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To His Excellency, Most Reverend Lorenzo Baldisseri, General Secretary of the Synod of Bishops

Your Excellency,

As active priests in the Catholic Church in the Netherlands and with close involvement in the subject of same sex unions, we would like to directly inform you about our insights concerning a part of the questionnaire distributed in preparation for the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops on 'The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelisation'.

To this end please find attached the English translation of our letter addressed to the Dutch Bishops. In addition we have included a number of translations of two brochures we published regarding the acceptance of homosexual persons within the Church and their contribution to church life (*Called to Blessing. A Pastoral Letter on Faith and (Homo)sexuality*, 1989), and the blessing of homosexual relationships (*Prepared to Give Blessing. A Pastoral Letter on the Celebration of Friendship*, 2000). These can also be viewed on www.homopastor.nl.

We hope that these documents may contribute to creating a constructive and welcoming attitude towards people who express their attachment in a union other than traditional marriage.

We wish you a good preparation of the Synod.

Respectfully yours in Christ,

Frans Bossink
Chairman WKHP

Theo Koster o.p.
Spokesperson WKHP

To the Bishops' Conference of the Netherlands

2nd Sunday of Advent 2013

Dear Bishops,

As announced in our (open) letter dated 14th November 2013, a commission of eight members of the Working Group of Catholic Gay Pastors in the Netherlands (WKHP) have studied the questionnaire you received from Msgr. Baldisseri with the aim of consulting the parishes in preparation for the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops in October 2014. We have restricted our answers to part five: Four questions "*on Unions of Persons of the Same Sex*".

Several days later we noticed that you decided to only send the last two of these four questions to the parishes. This surprised us, especially given the nature of question two, which so explicitly attempts to gauge the attitude of the local churches; that is, how the local churches relate to real lives lived. We therefore take the liberty to share our thoughts on all four questions with you.

All members of the committee are involved with the Catholic Community, pastorally and as worshippers. They are professionally active as priests or pastoral workers in a parish or health care institution, or as emeritus priests presiding at Sunday Eucharist in various parishes.

Moreover, the subject concerns all of us through our inner life and commitment, and some of us through civil status.

We sincerely hope that our insights may add to your contributions at the Synod.

Question 5a *Is there a law in your country recognizing civil unions for persons of the same sex and equating it in some way to marriage?*

The answer is 'yes' twice. According to Dutch civil law both couples of different sex and those of the same sex may register their partnership or enter into marriage. Two men or two women can therefore also be married and thus bound to all legal obligations and enjoy all rights attached to matrimony by the Law.

Question 5b *What is the attitude of the local and particular Churches towards both the State as the promoter of civil unions between persons of the same sex and the people involved in this type of Union?*

Before answering this question we wish to note the following:

- A meaningful answer is possible only when "local churches" are defined as "the parishes and other local communities".
In many places these local churches consist of ageing members and are lacking vitality. Many people who still consider themselves connected to Catholic traditions and ways of life, do not recognise themselves (anymore) in local parish life or in the episcopal directives. They find an *almost total absence of openness for a respectful meeting* concerning their (relational and educational) issues and proceed to seek inspiration and direction elsewhere.
- We perceive the intimation of the State being a 'promoter' of same sex relationships as tendentious. The Dutch Government formalized same sex relationships as of equal merit; this was the result of many years of cultural development, and rests on a broad base of support among the population of the Netherlands. This is therefore not a case of *promotion*, but one of recognition of the views of the vast majority of the country's population.
- The majority of Catholics we meet, support this development. They agree with the equation of same sex and heterosexual marriage and *feel estranged from the Church* regarding this issue.

As pastors we are on occasion approached with the request for a *blessing* of the marriage of two men or two women. This concerns people who publically testify to their responsibility for each other. They wish for their relationship to be fruitful for others, and ask to receive God's blessing. We do not wish to deny them this. 'Ubi caritas et amor Deus ibi est.'

Particularly in the case of individuals who are closely involved with the local faith community, their wish is supported by most parishioners and demands public manifestation. This creates a predicament for several among us, as Church Authority disapproves of this. Whereas some will decide on a blessing in the parish church, others will choose for a concealed ceremony out of fear of reprisals, thereby burdening the marriage partners with our own embarrassment.

Yet regularly, a made to measure ritual seems acceptable, in form and content more or less deviating from the marriage sacrament, enabling the couple to know themselves truly blessed.

In our experience it is helpful when we speak of our own sexual orientation as a *given*, and explicitly acknowledge the value of same sex relationships, as this aids others to also come to the fore. In this way, openness and respect can work in liberating and healing ways for others who feel snared by this issue.

On the other hand, we often notice that many Catholics (homosexual men and women as well as their family and friends) have dealt with this issue long ago, and found their own integrated paths in life, just as many others in Dutch society.

Question 5c *What pastoral attention can be given to people who have chosen to live in this type of union?*

Our reply can be summarized by the words: respect, sincerity and open dialogue.

Issues from other parts of the country and from the wider Catholic world are naturally topics in our faith communities. Several years ago the local priest in the village of Reusel refused Holy Communion to "Prins Carnaval", a local dignitary with a crucial role in the Carnival celebrations, on the basis that he openly lived together with his husband. This man, supported and honoured by the village community, was thus met with exclusion, rather than affirmation. Many Catholics experienced this lack of respect as an insult.

When a seminary teaches that homosexual relationships do not endure, this exposes at best a lack of information, and at worst a lack of *sincerity*.

Ecclesiastical pronouncements made without first consulting the people who are immediately concerned, indicate that the *open dialogue* is missing. It was refreshing to hear Pope Francis explicitly refrain from judgement on this matter during an interview.

Presently, many are sincerely searching for what the Gospel can mean in their life. This, in our opinion, constitutes a great challenge and opportunity for both Church and pastor to once again become dependable interlocutors, also in matters concerning relationships and parenting.

Question 5d *In the case of unions of persons of the same sex who have adopted children, what can be done pastorally in light of transmitting the faith?*

In our opinion the answer should be; exactly the same as is done for families where children are raised by a father and a mother.

Children from families with two fathers or two mothers should by no means be treated differently. Baptisms should occur as normal and take place concurrently with baptisms of children from heterosexual couples, should this be convenient. One point of extra pastoral awareness could be the message of the Gospel against social exclusion.

We hereby conclude our findings.

We would be happy to give further verbal explanation.

May God bless you and give you wisdom.

With brotherly greetings,

Frans Bossink
Chairman WKHP

Theo Koster o.p.
Spokesperson WKHP