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Faith in Jesus means being optimistic about future, synod message says

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Despite the growth of secularism, increased hostility toward Christianity and sinful behavior by some church ministers, members of the Synod of Bishops said they are optimistic about the future because of Christ's promise of salvation.

Addressing a message to Catholics around the world Oct. 26, synod members said they were certain God "will not fail to look on our poverty in order to show the strength of his arm in our days and to sustain us in the path of the new evangelization."

Even if the world often resembles a "desert" for Christians, "we must journey, taking with us what is essential: the company of Jesus, the truth of his word, the eucharistic bread which nourishes us," the fellowship of community and the work of charity, the message said.

Pope Benedict XVI and the synod members -- more than 260 cardinals, bishops and priests -- along with priests, religious and laymen and women serving as synod observers and experts, began meeting at the Vatican Oct. 7 to discuss ways to strengthen Catholics' faith and to encourage lapsed Catholics to come back to church.

The synod members approved their "message to the people of God" Oct. 26. They were to vote on proposals to make to Pope Benedict, who will write an apostolic exhortation on the new evangelization, and were to concelebrate the synod's closing Mass Oct. 28.

While the message described forces hostile to the Christian faith today, the synod members also said, "With humility we must recognize that the poverty and weakness of Jesus' disciples, especially of his ministers, weigh on the credibility of the mission."

At the same time, they said, they also were "convinced that the Lord's spirit is capable of renewing his church and rendering her garment resplendent if we let him mould us."

"It is our duty, therefore, to conquer fear through faith, humiliation through hope, indifference through love," the message said.

At a news conference about the message, Philippine Cardinal-designate Luis Tagle of Manila was asked how the bishops could take the line of optimism when Catholics in some parts of the world were leaving the church because of the clerical abuse scandal.

The cardinal-designate said that "no one pretended there was no problem. There was no such blindness in the synod hall," but the bishops "are believers" and the Catholic faith teaches that with real conversion, God will help the church and its ministers respond to "those really painful and scandalizing moments in the church."

The message included special words of thanks and encouragement for Catholics in different regions of the world. It said synod members were grateful for the generous charity and missionary work of North American Catholics, but it also said Catholics in the United States and Canada "need to recognize the many expressions" of their culture "which are today far from the Gospel."

Addressing Catholics' involvement in political life, the synod message insisted "politics requires a commitment of selfless and sincere care for the common good by fully respecting the dignity of the human person from conception to its natural end, honoring the family founded on the marriage of a man and a woman," and working to end "injustice, inequality, discrimination, violence, racism, hunger and war."

Looking at specific areas of church and social life, the bishops first highlighted the role of the family, "where women play a very special role," in teaching the faith.

The bishops promised greater efforts to strengthen and accompany Catholic families, particularly through marriage preparation and post-wedding programs.

While they condemned efforts to move away from a traditional definition of marriage, they expressed particular concern for divorced, separated or unmarried couples.

"To all of them we want to say that God's love does not abandon anyone; that the church loves them, too; that the church is a house that welcomes all; that they remain members of the church even if they cannot receive sacramental absolution and the Eucharist," it said.

In the message, the bishops offered thanks for the work of priests, religious and deacons whose ministry is crucial for the church. And they recognized the many men and women who witness to Christ in the world, including other Christians "with whom unity, unfortunately, is not yet full," but who share baptism in Christ.

Synod members said they were "concerned, yes, but not pessimistic" about the situation of young Catholics around the world because while they often are under "the most aggressive attacks" of secular culture, they have "deep aspirations for authenticity, truth, freedom, generosity, to which we are convinced that the adequate response is Christ."

While many synod members spoke during the meeting about the importance of using social media and other new forms of communication to spread the Christian message, it earned only a brief mention in the 11-page message.

The new media, they said, are places where "consciences are often formed, where people spend their time and live their lives. It is a new opportunity for touching the human heart."

The bishops focused on two "expressions of the life of faith" that they believed would be particularly helpful in strengthening the church's outreach: a greater emphasis on helping people learn the art of contemplation -- the "prayerful silence" that "can prevent the word of salvation from being lost" amid the world's noise -- and a greater commitment to acts of charity and works of justice because "it is Christ's face that shines in the face of the poor."

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