Bretzke’s Script for

*Life Matters: Reflections Extraordinary Synod on the Family [Uploaded October 26, 2014]*

https://www2.bc.edu/james-bretzke/BretzkeSynodOnTheFamilyBCTalk.pdf OR
https://www2.bc.edu/james-bretzke/BretzkeSynodOnTheFamilyBCTalk.pptx

**Slide 1:** “Life Matters: Reflections on the Synod on the Family”

**Slide 2:** Initial Disclaimers (just read this slide)

**Slide 3:** A Synod is not an Ecumenical Council, but this current triennial form was established by Pope Paul VI after Vatican II to try and institutionalize on a smaller, manageable scale some of the world-wide collegiality of bishops that was so rich at the Council

**Slide 4:** The Preparation for a Synod follows a set process: (see Slide 4)

**Slide 5:** However in this Extraordinary Synod there were a number of important innovations—primarily in the invitation not just to bishops but to all the faithful to share their own views in the form of a questionnaire which had 39 questions under nine topics.

The *Lineamenta* (sort of a compilation of input from around the world) and the resulting *Instrumentum Laboris* (working document for initial Synod discussion) both acknowledge with uncommon frankness and lack of condemnation areas of difficulty and down-right “non-acceptance” of Church teaching in key areas that deal with the family and related sexual ethics.

Perhaps not surprisingly this whole process garnered a good deal more media attention in the secular press than previous Synods had occasioned.

**Slide 6:** Possibility of Change in the Pastoral Care of Divorced & Remarried Catholics, admitting them back to the Sacraments quickly became one of the key issues of contention in the lead-up to the Synod. In a February 2014 Consistory of Cardinals Pope Francis had asked the recently retired prefect of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity, Cardinal Walter Kasper, to address the assembled cardinals on the upcoming Synod.

Soon after Kasper’s talk there was considerable push-back on the possibility of admitting the divorced and remarried to the Sacraments, led chiefly by Cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Müller (b. 1947), prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and most strenuously from Cardinal Raymond Burke (b. 1948), prefect of the Apostolic Signatura, the Church’s analogue to the Supreme Court.

**Slide 7:** The competing positions were captured to an extent by two books: Kasper’s *Mercy* (endorsed by Pope Francis himself) and *Remaining in the Truth of Christ*, a collection of 9 essays including Burke, Müller, and 3 other cardinals, and 4 others (including 2 Jesuits—Paul

**Slide 8** A crucial point to this whole controversy revolves around whether the contemplated change in pastoral practice of allowing divorced & remarried access to the Sacraments is only a change in Church discipline or whether it would be tantamount to a profound change in Church doctrine. Disciplines can be changed by the legitimate ecclesial authority, but revising Church doctrines are far more complex.

**Slide 9** Moving from the general discussion to the particular issue: If we consider reception or non-reception of the Sacraments as a “discipline” that can be separated from “doctrine,” then it is possible in theory to relax a discipline for pastoral reasons while still maintaining the doctrine that a valid sacramental marriage is indissoluble until the death of one of the parties. This basically is the position of Cardinal Kasper, whereas Cardinal Burke et al. maintain that the connection between the two is so tightly woven together that relaxing one would entail the unraveling of the other.

**Slide 10** The “internal forum” solution traditionally is used *not* in a marriage tribunal case, but a decision made in conscience in which an individual—usually in consultation with a priest-confessor—goes over the history of the first marriage, including its breakdown, to discern whether in good conscience one believes that one or more of the required conditions for a valid sacramental marriage were not present at the time of the wedding. If for some reason this evidence could not be presented in the external forum of a marriage tribunal then, and only then, could the person be advised that before God (*coram Deo*) the sacramental marriage likely never occurred and so again *coram Deo* the person would be free to marry (and in this case return to the sacraments). Cardinal Kasper’s position though would not enter primarily into this sort of investigation in the internal forum, but would begin with the same presumption that the marriage was valid, but had irretrievably broken down and could not be repaired for a variety of reasons. Sin might well have helped caused the breakdown and the Church’s sacramental response to sin is forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. So the person(s) would be invited to this Sacrament and then would likewise be invited to receive Communion.

So this sets the scene then for the opening of the Synod

**Slide 11** In the Pope’s Opening Address we see the accent on the desire for openness that may have produced what in Italian might be called a *Confronto Americano*—literally an “American-style Confrontation” which we’d probably translate as a “frank discussion,” but which often in ecclesial culture is seen as a *bruta figura* (literally an “ugly figure” which is to be avoided at all costs if possible).

**Slide 12** The First Week of the Extraordinary Synod was given over to a variety of speeches from the Synod Participants. One of the most striking was from a married couple from Australia, the Pirolas, who spoke of friends who welcomed their gay son with his partner into their home,
underlining he was after their son. This talk was greeted with applause in the Synod Aula, but shortly afterwards Cardinal Burke gave a recorded TV interview in which he deplored this “acceptance” saying it would scandalize the younger members of the family and ultimately harm further the son himself who was engaged in a life-style repugnant to the natural law as well as Scripture and Church teaching.

Perhaps that exchange may have occasioned “pushback” from the liberal wing of the Synod, as the mid-term Summary of the First week (called a Relatio) put together by a special Committee appointed by the Pope presented surprisingly “open” language to those not married in the Church, the Divorced/Remarried, as well as Gay men and women. For every action there is an equal opposite reaction and a number of the Synod Fathers expressed varying degrees of discomfort over the mid-term Relatio and a group managed to have the English translation of the Italian original revised, as we see in the next slide.

**Slide 13** Here we see a couple of the contested translation points, and I have the Italian original in green, the first English translation in blue and the revised English translation in red. I suppose there is no way ultimately of saying which translation is to be “preferred,” but as someone who lived, studied, taught and did pastoral work in Italian for seven years I would argue that the first English translation is more faithful to the Italian original than the revision.

**Slide 14** Following the First Week’s general sessions the participants broke up into ten language small groups called Circoli minores for further discussion on the Synod themes and the mid-term Relatio. Having lived through a few Synods in my 7 years in Rome I would note that this Synod had greater transparency and openness to a variety of viewpoints. I remember an anecdote from one of my fellow students in the 1980’s who served as a scribe for one of the Circoli minores being told not to be certain items into his final compilation since it was “not in the final report” (which was supposedly written only after the small groups had concluded---but in this case had actually been drafted before the Synod had begun).

**Slide 15** Of the 3 English-language groups the one chaired by Cardinal Burke seems to have registered the strongest negative reactions to the Synod First Week talks and the mid-term Relatio [leave time for people to read the slide]

**Slide 16** The other English-language groups seem to be a bit more open to the possibility of change,

**Slide 17** but raised two other concerns: one, deals with what is called “spiritual communion” by which a person who is impeded for one reason or another for receiving communion physically is invited to join him/herself with the Lord spiritually. This practice traditionally has been practiced by those who find it impossible to be physically present at Mass (e.g., due to illness, work, travel, etc.). Some advanced the spiritual communion idea as a compromise solution that would exhibit greater pastoral sensitivity to the divorced and remarried, but without allowing them to receive the sacraments. In the Synod Aula, however, this “solution” was criticized on
theological grounds: if we can invite people in good faith to “spiritual communion” with the Lord and His Church then what would prevent them from receiving regular Communion if they could be present?

**Slide 18** The second concern revolves around a much-discussed term that came up in the Synod Aula, namely how one legitimately can understand and invoke “gradualism” in relation to both moral and ecclesial law. This item was one of the most important conceptual debate points and I’ll return to it at the end of the talk.

**Slide 19** The 3 Italian groups brought forward a number of different points which I’ll let you read here, but which I won’t have time to go into in greater depth. [leave a little time to read]

**Slide 20** Now we come to the concluding actions of the Synod, namely the construction of the Final *Relatio* (or Synod Report to the Holy Father) and the individual votes on each of the 62 paragraphs in the document. A couple of initial points to underscore: *every paragraph* received a majority positive vote; *no paragraph* got an unanimous vote (several paragraphs had one person voting against them, but the identity of the voters remains unknown). Three paragraphs failed to reach the desired two-thirds vote to indicate “consensus” and we’ll see these three in the next slides. Finally, the Holy Father ordered the whole document, *along with the individual vote tallies*, to be published—and this is yet another “innovation” and mark of “transparency” in this Synod.

**Slide 21** Some conservatives argue that a 4th paragraph, on “dialogue” with those in *de facto* non-sacramental marital unions, also “failed,” to gain a two-thirds consensus but this would only hold if you compute the total number of possible votes, and not the actual votes cast.

**Slide 22** Communion for the Divorced & Remarried, the Kasper proposal, was probably the “clearest” of the Paragraphs for voting purposes, and while it won majority approval we see that it failed to gain the desired two-thirds vote.

**Slide 23** The “Spiritual Communion” paragraph also failed to gain two-thirds, but in this case we strongly suspect that people from both ends of the spectrum voted against the paragraph—though for opposite reasons.

**Slide 24** Probably a similar dynamic was in play on the Paragraph that was meant to indicate pastoral sensitivity to gay and lesbian Catholics. Again, I suspect that some who voted “no” did so because they thought this Paragraph went “too far” while others opposed it for watering down the more sympathetic language found in the mid-Synod *Relatio*. In any case, if just one person had changed his vote the Paragraph would have garnered a two-thirds “consensus.”

**Slide 25** After the votes were cast and announced the Holy Father gave his final discourse, which was received with a five-minute standing ovation. This speech has already been fairly widely reported in the Press, and I used it for a couple of homilies myself so I’ll simply point to the
summary I’ve done here from the Italian original. In the Q&A if we have time and interest we
could unpack some of this Discourse further.

**Slide 26** Now onto Spin Control: This could involve another talk at least triple in length, so all
I’ll do here is to offer up a quick digest of some of the stronger voices—even if they are not
necessarily the most widely held views. Clearly the *odium theologicum* (theological hatred) that
has plagued the Church for centuries remains quite viral.

**Slide 27** Here are some of the shrillest comments, and indeed would be genuinely quite troubling
if they are in fact true.

**Slide 28** The usual conservative trope of *Cum Petro et Sub Petro* “with Peter and under Peter”
seems to have lost a good deal of its force as well.

**Slide 29** One of the interesting markers in Pope Francis’ papacy is how regime change has
tempered some of episcopal voices in the United States. The nomination of my old “curate”
Blasé Cupich to be Cardinal George’s successor in Chicago is probably one of the most
commented upon changes in the ecclesial landscape. However, there are still a few bishops in
the United States that still seem rather uncomfortable with both the Pope and the recently
concluded Synod. Here is one reaction from a non-participant, Archbishop Charles Chaput (a
novitiate Capuchin classmate of our own Cardinal Sean O’Malley)

**Slide 30** Besides Cardinal Burke in Rome probably the severest American episcopal critic I’ve
seen of Pope Francis and the Synod was voiced by Providence Bishop Thomas Tobin in his last
week’s “Bishop’s Column” posted on the Diocesan web-page. His last line though recalls a
much quoted line from St. John XXIII who used to say “It’s your Church God, and now I’m
going to sleep.”

**Slide 31** A genuine surprise to me (from what I had predicted when we first set up this talk’s
topic many months ago) is how very little we have heard concretely about educating Catholic
voters in the upcoming elections. Here though Bishop Tobin has taken the lead among his
brother bishops in instructing the Catholic faithful in Rhode Island.

**Slide 32** An issue that I suspect will carry forward into the next Synod and beyond is the playing
out of this crucial distinction between “discipline” and “doctrine.” Two recent commentators I
believe ultimately are confusing, if not equating, the two and I think this sort of “confusion”---
while not of the devil—nevertheless needs to be clarified in the months to come.

**Slide 33** Reading the Roman Tea-Leaves is really a question of perspectives and paradigms. I’ve
listed here some of the key bullet points that I think were in play in the Extraordinary Synod just
concluded and which will probably continue to play a major role in the next Synod, as well as
other important areas in the Church today. I think a deeper consideration of these might also
help relieve some of the confusion, distress and even acrimony this Synod seems to have
uncovered. Perhaps we might want to return to some of these in the Q&A, but “globally” I would suggest that how we “see” the Church and the world in these individual areas does more than anything else to predict how this or that in the Synod might have resonated—or conflicted—with our own theology.

Shifting ecclesial landscape *ad intra* and *ad extra*

Attitudes toward the “World” & the “Pope”

Legal vs. Pastoral Paradigms

Deductive vs. Inductive “Reading” of “Truth”

Moral analysis of concrete situations

Gradualism of the Law OR Law of Gradualism

Doctrine & Tradition: Continuity & Change

Conflict of Duties & Hierarchy of Truths

Primacy of Informed Conscience

“*Sensus Fidelium*” and the “Magisterium”

**Slide 34** The just-concluded Extraordinary Synod was *never* meant to settle definitively any of the issues discussed, and so we really do need to look ahead to the regular Triennial Synod in October of 2015 in which the process will continue---again with the accent of Listening and Dialogue as a necessary propaedeutic to “See, Judge, and Act.”

**Slide 35** For me, one of the most disquieting aspects of the Synod is the level of acrimony that seems to have come to the surface, and so perhaps it would be worth recalling St. Augustine’s guidelines for discernment and antidote to the perennial problem of *odium theologicum*

**Slide 36** And finally, lest we think that the material for the Synod, or the Church is just the preserve of the religious professionals I would like to leave us with this Prayer of one of our most important Doctors of the Church, St. Theresa of Avila.

**Slide 37** So relax, indeed God is still in charge, and His Son is our true Alpha & Omega

Thank you very much!