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Q&A on the synod for new evangelization

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 5, 2012 All Things Catholic

The 25th Synod of Bishops begins Sunday, this one dedicated to "The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith." New evangelization is the apple of Pope Benedict XVI's eye, so the synod, held every couple of years or so since 1967, is being touted by the Vatican, along with the Year of Faith that opens Oct. 11, as the biggest happening of the fall.

In all honesty, at least from a media point of view, it's not even the biggest Vatican event happening right now. That distinction belongs to the trial of Paolo Gabriele, the former papal butler charged with being the mole at the heart of the Vatican leaks scandal. An initial verdict could come as early as Saturday.

Yet the synod is nonetheless worth tracking, especially given the theme. (For those not fluent in Catholic-speak, "evangelization" refers to missionary outreach. We'll get to the "new" part below.) Here are three good reasons why:

- Particularly in places where Catholicism traditionally has been strong, evangelization is a real challenge. In Latin America, the church has sustained massive losses to Pentecostal and evangelical Christianity, estimated at 8,000 defections per day during the 1990s; in the United States, Catholicism has a higher retention rate than other Christian denominations, but a lower recruitment rate, and would be losing ground without Hispanic immigration.
- Synods are always a valuable sounding board for the realities of the church in various parts of the world -- sort of a graduate seminar in being part of a global family of faith.
- Synods are also a bit like the Iowa caucuses of Catholicism, a chance for up-and-coming leaders to break out of the crowd, often with one eye on the next papal election.

This synod will run Oct. 7-28. I'll be in Rome for most of that time covering it, so watch the *NCR* website for regular reports. In the meantime, here's a basic primer.

What's a Synod of Bishops?

The term comes from a Greek word formed by combining roots meaning "together" and "going" or "way" -- so literally, the idea is going forward together. It's been used over the centuries to refer to assemblies of bishops, as in Orthodoxy, where the synod is the all-important body of bishops that elects the patriarch and establishes church law.

In the old days, Catholicism had synods, too, but the term largely fell into disuse until the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). In 1965, Pope Paul VI created the Synod of Bishops to give the world's bishops a voice in crafting policy, though it's more like a sounding board than a legislature -- it only advises the pope, and it's up to him to decide what to do.

In terms of the cast of characters, a synod generally includes about 20 bishops representing the Eastern churches and 170 or so chosen by the bishops' conferences of the world. The 25 prelates who head Vatican offices are

also voting members, as are 35 bishops or so named by direct papal appointment. There are generally 10 religious, chosen by the Union of Superiors General. All in, that's generally 260 or so voting members.

American bishops this time include Cardinals Donald Wuerl of Washington (more on his role below) and Timothy Dolan of New York; Archbishops Jose Gomez of Los Angeles, Joseph Kurtz of Louisville, Ky., and Gustavo Garcia-Siller of San Antonio; and Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson, Ariz., who is standing in for Cardinal Francis George of Chicago while he undergoes chemotherapy.

In addition, there are also usually around 40 "experts" and 40 "auditors." They don't vote, but they have a chance to speak and to take part in small group discussions where the sausage is really ground.

The 10 Americans in these categories are:

- Edward Peters, canon law professor at the Sacred Heart Seminary of Detroit;
- Curtis Martin, founder and president of the Fellowship of Catholic University Students;
- Missionary Servant Sr. Sara Butler, professor at St. Mary of the Lake University in Mundelein, Ill., and a member of the International Theological Commission;
- Benedictine Fr. Jeremy Driscoll, professor at Rome's St. Anselm Pontifical Athenaeum and liturgy professor at the Mount Angel Seminary in St. Benedict, Ore.;
- Ralph Martin, director of graduate theological programs in the new evangelization at Sacred Heart Seminary;
- Franciscan Sr. Paula Jean Miller, theology professor at the University of St. Thomas in Houston;
- Carl Anderson, Supreme Knight of the Knights of Columbus;
- Marylee J. Meehan, former president of the International Catholic Committee of Nurses and Medico-Social Assistants;
- Peter Murphy, executive director of the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Evangelization and Catechesis; and
- Sacred Heart Sr. Mary Lou Wirtz, president of the International Union of Superiors General.

There are also usually around 15 "fraternal delegates," meaning representatives of the various Christian confessions, such as the Orthodox and the Baptists. They don't have a vote, but they can give a speech and take part in the small group discussions. An interesting footnote this time around is that one of those fraternal delegates will be a female bishop: Sarah Frances Davis of Jamaica, representing the World Methodist Council.

Does a synod accomplish anything?

Depends on how you look at it. A synod is merely consultative, and generally its counsel isn't a shocker. If you read the preparatory documents (especially the lengthy working document, called the *Instrumentum Laboris* *[1]*), you'll generally have a pretty good idea of what's likely to come out on the other side.

For that reason, critics often deride the synod as an expensive talk shop. On the other hand, there are at least two reasons why the real value of a synod isn't so much the destination but the journey.

First, a synod offers an education in Catholic life around the world. This time, we should get insight on what evangelization means in the barrios of Latin America, for instance, or the sprawling mega-cities of Asia. We'll hear about the perils of evangelization behind the lines of the Islamic world, or in other spots where Christians face overt hostility about anything that smacks of proselytism -- such as India, where Hindu radicalism is a growing social force.

Perhaps especially for Americans, who can be a bit myopic in their thinking about the church, that dose of global perspective is always healthy.

Second, even if the press for consensus usually means that discordant ideas are watered down or cast aside, they can still be heard along the way. In speeches on the synod floor, in the small groups, in media interviews on the margins, and so on, there are always nuggets -- dissenting views, challenges to conventional wisdom and novel concepts. They might not make it into the official verbiage, but they're discernible for those with ears to hear.

In that sense, a synod of bishops is the opposite of a regular-season NBA game. If you only tune in for the final two minutes, you're likely to miss most of the good stuff.

What's the new evangelization?

In some ways, it's easier to say what it's not.

First, church officials insist it's not to be confused with proselytism, meaning aggressive or coercive missionary campaigns. They cite a 2007 note from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith that defines proselytism this way: "The promotion of a religion by using means, and for motives, contrary to the spirit of the Gospel; that is, which do not safeguard the freedom and dignity of the human person."

The mantra is usually John Paul II's sound bite that the faith must always be proposed, but never imposed.

Second, it's also not simply about boosting Mass attendance, regular prayer and so on. It includes engaging broad social and cultural challenges through a distinctively Christian lens. Among those challenges, synod documents tick off secularism and relativism, a "hedonistic and consumer-oriented mentality," fundamentalism and "the sects," migration and globalization, the economy, social communications, scientific and technical research, and civic and political life.

Third, the new evangelization is not designed just to find more creative PR strategies. It also means an examination of conscience about problems inside the church.

"Another fruit of transmitting the faith is the courage to speak out against infidelity and scandal which arise in Christian communities," the preparatory document says. Failures in evangelization, it says, could reflect the church's own incapacity to become "a real community, a true fraternity and a living body, and not a mechanical thing or enterprise."

So what is it? Croatian Archbishop Nikola Eterovi?, the secretary of the Synod of Bishops, has defined new evangelization by distinguishing three different kinds of missionary effort:

- evangelization as a regular activity of the church, directed at practicing Catholics;
- the mission *ad gentes*, meaning the first proclamation of Christ to non-Christian persons and peoples;
- "new evangelization," meaning outreach to baptized Catholics who have become distant from the faith.

Defined in those terms, the new evangelization aims to reach out to alienated Catholics who in many cases have become effectively secularized. Europe and North America are a special preoccupation, because that's where a disproportionate share of these "distant Christians" are found. Given those realities, the document declares: "Now is the time for a new evangelization in the West."

Are there voices that won't be heard?

Sure. On the subject of evangelization, there are liberal critics would argue that if the church is serious about reaching disaffected Catholics, better missionary strategies alone won't cut it. What's required, they believe, is reform in church teaching and practice: reconsidering the church's condemnation of gay marriage, for instance, or its ban on women priests.

From this point of view, the real evangelical problem in the West isn't with the sales pitch, but with the product. That's a view unlikely to be expressed, at least quite so directly, on the synod floor.

On the right, some have long been convinced that the church's missionary enterprise has been fatally hobbled by "ecumenical correctness," meaning an unwillingness to flatly tell other Christians, followers of other religions, and nonbelievers, that they're wrong and Catholicism is right. Recalcitrance in the name of good manners, they believe, not only put souls at risk, but it also diminishes the motives for anyone to embrace the demands of Catholic faith and practice.

One source of heartburn for that crowd may come Oct. 10, when the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, addresses the synod by special papal invitation.

More practically, some middle-of-the-road Catholics who don't have a strong ideological agenda and who would like to see the church grow quietly grumble that the best thing the Vatican could probably do is to get out of the way. Recent scandals, meltdowns and PR disasters, from the Holocaust-denying bishop contretemps to the sexual abuse crisis and the leaks scandal, they say, all have made the work of evangelization more difficult.

Care to take bets on anyone saying that out loud during the next three weeks?

Who are the stars of the show likely to be?

Here, there's an intriguing bit of American subtext. In every synod, the key figure is the *relator*, or general secretary, who organizes the work, supervises preparation of all the documents, and delivers two key reports before and after the synod deliberations. The first one sets the tone, while the second sums everything up.

It's a much-watched job, in part because the last two popes in a row first came to prominence as a synod *relator*. Cardinal Karol Wojtyla of Poland held the job for the 1974 synod on evangelization, and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger of Germany did so for the 1980 synod on the family, a performance that sealed John Paul II's determination to bring him to Rome as his doctrinal czar.

This time around, the *relator* is Wuerl, 72, himself frequently mentioned as a candidate for a senior Vatican job. In 2010, Wuerl published a pastoral letter on the new evangelization said to have left a very positive impression on Benedict XVI.

Also on hand will be Dolan of New York, a return engagement after he took Rome by storm in February during the consistory in which he entered the College of Cardinals. Back then, church watchers touted him as a possible papal candidate; it will be interesting to gauge whether he generates the same kind of buzz now.

The three presidents of the synod, who will take turns chairing the daily meetings, are:

- Cardinal John Tong Hon of Hong Kong
- Cardinal Francisco Robles Ortega of Guadalajara, Mexico
- Cardinal Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya of Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo

All three are intriguing figures. Tong is the church's new point man on China, while Monsengwo is a longtime voice of African Catholicism. Robles is a rising star in Latin America, and some see him as a dark-horse papal

contender.

Just 63, Robles has a lot going for him. He lived at Rome's Pontifical Mexican College from 1976 to 1979 while studying at the Jesuit-run Gregorian University, and he was part of the Mexican delegation to the 1997 Synod for America. He also holds a great calling card in Italian popular Catholicism, which is a strong personal devotion to Padre Pio.

Robles is widely considered less conservative, both theologically and politically, than his fellow Mexican cardinals. He comes from a working-class family in Jalisco, and though he's never been part of the liberation theology movement, he has good relationships with progressive sectors of the Mexican church. Yet he also enjoys strong papal support. Benedict transferred Robles to Guadalajara in 2011 even though the incumbent was still 78, creating the anomaly of two cardinal-electors in the same diocese, something Benedict prefers to avoid. Robles is also the lone Spanish-speaking Latin American named as a member of the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization.

Finally, the synod will shine a spotlight on Archbishop Rino Fisichella, 61, an Italian tapped by Benedict in 2010 as the first president of the new pontifical council. To some extent, it's been an office in search of a mission for the last two years, and this is Fisichella's chance to show the world that it can make a difference.

Will the synod be overshadowed by the butler's trial?

Technically no, because if the trial wraps up tomorrow it'll be out of the way before the synod begins. Yet the procedure allows for an appeal, so if Gabriele is convicted there will still be stories to do about where the process goes from here, along with a renewed drumbeat of speculation about a possible papal pardon.

This intersection of the trial and the synod could play out in different ways.

On the one hand, it could be styled a further proof of just how colossally tone-deaf the Vatican is with regard to PR. At the very moment they're deliberating how to make Catholicism look inviting and attractive, they've also basically handed the media an engraved invitation to produce stories about corruption, palace intrigue and back-biting at the highest levels of power.

On the other hand, if the Vatican could somehow use the trial to show that it's committed to due process and that it has nothing to hide, it might actually debunk some anti-clerical stereotypes that get in the way of drawing people to the faith.

At this stage, however, it's not clear that will be the take-away. So far, press coverage has stressed how the presiding judge, Giuseppe Dalla Torre, has seemed to hamstring Gabriele's defense. Dalla Torre refused a request to pursue the results of an investigation by a commission of cardinals, saying cardinals answer to the pope, not to a Vatican court. Dalla Torre also repeatedly interrupted Gabriele when he was describing others in the Vatican with whom he had discussions, and Dalla Torre even refused to enter a floor-plan of the office where Gabriele worked into evidence.

If the trial seems to leave more questions hanging than it answers, it could cast a shadow over the synod that's hard to dispel. However it plays out, the juxtaposition of these two events makes Rome in October must-see TV.

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