

No going back. This synod will be decisive

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This synod will be decisive, according to a cardinal who is close to Pope Francis and is hopeful of an outcome that will bridge the gulf between church teaching and practice.

Speaking in London, where he had stopped off to give the annual Archbishop Romero Memorial Lecture on his way to the synod, the man often considered to be Pope Francis 'closest adviser seemed relaxed, even ebullient, in the face of the likely disputes and struggles ahead. "You know," said Cardinal Óscar Rodríguez Maradiaga SDB, "I believe strongly in the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit never takes a holiday – not even a siesta."

The Archbishop of Tegucigalpa, former president of Caritas Internationalis and chairman of the "C9" – the Pope's group of cardinal advisers – does not allow himself lengthy siestas either. "I am very hopeful that something good will come out of the synod," he told me, "and I sense there has been hard work and careful planning to ensure that these hopes will not be frustrated." Like Pope Francis, Rodríguez's instinct is to think first of those at the margins. "My hope is that this time we will concentrate on pastoral solutions to the difficult questions. All of us know the theology. All of us know

what can be changed and what cannot be changed. The challenge of the synod is, how can we reconcile our theology with the pastoral needs of the people?”

At the 2014 synod, there was a lot of debate, and the cardinal expects that this time there will be more decision-making. The Pope’s announcement that the annulment process would be streamlined was, Rodríguez said, “a very wise move. Now that this question is dealt with, we can concentrate on what we have to concentrate on.” Another factor he believes will help is that many of the participants will not be the same bishops who were there last time.

What of the major disconnect between the views of the great majority of ordinary Catholics and the teaching of the Church as exposed by the responses to the questionnaires sent out to parishes ahead of the synod? Rodríguez was quiet for a moment. “We are going to the synod to try to build bridges. That is the work of ‘Pontifex’ – the Pope is ‘the builder of bridges’. When the Holy Father asked me to come to the last synod, I said to him, ‘We have the teaching of the 1980 Synod on the Family, we have *Familiaris Consortio*. Why do we need another synod to discuss these questions?’ It’s true that the teaching of the Church hasn’t changed since 1980 – but marriage has changed, the situation for young people has changed, attitudes to relationships have changed. If the Synod Fathers of 1980 were meeting now, they would be saying very different things.” Rodríguez told me he was disappointed by the language and tone of the final report of last year’s synod on gay relationships. “I loved the language of the *relatio post disceptationem*” (the mid-term report at the 2014 synod that caused such alarm among conservative-minded delegates). “When this language was changed and impoverished, something was lost. What I thought was a very good bridge was withdrawn.” He shrugged. “Well, OK, I thought – if this bridge doesn’t work, then we will try to build another one.”

In the past, the Pope issued a teaching document in response to the synod – a year or 18 months after it had finished, when, as Rodríguez agreed, “everyone has forgotten about it”. This time, he believed, it will be very different. “I have heard that the Holy Father wants the bishops themselves to make the final document of this synod.”

What about those who wish to block reform? “It is going on, but the opposition is growing weaker. Why? Because they have no arguments. First, they said the Pope is going to change the teaching of the Church. And he has said, ‘No, I am not intending to do that’. And so ...” Rodríguez shook his head and made a brisk, dismissive gesture. “Are we to go backwards? No. I believe the gearbox of the Holy Spirit has no reverse gear.”

Does Pope Francis ever speak to you about retiring? I asked. “No. He still has work to do. He must take us to the stage where the reforms cannot be reversed. He has said to me, ‘I pray that when I am called to the Lord, the process will be irreversible.’ And that’s why we say to him, ‘Holy Father – take care of your health.’”

Brendan Walsh - The Tablet