

Letter from the Bishops of New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Recently the Church received the call of Pope Francis to convene an Extraordinary Synod (meeting of Catholic bishops) in Rome, planned for 5-19 October 2014, on the topic of:

Pastoral challenges of the family in the context of evangelisation.

We welcome this rare and important occasion, in which all the bishops of the Church have been asked to seek input by as many of the faithful as possible, on pastoral challenges facing the family.

With this in mind, we, as bishops in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory, invite you to take some time for prayer and reflection, and to share your responses to the questions put to us by His Holiness. You will find in the Preparatory Document, a list of particular pastoral challenges, and you do not need to have a response to each one, nor feel the need to give a specific pastoral answer for every challenge that sits before us in these difficult times for the family. Your honesty and good will are invaluable at a moment such as this.

It is important to realise that the Extraordinary Synod, like the Second Vatican Council, will be a pastoral rather than a doctrinally-focussed gathering. We hope that this will help the Catholic and wider community to respond to the real-life challenges faced by families.

Therefore the Catholic moral teaching on basic issues such as sexuality, marriage and family will remain in place. For example, a recent article in the *Osservatore Romano* (23 October 2013) by Archbishop Gerhard Müller, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "on the indissolubility of marriage and the debate concerning the civilly remarried and the sacraments" clearly sets out the Church's teaching and was published with the approval of Pope Francis.

The Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, seeks your contribution to a conversation the Holy Father has invited us to enter, and we hope for a wealth of thoughtful and prayerful responses as we work to maintain Gospel truths, strengthen family life, and reach out and help all people caught up in difficult situations.

The Holy Family offers us a unique model of family life. What is particular to Jesus, Mary and Joseph, is not that they were immune to life's concerns. On the contrary, persecution and hardship dogged them. Yet Jesus Christ lived in the heart of their home, and we see in both Our Lady and St Joseph, people who remained faithful to God's Word.

May the work of this Synod help inform each of us and the Church in Australia how to respond more effectively to the pastoral issues faced by families.

