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The synod turns sexy; statistics in a global war

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 8, 2013 All Things Catholic

If proof were ever needed of how much Pope Francis has captured the interest of the global media, the fact that over the past week, a Synod of Bishops, of all things, has emerged as a sexy news story ought to deliver it.

I've covered eight synods from soup to nuts, and while they've all been useful sounding boards, none has ever really taken the world by storm. Generally, they're insider stories, covered by specialists and ignored by pretty much everyone else.

Yet on Wednesday, I actually found myself on CNN using the terms *lineamenta* and *instrumentum laboris*, bits of vocabulary concerning a synod I would have sworn would never come out of my mouth on commercial television. (The terms refer, respectively, to an initial discussion paper prepared for a synod, usually a year or so in advance, and to a working document for the meeting itself drawn up on the basis of reactions to the first paper.)

The ferment this time is largely due to a set of 38 questions circulated by the Vatican [1] for the synod, including hot-button issues such as same-sex marriage, divorce and contraception. At one level, people seem astonished the Vatican is actually soliciting opinions; at another, given Francis' reputation as a maverick, there's a natural tendency in some quarters to wonder if these questions are a prelude to upheaval.

Herewith, some brief Q&A about the synod.

Is it new for the Vatican to request input?

At least in theory, no. As hinted above, the secretary's office for the Synod of Bishops in the past has drawn up a document laying out the terrain for a synod, called a *lineamenta*, and sent it out to bishops' conferences, religious orders, and other participants, asking that it be studied and commented upon. The document generally has included a set of reflection questions not all that different from the ones released this week.

Instructions accompanying the *lineamenta* usually invited bishops' conferences to take the temperature of the grass roots prior to crafting their responses in whatever fashion seemed best suited to them, so there was at least a nod to popular participation. This time around, the synod office hasn't released a full-blown *lineamenta* but a briefer "preparatory document," but the thrust is the same.

Thus when Vatican spokesman Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi said earlier this week that requesting input is part of the "habitual praxis" [2] of a synod, he was right, although to be honest, sometimes it's been a practice honored more in the breach than the observance. You'd be hard-pressed to find an ordinary Catholic who's aware of having been asked for his or her views on previous synods, even if theoretically that's always been part of the mix.

If there's a real contrast with past practice, it's probably not so much that the Vatican is asking questions, but rather that people seem prepared to believe Francis is actually interested in the answers.

Do Catholics have to wait to be asked to provide suggestions?

Certainly not, a point confirmed Tuesday during a Vatican news conference by Archbishop Lorenzo Baldisseri, the new secretary of the Synod of Bishops, who said ordinary believers could write directly to his office and their contributions will be considered in putting together synod materials.

Canon 212 of the Code of Canon Law states that "the Christian faithful are free to make known to the pastors of the church their needs, especially spiritual ones, and their desires." In that light, nobody is obligated to wait for a formal questionnaire to get something off their chest. To be honest, Catholics aren't generally all that shy about exercising this right.

So the process is basically business as usual?

Again, no. Focus on the questionnaire misses the real novelty, which is that for the first time, a synod is being organized as two events in one: an "extraordinary synod" in 2014 to collect ideas and to float initial proposals, and then an "ordinary synod" in 2015 to adopt proposed solutions to present to the pope.

In part, that decision came out of the first encounter between the pope and his kitchen cabinet of eight cardinals from around the world in early October, where the desire for a more participatory and better-thought-out synod process was among the front-burner topics. One conclusion was that there needs to be a gap between the discussions and the preparation of proposals in order for participants to reflect on what they heard and to solicit reactions from other quarters.

That yearlong interval between debate and conclusions obviously invites the whole Catholic world, and not just the 300 or so participants gathered in the synod hall in Rome, to get in on the act.

When Baldisseri referred Tuesday to "methodological" changes designed to make the synod "a real and effective tool for communion," this is likely a big chunk of what he had in mind.

In that light, word to the wise: Next October's gathering is not the make-or-break moment for whatever new approaches Francis eventually may launch vis-à-vis the family. It's more akin to an opening act, with the main event to follow in 2015.

Does calling this meeting imply that Francis is contemplating radical changes in church teaching on the family?

It all depends on what one means by "radical."

If anyone is expecting the pope to toss existing doctrine on hot-button issues such as gay marriage or birth control out the window, they're likely to be disappointed. Recall that when Francis was asked on the papal plane from Brazil to Rome for his personal views on abortion and gay marriage, he said they're the views of the church because he's a "son of the church."

The Vatican has been trying to play down expectations for upheaval along these lines. At Tuesday's press conference, for instance, Italian Archbishop Bruno Forte, who will play a lead role in the synod, said it's not been called for "debating doctrinal questions," but rather to examine pastoral practice.

In general, the thrust of the questions is not to ask people for their views on the content of church teaching, but

rather how it can be better presented and how best bring it down to the retail level.

Yet there are two other areas where the pope has signaled openness to substantive change, both of which seem destined to figure prominently in the synod's discussions.

The first concerns divorced and remarried Catholics, including the question of admitting them to the sacraments. Also on the papal plane in July, Francis called the present moment a "kairos" for mercy, connecting that insight to the situation of divorced and remarried believers, and hinted that he'd be open to examining the Orthodox practice of blessing a second marriage under certain circumstances.

Since Francis has put the subject on the table -- building, by the way, on Benedict XVI, who on two occasions referred to the pastoral care of divorced and remarried believers as an "open question" -- synod participants presumably will feel empowered to air their views.

The second has to do with annulments, meaning the formal declaration by a church court that a marriage never existed. For years, some theologians and canon lawyers have argued that trends in modern culture tempt people to walk into marriages more as an experiment than a real lifetime commitment, raising questions about whether they're actually capable of the consent to marriage that canon law establishes as a requirement for validity.

Among other things, it's possible that participants in the synod may press for revisions to the annulment process intended to make it less cumbersome and arduous -- justified, perhaps, as part of outreach to what the synod document refers to as "wounded persons."

These two possible zones of reform may not be quite as scintillating from a media point of view, but for the millions of Catholics around the world personally affected by them, they would be relevant indeed.

Anything else we should know?

Remember that a synod of bishops is not the legislative branch of the Catholic church, however tempting it may be to think of it in those terms. Ultimately, a synod only makes recommendations to the pope, and it's up to him to decide what to do.

Canon 331 says the pope enjoys "supreme, full, immediate and universal ordinary power in the church," which basically means that the buck always stops on his desk. Of course, Francis has said repeatedly that the church needs a more collegial and synodal style of decision-making, so he's certainly likely to take whatever input he gets seriously -- but in the end, even more important that what surfaces in the synod is what's in his head.

* * *

Mark Twain attributed the famous line about the dangers of "lies, damned lies, and statistics" to Benjamin Disraeli, although it's not found in any of the former British prime minister's works -- illustrating, perhaps, that numbers are not the only thing gifted writers sometimes employ to pull a fast one.

Whoever said it, the line captures something real. Because numbers carry an aura of objectivity, people invoke them to support all sorts of arguments, often without sweating their reliability. That's the mission of the BBC radio program "More or Less [3]," which critically examines statistics used in journalism and in public debates.

Recently, the show focused on statistics used in my writing on anti-Christian persecution -- not so much my recent book, *The Global War on Christians [4]*, but rather a cover story I did for *The Spectator* [5] in early October. The gist was that three of the statistics I cited in that piece are exaggerated or, at least, open to question.

Those statistics are:

- A 2009 estimate from the chairman of the International Society for Human Rights, based in Frankfurt, Germany, to the effect that 80 percent of acts of religious discrimination today are directed at Christians. A spokesperson for the society told "More or Less" they no longer use this estimate because it's impossible to know with precision what share of acts of discrimination are directed against specific populations.
- A September 2012 report from the Pew Forum indicating that between 2006 and 2010, Christians had faced some form of harassment in 139 nations, almost three-quarters of all the societies on Earth. Here, "More or Less" faulted me for leaving out important context because the Pew report also found that Muslims faced difficulties in almost as many nations and that other religious groups are also under threat.
- The estimate from the Center for the Study of Global Christianity that each year for the past decade, an average of 100,000 Christians per year have been killed "in a situation of witness." The program charged that this estimate includes too many situations, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, in which Christians are being killed but not for reasons of faith. Moreover, a great deal of this killing is also Christian-on-Christian.

These are legitimate concerns, and you don't have to be in denial about anti-Christian violence to raise them. I tried to respond in my interview with the BBC, and I'll give a fuller version here.

My basic point was that virtually all of the numbers used to talk about religious violence, whether directed at Christians or anybody else, are estimates. Getting hard data is notoriously difficult, in part because victims often don't make reports for fear of reprisals and in part because the neighborhoods where the most lethal activity is occurring don't welcome independent investigators nosing around.

Everyone in the field wishes the data were more reliable, although they also realize that in the grand scheme of things, that's a detail. The big picture is that whatever the exact numbers turn out to be, Christians are increasingly at risk.

80 percent

When Martin Lessenthin, chairman of the International Society for Human Rights, provided the 80 percent figure in 2009, he made clear that it was an estimate based upon conversations with colleagues and surveying the findings of other human rights observatories. Because there is no precise catalogue of all violations of religious freedom around the world, it's impossible to know with certainty what share is actually directed against Christians or any other group.

In effect, Lessenthin was trying to make a fairly simple observation with his estimate. Because Christianity is the world's largest religion, with 2.3 billion adherents, and because its greatest growth is in regions with a mixed record on human rights, the raw number of assaults on Christians is bound to be larger than any other group.

If it's hard for some to believe that, it probably speaks to a problem with narratives. In the West, the usual narrative about Christianity is that it's big, wealthy and politically powerful, which makes it hard for some people to get their minds around the fact that Christians can actually suffer persecution.

Yet that view of things is badly out of date. Two-thirds of the planet's Christians now live in the developing world, a share projected to reach three-quarters my mid-century. The majority is poor, and they're often members of ethnic, linguistic and cultural minorities, so they're doubly or triply at risk. The faith is growing in rough neighborhoods such as sub-Saharan Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East, where local Christians are often blindly (and erroneously) identified with "the West."

The claim that these Christians endure 80 percent of all acts of religious discrimination may be no more than an educated guess, but it still reflects reality better than a badly outdated worldview styling Christians as more likely to be the oppressors rather than the oppressed.

139 countries

"More or Less" was absolutely correct in noting that according to the Pew data, Christians are hardly the only group being harassed. In the 2012 survey I quoted, the totals for the number of countries in which followers of a given religion faced difficulties were as follows:

- Christians: 139
- Muslims: 121
- Jews: 85
- Others: 72 (a catch-all category that includes Baha'is, Zoroastrians, etc.)
- Folk Religionists: 43
- Hindus: 30
- Buddhists: 21

The study documents what it calls a "rising tide" of restrictions on religion around the world in which Christians are not the only victims.

In the book, I note the risk in using the rhetoric of a "war on Christians" when other faith groups are also in the firing line, writing that it "could make the defense of religious freedom seem like a parochial matter of Christian self-interest, rather than principled support for the human rights of all persons."

That said, the reason for paying special attention to the Christian data is because it challenges the narrative. It's far easier for the typical Western mind to accept that Jews or Buddhists can experience persecution than that Christians do, and actually in much greater numbers given the larger overall size of the Christian population.

Waking up to the reality of the global war on Christians doesn't mean other groups aren't suffering as well. At the same time, nothing about their suffering means the global war isn't happening.

Counting martyrs

I devote a section of chapter one in *The Global War* to the debate over the estimate provided by the Center for the Study of Global Christianity of 100,000 new martyrs every year. The BBC fact-checkers are right that there's a lively debate about that number, with even some of the most concerned experts on anti-Christian persecution believing it's inflated because it includes too many casualties whose deaths had nothing to do with religious motives.

I quote Thomas Schirrmacher of the World Evangelical Alliance, for instance, who said in August 2011 that he regards a tally of 20 Christian fatalities per day, which works out to 7,300 per year, as more realistic. Recently, the Christian missionary organization Gospel for Asia released its own estimate of 14,000 Christians killed for the faith every year around the world, claiming the number is based only on reported cases.

The debate almost certainly will go on. As Schirrmacher put it two years ago, "We are far from having a reliable report of the number of martyrs annually."

Even Schirrmacher's low-end estimate, however, works out to almost one new Christian martyr every hour. There may be an argument over the body count, but there's no serious dispute that the "global war" is real.

In the book, I caution against an overly restrictive definition of what counts as anti-Christian violence, suggesting that the classic standard for martyrdom of a death *in odium fidei*, meaning in explicit hatred of the faith, leaves too much out of the picture.

Here's the thought exercise I often use: Consider a devout female catechist in Congo who's killed by a paramilitary group for resisting their forced enrollment of child soldiers. One could say that's tragic but not martyrdom, because these thugs didn't care about her faith. They just wanted to keep her hands off their new recruits. Yet drilling down, the catechist's motives had everything to do with her faith. She put herself in harm's way because she believed she was following God's call to serve the vulnerable, so in a very real sense, she died for the Gospel every bit as much as an ancient martyr killed for refusing to sacrifice to pagan gods.

In a sound bite, it's a mistake in surveying the global war on Christians to focus exclusively on the motives of those pulling the triggers. At some stage, we also have to consider what was in the hearts of the people getting shot.

That perspective does not resolve the debate over numbers, of course, but it does suggest a more expansive standard for deciding what counts in trying to determine the real scale of anti-Christian violence.

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