

Third Sunday of Lent

Last month Pope Francis published a letter addressed to families. He wrote, “in our day the Church is called to proclaim the Gospel by confronting the new and urgent pastoral needs facing the family.” To that end the Holy Father has announced that this coming October he will host a meeting of some bishops, who are even now preparing for the event together with priests, brothers, sisters, and laity from around the world. He says this synod will discuss the “pastoral challenges to the family in the context of evangelization.”

Last fall the Vatican released a questionnaire to help bishops prepare for the synod, and many Catholics around the world filled it out, even here in our own diocese. The questions included pastorally difficult topics such as couples living together before marriage, divorced and remarried Catholics, same-sex unions, the adoption of children by same-sex couples, and the use of artificial means of birth control.

Last month at the invitation of Pope Francis, Cardinal Walter Kasper shared with other cardinals his personal thoughts about divorced and remarried Catholics, who by Church law are excluded from communion. He said their situation must be examined “from the perspective of those who suffer and ask for help.” He urged an approach that would “tolerate that which was in itself impossible to accept,” namely divorce, “in order to avoid the worst,” preventing people from receiving the sacraments. The synod this October will address this question. In October of next year there will be a second synod on the family, which will propose some solutions. There is no simple answer to this and other questions facing family life. However, Pope Francis has invited discussion on these matters.

When Jesus talked to the woman at the well, he wanted to give her living water. She did not understand the offer, but she wanted some of it anyway. Jesus then said to her, “You have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband.” This impressed her more than anything else. The man she first called “a Jew” and “Sir” she was now thinking could be “the Messiah” and “the Christ.” By the end of the story, she has convinced others that Jesus is the savior of the world. What she told people, what impressed her the most was not his teaching about living water, but this: “He told me everything I have done.” Jesus’ knowledge of her past did not lead to her punishment; it led to her discipleship.

In his letter, Pope Francis asks families to pray for the upcoming synod. He said your prayer will be “a precious treasure” that enriches the Church. Together with those prayers, we can also practice the possession of an understanding heart - one that acknowledges other peoples’ sin and sorrow, and offers life and hope. There are people living in ways with which we do not agree. What they need most is to meet Jesus Christ, and perhaps they can meet him through us.