

Following the Lead of the Pope of the Family



Putting into the Deep

At the end of his homily during the Canonization Mass for Saints John XXIII and John Paul II, Pope Francis said something that I hope will prove highly significant over the course of the next couple of years and far beyond.

Pope Francis called Saint John Paul “the Pope of the Family” and added, “I am particularly happy to point this out as we are in the process of journeying with families towards the Synod on the Family. It is surely a journey that, from his place in heaven, he guides and sustains.” He prayed specifically for his intercession “so that during this two-year journey toward the Synod [the Church] may be open to the Holy Spirit in pastoral service to the family.”

These words were very welcome because in the preparation for this October’s Extraordinary Synod on the Family and next October’s Ordinary Synod — a two-step process that will seek, respectively, to describe the enormous challenges to the family in today’s world and then, after a year’s worth of prayer and thought, formulate some responses — the treasure of the theological work of the “Pope of the Family” has been, shockingly and alarmingly, almost totally neglected.

In the Preparatory Document and questionnaire sent out by the Vatican in anticipation of the Synods, there was only one tiny reference to John Paul’s seminal 1981 document on the family *Familiaris Consortio*, which is the most comprehensive document summarizing the Church’s theology of the family and applying those truths to contemporary questions in the history of the Church. There were no citations at all of John Paul’s 1994 Letter to Families, which developed how “the history of mankind, the history of salvation, passes by way of the family.” There was no mention of John Paul’s five years of famous Catecheses on Human Love in the Divine Plan, popularly called the Theology of the Body, which is the deepest Biblical development of the Christian theology of marriage ever written.

To prepare for a Synod on the Family without having John Paul’s magisterial corpus as a theological guide would be like preparing for a symposium on the meaning of the Second Vatican Council without even considering John XXIII’s words convoking and opening it.

Far more attention has been given to Cardinal Walter Kasper’s 36-year-old arguments proposing a

pathway for those who are divorced-and-remarried to receive Holy Communion — ideas that were refuted theologically and pastorally by John Paul in 1981 and the future Benedict XVI in 1994 — than to John Paul’s work, which remains as relevant as ever, providing a vigorous response to basically all of the challenges facing marriage and the family today except those arising from the recent invention of same-sex pseudo-matrimonial unions. It just needs to be universally assimilated and implemented.

This was the point that Cardinal Carlo Caffarra of Bologna made in a remarkably candid interview with the Italian Magazine *Il Foglio* on March 14. Cardinal Caffarra was the theologian chosen by Pope John Paul II to be the founding president of the John Paul II Institute for the Studies of Marriage and Family in Rome and was one of his chief collaborators on marriage and family issues. I was privileged to see his brilliance first-hand as his student at the Institute in the late 1990s.

Talking about the preparations for the Synod, Cardinal Caffarra commented, “I am flabbergasted that in this debate, even eminent cardinals do not bear in mind those 134 Catecheses of John Paul II [the Theology of the Body]. In the history of the papacy no Pope has ever spoken so much about this theme and yet this teaching is ignored as if it did not exist.”

That ignorance has been a growing concern of mine. When John Paul died in 2005, his theology of the body was almost universally acknowledged as his greatest theological contribution, as a “theological time bomb” that was being detonated in chastity and marriage preparation programs all over, helping so many in the Church to grasp how and why the Church’s teachings on sexuality are “Good News” instead of “bad.” Thanks to the work of many lay apostles, the Theology of the Body is still expanding in grassroots relevance.

But one place where it hasn’t gotten the attention it deserves is at the highest levels of the Church. In his eight years as successor of Peter and John Paul, Pope Benedict spoke about the Theology of the Body only once. In his 14 months as our new Holy Father, Pope Francis has yet to mention it publicly at all. I’ve combed his pre-papal work for references but I’ve never found any, suggesting, candidly, that he may never have had the chance to read these catecheses, since no priest can read them without having his whole approach to love, sexuality, marriage, and family forever transformed.

The upcoming Synods are an opportunity to place the Theology of the Body and all John Paul’s inspired insights on marriage and family in the contemporary world fully in the center of the whole Church’s thought. The Church and the world — the future of which passes by way of the family — need those insights of the “Pope of the Family” now more than ever.

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