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Synod update: Syria, Islam and minor notes

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 19, 2012 All Things Catholic
Synod of Bishops 2012

Perhaps the closest thing to an honest-to-God news flash out of the Oct. 7-28 Synod of Bishops on the new evangelization, at least so far, was Tuesday's announcement that because the bishops can't be "mere spectators" to the carnage in Syria, they'll dispatch a special delegation next week to promote a solution based on "reason and compassion."

The delegation consists of:

- Cardinal Laurent Monsengwo Pasinya, archbishop of Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of the Congo;
- French Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran, president of the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue;
- Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York;
- Bishop Fabio Suescun Mutis, Military Ordinary of Colombia;
- Bishop Joseph Nguyen Nang of Phat Diem, Vietnam;
- Archbishop Dominique Mamberti, Secretary for Relations with States of the Secretariat of State (in effect, the Vatican's "foreign minister"); and
- Monsignor Alberto Ortega, an official of the Secretariat of State.

The idea is to represent all five continents, signifying universality, and to include heavy-hitters, signifying seriousness. Monsengwo is one of the most influential prelates in Africa, while Tauran is a veteran of the global stage; among other things, he was the chief spokesperson for the Vatican's opposition to the 2003 U.S.-led war in Iraq. Dolan, of course, is the president of the U.S. bishops' conference and carries a high media profile.

The mission has been described as symbolic, meaning that the group won't be doing much diplomatic heavy lifting. (As of Thursday, there was no word on whether the delegation would meet Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.) The idea is primarily to express that the church cares, particularly about Syria's 2.3 million Christians -- many of whom are terrified they'll be the first victims of whatever might follow the fall of the Assad regime. Some believe Syria could be the next Iraq, where an ancient Christian community has been gutted overnight.

It may be tempting to dismiss this as a hollow photo op. After all, a quick flyover by a group of foreign bishops is unlikely somehow to miraculously convince the warring parties to lay down their arms and to buy the world a Coke.

There are four reasons, however, why it's actually important.

First, the Synod of Bishops is routinely accused of being an expensive talk shop that doesn't accomplish much, and at one level, that's perfectly true. In fairness, the experience of listening to different voices from all over the world for three weeks has value in itself, but the synod is really not action-oriented. Usually it produces a set of fairly predictable propositions for the pope's consideration, and then people go home.

In this instance, however, it's actually trying to do something. If it's not clear what the delegation might achieve,

at least it's a step beyond sitting in a meeting hall and lamenting the problems of the world.

In a nutshell, this sets a precedent that a synod can do more than just talk.

Second, it's significant that this delegation represents the Synod of Bishops rather than the Vatican. Not only does it show that concern about Syria isn't just concentrated in Rome but is widely shared among the world's bishops, but it also demonstrates that the bishops can use the synod to exercise joint responsibility. In effect, it's a concrete form of episcopal collegiality, which is what the synod was envisioned by Pope Paul VI to achieve when he created it in 1965 at the close of the Second Vatican Council.

In that sense, the Syria mission isn't just a diplomatic and humanitarian undertaking, but something with ecclesiological significance, too.

Admittedly, the announcement was made by a Vatican official; the logistics are being handled by the Vatican; and it's been packaged as a papal initiative. Dolan said he was approached at 4:25 p.m. Tuesday, minutes before the announcement was made, and was told the Holy Father wanted him to go. The point, however, isn't so much who's doing the legwork, but what the delegation represents.

Third, one should not underestimate the value of mere presence. During Pope Benedict XVI's mid-September visit to Lebanon, I had the chance to speak with a number of Syrian Christian refugees who attended his Mass on Beirut's waterfront. When I asked them what we in the West could do for them, by far their most common answer was: "Don't forget us." They feel a profound sense of isolation, and even a symbolic gesture that the church is paying attention means something.

Fourth, this mission could generate considerable press interest. Vatican communications officials say that within hours of the announcement, media agencies from all over the world made requests to travel with the bishops. Given that one thrust is to express solidarity with Christians at risk, the delegation will have a classic "teaching moment" to raise consciousness about the most dramatic, and most under-reported, Christian story of our time: the rise of a new generation of martyrs.

I've quoted this estimate before, but it bears repeating: Various sources peg the number of Christians killed each year at 150,000, either out of hatred for the faith or hatred for the works of charity inspired by the faith. That's 17 new martyrs every hour.

The stories are legion. On Wednesday morning, for instance, I went out to a Carmelite retreat center near Rome's Ciampino airport to speak to a group of leaders in the order, where I met Fr. Désiré Unen Alimange, an upbeat and dynamic Carmelite from the Congo. He was a friend and protégé of Archbishop Christophe Munzihirwa of Bukavu, who was killed in 1996 for trying to prevent Tutsi militants from murdering Hutu refugees. Munzihirwa's favorite saying was, "There are things that can be seen only with eyes that have cried."

If this delegation can use its media spotlight to tell such stories -- and, perhaps, to mobilize people to do something to defend these people -- it's worth a try, even if it is only symbolism.

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The Synod of Bishops on the new evangelization reached its halfway point Wednesday, with the "report after the discussion" by Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington, D.C., who's serving as the *relator*, or general secretary. If nothing else, one has to give Wuerl credit for brevity -- these reports are often sprawling, but he managed to summarize the discussion to date in a crisp 4,000 words.

The purpose of the *relatio post disceptationem* is to guide the small working groups that will now begin to

suggest propositions, not to anticipate their results. Nevertheless, looking at how Wuerl framed the issues, it seems clear what some of the synod's big-picture conclusions are likely to be:

- A strong accent on the laity as the front-line carriers of the new evangelization.
- Small Christian communities, sometimes called "base communities," as a valuable pastoral model. (Wuerl described them as "living centers of evangelization.")
- A push for more effective catechesis, perhaps including an office of "catechist" as a formally recognized ministry.
- The notion that new evangelization should be carried out in an ecumenical key. (If the aim is principally to reach out to lapsed Catholics, then it's not about fishing in somebody else's pond -- and today, many synod participants said, all Christian denominations find themselves facing the same struggles in regards to secularism.)
- A call for more effective use of social communications and digital media.
- Spiritual renewal, including strengthened sacramental practice and personal conversion.
- Stressing the church's social justice teaching and its works of charity as a valuable aid to evangelization -- as Wuerl put it, they are "a sign for others to recognize the presence of God working in our world."
- Strong emphasis on both the family and the parish as the ordinary venues in which most people meet the faith and grow in it, and therefore as privileged settings for new evangelization.

If you're looking for the most glaring omission, it's probably Wuerl's treatment of the synod's discussion on Islam. He deals with it in a brief paragraph about the Middle East, and refers only obliquely to "recognition of the difficulties that Christian communities face."

That passing reference, to tell the truth, doesn't come close to capturing the flavor of what's been said.

Perhaps Wuerl felt compelled to downplay things in the wake of an anxious moment last Saturday, when Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana, president of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, played an alarmist YouTube video [1] predicting a Muslim takeover of Europe (as well as Canada and the United States), fueled by immigration and high birth rates. The video is three years old and its statistical claims have been thoroughly debunked. Several synod participants, including a number of French bishops, protested vigorously.

Turkson later apologized, saying it wasn't his intent to "call Christians to arms," and the Vatican was quick to say the video hadn't been endorsed by the synod. Nonetheless, many people held their breath, fearing another "Regensburg moment," when something said or done by a church official set off a firestorm.

In that context, it's understandable that Wuerl might not have wanted to stir the waters. Yet there are four points that didn't find an echo in his report:

- Concern in the synod hasn't come just from the Middle East. It came from Africa and Asia, too, as well as Europeans worried about the rising Muslim presence on the continent and the questions it raises about Europe's Christian identity. It would be a mistake to think the ferment was geographically limited.
- The rise of Islamic-tinged governments is raising real worries about religious freedom, and not just in the usual hotspots. Bishop Jean-Baptiste Tiama of Mali, for instance, reported that an Islamist movement "occupies two-thirds of the country and threatens democracy and the existence of other religions" and also "extols the establishment of Islamic law in the entire country."
- The concern wasn't just about Islamic extremism. There was also considerable talk about Islamic missionary efforts, with some bishops frankly conceding that in their parts of the world, they're being out-hustled and out-spent by Muslim missionaries. (Ralph Martin, one of the American experts at the synod, told me Wednesday that one bishop said to him that mosques are being built in his country in places where there isn't a single Muslim, as a way of "staking their claim.")
- A particular source of anxiety was Muslim converts to Christianity -- who, according to several

> participants, are not as rare as one might think, but who are compelled to live a catacomb existence because of both *de jure* and *de facto* recrimination.

In general, the thrust can be summed up this way: The church shouldn't succumb to histrionics or alarmism about Islam and it shouldn't throw in the towel on dialogue, but it also needs a more robust capacity to push back.

Whether that will find some echo in the propositions that go to the pope or whether a sort of diplomatic silence prevails there, too, remains to be seen.

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A synod is a classic example of an event where it's the journey, not the destination, that matters. The final results may be anodyne, but there are always notes along the way that raise eyebrows, ruffle feathers, or at least put some interesting cards on the table. These notes, representing a variety of experiences and points of view, might not be among the synod's conclusions, but they're nonetheless part of the record.

Without being exhaustive, here are a few examples.

Religious life and alienated Catholics

There's been relatively little talk about the role of religious life in the new evangelization, and the first phase almost came to a close without hearing from a single sister. On Wednesday morning, however, American Sr. Mary Lou Wirtz, a member of the Franciscan Sisters Daughters of Jesus and Mary and president of the International Union of Superiors General, was inserted into the line-up at the last minute, and she made a strong case for religious as "a prophetic presence and witness."

"Today, there are people of our Catholic faith and tradition who are hurting," Wirtz told the synod. "Some, when they turn to the church in the midst of their pain, are alienated by judgmental attitudes or issues of power and control."

In that context, Wirtz suggested, religious can play an important role in helping the church to "enter into the pain of our people."

Religious are more than a "resource," she said, quoting the language used in an official synod document. They're a living witness, which, despite declining numbers, is "alive and well and will continue to be so."

Divorced and remarried Catholics

As I noted last week, a couple of synod participants, including Archbishop Bruno Forte of Italy, indirectly raised the pastoral care of divorced and remarried Catholics, including the vexed question of their exclusion from the sacraments, in their formal speeches.

In free discussion and informal conversation, however, the issue came up a good deal.

Sr. Paula Jean Miller, a member of the Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist and one of the theological experts at the synod, described the conversation in an Oct. 16 interview [2] with *NCR*.

The question, she said, is "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," Miller said, "and many of the bishops are saying we have to come up with a better solution than we have at the moment."

Liturgical translation

Let's face it: A Synod of Bishops isn't exactly a laugh riot. That made a presentation by Archbishop Ignatius Suharyo Hardjoatmodjo [3] of Jakarta, Indonesia, memorable, because he drew what one participant described as "heartfelt laughter" while talking about a matter typically seen as ill-suited to comedic effect -- liturgical translation.

Suharyo's basic argument was the need for flexibility in translation based on cultural differences. He then offered an especially telling case in point from his own neighborhood.

"When the priest addresses the people, '*Dominus vobiscum*,' the people are to reply, '*Et cum spiritu tuo*,' " he said. (In English, that's "The Lord be with you," followed by "and with your spirit" in the new translation.) Yet, Suharyo said, the word "spirit" as translated into his local language comes out as "*roh*," which often connotes an evil spirit.

Thus his punch line: A literal translation of "*et cum spiritu tuo*" means his people end up saying, "With your evil spirit."

Suharyo, 62, went on to make a strong case for "subsidiarity" in translation, meaning allowing local churches to make some of these calls for themselves.

"My wish -- I hope that I am not alone -- is that the translation of liturgical texts ought not always to be done literally; rather, seriously take into account the diversity of the cultural background," he said. "Could the principle of subsidiarity be applied in the task of translation and even in other areas of the life of the local church?"

Subsidiarity, Suharyo said, is "the spirit of Vatican II."

Evolution and GMOs

The topic of the relationship between faith and science has come up a fair bit during the synod, most notably on Oct. 12 in an address by Werner Arber, a 1978 Nobel Prize winner in medicine and physiology and president of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. (A Swiss Protestant, Arber is the first non-Catholic to head a pontifical academy.)

Two things were striking about the address.

First, some Catholics today are floating the idea of "intelligent design" as an alternative to both creationism and evolution (or at least to "evolutionism" as a philosophy, as opposed to "evolution" as a biological theory). In that context, Arber made a strong case for evolution as a settled fact of life.

"The ongoing processes of evolution of the universe and of life are now solidly established scientific facts," Arber said, calling these evolutionary processes "essential elements of permanent creation."

Second, he also delivered a plug for genetically modified organisms (GMOs), despite the fact that they continue to be controversial among some Catholic social justice activists and among some bishops in the developing world.

"The Pontifical Academy of Sciences devoted a study week in May 2009 to this issue with particular emphasis given to transgenic plants for food security in the context of development," he said. "Our academy concluded that recently established methods of preparing transgenic organisms follow natural laws of biological evolution and bear no risks anchored in the methodology of genetic engineering."

"The beneficial prospects for improving widely used nutritional crops can be expected to alleviate the still existing malnutrition and hunger in the human population of the developing world," Arber said.

At a Vatican press conference Thursday, Archbishop Sviatoslav Shevchuk of the Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine said the bishops "listened with great interest" to Arber's presentation, but there wasn't any follow-up to his point about GMOs because it wasn't really germane to their topic.

Who can be saved?

Despite the fact that a synod of bishops includes a roster of theological experts, there's been strikingly little doctrinal conversation. At the beginning, Wuerl laid out four key theological pillars to the new wvangelization -- anthropology, Christology, ecclesiology and soteriology -- but talk on the floor has tended to be more pragmatic.

The floor, however, is not the only place where the sausage is ground. In informal chats, in the small groups and in events around the synod, such as receptions and meetings, participants can raise questions and float ideas that eventually work their way into the proceedings.

One guy doing that at the moment is Ralph Martin, a professor of theology at Detroit's Sacred Heart Seminary and a longtime leader in charismatic circles. At a reception at Rome's Angelicum University last week, Martin distributed copies of his book *Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization*, published by Eerdmans. Its endorsements read like a who's who of Catholic officialdom, including Dolan, Wuerl and Cardinal Francis George of Chicago.

In a nutshell, Martin believes Catholics have become overly optimistic about salvation outside the church, which has taken the wind out of the sails of what, historically speaking, has been primary motive for missionary efforts -- to save souls.

"There's an unspoken world view that goes like this: Broad and wide is the way that goes to heaven and almost everybody's traveling that way, and narrow is the door that leads to hell and hardly anybody's going that way," Martin said in an Oct. 17 interview.

"That's exactly the opposite of what Jesus tells us the situation is," he said.

While recognizing that Vatican II taught that non-Catholics can be saved, he insists the council didn't mean that it happens automatically or easily. In fact, he says, it's "fraught with danger and uncertainty."

Martin told me he hopes the synod will deal with it.

"If we neglect to address this, we're ignoring one of the things that's most muddying the waters in terms of a serious response to the call to evangelization," he said.

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