

Vatican summit on family concludes with vague but open document

by [David Gibson](#)

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For three weeks in October, Roman Catholic bishops held their most significant and contested gathering in the past 50 years.

The synod of 270 cardinals and bishops from around the world was the second called by Pope Francis to address whether Catholicism could adapt its teachings to the changing realities of modern family life.

While the delegates made hundreds of suggestions on a host of issues, two took center stage: Could the church be more welcoming to gay and lesbian churchgoers? And was there a way divorced and remarried Catholics could receive communion without first obtaining an annulment of their marriage?

The final document was a compromise intended to gain support from both reformers and hard-liners, reiterating the church's opposition to same-sex marriage and reaffirming that marriage for Catholics is a lifelong sacramental union.

Yet the report contained key phrases about individual Catholics in "irregular" situations—such as being remarried without an annulment—using the "internal forum" of their conscience, in consultation with a pastor, to consider their status in the church. For decades the Vatican had effectively barred priests and penitents from using the internal forum in the remarriage context.

The final document did not offer any of the openings to gay and lesbian Catholics that had been raised during a preceding synod last October. It spoke only about respecting the dignity of people and rejecting "unjust discrimination."

The often vague language of the report left the door open for Francis to take further action to provide greater pastoral flexibility to bishops and priests, as church leaders expect him to do.

These meetings began after the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) but had become routine affairs. During this synod Francis said that the meeting showed that the church “does not simply rubber stamp” foregone conclusions.

Washington cardinal Donald Wuerl, one of the American bishops most trusted by Francis, played a key role. He expected some form of follow-up to the document, he said in an interview after the synod.

One of the messages of the synod was that while the church has “a very clear teaching,” he said, “that teaching includes the mercy of God and the care of the individual believer. Those two elements of the same reality are what the pope has lifted up and made visible in a way they haven’t been in a long time. If you are not able to minister to that person where that person is, you are not completing the teaching.”

Anglican bishop Tim Thornton, from Cornwall, England, was one of 14 fraternal delegates bringing views of other churches to the synod discussions. Others included representatives from the Baptist World Alliance and the Coptic Orthodox Church. Each of them, as well as lay observers, was given a three-minute slot to present his views.

Thornton said that in his three minutes, he cautioned bishops against focusing on a one-model-fits-all version of the family: “I was hearing a lot about ‘the family,’ which is some kind of ideal construct. Mine isn’t ideal, I can tell you!”

He outlined how his view differs from that of his Catholic counterparts.

“I don’t . . . go along with what appears here, which is that there is a thing called doctrine, a thing called pastoral practice, and somehow those two are either clearly delineated, or there is an obvious gap between them that needs to get linked up,” he said. —Religion News Service