

The Church as Mother and Teacher

*This is the full version of an intervention delivered in briefer form to the general assembly of the Synod of Bishops on October 14 by **Cardinal George Pell**, Prefect of the Secretariat for the Economy of the Holy See.*

Paragraph 69 [of the *Instrumentum Laboris*] speaks of the Church as a tender mother and a clear teacher.

Every mother loves her children and feels their suffering. If we cannot feel the suffering of others, our hearts are dead or dying. But a good mother does not give her unhappy or wayward children everything they think they need; and she works to prevent her other, healthy children from repeating the mistakes of the wounded. Too much sugar is bad for the health.

We bishops are gathered as successors of the apostles; as priests, prophets, and leaders to lead in prayer and worship; to teach, warn and rule in service. While we teach with and under the successor of Peter, we are not delegates of the Pope – hence the Holy Father’s encouragement of open discussion.

We are wounded healers, but we also practice preventive medicine and strive to preserve ourselves and our people in holiness, in spiritual health. We are interpreters of the great mystery of God’s love and forgiveness, and our first episcopal task as teaching bishops is not to be theologians, but to teach, explain, and defend the apostolic tradition of faith and morals. Young adults need to be shown that our defense of lifelong marriage is sincere and serious.

We stand under the Word of God as its servants and protectors. As Cardinal Erdő pointed out so well [in his introductory address on the first working day of the Synod], we have no power to change the central teachings of the New Testament or the essential teachings of popes and councils. We are not like Moses, and while we are the successors of the apostles, we are not their equals. We can contribute to the genuine development of doctrine, as we read in Vincent of Lérins recently in the prayer of the Church. But we have no power to change or diminish the Word of

God, much less to refashion it according to prevailing insights, or relativize the objective truths of Catholic faith and morals as passing expressions in some Hegelian flux.

Too many have lost confidence in Jesus's doctrines and doubt or deny that mercy is found in his hard moral teachings. The crucified Jesus was not afraid to confront society, and he was crucified for his pains, teaching his followers that life is a moral struggle that requires sacrifices, and his followers cannot always take the easy options. He did not tell the adulterous woman to continue in her good work, but to repent and sin no more. The Prodigal Son acknowledged his sins before he returned home.

While we have many theologians, we have one faith and one set of official doctrine. We have seven sacraments but many different devotions and paraliturgies. The Ten Commandments are not like an examination where only six out of ten need to be attempted. The prohibition of adultery still continues today, although less drastically protected than it was in the first centuries when, like murder and idolatry, it often meant exclusion from the worshipping community.

Groups of bishops do have the authority to teach, explain, and even develop doctrine; but not even a council with and under a pope can change essential Catholic moral teachings sanctioned by Scripture and the Magisterium. It is for reasons such as these that the Holy Father has said that "doctrine cannot be touched."

Catholic unity around the apostolic tradition of faith and morals is a mystery and a blessing, to be valued and defended by prayer, teaching and sacramental discipline. In this way God's unfathomable and infinite mercy will continue to be available to believers.