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Synod expert: 'The bishops have absorbed Vatican II'

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 17, 2012 NCR Today
Synod of Bishops 2012

Interview with Sr. Paula Jean Miller

A member of the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist, Sr. Paula Jean Miller teaches theology at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas, and directs its ?Living Learning Center? as well as its Catholic Studies program. She?s among the theological experts invited to take part in the Oct. 7-28 Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization.

Miller sat down Oct. 16 for an interview at a residence of her community in Rome, just a stone?s throw from the Vatican, as the synod reached its half-way point.

Miller is among 29 women named to the synod, ten as ?experts? and 19 as ?observers.? The voice of women at the meeting, and the broader question of the role of women in the New Evangelization, is among the topics she discussed.

The following are excerpts from the conversation.

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What impressions do you have so far?

What?s really struck me, and it took about a week or so, is this: In Vatican II, we had a major pivot point in terms of theology. We moved into a ?communio? ecclesiology, we moved into a personalism in philosophy, we put Jesus Christ back into the center, so everything was geared to the personal encounter with Jesus Christ. We put scripture back, we put ecumenism into the limelight, we prioritized the call to holiness of priests, religious, and the laity, and the lay role is in the world. There were a lot of major shifts fifty years ago, which were very dramatic, and it was not the parlance of the bishops at that time.

What?s been very clear to me in this synod is that all of that has been assimilated, and it is absolutely the parlance and the viewpoint and the approach that each of the bishops are using to summarize what?s going on within their people, their clerics, their laity. They?re talking about the need reach out in ecumenism, how they?re developing their laity into the new evangelizers, and what the role of the priest and the role of the bishop in relationship to that. I think that?s the most striking thing: Now it is taken for granted as the framework and parlance, and these prelates are into that new school. The question is, ?How do we do it??

Clearly none of them are satisfied with the level of implementation, but they all are thinking with those theological ideas.

In terms of content, what has struck you?

One thing, and to the best of my knowledge and experience we?re not as far along with it in the church in the

United States, is developing ?base ecclesial communities.? The parish structure is built from these base ecclesial communities, which are not only an experience of a personal, intimate encounter with Jesus Christ and an understanding of the Trinity, but the people are also being trained to take co-responsibility for mission.

In many dioceses, laity are going door-to-door, knocking on doors, visiting with people. I mean, this doesn?t sound Catholic! This is the Jehovah?s Witnesses or something. They?re taking prayer sheets, they?re taking the Word of God, they?re praying with people, they?re reading Scripture with them. They leave parish contact information, so that if the person wants to go any further, they can. It?s not about applying pressure, but they have the information. In this regard, many dioceses in India, in South America, in Africa, are ahead of us.

There was a time when the notion of base communities was controversial because of its association with liberation theology. Does the synod show we?ve recovered ?

That?s correct.

In some ways, aren?t American parishes already structured in terms of a network of small communities? Most American parishes have a youth ministry, and an adult faith formation program, a soup kitchen, the Knights, and so on.

I don?t think they quite have the community understanding. If you look at the check-list you just ran down, they?re all functional groups. We?re a pragmatic, functional people. That?s very different than base communities, where you have a community sharing the Word of God, sharing the Eucharist, sharing their lives with one another, getting support from one another to live the intensity of the Christian life as a community. Think of the Acts of the Apostles, ?see how they love one another!? That?s very different from an activity-oriented group.

Is it a model worth exploring?

Well, it?s Christianity. It might be nice to give it a day in court!

There?s been a lot of talk about Islam. Has that surprised you?

I wasn?t surprised, because where it initially emerged was from the Middle East and Africa, and in both areas it?s a challenge. We certainly know that from the emigration of Christians out of Islamic countries, and all the questions related to freedom of conscience and freedom of religion. How do the Coptic Christians live with Islam in Egypt today, for instance, or in the Sudan, where Christians are being crucified on the roadsides? It?s a question of evangelization too, and the New Evangelization, because some Muslims are interested in conversion and yet they don?t have the freedom to pursue it openly.

Several bishops have talked about Muslim converts to Christianity, and how complex pastoral care of those people is.

It has to be a catacomb reality, because they don?t have freedom of conscience, and certainly not freedom to convert. They have to think not only about their own safety, but the ramifications for their family and so on. We love martyrs and they?re the seed of the church, but we don?t want to put people on the chopping block either.

Is there a theme especially near and dear to your heart?

The family. Something that has come up a number of times ? is that we have a very critical problem with divorce, separation, and cohabitation, which creates situations where people love the church and want to be a part of it, and yet because they?re not able to receive the sacraments, they don?t really feel like they belong.

How to handle the tension between maintaining the law of Christ, of marriage being indissoluble and the sacrament of the union between God and humanity, making that alive and visible in the world, while still making people in difficult situations feel loved and part of the community and fully a member of the church? It?s a very, very difficult problem, and many of the bishops are saying we have to come up with a better solution than we have at the moment.

Do you have any thoughts about what it might be?

No, not off the top of my head. My degree is in marriage and family studies, and I?ve been at this all my life. I?ve worked in tribunals for many years, and I know the suffering. The bishops are clearly asking for help in trying to find a better solution. That?s going to take a lot of time, prayer, effort and discussion. Hopefully the Holy Spirit is going to descend and give us what that answer is going to look like, but there?s no easy solution. It?s something we have to work harder on.

The church ends up with a problem, because American culture is not preparing young people for any vocation. Our culture absolutely does not do any service to youth in preparing them for marriage, much less religious life or priesthood. Our whole culture is turned inward toward the impulse to self-gratification. Any vocation, and certainly marriage, is all about being focused on the other, not oneself.

How do you build a marriage on that? How do you build any kind of as personal relationship, even a friendship? The church has inherited a situation that?s the result of a very defective cultural system. How do we even begin to resolve the question without looking at the wounds of our culture, which is creating the problem? How do we set up community structures to support people who are seriously wounded by failed relationships, and their children? We have such serious questions to deal with, and there simply are no easy answers.

It?s going to be one at a time. We always say in our community, ?salvation one person at a time.? That?s come out in the synod, that the New Evangelization has to be one person at a time if we?re really talking about a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. It can be complemented by things through the mass media and the internet, but it has to be personal at its core.

You?re in religious life. What about the role of religious in the New Evangelization?

There?s been very little resonance in the synod so far regarding consecrated life. ?

In the past, the religious communities have been the ones primarily doing the missionary work. With that backdrop, it?s interesting that at a synod on the New Evangelization, we really have not spoken about the role of consecrated religious.

Why do you think that is?

I don?t know. Maybe it?s because they feel there are fewer religious in the world today, which is certainly true. Perhaps it?s because the focus since Vatican II has been on the engagement of the laity, and the laity entering into the secular realm. Certainly the whole problem of secularism has been important at this synod.

Do you think the reticence has something to do with the current tensions between religious and bishops?

If you mean questions about whether some religious are in a true relationship with the church and the magisterium, that?s certainly a real issue. Thank God we have Archbishop [J. Peter] Sartain in the United States, who seems to be dealing with this very well right now. [Note: Sartain is the American bishop tapped by the Vatican to lead discussions with the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the largest umbrella group for leaders of women?s orders in the country.]

There is a difference of perspective, a difference of understanding, and at least we?re working with it. That?s the best we can do. We have to deal with these issues up-front, and we have to try to resolve where the differences are. ? What you don?t want to do, if you?re trying to build your church and to launch a New Evangelization, is to bring in an element which is going to make that more complicated or less effective.

The basic requirement for the New Evangelization is that we ourselves have to be evangelized. We have to be on fire with a passionate love of Jesus Christ. If we?re not, then how do I light that fire in you? If I?m just on a negative trip, do you want to join it? What the bishops need are priests and religious who are on fire with that love, and who can share it. No business in the world is going to bring in people as their front line who think the business isn?t going to work.

You?re among the relatively few women at the synod, even though it?s an all-time high. Even the choreography makes it look like a boy?s club ? you have the presiding prelates on the dais, then the cardinals in the front rows, then the archbishops and so on, and there you are all the way in the back. What?s your sense of the voice of women at this meeting?

The fact there is a record number of women is a strong message ? and the issue has come up on a number of occasions already. People are saying that most of the church-going people in the world are women, the ones who are doing catechesis are women, and so on.

The feminine dynamic ? and we do this better than men, I do believe ? is about how we enter into the relational dimension, which is where the church is trying to grow right now. As the New Evangelization takes form through the family, through base Christian communities, where the emphasis is on how you have a personal encounter with Jesus Christ and develop strong inter-personal relationships, that?s a feminine dynamic, whether it?s done by a man or a woman. Let?s face it ? women have a better instinctual knack for doing this. If that?s going to be the movement of the church, then the men have to learn from the women.

Do you think these men in the synod are prepared to do that?

My sense is yes. I won?t say it?s true of everyone in the room, partly because I haven?t even met everyone yet. But from the way they?ve been approaching things, talking about their own church struggles and their own people, I do believe they?re in the mode of listening and seeking the best way to move. I think it?s a new church in that way. The future has to be co-responsibility between the clergy and the laity ? and we have a lot of work to do!

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