



His Eminence Vincent Cardinal Nichols
President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales

INTERVENTION TEXT

III Extraordinary General Synod of Bishops
Pastoral challenges of the family in the context of evangelization
5 to 19 October 2014

A fruitful context for the discussions of this Synod is provided by three parables in Chapter 13 of St Matthew's Gospel.

The first parable opens with the words 'A sower went out to sow' (Matt. 13:3). The seed is the Word of the Kingdom (v.18). This is the first and fundamental stance of the Church today: that of constantly and faithfully sowing the seed which is the Word of the Kingdom. The fruitfulness of the seed we sow is the work of the Lord and the crop is all that arrives in his heavenly Kingdom, borne there in his arms. The reaping and storing of the crop is neither our preoccupation nor our task. We only assist the Lord in sowing the seed of His Word.

The life of every family is so often the fertile soil in which the seed is planted. This we can see clearly if, with open eyes, we look at the reality of so many family lives. People strive hard for stability in family life. They long for fidelity. They rejoice in the fruitfulness of their families, nurturing and treasuring children and grandchildren as the most precious blessings in their lives. Between parents and between children and their parents, truly sacrificial love is received and given. The family is so often very fertile soil.

Can we rediscover the Church as called by the Lord to plant the seed of the Word ever anew? And the family as a privileged nursery or seed bed for that Word? In order to aid this rediscovery it may be profitable to focus clearly on the children of a family and to seek at all times to serve the well-being of the child.

Planting the seed of the Word certainly includes the proclamation of the Church's teaching about marriage and family life. In this, as we are reminded in the *Instrumentum Laboris*, often 'an intensive, clamorous outcry is being raised against the voice of the Church'. So it 'comes as no surprise to the Church that she, no less than her divine Founder, is destined to be a sign of contradiction' (121). We are convinced in faith that this teaching serves to both disclose and



realise the deepest human truth and its achievement through grace. Yet consultation in preparation for this Synod also made clear the distances between the perceived stance of the Church in her teachings and pastoral actions on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the complexities and tensions of family experience. Therefore we rightly acknowledge the need for humble reflection on how this teaching is portrayed and embodied.

Here the second parable of Chapter 13 of St Matthew's Gospel is instructive. As we look closely and lovingly at so many situations of family life today, there are many aspects that do not fit or meet the expectations of the full truth of the Church's teaching. This can be seen in the fundamental relationships between spouses, in the tragic breakdown of that relationship, in the shape or 'topography' of many families. In many ways there are divergences from the full truth of God's plan written in our human nature.

The parable teaches us to be patient. Its primary message is that we are not to uproot the tares because in doing so we will uproot the wheat, those who 'are sons of the Kingdom' (v. 38). Patience and great love is required if we are not to destroy so much that is good in contemporary family life. 'Let them both grow together until the harvest' (v.30) is the Lord's command.

Many are fearful that between the beauty at the heart of Church teaching and the reality of our lives lies a gulf, a dark abyss of failure. We fear that if, with stark honesty, we admit our failings then, being unable to reach to the heights to which we are called, we fall into nothingness. So we both hide our failings and minimise or deny the true standard of our calling. But in-between our reality and the demands of our full vocation lies not an abyss but the endless mercy of God. It is this, above all, that we are called to express and explore in all we do.

Mercy is to be the unmistakable culture of the Church, in every time and in every place. Mercy is the air we breathe and the inspiration of our words and actions. Whenever we put forward the fullness of the Church's teaching, we must find words which invite and not burden, which entice and not repel, which are full of hope and not condemnation. In describing the reality of our world we are surely called to rejoice ten times in all that we see as good and to comment only once on all that is a sign of our human failure. Our sins are widely felt and echo all too readily and strongly in our hearts. We do not need to be reminded repeatedly of our weaknesses. But we do need to be drawn continually afresh to our highest calling.



Failure and sin mark every relationship. Every marriage lives the tension between the presence of the Kingdom already within us and its full realisation only at 'the close of the age' (v. 40). As Augustine said: 'Let the one who is wheat persevere until the harvest; let those who are weeds be changed into wheat. In the Lord's field, which is the Church, at times what was grain turns into weeds and at times what were weeds turn into grain, and no one knows what they will be tomorrow' (Sermon 73). Mercy and forgiveness are absolute necessities both from within the relationship itself and from without especially when the burden of failure and sin crush the fruit of grace.

The work of repentance and forgiveness can only take place within the culture of mercy. Mercy and forgiveness are not the same. Mercy is our culture; forgiveness is our pathway. Forgiveness is always a definite act, the consequence and fruit of a journey. Forgiveness means a change in how we live, a solid striving to express more fully, step by step, the beauty of our calling (Cf. CCC 2337). Only in the wider culture of mercy in the Church can we fulfil the ministry of reconciliation in marriage and family life.

The shortest of Matthew's three parables is that of the mustard seed (vs.31-32). Can it be a parable of every family life? The seed is the smallest of all seeds. The seed grows to become a tree within which 'the birds of the air come to make nests in its branches.' This, surely, corresponds to the aspirations of every family, to see its members, their loved ones, their children, and their children's children, 'making their nests' within its loving embrace.

This Synod is facing the pastoral challenges of the family. Here are some that are crucial:

1. A renewal in pastoral actions in support of the family.

- Such actions serve to break the isolation and privatisation of much family life today.
- They should give priority to the needs of children and to the vocation of parenting. They should therefore be open to all who are parenting children, no matter the make-up of their family cohort (Cf. Instrumentum Laboris 115 and 120).
- They should be focussed on both the human and faith formation of the family, especially on the task of passing on the great gift of faith. (Cf. IL 132 'Parents are called not only to bring children into the world but also to bring them to God, so that through baptism they can be reborn as children



of God and receive the gift of faith'). In this work, popular devotions which have a family dimension can play a crucial part (ICT '*Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church' 107-112). Parents are always the primary educators of their children.

- In this work the role of godparents and grandparents should be further explored and developed (Cf. IL 154, 155).

2. A renewal in preparation for the celebration of the sacrament of marriage.

- Such preparation must provide not only a strengthening of the human dimensions of the marriage relationship but also its faith dimension both in its inner nature as a reflection of the mystery of Christ and his Church, and in the family's vocation of faithful and continuing witness to Christ in contemporary society. Situations in which such understanding is missing or refuted raise questions about the validity of the marriages themselves.

3. Pastoral and academic initiatives to propose a 'coherent anthropological vision in revitalised language' (IL 128).

- Such initiatives lie at the heart of the challenge we are facing. Issues regarding the parenting needs of children, of the societal nature of the human person and of the family, of gender and sexual identity and of the differences and complementarity of the sexes, all need to be brought together in the Church's teaching on marriage and family life. Conflicts and confusions in anthropology underlie much contemporary controversy and instability. The Church has a crucial contribution to make if we can find a revitalised language.

In addition, the Synod needs to explore with great care the nature of our participation in the one Sacrifice of Christ, made real and present in every celebration of Mass. The relationship between participation in the Eucharistic Sacrifice and reception of Holy Communion needs to be further elaborated as does the missionary imperative of the Eucharist. All are called to participate in the mission of Christ, centred in the Eucharist, according to their age and circumstances.

Vincent Cardinal Nichols
Archbishop of Westminster
5 September 2014