

Bishop Barron criticizes synod's report on morality

written by Special to Arkansas Catholic |



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Bishop Robert E. Barron said he is in "frank disagreement" with a section of a report from the Synod on Synodality indicating that scientific advances could prompt "rethinking" of the Church's teaching on sexual morality.

In an essay titled "My Experience of the Synod" published Nov. 21 on the website of Word on Fire, a media apostolate Bishop Barron founded and leads, he wrote, "The suggestion is made that advances in our scientific understanding will require a rethinking of our sexual teaching, whose categories are, apparently, inadequate to describe the complexities of human sexuality."

His remarks respond to a point in the synthesis report from the synod's first meeting, held Oct. 4-29 at the Vatican, that states: "Certain issues, such as those relating to matters of identity and sexuality, the end of life, complicated marital situations, and ethical issues related to artificial intelligence, are controversial not only in society, but also in the Church, because they raise new questions. Sometimes the anthropological categories we have developed are not able to grasp the complexity of the elements emerging from experience or knowledge in the sciences and require greater precision and further study."

It continues: "Church teaching already provides a sense of direction on many of these matters, but this teaching evidently still requires translation into pastoral practice. Even where further clarification is required, Jesus' actions, assimilated in prayer and conversion of heart, show us the way forward."

Bishop Barron, who leads the Diocese of Winona-Rochester, Minn., said he had two issues with the report's language: first, "that it is so condescending to the richly articulate tradition of moral reflection in Catholicism, a prime example of which is the theology of the body developed by Pope St. John Paul II."

"To say that this multilayered, philosophically informed, theologically dense system is incapable of handling the subtleties of human sexuality is just absurd," he said.

Additionally, he said, "the deeper problem I have is that this manner of argumentation is based upon a category error — namely, that advances in the sciences, as such, require an evolution in moral teaching."

Bishop Barron was among 14 bishops from the United States who attended the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which for the first time included voting lay members among its 363 delegates. The complementarity of faith and science has been a particular area of emphasis for the bishop and Word on Fire, and in February the organization launched a five-episode series on their intersection called "Wonder: The Harmony of Faith and Science."

Using the example of same-sex attraction, Bishop Barron wrote, "Evolutionary biology, anthropology and chemistry might give us fresh insight into the etiology and physical dimension of same-sex attraction, but they will not tell us a thing about whether homosexual behavior is right or wrong. The entertaining of that question belongs to another mode of discourse."

He said it is "troubling to see that some of the members of the German bishops' conference are already using the language of the synod report to justify major reformulations of the Church's sexual teaching."

Bishop Barron said he also questioned whether the synod was too focused on the Church's internal workings instead of its outward mission, whether it seemed to falsely articulate a tension between love and truth, and whether the term "mission" was used too ambiguously, with an emphasis on the Church's temporal social responsibilities over its commission to preach the Gospel.

"The primary mission of the Church is to declare the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and to invite people to place themselves under his Lordship," Bishop Barron wrote. "This discipleship, to be sure, has implications for the way we live in the world, and it certainly should lead us to work for justice, but we must keep our priorities straight."