Francis closes synod warning against spirituality that ignores people’s struggles

Pope Francis leaves after celebrating the closing Mass of the Synod of Bishops on the family in St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican Oct. 25. (CNS/Paul Haring)


Family Synod 2015

Vatican City

Concluding a worldwide gathering that saw some 270 Catholic bishops deliberate on difficult issues of family life, Pope Francis on Sunday warned against a temptation to practice a "spirituality of illusion" that ignores people’s struggles or sees things only as we wish them to be.

In a homily during a Mass closing the Oct. 4-25 Synod of Bishops, the pontiff also warned the prelates and the wider church against a "scheduled faith" where things are so planned out that we cannot stop for those in need or those who are crying out for our help.
The pope made his remarks in a reflection on the Gospel reading of the day, which sees Jesus give sight to a blind man named Bartimaeus who he has encountered on his journey to Jerusalem. 
"Even though he has only begun his most important journey … he still stops to respond to Bartimaeus’ cry," said Francis. "Jesus is moved by his request and becomes involved in his situation. He is not content to offer him alms, but rather wants to personally encounter him."
"Jesus shows that he wants to hear our need," said the pope. "He wants to talk with each of us about our lives, our real situations, so that nothing is kept from him."
Then, outlining two temptations he said are encountered by those who follow Jesus, the pontiff said:
"None of the disciples stopped, as Jesus did."
"If Bartimaeus was blind, they were deaf: his problem was not their problem," said Francis. "This can be a danger for us: in the face of constant problems, it is better to move on, instead of letting ourselves be bothered. In this way, just like the disciples, we are with Jesus but we do not think like him."
"We are in his group, but our hearts are not open," said the pope. "We lose wonder, gratitude and enthusiasm, and risk becoming habitually unmoved by grace. We are able to speak about him and work for him, but we live far from his heart, which is reaching out to those who are wounded."
"This is the temptation: a 'spirituality of illusion:' we can walk through the deserts of humanity without seeing what is really there; instead, we see what we want to see," he continued. "We are capable of developing views of the world, but we do not accept what the Lord places before our eyes."
"A faith that does not know how to root itself in the life of people remains arid and, rather than oases, creates other deserts," he said.
Outlining the second temptation, Francis said that temptation occurs when "we are able to walk with the People of God, but we already have our schedule for the journey, where everything is listed."
"We know where to go and how long it will take; everyone must respect our rhythm and every problem is a bother," said the pontiff. "We run the risk of becoming the 'many' of the Gospel who lose patience and rebuke Bartimaeus."
"Jesus, on the other hand, wants to include, above all those kept on the fringes who are crying out to him," said the pope. "They, like Bartimaeus, have faith, because awareness of the need for salvation is the best way of encountering Jesus."
Francis’ words Sunday came during a Mass in St. Peter’s Basilica that formally closed the three week gathering of bishops, which saw the prelates deliberate over a wide range of issues facing families. The remarks follow strong words given by the pope at the end of the work of the gathering Saturday evening, when the pontiff renewed his continual emphasis of the boundless nature of divine mercy, saying: "The Church’s first duty is not to hand down condemnations or anathemas, but to proclaim God’s mercy."
The synod concluded Saturday with release of a final document that strikingly recommended softening the church’s practice towards those who have divorced and remarried, saying such persons should discern decisions about their spiritual lives individually in concert with the guidance of priests. The document proposed use of what is called the "internal forum," to allow priests to privately help remarried Catholics "in becoming conscious of their situation before God" and then deciding how to move forward.
"The conversation with the priest, in internal forum, contributes to the formation of a correct decision on what is blocking the possibility of a fuller participation in the life of the church and on steps that might foster it and make it grow," stated the document.
"For this to happen, the necessary conditions should be guaranteed of humility, discretion, and love of the Church and its teachings in the sincere seeking of the will of God and in the wish to give a more perfect response to it," the document continued.
Catholic teaching says that acts of governance in the church can take place either in an internal or external forum. The internal forum is the forum of conscience, where a decision is made in private counseling with a priest without a formal decree or any sort of publicity.
Francis told the prelates Sunday that Christians are called to act like Jesus did with Bartimaeus. "Jesus’ disciples are called to this, even today, especially today: to bring people into contact with the compassionate Mercy that saves," said the pontiff. "When humanity’s cry, like Bartimaeus’, becomes stronger still, there is no other response than to make Jesus’ words our own and, above all, imitate his heart."
"Moments of suffering and conflict are for God occasions of mercy," said the pope. "Today is a time of mercy!"

Francis also called on the bishops to "follow the path that the Lord desires."

"Let us ask him to turn to us with his healing and saving gaze, which knows how to radiate light, as it recalls the splendor which illuminates it," said the pontiff. "Never allowing ourselves to be tarnished by pessimism or sin, let us seek and look upon the glory of God, which shines forth in men and women who are fully alive."

Following Mass Sunday, the pope led crowds in St. Peter’s Square in the weekly recitation of the Angelus prayer. He spoke of the Synod during his remarks before the prayer, mentioning it as a time of "walking together" for the bishops.

"I invite all to give thanks to God for these three weeks of intense work, animated by prayer and by a spirit of true communion," said Francis. "It was tiring, but it was a true gift of God, that will surely bring much fruit."

The pope also reflected on the first reading of the day, where the prophet Jeremiah says God will lead his people home.

The reading, the pontiff said, "tells us that the first who wants to walk together with us, to make a 'synod' with us, is truly Him, our Father."

"His dream, since always and for always, is that of building a people, of gathering them, of guiding them toward the land of liberty and peace," said Francis. "And this people is made of families."

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