

The Family Synod as a Teachable Moment

by Christina R. Zaker

Teachable moments are those moments that catch you by surprise and you recognize the need to change plans and respond. Beth Lewis explains, “A teachable moment is not something that you can plan for; rather, it is a fleeting opportunity that must be sensed and seized by the teacher.”¹ I had one such moment as I gathered the women of our parish scripture study. Normally we begin with prayer and then have a discussion around the upcoming Sunday scriptures. On this particular Thursday one woman, Delores, came in with a hint of exasperation. “I don’t see how they expect us to answer these questions,” she remarked placing a stack of papers on the table. She was referring to the questions the Vatican had sent to bishops’ conferences in anticipation of the October 2014 Synod.

The Vatican had given the bishops’ conferences only scant direction asking that they “share it immediately and as widely as possible,”² and each diocese was to develop its own way to cultivate responses. Chicago made the document available to the public but made no attempt to alter the questions to make them user-friendly for the average parishioner like Delores. When she walked in expressing her frustration I saw her desire to respond as a teachable moment for the whole group. Pope Francis was convening the family synod in a style designed to cultivate participation, and Catholics needed to feel the responsibility to actively participate in the discussion. So with the group’s permission we digressed from the Sunday scriptures.

We had a lively discussion and shared stories of great depth. One woman spoke of her children’s confusion when she got an annulment. One woman spoke of her gay nephew. She longed to help his mother accept him, but struggled to find compassionate statements in our church teaching to embolden her efforts. We talked of birth control and promiscuity; of natural law and patchwork families. The feelings they shared and the need to be heard was touching. One comment that continued to be repeated as if it were a mantra was that the church needed to be a safe place for these questions to be asked. Somehow our church had to be a safe place for a gay couple to ask

1 Beth Lewis, “Teachable Moment,” *About.com: About Education*, <http://k6educators.about.com/od/educationglossary/g/teachmoment.htm>.

2 Archbishop Lorenzo Baldisseri, secretary general of the Vatican’s Synod of Bishops, from the letter accompanying the distribution of the 2014 synod questions.

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about baptizing their child, a safe place for a teen to question about birth control, a safe place for a single mother to ask for assistance.

The discussion lasted well beyond our regular time; no one was in a hurry to leave. Opinions were varied regarding different questions and responses, but there was a growing sense of ownership that took place among the group. The subtle shift in the space of three hours moved this group from a stance of being outside the center of power in the church, to a group with authority as well. The statements shifted from “the church needs to . . .” or “they should do this . . .” to more pastoral ones like, “how do I encourage my sister . . .” or “can a grandmother provide a safe place for a teen to ask those questions?” It was a beautiful shift in the conversation and I realized the teachable moment the morning had been for all of us.

Those insights highlight the thought that Pope Francis is also seizing a teachable moment with the synod. In order to explore that thought further, we will look at Inquiry Based Learning (IBL) and the ways in which this synod process is a teachable moment that offers a refreshing shift away from the oftentimes ordinary lesson plans of the church.

Inquiry Based Learning—Beginning with Questions

IBL begins with the questions. It is an attempt on the part of the teacher to engage the students in asking questions and seeking answers. “The power of an inquiry-based approach to teaching and learning is its potential to increase intellectual engagement and foster deep understanding”³ The synod engagement began with the questions. Not only were questions distributed to the bishops’ conferences and in turn to much of the wider church, but there also was a stance that all questions were valid. This type of open invitation to ask questions and seek honest responses was encouraged throughout the process. As Pope Francis remarked at the opening of the 2014 Synod, “*We must say everything we feel we need to say, in the spirit of the Lord, without pusillanimity and without fear. At the same time, we must listen humbly and embrace with an open heart what our brothers tell us. These two attitudes express synodality.*”⁴

The willingness to begin with the questions and encourage humble listening impacted the engagement of the whole church. The Vatican received responses from all over the world. The initial questionnaire “spurred a massive response from the conferences and also from lay Catholics globally.”⁵ People sensed the church was creating a sacred space to share stories and ask questions and they wanted to contribute.

Inquiry Based Learning—Student and Teacher Learning Together

Another intriguing aspect of IBL is that the teacher takes a stance of collaborative learner alongside the students. “Inquiry starts with teachers as engaged learners and researchers with the foundational belief that the topics they teach are rich, living and generous places for wonder and exploration.”⁶ The notion that *family* is a “rich, living and generous place for wonder and exploration” seemed to have navigated the stance that the Synod of Bishops and Pope Francis himself took. There was a sense that they longed to learn alongside the people of God. The *Relatio post disceptationem* beautifully highlighted the steps the Assembly undertook in the first half of the synod gathering. First they listened. They listened to gain an understanding on the context of today’s families. They heard from social, psychological, and pastoral contexts and they listened. Perhaps they did not engage a wide enough group of contextual representatives, but their stance was one of listening.

3 Neil Stephenson, “Introduction to Inquiry Based Learning,” <http://www.teachinquiry.com/index/Introduction.html>.

4 Michael Sean Winters, “The Synod Opens,” *National Catholic Reporter* online, October 7, 2014, <http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/synod-opens>.

5 Joshua J. McElwee, “Vatican Asks for Wide Input on 2015 Synod, Not Based on Doctrine,” *National Catholic Reporter* online, December 9, 2014, <http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/vatican-asks-wide-input-2015-synod-not-based-doctrine>.

6 Stephenson, “Introduction to Inquiry Based Learning.”

The second step highlighted during the synod was “the gaze on Christ: the Gospel of the Family.”⁷ Although at first glance one might expect this to be a turn toward what the church teaches on family, the synod chose instead to see it as a second form of listening—one of listening with the heart of mercy. “Following the expansive gaze of Christ, whose light illuminates every man [and woman], the Church turns respectfully to those who participate in her life in an incomplete and imperfect way, appreciating the positive values they contain rather than their limitations and shortcomings.”⁸ The inquiry based stance allows the teacher to be a learner along with the student. Here the synod is inviting the whole church to learn together not only about the broad spectrum of the context of families today, but also to seek ways of responding that illustrate Christ’s love and tenderness.

The third step undertaken by the synod was to face the situation. IBL speaks of the reflection necessary to critically think about what one is studying. IBL encourages reflection that moves from being able to see things from one perspective and critique from one stance to “the learner has the ability to view things from multiple perspectives, to observe several aspects of the situation, and to place them in a particular context.”⁹ As the synod turned to the topic “Facing the Situation: Pastoral Perspectives,” they illustrated this critical point, carving out the space for reflection that opens up an understanding of multiple perspectives and contexts.

The *Relatio Synodi* distributed at the end of the synod mirrored the same method: with listening, looking, and confronting. Although the tone in the final document was less pastoral (as illustrated in the language used: “looking” and “confronting” are less hospitable verbs than “gazing” and “facing”), the traces of IBL remain in the attempt to listen, look, and pause to reflect on family as a “rich, living and generous place for wonder and exploration.”¹⁰ The space carved out between the first synod and the 2015 synod fosters further research and reflection. “These proposed reflections, the fruit of the synodal work that took place in great freedom and with a spirit of reciprocal listening are intended to raise questions and indicate points of view that will later be developed and clarified through reflection in the local Churches in the intervening year.”¹¹

Teachers in IBL need to have a certain tolerance for the messiness of this form of teaching and learning. Pope Francis exemplifies an IBL teacher in that he has shaped the process as open, organic, and filled with trust. He seemed to be willing to learn alongside the faithful and trust the Spirit. Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, the archbishop of Vienna, spoke about this when he asked Pope Francis “about the controversies between the bishops and asked him if perhaps they were getting too heated, but Francis had told him to trust in God.”¹² This trust and the ongoing invitation to speak what was in their hearts in open dialogue was something that breathed new life into the bishops. “The pope could hardly have designed a better way to elicit an exercise of collective responsibility from this group [of Bishops].”¹³ In addition, the act of inviting responses from the wider church modeled ways to generate participation and collaboration.

7 Cardinal Péter Erdő, “Synod 14—Eleventh General Assembly: ‘Relatio post disceptationem’ of the General Rapporteur. 13/10/2014,” no. 12, *National Catholic Reporter* online, October 15, 2014, <http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/relatio-post-disceptationem-2014-synod-bishops-family>.

8 *Relatio post disceptationem*, no. 20.

9 Maria Isabel Runnel, Margus Pedaste, and Ali Leijen, “Model for Guiding Reflection in the Context of Inquiry Based Science Education,” *Journal of Baltic Science Education* 12, no.1 (2013): 110.

10 Lewis, “Teachable Moment.”

11 III Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization: *Relatio Synodi*,” (Vatican City, 2014), no. .62, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20141018_relatio-synodi-familia_en.html.

12 Christa Pongratz-Lippitt, “Schönborn: The Next Synod Must Concentrate on the Realities of Family Life,” *National Catholic Reporter* online, December 9, 2014, <http://ncronline.org/news/global/sch-nborn-next-synod-must-concentrate-realities-family-life>.

13 Francis X. Rocca, “Did Pope Francis Get What He Wanted from the Synod?” *National Catholic Reporter* online, November 3, 2014, <http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/did-pope-francis-get-what-he-wanted-synod>.

Inquiry Based Learning—Fostering Deep Understanding

The women in the scripture study recognized that the church was open to their questions, their stories, and eventually their ownership of how to respond. This is the intellectual engagement and deep understanding IBL seeks. The 2014 Synod was named “Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelization,” and the 2015 Synod is “The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and Contemporary World.” Those titles shift the conversation from one that looks at the *family* as fraught with challenges, to one that sees *family* as having a vocation and responsibility to transform the world. Critical to the success of this experiment—this teachable moment that Pope Francis has sensed and seized—is how successful it has been at inviting and allowing the people of God to own the process and the responses. That remains to be seen as we look to the 2015 Synod.

In the Concluding Discourse from October 18, 2014, Pope Francis writes, “We still have one year to mature, with true spiritual discernment, the proposed ideas and to find concrete solutions.” We are challenged in this interim year to “true spiritual discernment,” challenged to see this year as a teachable moment. The space has been carved out to engage our parishioners, students, colleagues, and communities in an intentional conversation to discuss and debate and propose the way forward. This is a teachable moment, and we must seize it as an opportunity to learn alongside one another. Take the lead of Pope Francis and trust God even in the midst of the messiness. I am looking forward to what might take place if we let the Spirit lead.