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A Growing Gap? Catholic Pastoral Workers and Volunteers' Perceptions of Family Life and Church Teaching in Flanders

In this article¹ we discuss the main results of an online questionnaire within Flanders about the perceptions of Catholic ministers and volunteers about family life. We discuss the relationship between their faith, their own family experiences and

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¹ We thank John Arblaster for the translation of this text. See also: A. Dillen, T. Knieps-Port le Roi, K. Krysinska, *Over hete hangijzers... of de perceptie van enkele thema's uit de kerkelijke leer*

their ideas about the teaching of the Catholic Church on themes as contraception, divorce, remarriage, cohabitation and homosexual relationships. We also suggest ways for pastoral care in the future.

1. Research about Catholic teaching on the family

The survey entitled “Gezinsleer: aanvaarding en positionering (GAP)” (Teaching on the Family: Acceptance and Positioning), which was available to be filled in online between 15 December 2013 and 8 January 2014, was part of a research project at the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven. Through this project, we intended to acquire broader and more profound insights into the perspectives and experiences of Catholic pastoral workers with respect to ethical issues concerning marriage and the family. Within this framework, the survey’s aim was to assess experiences and points of tension in Church teaching on these subjects.

This survey was drawn up in response to the Extraordinary Bishops’ Synod convened by Pope Francis from 5 until 19 October 2014 on the theme: ‘Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelization.’ The survey we report upon here is limited to the Catholic Church in Flanders and it primarily consists of quantitative, closed questions.

2. Target population

The present survey is specifically directed to people who are professionally or voluntarily involved in pastoral services and faith communication in the Flemish Church, such as pastors (pastors in care services, parish assistants, chaplains in prisons and the army) and volunteers in pastoral services (parish collaborators, care services, other forms of categorical pastoral care), formation directors in the various dioceses, contributors to family pastoral services and volunteers in marriage preparation and programmes for the divorced, teachers of religious education, theology lecturers and assistants in pastoral services in the broad sense.

Since the survey was directed at this specific target population, the results must not be generalised to the ‘average Fleming or Catholic’. Responding to the majority

over het gezin bij pastoraal geëngageerden in Vlaanderen. Resultaten van een empirisch onderzoek, “Collationes: Vlaams Tijdschrift voor Theologie en Pastoraal” 44 (2014) (2), p. 209–228.

questions required sound knowledge of and involvement in pastoral care and faith communication. A significant number of people who attempted the survey informed us that they did not continue to fill it out because they realised that they were not part of the target population.

The results from participants concerning their practice of faith indicate that the respondents are a strongly church-involved and faithful group of people. From a research perspective, this is an important and interesting group. This is because the survey provides insight into the knowledge of, and attitude towards, the Church's teaching on the family, among people, who have leadership or supporting roles in the Church, and who, it may be presumed, have a certain loyalty towards the Church. In other words: they are people who (generally speaking) have not rejected the Church on the basis of its positions concerning the family.

3. Data Collection

The survey was conducted anonymously and was available to be filled in online between 15 December 2013 and 8 January 2014. In total, 1853 respondents, who are involved in the Flemish Church in one way or another, filled in the complete survey.

The target group was contacted, on one hand, through targeted mails with an invitation to fill in the survey, and on the other, through electronic newsletters, social networks (Facebook, etc.) and the internet.

4. Type and Aim of the Questions

The survey contained a total number of 52, predominantly closed questions. A small number of questions allowed for a limited possibility to answer freely (open-ended questions).

The survey was structured in a number of different sections, in which the following issues were addressed, respectively: the personal profile of the respondents, knowledge of Church doctrine and opinions of Church doctrine among respondents, presumed knowledge and opinion of the Catholic faithful concerning Church doctrine, pastoral practices concerning various lifestyles, the faith profile of the respondents, faith communication/faith practices with the family or the lifestyle of the respondents and feedback about the survey.

The survey contained a number of statements based on Church teaching on marriage and the family. This concerns the following subjects: marriage as

the basis for sexual expression and as a condition for family life, cohabitation before marriage, contraception and family planning, divorce and remarriage, and homosexual relationships. A number of questions were inspired by or formulated in conjunction with the Vatican's survey². These assessed agreement with elements of Church doctrine, rather than questioning people in a general way about their perspectives on or experiences of family life.

The assessment of faith experience was built on existing instruments (among others, the 'Post-Critical Belief Scale' designed by Dirk Hutsebaut³) and classical questions concerning Church practice. The survey also contained an open question concerning faith education, which people could fill in to indicate whether and how they (still) conduct faith education in a family context.

Participants had to give their opinion about various items on a Likert-scale of 1–5 (mostly). Many of these items were considered together in (newly constructed) scales, with often different subscales. Some of these scales will be mentioned below.

5. A Number of Results in a Nutshell

The personal profile of the respondents and connections to perspectives on the family

The majority of respondents were male (56.2% compared to 43.8% female). This may be partly explained by the fact that 9.5% of the respondents are priests.

The respondents' average age was 54.98 years old. The youngest participant was 14 years old, the oldest was 92. With a standard deviation of 14.5, this means the majority of the participants were between 40 and 70 years old. People in their twenties and thirties were underrepresented.

Almost half the respondents indicated that they are active in the Church as volunteers. 11.5% were priests or religious and 28% received a salary for their work

² http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20131105_iii-assemblea-sinodo-vescovi_en.html (08.08.2014).

³ See [http://www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/lerarenopleidingen-identiteit-de-post-kritische-geloofsschaal-\(pkg\)](http://www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/lerarenopleidingen-identiteit-de-post-kritische-geloofsschaal-(pkg)), <http://www.kuleuven.be/thomas/page/pkg-pcbs> (08.08.2014). See also B. Duriez, D. Hutsebaut, J.R. Fontaine, *A Further Elaboration of the Post Critical Belief Scales*, "Psychologica Belgica" (2000) 40, 3, p. 153–181.

in the Church, pastoral care or religious education. 18% of all respondents indicated they do not have a function in the Church (either professional or voluntary). It is thus evident that the survey was also circulated and filled in outside the primary target population.

Approximately 15% of the respondents were members of a family group. Considering the theme of the survey, one may assume that members of family groups were particularly motivated or encouraged to respond to the survey. 12.5% were active in church-based/Christian-inspired marriage preparation courses. Among the priests, the number that indicated that they are involved in marriage preparation was proportionally relatively high.

In terms of education, the vast majority of the respondents has received higher or university education. Only 8.9% did not complete more than lower or secondary education.

Almost two-thirds of all respondents (64%) have received theological formation, 26.7% at a university level. Considering the target population of the survey, this figure does not deviate from expectations.

With respect to the family situation, the following emerges: 69.6% of the respondents have children. The average number of children among respondents with children was relatively high: 2.9 (with a minimum of 1 child to a maximum of 17 children, including adoptive children, foster children and children in newly constituted families).

61.7% indicated that they are married; 25.5% were single; 5.6% were 'cohabiting'; 3.3% were widows/widowers. 16.2% indicated that they have 'cohabited' before marriage. Relative to the dramatic increase in unmarried cohabiting couples in the general population over the last few decades, this is a relatively low percentage, which may be explained by the relatively high age of the respondents on the one hand, and by the curbing effect that, until recently, has restrained those active in the Church from cohabiting before marriage.

The number of divorced and remarried people was also relatively low: 8.8% (persons who were divorced) and 2.2% (persons who were remarried). Only 1.6% of respondents indicated that they live in a homosexual or lesbian relationship. Among other things, this may be related to the fact that homosexual cohabiting couples are not 'permitted' or do not 'wish' to be active in the Church, and thus are not inclined to participate in a survey that presumes a form of ecclesiastical engagement or commitment. Similarly, the low percentage of 'remarried' people, may be explained by the curbing effect that Church involvement has on (divorce and) remarriage, as well as by the difficulty for a number of these people to be active in the Church (either professionally or voluntarily).

It is thus apparent, from these findings, that the vast majority of the (Church-involved) respondents is not unmarried or living in a homosexual/lesbian relationship and is not divorced and remarried. The largest proportion, that is neither celibate nor single, lives in a traditional family unit. To the extent that the respondents express dissatisfaction with the Church's position regarding these subjects, they are mostly not motivated by their personal family situation. Nevertheless, the scores on the scales concerning family and relationships reveal a small, but significant difference among those who indicate that they themselves have been divorced and among others. We refer here to the subscales of the general scale on attitudes to family and relationships, namely the scales concerning 'defence of marital fidelity' and 'heteronormative marriage', 'rejection of relationship/sexuality outside marriage'. Those who have been divorced are less inclined than others to agree with statements such as 'Marriage is a life-long bond that may never be broken' (an example statement from the scale concerning the defence of marital fidelity), 'marriage is by nature a union between a man and a woman – not between people of the same sex' (an example statement from the scale concerning heteronormative marriage). Or: on average, those who have been divorced are more inclined than others to agree with statements such as 'Partners of the same sex must have the same rights as heterosexual couples' (an example statement from the scale concerning hetero-normativity) and 'Divorced people who are remarried must be approached in the same way within the Church as all other Christians' (an example statement from the scale concerning the defence of marital fidelity). On the scale concerning family attitudes as a whole, this difference occurs between people who have experienced a divorce (as a partner) and others, where the average is 2.08 (people who indicate that they have been divorced: a total of 143 respondents) compared to an average of 2.38 (on a five-point scale) among those who indicate never to have been divorced (1710 respondents). On the whole, this indicates a generally low rate of agreement with a number of elements of Church teaching on the family, not only among people who have been divorced themselves, but also among many others.

When we examine the results on various scales in relation to civil status, we also note differences. Respondents who cohabit (a small group of 104 respondents) have a lower average score on the scale concerning attitudes towards family and relationships – this means that they tend to disagree more with aspects of Church teaching than married people.

In other words: personal experience (divorce, unmarried cohabitation) affects how people think, or these perspectives affect experience. This influence presumably works in both directions – no causal relationship may be ascertained. At the same time, we may not conclude that the critical assessment of many statements

of Church teaching is expressed only by people who find themselves in so-called 'irregular' situations.

Respondents' Faith Profile

When one bears in mind that the sample consists of Church-involved people, one may expect that the respondents have a strong faith profile and are also practising religious people. This is confirmed by the findings.

In response to the question 'how faithful do you think you are?' on a scale from 1 to 10, 92.2% scored 6 or more. 93.6% said of themselves that they received a profoundly religious to very profoundly religious upbringing; to 96%, faith is important to very important in life and in response to how people describe themselves religiously, more than three-quarters said that they consider themselves 'Catholic'.

Generally speaking, the respondents also engage in strong and frequent religious practice. 75.4% pray regularly, or even daily, and the vast majority attends religious services regularly: 41.7% attend services weekly and 23.3% attend services multiple times per week or even daily.

Generally speaking, the respondents tend to think about religious themes symbolically (an average of 5.73 on a Likert-scale from 1 to 7). The 'literal thinking' score is low. Statements concerning 'literal unbelief' ('external critique' in the post critical belief scale) have a low score. These are statements such as 'The Faith is ultimately nothing more than a safety net for human fears' or 'the scientific explanations of humanity and the world have made religious explanations superfluous.' Items concerning 'literal belief' also have a low average score (2.81 on a Likert-scale from 1 to 7). This includes statements such as 'Ultimately, there is only one correct answer to every religious question' and 'God is determined once and for all and is thus immutable'.

The high score for symbolic thought and low score for literal belief indicate that the respondents generally think biblical narratives should be interpreted in their context, that they realise there is not just one truth and that their own perspective on faith is only one among many. The scale concerning symbolic thought also contains statements such as 'Despite the fact that the Bible was written in an entirely different historical context, it still contains an important message'.

To those who live in a family unit, faith is also an important theme in family life, as is apparent from the scores concerning talking to one's partner about faith and the religious education of children.

We did not ask any questions about less traditional religious practices, such as forms of meditation, new age-oriented spirituality or elements of popular devotion

such as pilgrimages, candle-burning, etc. Based on international research, we may assume that these elements occur among a group of participants in combination with classical Catholic experience (church practice, prayer, etc.)⁴.

Attitude to Church Teaching

In its initial impulse, this survey assessed knowledge of Church teaching on marriage and the family among the respondents themselves, but also the presupposed knowledge among the people they encounter in their pastoral activities or involvement in the Church. In response to the question 'Do you ever read (official) Church documents that concern sexuality, marriage, and the family?', 40.3% responded 'never' (12.5%) or 'rarely' (27.8%). By contrast, the majority (58.2%) responded that they read Church documents 'sometimes' (36.2%) or 'regularly' (22.0%).

In response to the question of where the respondents come into contact with the Church's teaching on the family, 40% of the respondents indicated that they have a personal interest in the subject, which is expressed in their personal reading and formation. From this, one may conclude that the subject of sexuality, marriage and the family is of great personal interest to the respondents, and that they are interested in hearing the Church's view on these matters. These results are presumably coloured, and may not simply be generalised to the entire group of pastorally involved people in Flanders. The people who filled in the survey voluntarily presumably have an above average interest in the topic of the family, than other pastorally involved people.

It is striking that the respondents estimate that their own and others' subjective knowledge of Church teaching is relatively high. Between 60 and 75% say that they are able to outline the main points of the Church's teaching on marriage and the family, or even that they have a thorough knowledge of this teaching. In principle, this applies to all the subjects treated in the survey (marriage as the basis for sexual expression and as a condition for family building, cohabitation outside marriage, contraception and family planning, divorce and remarriage, homosexual relationships). 70% of respondents consistently reported being well informed on all these subjects. This may, in part, be explained by the comparable

⁴ F. Zaccaria, *Participation and Beliefs in Popular Religiosity. An Empirical-theological Exploration among Italian Catholics*, Leiden 2010, Brill; A. Dillen, *Omgaan met nieuwe spiritualiteitsbeleving. Pastoraaltheologische reflecties*, in: *Zelf zorgen voor je ziel. De actualiteit van christelijke spirituele centra*, Almere 2013, Parthenon, p. 153–166.

percentage that has received a theological education, in which these themes have possibly been treated, and by the percentage that indicate an interest in the topic via literature and study.

Generally speaking, the respondents of this survey appear to estimate knowledge of Church teaching among others, relatively highly. The number of respondents who assume that people they encounter in a church context have no or only a very vague knowledge of the Church's position ranges, depending on the specific subject, between 22 and 33%. In each of these cases, however, a third of the respondents assume that these people 'have some little knowledge' of Church teaching. And a third generally presumes that there is good to even thorough knowledge.

This is the case to a larger extent concerning Church teaching on contraception, divorce and homosexuality than, with respect to, for example, the Church defence of marriage as the foundation for sexuality and family building. This is probably related to the fact that these themes are more controversial and receive more media attention. It is therefore presumed that people are more knowledgeable on these subjects.

A clear trend becomes apparent from questions inquiring into whether the respondents agree with Church teaching, and whether they desire changes to be made in these matters. The vast majority indicate that they are in disagreement with the Church's position regarding all the topics covered, and desire clear or even far-reaching changes. This trend is highest with respect to contraception (76% were in disagreement with Church teaching and 84.2% requested clear or far-reaching changes), followed by divorce and remarriage (68.5% disagreed and 80.4% desired serious change) and homosexuality (68.6% in disagreement and 74.9% want change). With respect to cohabitation outside marriage, a majority of 72.3% desire change, but the percentage of disagreement lies slightly lower at 60.6% (25% of respondents were undecided on this issue – a higher percentage than on other issues).

More complex analyses of the research results also reveal that the theme of cohabitation outside marriage, produces slightly less clear results than other themes such as contraception or homosexual relationships.

The respondents are divided on the issue of attitudes towards marriage as a union between a man and a woman as established 'in creation' or 'by nature'. In response to the statement 'Marriage between man and women is ordained by God in creation' 50% of the church/religiously-involved group indicates that they 'disagree' or 'completely disagree'. In response to the statement 'Marriage is by nature a union between a man and a woman – not between people of the same sex', 49% state that they disagree or completely disagree. To the statement 'I recognise the value of long-term homosexual relationships, but do not think they should be called

'marriage' 41% indicate they disagree or disagree completely. These results reveal that a considerable proportion of Flemish pastors/volunteers/church-committed people do not automatically reject the possibility of homosexual marriage. At the same time, a relatively large group would prefer to reserve the term 'marriage' for heterosexual relationships. Homosexual relations are generally considered more acceptable (83% disagree or completely disagree with the statement 'People of homosexual or lesbian orientation should refrain from sexual relations'). In response to the question 'In your function as a pastoral worker/teacher/catechist/church-committed person, how do you deal with homosexual people and couples?' only 4.4% responded 'I try to explain and make understandable the Church's position regarding homosexuality'.

The Church's official teaching on homosexuality and the views of church-committed people and their pastoral attitudes are partly, and among a limited group, in accord. Among another group, there is clearly a division between the respondents' views and the Church's teaching.

Furthermore, it appears that the respondents more readily state that they desire Church teaching to change than that they indicate disagreement. 'Change' is possibly a term that denotes something in the teaching or the way in which the Church deals with the teaching which people think ought to be changed, while 'agreement' or 'disagreement' may refer to the body of the teaching as a whole on a particular subject. Presumably, many people are in agreement with part of the teaching on the family, but partially also disagree. Thus, indicating that change is desirable does not necessarily imply that everything should be changed.

The survey contained a number of specific statements concerning the perception and experience of sexuality, marriage and the family, and the respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agree or disagree. Examining the average scores, it is striking that the statement with the highest score (4.33 on a 5-point scale) concerns divorced and remarried people: 'Divorced people who are remarried must be approached in the Church in the same way as all other Christians'. The statements with the lowest degree of agreement, on the other hand, concern the use of contraceptives, homosexual relations and unmarried cohabitation. Concretely: the respondents generally tended to disagree with the following statements: 'The use of contraceptives contradicts the essence of marriage, which must at all times be open to procreation' (average of 1.65); 'People with homosexual or lesbian orientation must refrain from sexual relations' (average of 1.80); 'Unmarried cohabitation is ethically problematic' (average of 1.96).

It is also striking that opinions are also divided about statements which concern the meaning and role of marriage. 'I recognise the value of long-term homosexual

relationships, but do not think they should be called 'marriage' scores a 3.0 average (43.4% agrees, 41.1% disagrees), with a standard deviation of 1.36. 'Marriage is by nature a union between a man and a woman, not between people of the same sex' has an average score of 2.79 (35.5% agrees, almost 50% disagrees), with a standard deviation of 1.352. 'Marriage as the foundation of the family may not be questioned' scores 3.0 (approx. 38% agrees, 40% disagrees, 22% "does not know") with a standard deviation of 1.171.

These scores indicate that there are divergent opinions on a number of themes. In other words, generally speaking, the respondents do not concur on every theme. There are also a number of themes about which the respondents are clearly in agreement or disagreement (see the four statements listed above), but there are others (see the statements about marriage) about which there is far more diversity within the group of respondents. These are statements that often demand greater nuance, and to which many people probably would have liked to respond 'it depends'.

The results indicate a clear connection between one's personal view of belief, personal views of ethical themes related to the family and the way in which people think others agree with Church teaching and desire change in this regard. In other words, the more one thinks literally about faith, the more one agrees with statements about the indissolubility of marriage, the less one desires change in Church teaching oneself, and the more one presumes that others agree.

There is a clear correlation between one's own view of family-related themes and the extent to which one thinks others will agree with Church teaching. The more one agrees with Church teaching on family issues, the less one thinks others (faithful, people encountered in pastoral contexts) desire change in Church teaching. And: the less one desires change in Church teaching, the less one presumes that others desire change (correlation of 0.469, $p < .0001$).

This has ramifications for the interpretation of the preparation of the Bishops' Synod. If the survey from Rome had only been directed to bishops, and the bishops had responded only from a position of loyalty, a different general image would presumably have emerged than if the questions had also been directed to volunteers in the Church, professionally involved laypeople and especially also members of the Church who do not fulfil specific functions within the Church. The option to send the list of open questions to local groups and members of the Church is thus, very significant in this respect.

Insight into the correlation between one's own views and the way in which one perceives others also produces an important nuance. We do not know with certainty what the 'average Catholic' thinks about the Church's teaching on the family and how the lens of the pastors/Church-committed people through which we look

when reproducing the results of this survey is coloured. It is impossible, however, to ascertain the view of the 'average Catholic' in Flanders, for it is impossible to identify this group as such. Finding a representative sample would be extremely complex.

We do know, however, that a group of strongly Church-committed people are generally relatively critical towards Church teaching on the family. This criticism is expressed a little bit more mildly among the group of volunteers than among professionals, and more mildly still among priests, yet there is still clearly more disagreement than agreement among the latter two groups concerning themes such as homosexuality, divorce, and contraception.

There are relatively few differences between age categories in the scores on the various subscales. There are far greater, significant differences between priests/religious, volunteers and lay people with a professional function in the Church. Priests/religious estimate that they have greater knowledge of Church teaching and generally have more traditional views on family-related themes than the other two groups.

The group of professionals scores second highest in estimates of their own knowledge of Church teaching, higher than the group of volunteers. This may presumably be explained by their theological education. Indeed, those who have received a theological education also score significantly higher than people without theological education where one's own knowledge of teaching on the family is concerned, but they are (generally) less in agreement with it.

The group of volunteers scores higher than the professionals where agreement with Church teaching is concerned (both in general and concerning subthemes such as homosexuality or divorce). In other words, the group of salaried pastors/lecturers/religion teachers is a strongly Church-committed and faithful group, but is also the group that is most critical of Church teaching on the family.

There are also limited differences between men and women: on average, men score higher on scales (collections of various statements) concerning the defence of marital fidelity and the focus on heterosexuality. This may possibly be influenced by the fact that the group of men contains a considerable number of priests, whose score on these scales is also higher.

Furthermore, it is striking that people who refer to themselves as 'Catholic' (the largest group of respondents: 1296 people) differ in some respects from those who refer to themselves as 'Christian, but not Catholic' (358 respondents). A minority describe themselves as 'spiritual' (83 people), 'not religious' (20 people) or describe themselves in another way (usually in reference to Catholic or Christian) (96 people). On average, those who call themselves 'Catholic' score significantly differently than those who call themselves 'Christian but not

Catholic' where general agreement with Church teaching or the desire to change the Church's teaching on the family is concerned. From questions concerning individual aspects of Church teaching, it is apparent that on average, those who call themselves 'Christian but not Catholic' agree slightly less than those who call themselves 'Catholic' on statements concerning the value of marital fidelity (for example: 'Marriage is life-long bond that may never be broken') and concerning the importance of heterosexual marriage (for example: 'Marriage is by nature a union between a man and a woman and not between people of the same sex').

Generally speaking, we may conclude that the more often people attend religious services, the stronger they defend elements in the Church's teaching.

There appears to be no correlation between the perception of the degree to which other people know the Church's teaching and the estimation people have of other people's acceptance of the teaching on the family. This implies that the way in which people judge other people's knowledge of Church teaching is not correlated to what they assume these people think about the teaching. In other words, the hypothesis that is occasionally formulated: that people would agree with the teaching if they were better acquainted with the teaching; or expressed otherwise: that they disagree with the teaching because they do not know the teaching well enough, is not confirmed as a hypothesis, that is generally accepted by Church-committed people. Many priests, pastors and religion teachers consider knowledge of the Church teaching on the family among people they encounter, to be independent of their presumed agreement or disagreement. A possible factor in this regard is that many Church-committed people do not know the extent to which Church teaching is actually known.

Pastoral Practices

In another section of the survey, we inquired into the respondents' actual pastoral attitudes towards current forms of relationships and family situations, as well as how, according to them, the Church should ideally respond to these situations. It should come as no surprise that there is considerable divergence between the ideal image and actual pastoral practice. 72.9% envisions a Church that simply welcomes people in whatever their form of relationship or family situation is and judges their choices in an ethically positive way. The vast majority of respondents who work in pastoral counselling indicate that they tend to support people to develop their own values (44.2%) and to invite them to follow their own conscience (23.2%). 26.4% indicate that they are more inclined to listen and try to steer people as little as possible. Confronted with the desire for sacramental marriage of couples that

are little involved or committed to the Church, the largest group (35.6%) indicates that they listen to the request and allow the couples to determine the form of their marriage themselves.

The number of respondents who, in their pastoral counselling, refer explicitly to the Church's positions is limited, and again varies depending on the form of relationship or relational situation at hand. In general, only 13.4% of respondents are of the opinion that the Church should welcome people but make very clear that certain choices and situations are ethically unacceptable. 16.2% indicate that they actually explain the Church's teaching in their own pastoral practice. At 21.3%, the number of respondents who recommend couples that seek marriage but are little involved or committed to the Church to follow a form of faith exploration is still relatively high. This presumably concerns a form of evangelisation or catechesis, which many respondents presumably deem less problematic than pointing out ethical problems with the form of the relationship, as is apparent from the percentages indicated above.

It is also apparent from the aforementioned results that, in general, the respondents find it easier to defend/accept the importance of marriage in cases of cohabitation outside marriage than the Church's teaching on homosexuality or divorce. This is especially clear where pastoral attitudes to couples in such situations are concerned. Concerning such cohabitation, it is possible that respondents simply 'present the Church's position': 23% state that they acquiesce with the choice of this relational form but ask the couple to consider the possibility of a sacramental marriage. In dealing with remarried divorced people and homosexual people/couples, however, the percentage of those who refer explicitly to the Church's teaching drops further: the indissolubility of marriage is only raised by 3.2% and teaching on homosexuality is raised by 4.6%.

There may be a connection in this regard between one's own pastoral options (not or no longer to raise the Church's positions) and the perception of how specific groups of people experience the Church on these issues. The majority of respondents are of the opinion that most unmarried cohabiters, divorced and remarried people and homosexual couples no longer care about the Church's position. 39.8% thinks this is the case for homosexual couples, 47.3% for divorced and remarried people and even 66.4% for unmarried cohabiters.

We also asked a number of questions about the respondents' personal pastoral attitudes and about the attitude the Church should adopt towards people in 'irregular family situations'. The question was: 'How would you describe the Church's ideal attitude towards people who live in 'irregular family situations' according to the Church?' The respondents were asked to choose from the following five options: (1) 'The Church should make clear to everybody which forms of sexual relationships

and which forms of cohabitation are ethically acceptable according to the Church's teachings.' (2) 'The Church should welcome such people but also make clear that their family situation is undesirable according to Church's moral teaching.' (3) 'The Church should welcome these people and evaluate their choices in an ethically positive way.' (4) The Church should welcome these people and otherwise keep silent about family-related themes. (5) 'Other'. The vast majority selected the third option. When we compare the consistency with other views, two distinct groups clearly emerge. The first group predominantly advocates change in the Church's teaching on the family. This is a large group (1271 respondents), which thinks that the Church should 'welcome these people and evaluate their choices in an ethically positive way' or secondly, those who think that the Church should 'welcome these people and otherwise keep silent about family-related themes' (185 respondents). Respondents who selected these answers have a notably higher average score on the question of the extent to which they want the Church to change its teaching on the family (respectively: 4.15 and 4.10 on a 5-point scale) than respondents who select one of the other answers. Respondents who think that the Church should make clear for everyone 'which forms of sexual relations and which forms of cohabitation are ethically acceptable according to the teachings of the Church' (38 respondents) or that the Church should 'welcome these people but also make clear that their family situation is actually undesirable according to Church teaching' (249 respondents) have a notably lower score on the question of the need for change, and on average tend to hesitate about the necessity of changes in Church teaching on family (average score of 2.85 on a 5-point scale). Furthermore, a third, 'middle group' also emerges. This group consists of respondents who formulated their own nuances and selected the category 'other' (110 respondents). They have an average score of 3.81 on the question of change (5-point scale) – indicating that they desire change in Church teaching, but to a lesser extent than those who selected answers three or four on the above question.

We also inquired into how the respondents deal with people who are remarried after being divorced, providing four fixed options: (1) 'I point out to these people that according to the Church, they live in illicit situations.' (2) 'I attempt to explain and clarify the Church's position regarding the indissolubility of marriage.' (3) 'I make these people feel welcome in our Church community.' (4) 'I do not discuss their family situation.' On average, respondents who tend to desire change in the Church's teaching on the family and who have low scores on the scales of 'defence of marital fidelity' and 'heteronormative thought on marriage' clearly responded differently than the (small) group who (quasi) completely endorse the Church's teaching on the family.

The number of respondents who selected the first and second of the aforementioned four options is extremely low. The third and fourth positions were selected by a relatively large group of respondents (third: 1189; fourth: 313). The people who selected 'I make these people feel welcome in our Church community' have a considerably higher score (4.03) on the scale of the hope/desire for change in the Church's teaching on the family than those who selected the other options (those who selected option four have an average score of 3.86 on the scale of desire for change in Church teaching on the family). From this and other consistencies, we may conclude that, a large group of respondents not only think the Church's teaching on a number of family themes should change, but that in their practice, they have already implemented these changes (at least partially). They state that they already practice those things that they hope will change in Church teaching. This raises the question of the extent to which 'being welcome' and 'positive evaluation of people who remarried after divorce' reflects actual practice. It is possible that a number of people paint a brighter picture of reality in this regard.

6. Ongoing Theological and Pastoral Reflections

From the above analysis of the data generated by this survey, we are stimulated to formulate four reflections concerning theology and pastoral care.

1. This survey demonstrates that the Flemish respondents, in their own self-perception and perception of third parties, generally estimate knowledge of the Church's teaching on marriage and the family to be relatively high. The presupposition that this teaching is insufficiently known, and therefore misrepresented or unduly rejected, is not supported by this survey. It is the case, however, that we did not assess the extent to which people actually know the Church's teaching and to whom the respondents refer when indicating other people's knowledge. Nevertheless, the research results indicate that *the first priority for the Church, theology and pastoral care is not to improve knowledge of Church teaching in order to further its acceptance and implementation*. Indeed, the content of Church teaching appears to be relatively well known and is generally not accepted by the majority.

2. Other research has indicated that a strong degree of faith and religious practice is linked to a classical view of marriage and the family⁵. Public opinion

⁵ See e.g. D. Pollefeyt et al. (ed.), *Godsdienstonderwijs uitgedaagd*, Leuven 2004, Peeters, p. 287; P. Deboosere/D. Mortelmans/J. Marquet: *Gezin: opvattingen over relaties, gezin, gender en familiale*

tends to assume that people who are Catholic believers, and who are committed to and involved in the Church have very classical attitudes to these themes. The position of the Magisterium plays a part in this perception. Our research, however, contradicts the notion that there is a homogenous group of Catholics who are committed and loyal to the Church and sketches a nuanced image of the Flemish Church. The teachings concerning marriage and sexuality are endorsed by only a very limited group of pastorally active people, in addition to Church leaders. A significant group of other people refer to themselves explicitly as 'Catholic' and are involved in the Church, but only agree to a limited extent with teaching on marriage and the family. *Being faithful and committed in the Catholic Church does not necessarily imply agreeing with every article of doctrine concerning marriage and sexuality presented by the central teaching authority of the Church.* A clear image emerges of a Church, and of Church-involved people, who are strong believers and committed, and yet critical towards the majority of elements of Church teaching on marriage and the family at issue here. If lines of division may be drawn between those who agree with Church teaching and others who disagree, that line does not run between those loyal to the Church and those on the margins, but between the group of faithful who read the same Bible, endorse the same tradition and believe in the same God. Differences between agreement and disagreement are not so much related to belief or unbelief, but to the way in which people believe (more 'literal', believing in one absolute truth, or more symbolically, conscious of context-dependency of statements of doctrine). There is more agreement with Church teaching among priests than among lay pastors/religion teachers and among volunteers, but even these results generally indicate relatively little agreement with Church teaching on the family.

3. The results of this survey may challenge an all-too-pessimistic analysis of values held by people in Church and society. The example below demonstrates how widely divergent views exist both within society generally and within the group of committed Catholics. They also demonstrate that a relatively large group of committed believers/pastors often have similar views to those generally accepted in society (including about themes such as the sexual expression of homosexuals and lesbians and the use of contraceptives). In other areas, including with respect to marriage and divorce, there is a clearly discernible difference. For example, the statement 'Separating is the best solution in the event of an unhappy relationship,

solidariteit, in: K. Abts/K. Dobbelaere/L. Voyé (eds.): *Nieuwe tijden, nieuwe mensen: Belgen over arbeid, gezin, ethiek, religie en politiek*, Tiel 2011, Campus Lannoo, p. 23–69.

even if there are children involved' was included in this survey (for committed Catholics) and in the context of a research into *Divorce in Flanders* to a large group of adults in Flanders⁶. In our survey, 21.4% indicated that they completely disagree with the statement, but in the family-sociological research that result was only 11.1%. Among committed Catholics, there is very large group of people who are not sure or who would probably answer 'it depends' (score 3 on a scale from 1 to 5), namely 35.7%. In the other study, this group was much smaller: 16.3%. The group who agree or completely agree with the statement that 'separating is the best solution' amounts to 42.9% among committed Catholics. The result in the other survey was 72.5%. On the one hand, these figures indicate that the group committed to the Church is generally more dismissive of divorce than an average group of Flemings. On the other hand, the research also indicates that those committed to the Church are divided. It is difficult to establish general tendencies with respect to marriage and divorce. We must also note that in the research *Divorce in Flanders*, 27.5% indicated that divorce is not simply acceptable, from which we may conclude that there is also a certain diversity in society at large.

4. The themes concerning marriage and the family treated in this survey are considered the most 'thorny' topics, at least in the Western churches. There are, in addition, numerous other subjects that are pastorally and ethically significant for the relationship between faith, Church and the family, such as male-female relationships and equal partnership in general, the care and education of children in the broadest sense, nonviolence and appropriate responses to violence in families, community building within families, the relationship between family and the Church and the place of families in the Church, care for those with an unfulfilled desire to have children, etc. Further attention and research is required in all these areas.

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