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Looking back in history in order to move the Church forward

By Michael O'Loughlin

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As 270 Catholic bishops from around the world debate issues related to the family inside the Vatican's Synod Hall from Oct. 4-25, activists, advocacy groups, and ordinary people with a cause to promote or a question to raise have descended on Rome to be active on the sidelines of the event, representing views across the spectrum. Crux is offering periodic snapshots of this "synod outside the synod," profiling people and their causes.

ROME — Christian Weisner grew up in Germany in a Catholic family that was profoundly shaped by the Second Vatican Council. In Pope Francis, he sees an opportunity for that historic moment in the Church to be fully realized.

"In many ways, Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict, who was head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 23 years before he became pope, really worked against the Council," he said. Francis, in contrast, is bringing "the ideas, the principles of the Council, back to Rome, back to our Church."

It's that feeling of possibility, Weisner said, that brought him from his home outside Munich to Rome to observe the Synod of Bishops as it deliberates issues important the international movement he helps lead, We Are Church.

The group was formed in the wake of a sexual abuse scandal involving the late Austrian Cardinal Hans Hermann Groër, who was accused in 1995 of molesting several seminarians. Today, We Are Church says it has members in 20 countries. It promotes admitting women to the priesthood, allowing priests to marry, and upending the Church's hierarchical structure.

The group isn't without its critics.

Last year, for example, one of the co-founders was excommunicated by her local bishop for simulating the Mass with her husband in their home. And in 2011, Vienna Cardinal Christoph Schönborn said that implementing some of the reforms sought by We Are Church "would lead our diocese into a schism."

But Weisner isn't backing down, and said his beliefs stem from the Second Vatican Council.

"We don't want to have a Church of two classes. Jesus was not a man of hierarchy," Weisner said. "Jesus was a visionary preaching the Kingdom of God. There are different forms of service in Church, but there should be no different classes."

As a young Catholic during Vatican II, Weisner could feel the Church changing before his eyes, with the laity being invited to participate fully in the faith. However, he believes Francis' two predecessors didn't share that view, and were too focused on the authority of the hierarchy at the expense of including the laity.

Weisner spoke to Crux via Skype from Germany. He was in Rome for the opening week of the synod earlier this month, and will return before it wraps up Oct. 25.

He said he's happy bishops are debating family issues, but that he is disconcerted by what he says is sloppy theology when it comes to Church teaching about family life.

"This Church, with its very, very strict sexual teaching, is excluding from the Church, and sending people away," he said. "I think it is so good, that in this synod, our Church has the chance to close that gap and find new ways to welcome people in the Church and not send them away."

He echoed thoughts found in a small-group report from the German-speaking bishops last week in which they said that how societies have understood marriage has evolved throughout history.

"Church teaching about sexuality, about marriage, has changed over the centuries. It's wrong to just say, 'Jesus said so.' It's not that simple, as modern exegesis found out," he said. "And today's life is now more complex. People live much longer. The ideas of Catholic marriage have changed over the centuries theologians tell us."

He said that he believes the same is true with homosexuality, and that he doesn't believe bishops from the developing world who say that gay rights are an issue only for churches in Western nations.

"The modern kind of homosexual partnership is very different from the kind the Bible criticizes," he said. "Now we are talking about a partnership between two people who take responsibility for each other. That was not the case in the times of Jesus."

He said that if bishops don't think their flocks want the Church to change its views on gay relationships, he wonders if they're really listening. He pointed to the inquiry Pope Francis asked bishops to undertake before the 2014 extraordinary synod of bishops, which included candid questions about pastoral care for divorced and gay Catholics.

"I would ask them, 'Did you really follow the proposal of the pope, send out the questionnaire to the people in your parishes? Do you really know how your people in your country live, think, believe?' That would be the question."

Even while he spoke passionately about issues related to sexuality and family, including what he sees as a minimal role for women inside the synod hall, he said the most important issue confronting families today is violence and war.

"This is the most essential question of the synod: In these terrible times of poverty, wars and millions of refugees, how can families live religious and responsible lives?" he said.

"The mercy of God, to see Jesus Christ as our guide and our bond with him, I think that is really what is Catholic," he continued, "and not only the commandment 'Thou shall not commit adultery.' I think there are Ten Commandments and The Sermon on the Mount to follow."

Weisner said he hasn't had a chance to meet with any bishops while in Rome, but that he's writing about the proceedings for We Are Church. What would he say, however, if he were given the chance to address the synod?

"Life is complicated," he said. "Open up your ears, and your eyes, understand how people have to live their lives, and support them as strongly as you can."

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