Bretzke’s Script for Wade Lecture Synod on the Family

**Slide 1:** “Re-Reading the Roman Tea Leaves on the Synods on the Family: Reflecting Back and Looking Forward”

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

**Slide 3:** 1st Reading The Roman Tea Leaves: These are some of the themes that we might come back to at the end, for further discussion, but for the time being I’ll just let them pass without further comment beyond stating the obvious that any number of factors help shape our perspective, lift up certain things to be seen in certain ways, obscure or skew others, and produce blind-spots for overlooking yet others. Since the “Synod” is a “walking together” in the Greek then this very process of coming and walking together may help us expand and correct our individual distorted visioning.

**Slide 4:** A Synod is not an Ecumenical Council, but this current tri-ennial 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. Here we see some of the highlights of the whole Post-Vatican II history of Synods.

**Slide 5:** The Preparation for a Synod follows a set process: (see Slide 5)

For the Extraordinary Synod both the *Lineamenta* (sort of a compilation of input from around the world) and the resulting *Instrumentum Laboris* (working document for initial Synod discussion) took into direct consideration a questionnaire that went out not only to the bishops, but even to the people in the pews if the local bishops so allowed.

The US representatives for the Extraordinary Synod all attended *ex officio*: Cardinal Dolan as a member of the Preparatory Commission, Cardinal Burke in his capacity as head of the one of the Vatican offices (Apostolic Signatura, the equivalent of the Vatican Supreme Court) and Archbishop Kurz (not to be confused with his MU name-sake) as head of the USCCB.

**Slide 6** shows the Time-Line of a typical Synod

**Slide 7** 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 resulting *Lineamenta* and *Instrumentum laboris* both acknowledged 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. This in turn led to a good deal more media attention in the secular press than previous Synods had occasioned.

**Slide 8** In the Pope’s Opening Address we see the accent on the desire for openness or “παρρησία (parrhesia)-- meaning to speak candidly or boldly, and without fear which 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 9**: The big lead-up to the Extraordinary Synod revolved around the possibility of Change in the Pastoral Care of Divorced & Remarried Catholics, by 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 Leo (the Lion, as his devotees like to style him) Burke (b. 1948), the then prefect of the Apostolic Signatura.

**Slide 10** Here in this slide we see the Battle of the Books in which the competing positions were captured to an extent by 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 Mankowski, SJ, and Archbishop Cyril Vasil’, S.J., rector of the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome).

**Slide 11**: 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 12** 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 13** 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 very 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.

**Slide 14** 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 15** 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 16** 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 17** 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]. Perhaps the key dynamic was shifting from the *Instrumentum laboris* vocabulary of “Listen, Judge, Act” to a “clearer” more active “See (instead of a passive “listen”) moving directly to “Judge” and “Act.”

**Slide 18** The other English-language groups seem to be a bit more open to the possibility of change, though the vocabulary could be read concretely in diverse, and even contradictory ways.

**Slide 19** but then 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 20** 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 principle has arisen implicitly in Church documents since Vatican II, but both its theoretical meaning and concrete application remain open to a certain range of possible interpretations, as we certainly saw in the various Synod discussions.

**Slide 21** Some certainly sought a middle ground of pastoral empathy, but like many “middle ground” positions ultimately failed to gain strong support from any contingent within the Synod.

**Slide 22** 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]. The French and Spanish groups highlighted similar concerns, but time does not let us go into these here.

**Slide 23** 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;

**Slide 24** *only one paragraph* got an unanimous vote and in the next slide we see a “Wordle” of this paragraph

**Slide 25** The Paragraph #2 Wordle which highlights the “mom and apple pie” aspect of this sole paragraph that no one objected to. Several other 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 26** 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 27** 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 28** 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, as I’ve indicated in this slide.
Slide 29 Given the contre-temps between the reaction of the Pirolas and Cardinal Burke and the Mid-Term Relatio it should have come as no surprise that whatever language was adopted in reference to pastoral treatment of the LGBTQ community it would not please everyone. This particular Paragraph’s failure to reach a two-thirds approval came from “no” votes from opposite ends of the ideological spectrum. Some 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 30 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 myself here from the Italian original, as it is very difficult to render his Address into universally clear and acceptable idiomatic English. In the Q&A if we have time and interest we could unpack some of this Discourse further.

Slide 31 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 32 Here are some of the shrillest comments, and indeed would be genuinely quite troubling if they are in fact true. One quite recent update: Patrick Archbold reported on April 1st (no fooling) that he has now been sacked from the conservative National Catholic Register for repeated failures to moderate his more extreme views.

Slide 33 Even the Pope has not been immune from attack, and the traditional 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 in the Jesuit Franciscan papacy.

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 Omaha “curate” Blasé Cupich to be Cardinal George’s successor in Chicago is probably one of the most commented upon changes in the ecclesial landscape, though there are others too, such as a colleague of mine in our days on the Priests Senate in San Francisco, Bishop Robert McElroy being posted to San Diego. Nevertheless, there are still a few bishops in the United States that still seem rather uncomfortable with both the Pope and the recently concluded Synod.

Slide 34 One of the sharpest American episcopal critics besides Cardinal Burke is Providence Rhode Island Bishop Thomas Tobin in his “Bishop’s Column” posted on the Diocesan web-page shortly after the Synod. 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 35 An issue that clearly 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 36 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.” Like the preceding Synod there is a questionnaire for this one, but it is quite ponderous and would take well over an hour to complete the 46 essay questions.

Slide 37 Somewhat disconcertingly I would note that the pre-Synod “positioning,” as we see here in this slide is taking on almost an apocalyptic tenor. I believe this underscores what I said about the impact of differing core perspectives which I briefly outlined at the beginning of the presentation on the 1st Reading of the Tea-leaves (slide 3). Paradigms never shift easily or quickly, and I think the two Synods do reveal that a major paradigm shift is in play in our ways of looking at the Church, its mission, and the Pope.

Slide 38 Unlike the Extraordinary Synod, more of the regular Synod’s delegates will be elected, though some come ex officio and others will be appointed by the Pope himself. Here we have the current slate of American representatives.

Slide 39 One of these, Archbishop Charles Chaput, OFM Cap., will arrive shortly after hosting Pope Francis at the World Meeting of Families to be held in the third week of September in Philadelphia. Chaput is one of the “culture warrior” bishops and was rather clear in expressing some reservations on the tone of the Extraordinary Synod last October as we see in this slide.

Slide 40 One of the right-wing conspiracy theories noised about is that the Pope would try to “stack” the Synod participants to ensure a change in the pastoral discipline regarding Communion for the divorced and remarried. But now even virulently “anti-Francis” journalists such as Sandro Magister concede this isn’t happening and so it really is an open question as to how the next Synod will line up on this divisive issue.

Slide 41 As we move towards our conclusion let’s spend a few minutes revisiting the core bones of contention. Cardinal Reinhard Marx who will be one of the German representatives at the Synod poses these thoughts that would seem to recast the traditional condemnatory position of “living in sin.” As a moral theologian I believe his stance does better reflect the reality of our lives---none of us is either a total moral failure or complete paragon of virtue, and so to a real extent we are all guilty of “living in sin.”

Slide 42 Here joining Cardinal Burke in denying this more nuanced view of Cardinal Marx and his episcopal Mitbrüder, we find Cardinal Kasper’s successor as Prefect of the Pontifical Council
for Christian Unity, Swiss Cardinal Kurt Koch. What I find of particular interest in his views expressed in a recent interview in *Die Tagepost* is a resurrection of the pre-Vatican II theological opinion, never adopted in the Council, of the “two source” theory of Revelation, with the Magisterium in the Cardinal’s view serving as a second (and presumably independent) source of Revelation. If this were in fact “true” one might see better why any change in a magisterial position on an issue would call into more serious question an understanding of Divine Revelation. History, though, would not support Koch’s thesis---but that is material for quite another talk!

**Slide 43** His Eminence Raymond, Leo the Lion, Cardinal Burke has hammered home again and again what he considers to be the only possible Catholic position on this pastoral issue. Again, history in fact has shown us that Church teaching on issues once considered to be definitively “settled” has indeed changed, such as positions on slavery, usury, the priority of the purposes of sexual relations within marriage. Here, though I think His Eminence is less an historian whose many pronouncements on the rapidly increasing decline of the moral fiber of the Church as it falls into the thrall of decadent secular morality are an interpretive aid to his actions.

**Slide 44** One of the interesting and unexpected developments of this polemic is a re-casting of the understanding of the primacy of conscience. Until the papacy of Pope Francis many conservatives such as German Grisez, George Weigel, Cardinal George Pell, etc. held to a strong *Roma locuta, causa finita* view of even the “non-infallible” teachings of the so-called Ordinary Magisterium. Now these same individuals do seem to be outlining at least a theoretical position that allows them to dissent from Church positions with which they fundamentally disagree. Of course Catholics on the other side of the ideological divide had come to a similar conclusion a few generations earlier. So the Synod may lift up again the position held firmly since the time of Thomas Aquinas (died 1274) that we are required always to follow our conscience presuming of course that we have taken sufficient care both to form and inform it.

**Slide 45** As I noted at the beginning of the presentation, *Synod* is a compound Greek word that means “walking together on the way.” Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium* spoke of the Church as being the Pilgrim People of God, and so perhaps the emerging processes involved in these two Synods will help re-shape our ecclesiology and especially concepts such as *Sensus fidelium* and *Sentire cum ecclesia* (thinking with the Church), as Vaticanista Robert Mickens hopes. Certainly we now can see more clearly that the Church indeed is not encapsulated completely within the hierarchy, or even one wing of that group.

**Slide 46** The Church remains a human institution, which means it is necessarily a political organization as well, and so it should surprise none of us to see evidence “lobbying” and “spin” from a variety of corners, as we see here in this recent contribution from the Polish Bishops Conference.
Slide 47 This slide shows my projections for some of the key people to track in the upcoming Synod. The Cardinals in blue are some of the official “officers” of the Synod, the Cardinals in red will attend *ex officio*, and the hierarchs in green have been elected by their respective bishops’ conferences to participate. Probably altogether we will have just under 200 Synod participants, and each will have time set aside in the Synod Aula to give their respective speeches.

Slide 48 Gathered outside the Aula, electronically or otherwise, will be the rest of us, and these contributions and commentaries will be important indicators of the pulse of the Church.

Slide 49 One part of that pulse-taking that remains for me as one of the most disquieting aspects of the Synod is the level of acrimony that seems to have come to the surface. So perhaps in conclusion it might be worth recalling St. Augustine’s guidelines for discernment and antidote to the perennial problem of *odium theologicum*. So relax, indeed God is still in charge,

Slide 50 and *Resurrexit, sicut dixit*, His Son remains our true Alpha & Omega

Thank you very much!