

Foreword

This special issue of *Melita Theologica* brings together the proceedings of the European Conference “Between Two Synods: Journeying Together,” which the Faculty of Theology, at the University of Malta, convened in conjunction with the European Society of Catholic Theology, on 20 February 2015, at the sixteenth-century Verdala Palace which was designed for the Knights of Malta by the Maltese engineer Girolamo Cassar.

At this particularly historical juncture when the universal Church is on a journey between two synods on the family to identify concrete solutions through ecclesial discernment to so many difficulties and problems that families are facing today, the organizing committee decided to take the pastoral challenges of the family in the context of evangelization as the main focus of this Conference.

The phrase “journeying together,” used by Pope Francis at the concluding address of the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops on the Family held in October 2014, was included in the title of the Conference for a specific reason. We wanted the Conference to be part of the synodal process which Pope Francis described as an attempt of the ecclesial community to “lend an ear to the rhythm of our time.” The Conference offered a unique opportunity for all participants to reflect on the conclusions of the October 2014 Extraordinary Synod and to offer fruitful contributions towards the Fourteenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops of October 2015.

Since many pastoral issues raised at the 2014 Extraordinary Synod were still open for discussion and required an in-depth analysis, our Conference was convened as a response to Pope Francis’ invitation to the ecclesial community to continue to reflect and discern in order to find concrete solutions to the problems of so many wounded families who feel that they are journeying alone as “a church in exile.” In this respect, Pope Francis continuously exhorts the Church to restore their adherence as members of the ecclesial community through mercy and accompaniment.

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In our Conference, we have focused on a number of controversial theological issues which remained open for discussion after the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops of October 2014:

- How can the theology of mercy towards broken and fragile families be reconciled with truth and justice?
- How can the conflict between Church doctrine and pastoral practice be resolved?
- What is the relationship between *sensus fidei* and *sensus fidelium*?
- What can the Catholic Church learn from the Orthodox tradition on divorced and remarried couples?
- How can we refine our theological language to make it more appropriate for pastoral care today?
- How can married couples who are at *centre* of the Church share their spirituality with those who are at the *periphery*?

These thorny issues were not raised in our Conference just for the sake of highlighting the divergences in opinions and perspectives that emerged during the 2014 Extraordinary Synod, but rather to search for a common theological ground in the hope of resolving these polarities. We wanted our discussions to be an opportunity to engage – within a spirit of collegiality, synodality and discernment – in deeper theological reflections, which could enlighten the ecclesial community to articulate adequately the true meaning and the proper relationship of these polarities.

At the beginning of the Extraordinary Synod of October 2014, Pope Francis had exhorted participants to exercise freedom of speech and expression. He insisted that speaking with *parrhesia* and listening with humility were necessary dispositions for an effective discernment. A sense of openness for the truth, freedom of speech and mutual respect, strongly recommended by Pope Francis, thus dominated our reflections and discussions during the Conference. We sincerely hope that the publication of these conference proceedings will be a valuable contribution to the ecclesial community in its process of spiritual discernment concerning the pastoral care of families.

Rev. Prof. Emmanuel Agius

Rev. Dr John Berry