided over the Festival of the Families. Thousands of people gathered on Baldwin Parkway to sing, dance, and celebrate. Wonderful clips of the video *Humanum* were shown to remind us of the beauty of marriage and family. Last



but not least, five families from different continents shared with us poignant stories as they live through the joys and challenges of their family life, many of which we find resonating in our own life. One of the comments from the Pope that struck me was when he said we need to take care of the elderly and the young, because the elderly carry with them the memories and history of our faith, and the young carry with them the future. It made us think of our ancestors, our parents, as well as our children and the younger generations after us. We are interconnected more deeply by our graced history, beyond family ties and genetics, and what we do now and how we take care of one another affect the whole human race.

In summary, the experience at WMOF left deep impressions within our hearts. We appreciate our own vocation of marriage and realize more profoundly what it means to be a sacrament for others as a couple living out our marriage vows on a daily basis. "Love is Our Mission: the Family Fully Alive" becomes the basis of our daily Examen when we would check the pulse of the loving moments, when we our hearts move us to loving actions. Coming home from the Meeting, we also have a deeper conviction

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and renewed commitment to family ministry. It is truly a privilege to be with Christ and to labor with Him. The countless hours of involvement in Marriage Renewal Workshops and formation for the couples to serve in this ministry are precious time being in communion with Christ in mission.

We are grateful to be sent and supported by our family and the CLC community. As we savor the graces received, we also ponder on how much more we can collaborate as an apostolic body to labor in this frontier. We so wish to see more CLC members becoming involved in family ministry as it is the frontier that is always in need of persons and resources. With the gift of the Spiritual Exercises and the spirit of communal discernment, we can do so much more in facilitating the families to encounter Christ in their daily life. Perhaps we need to engage in deeper conversations to see where the Spirit would take us further into this frontier. It would be awesome that World CLC would unite and embrace this as our mission in building a better family of God, fully alive, and fully ablaze with His love.



On the other page:
 - At the World meeting of Families in Philadelphia.
 - On the left: Hung and Kim Anh with their children on their 25th wedding anniversary.