The pope has smoked out his opposition

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Family Synod 2015

If you really want to know what happened inside the Synod of Bishops this past month, don't obsess too much over its final report (relatio) on the church and the family. Each of that document's ninety-four articles or paragraphs was approved by at least two-thirds of the 264 prelates (and one layman) that showed up for the final vote. And the reason there was such overwhelming approval is because of a delicate compromise that took all of the most controversial issues off the table or treated them with open-ended language. Nonetheless, Catholics of contrasting points of views (and even ideologies) have found ways to claim "victory" for their side through a favorable reading of one passage or another. But they are missing the point.

Pope Francis' novel decision to call the synod into session twice in twelve months to speak freely about the exact same issue ("the vocation and mission of the family in the Church and the contemporary world") was primarily not about the family. Rather, it was about re-introducing a process of discussion and debate at the highest level of the church, not seen since the first years immediately following the Second Vatican Council. He confirmed as much in a key address he gave on Oct. 17 during a symposium to mark the 50th anniversary of the Synod of Bishops.

In this two-pronged process, Francis intended his first synod gathering (last year) to help the bishops "take the pulse" of the Catholic people. He stimulated this by having the synod secretariat send an unprecedented questionnaire several months earlier to all the bishops of the world, encouraging them to canvas the lay faithful for their views and experience on the church's teaching and praxis regarding marriage, family and sexuality.

He had quite another idea for the second synod gathering, the one that just took place. It seems clearer, now more than ever, that it was designed to help him "take the pulse" of the bishops. And it was successful. In a sense, he has "smoked out" those bishops who, up until now, have not shown their hand.

Don't believe it?

On Saturday evening, as he brought this latest synod assembly's work to a close, the pope told the bishops and observers what he believed the exercise had been about.

Among other things, he said: "It was about laying bare the closed hearts, which frequently hide even behind the Church's teaching or good intentions, in order to sit in the chair of Moses and judge, sometimes with superiority and superficiality, difficult cases and wounded families."

Francis undoubtedly took note of those prelates he had in mind.

And while he thanked the bishops for engaging in "a rich and lively dialogue" through the many "different opinions which were freely expressed," he lamented that some synod participants spoke out "at times, unfortunately, not entirely in well-meaning ways."

He surely jotted down the names of a few more bishops.

"The Synod experience also made us better realize that the true defenders of doctrine are not those that uphold its letter, but its spirit; not ideas, but people; not formulae, but the gratuitousness of God's love and forgiveness," the pope said.

More names to add to his little black book?

Francis also said that this latest synod assembly "was about trying to open up broader horizons" and -- here he may have had a dozen or so other bishops in mind -- "rising above conspiracy theories and blinkered viewpoints, so as to defend and spread the freedom of the children of God."
The pope forged these impressions not so much from the final report the synod produced but from the three weeks he spent engaged with participants in the hall.

As Cardinal Gerald Lacroix of Quebec told reporters last week, Francis knows the "accents and difficult points" of the debates that went on. He also "knows the weight of each argument," even of those that did not make it into the final document.

In other words, the pope has gotten to know the bishops much better and is now in a stronger position to distinguish those who are on board with his vision of renewing and reforming the church from those who are not.

But if the more than 250 bishops (there were also non-bishop synod fathers) who were at this latest synod assembly are truly representative of the worldwide episcopate, Francis may have a difficult road ahead.

Nearly a third of the synod fathers voted against those articles in the final report that, although greatly watered down, hinted at greater openness to accommodating Catholics who fall short of the mark regarding church's marital laws and teaching.

And even more alarming is the list of twelve bishops that the general assembly elected to the synod's permanent council. Along with three papal appointees, this group of fifteen will prepare the ground for the next ordinary assembly of the synod.

The assembly was asked to choose three men each from the Americas, Europe, Africa and Asia-Oceania. According to one report, Archbishop Charles Chaput of Philadelphia garnered more votes than anyone else. Archbishop Blaise Cupich of Chicago, who was among the top three elected from the Americas, was eliminated because only a single representative is allowed from any one country. Others elected, who are generally described as opponents to change, were Cardinals George Pell (head of Vatican's Secretariat for the Economy), Robert Sarah (prefect, Congregation for Divine Worship), Marc Ouellet (prefect, Congregation for Bishops) and Wilfrid Napier (South Africa).

Elected from among those bishops generally seen as more reform-minded were Cardinals Vincent Nichols (England), Christoph Schönborn (Austria), Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga (Honduras), Luis Tagle (Philippines), Oswald Gracias (India) and Archbishop Bruno Forte (Italy).

The twelfth man elected to the permanent council was Bishop Mathieu Madega Lebouankehan (Gabon).

Pope Francis will be able to break what appears to be a divided council by appointing three bishops closer to his own thinking. And more importantly he now has a better read of the 250 or so bishops who have been "synoding" in Rome these past few weeks.

In the past, popes and their closest aides have found these synod assemblies to be a useful proving ground or talent pool for selecting future Church leaders. After this latest exercise, in which he practically forced the bishops to lay their cards on the table, Pope Francis is in a better position to confidently choose a number of prelates who will be assets in carrying out his agenda for church renewal.

He surely realizes that, with the current crop of bishops, he needs all the help he can get.

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