

Synod of Bishops on the Bible already causing ferment; Good Friday prayer revised

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 8, 2008 All Things Catholic

Though it's still eight months away, next October's Synod of Bishops on the Bible is already causing ferment. The gathering will be the 22nd synod since Pope Paul VI created it in September 1965 as a means of giving bishops a voice in governance of the universal church (though it will be just the 12th "ordinary" synod). It is keenly anticipated for at least three reasons:

- An eruption in Catholic appreciation for Scripture following the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), both in academic circles and at the grass roots, has had enormous impact in virtually every area of the life of the church, from moral theology to liturgical practice to popular prayer and devotion.
- Especially for Western Protestantism, which launched the Reformation under the slogan of *sola scriptura*, the Bible is the most important terrain for ecumenical encounter, and any shift in emphasis from Catholicism would likely have strong ecumenical implications.
- Since today's Catholic identity mega-trend has already transformed the way the church translates and interprets liturgical texts, it's reasonable to assume that a similar identity wave is poised to crest in Scriptural translation and exegesis.

Given what's at stake, it's hardly surprising that Catholics with an interest in Scripture are already mobilizing to try to steer the Synod's deliberations in one direction or another. So far, perhaps the most interesting examples have come from two of the hierarchy's best minds on Scripture, representing two distinct points of view: Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, the emeritus Archbishop of Milan; and Cardinal Marc Ouellet, Archbishop of Quebec and Pope Benedict XVI's designee as *relator*, or chairman, of the synod.

Both Martini and Ouellet can stake a claim to expertise on the Bible. Martini, a Jesuit, is a former rector of the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome. After he stepped down from Milan, he moved to Jerusalem to resume his Scripture studies. Though Ouellet's degrees are in philosophy and dogmatic theology, he has long had a special passion for Scripture. As a Vatican official in 1997, Ouellet organized a symposium at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on Scriptural exegesis. He has also taken part in an international group called the "Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar," composed of Biblical scholars and other academics who seek a "kneeling exegesis," a combination of rigorous academic investigation with deep faith in the Bible as the revealed Word of God. The main sponsors come from the Anglo-Saxon Protestant world - the British Foreign Bible Society, the University of Gloucestershire in the U.K., Baylor University in the States and Redeemer University College in Canada.

Martini's attempt to shape the upcoming Synod came with an essay in the Feb. 2 issue of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, a

Jesuit-run journal in Rome that enjoys a semi-official Vatican status. In broad strokes, Martini urged that the Synod not revisit big-picture theological decisions made at Vatican II in its document on the Bible, *Dei Verbum*, but rather focus on pastoral application of that document's vision.

For example, Martini warned against prolonged discussion of two hot-button issues treated at Vatican II: the relationship between Scripture and tradition, and the use of the historical-critical method. Both topics, he argued, have been dealt with in authoritative church statements, and the Synod should restrict itself largely to affirming those teachings.

"It's important to take care that formulas not be used which would carry us backwards with respect to the Second Vatican Council," Martini wrote.

Instead, Martini emphasized the practical. For example, he proposed that the Synod call for a three-minute explication of the readings from Scripture every time daily Mass is celebrated.

My story outlining Martini's argument in greater detail can be found here: [Martini's 'preemptive strike' ahead of Synod on the Bible](#) [1].

Ouellet, meanwhile, entered the fray with an interview in the Jan. 31 issue of *L'Avvenire*, the official newspaper of the Italian bishops' conference. In a Q&A with veteran Italian journalist Gianni Cardinale - who is sort of the Larry King of the Catholic church, routinely delivering interesting conversations with major Catholic newsmakers - Ouellet briefly outlined his vision for the Synod.

The following are Cardinale's questions and Ouellet's answers, in my translation from the Italian.

Cardinale: How did you react to your nomination as *relator*?

Ouellet: "I was obviously moved by the kindness the pope showed by nominating me for this responsibility, even if it means I have more work to do. We're talking about an important synod, which is already generating enormous interest in the Catholic church and also among the other Christian confessions."

So we're talking about a synod with a strongly ecumenical character?

"Certainly. Let's hope that it will contribute to the growing closeness between Rome and the other churches and Christian communities. It would be wonderful if that happens, especially since the tragic separation of the Reformation was based on interpretation of Scripture. But it will also be a synod that has as its goal a re-launching of the missionary dimension of the church. The Word of God is intended for all people."

What are the themes that the Synod might address?

"A first point that could certainly be clarified regards the distinction between Scripture, which is a witness, and the living Word of God, who is the risen Christ present in his church, principally through the sacraments. This distinction must always be maintained.

Another question on which the Synod will have to try to offer a word of clarification regards the interpretation of Sacred Scripture. Such interpretation can never be merely individual, but must always be reconciled with the living tradition of the church. Further, such interpretation must utilize the scientific research of exegetes, but at the same time it must never place itself in rivalry, or opposition, to the magisterium."

While Ouellet's brief comments by no means constitute a rebuttal of Martini, their accents are nevertheless different. Most importantly, while Martini discourages a discussion of the relationship between Scripture and tradition, Ouellet welcomes it. To some extent, this contrast probably reflects a basic difference in attitude towards the hard-won autonomy achieved by Catholic Scripture scholars in the decades since Vatican II.

For Martini, the emergence of Bible studies as a separate enterprise, no longer merely a sub-discipline of dogmatic theology, meant liberation from the embarrassment of "proof-texting." It was also a needed reminder, as *Dei Verbum* put it, that church teachings and traditions must in some sense be measured against Scripture, rather than automatically interpreting Scripture in light of them. That's what some Bible experts mean when they talk about Scripture as a "purifying" element in the church, a perennial challenge to complacency and self-congratulation.

While Ouellet would no doubt applaud all that, he also sees a shadow side to what he perceives as a growing distance between scientific study of the Bible and the church.

"Faith is a basic principle to the scientific character of exegesis," he said in a 2005 address to the Scripture and Hermeneutics Seminar. "If we exclude faith, we are not being rigorous, we are misunderstanding the book. This point has to be made in the academy."

"We have to move," Ouellet said then, "we have to help each other come home to Scripture in the spiritual sense."

In all likelihood, both the Martini and Ouellet instincts will be represented in next October's Synod - one current hoping to concentrate on concrete pastoral matters, the other pushing for a ringing endorsement of "kneeling exegesis." Since Ouellet is the *relator*, however, at this stage one has to give the second school an edge in terms of capacity to shape both the agenda and the eventual result.

The *lineamenta*, or official preparatory document, for the Synod can be found here: [Synod Lineamenta](#) [2]. The official title of the gathering is "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church." In addition to Ouellet, Pope Benedict has also named Austrian-born Bishop Wilhelm E. Egger of Bolzano-Bressanone, Italy, as the

Synod's special secretary. Egger served as president of the international Catholic Biblical Federation from 1996 to 2002, and has played lead roles in both the official Italian and German translations of the Bible.

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This week produced a new entry for the "It ain't easy being pope" files. In response to criticism of the Good Friday prayer for the conversion of Jews in the pre-Vatican II Latin Mass, a rite which Benedict XVI approved for wider use last July, the pope this week issued an amended version of the prayer. (Good Friday falls this year on March 21.)

In its original form, the prayer read as follows, in an English translation from the Latin:

Let us also pray for the Jews: that our Lord and God take away the veil from their hearts; that they too may acknowledge Jesus Christ to be our Lord. Almighty eternal God, who also does not repel the Jews from your mercy: graciously hear our prayers on behalf of the blindness of that people; so that once the light of your truth has been recognized, which is Christ, they may be rescued from their darkness.

In the revised form, the prayer now reads, once again in English translation:

Let us also pray for the Jews. May the Lord our God illuminate their hearts so that they may recognize Jesus Christ as savior of all men. Almighty and everlasting God, you who want all men to be saved and to gain knowledge of the truth, kindly allow that, as all peoples enter into your Church, all of Israel may be saved.

As is clear from comparing the two versions, Benedict has removed some of the language that critics found offensive: references to lifting "the veil from the hearts," the "blindness of that people," and the "darkness" of the Jews. As is also clear, however, the new version does not retreat from asking that Jews may recognize Jesus Christ as Savior, so that it remains a supplication for conversion.

Based on early exit polls, Benedict's attempt to meet his critics half-way appears to have left almost no one fully satisfied.

As *The New York Times* noted, some Catholic traditionalists are disturbed - if not by the content of the new prayer itself, then by the precedent that the old Mass can be bowdlerized in response to external pressure. (Some liturgical experts, by the way, think this may be the lasting significance of the pope's decision. As one put it to me this week, "It shows that the '62 missal can be reformed, that it's not inviolable or frozen in time.")

Many Jewish leaders and organizations are equally disgruntled, because despite what the Anti-Defamation League called "cosmetic" revisions, the prayer still remains an explicit appeal for conversion. The question of

missionary efforts directed at Jews has long been perhaps the sorest point in Christian/Jewish relations.

"We are deeply troubled and disappointed that the framework and intention to petition God for Jews to accept Jesus as Lord was kept intact," said Abraham Foxman of the Anti-Defamation League.

A further constituency that has voiced disappointment, and one which the *Times* failed to include in its round-up, is composed of more liberal Catholics who don't care for the old Mass for a variety of reasons, as well as veterans of Catholic/Jewish dialogue who see all this as a headache they don't need.

Fr. John Pawlikowski of the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago is a longtime stalwart of Jewish/Catholic relations. In an e-mail on Wednesday he outlined a series of concerns, including:

- "Even though only a small number of Catholics may pray the new version of the prayer, it creates a situation of the church seemingly speaking with two voices (the 1970 prayer and the new prayer) that do not dovetail easily. Which represents the more authentic theology of the Catholic Church with regard to the Jewish people? This situation compromises Catholic integrity."
- "I believe the Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews owes those of us in the dialogue some explanation of how the theologies behind the two prayers can stand together, and whether Cardinal [Walter] Kasper's often-quoted statement that Jews should not be the subject of proselytizing because they have authentic revelation and are already in a valid covenantal relationship with God [still stands]. Does the new papal prayer now invalidate Kasper's earlier statement? If not, how does he see it remaining as a Catholic position?"
- "The media needs to stop presenting the discussion of the prayer as a 'Vatican vs. the Jews' issue. There are many of us, including cardinals and bishops, who have spoken on this issue for many months from the Catholic side. Our voices should not be ignored."

Especially given that Benedict XVI's trip to the United States is just two months away (April 15-20), and that the pope is scheduled to meet with an inter-religious delegation including Jewish leaders, American Catholic officialdom is understandably anxious to defuse tensions.

On Tuesday, Auxiliary Bishop Richard Sklba of Milwaukee, chair of the bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, issued a statement saying that "the Holy Father has heard with appreciation the concerns of the Jewish community" and that "the Catholic church in the United States remains steadfastly committed to deepening its bonds of friendship and mutual understanding with the Jewish community."

Sklba's statement says that the new prayer puts the hope that Jews will acknowledge Christ in the context of Romans 11, where St. Paul writes that "all Israel will be saved" when "the full number of gentiles comes in." Though Sklba did not quite say so, some interpreted the remark as a suggestion that the conversion of Jews is more of an eschatological expectation rather than a goal to be sought explicitly in the here-and-now.

As one Catholic expert on Jewish/Catholic relations put it to me this week, "The prayer is not a prescription for aggressive evangelization of Jews."

That's been point one in behind-closed-door meetings, phone calls and e-mails this week between Catholic officials and Jews. Here's the second: There's a sense in which Benedict XVI is not really talking to Jews at all in this prayer, but rather to Catholics.

Job number one of Benedict's papacy is to reawaken a "thick" sense of Catholic identity, as an antidote to the inroads of secularism and what he has called a "dictatorship of relativism." Part of that picture is a strong insistence on the missionary character of the church; that was the point, for example, of the doctrinal note on evangelization issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on December 3. In that context, these officials argue, maintaining the language about conversion in the Good Friday prayer is not so much intended as a statement about Catholic/Jewish relations, but rather as an intra-Catholic reminder of the primordial imperative to "go forth and make disciples of all the nations."

In other words, these officials are saying, the pope is not preparing a new offensive to proselytize Jews. Rather, he's trying to call Catholics back to a clear sense of themselves, an effort much broader than relations with Judaism (even if it obviously has implications for that relationship.)

Whether the various parties disturbed by the prayer will ultimately find that explanation satisfactory remains to be seen. In the meantime, however, there is at least one ray of hope that these tensions will not derail Jewish/Catholic relations.

As mentioned above, when Pope Benedict comes to Washington he's scheduled to address a group of almost 200 leaders of other faiths, including representatives of all the major Jewish organizations in the United States, such as the National Council of Synagogues, B'Nai B'rith, and the American Jewish Congress. One fear in the wake of this week's developments has been that some Jewish leaders might boycott. This is not merely an idle hypothesis, given that the last time then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was on the East Coast, in New York in 1988, a handful of rabbis refused to meet him in protest over comments allegedly suggesting that Christianity is the "fulfillment" of Judaism.

When I asked a spokesperson for the Anti-Defamation League on Wednesday if they were considering trying to organize a walk-out, however, the response was conciliatory:

"We look forward to meeting Pope Benedict when he is in D.C. and discussing issues of mutual interest," said Myrna Shinbaum on behalf of the ADL. "We believe the other Jewish organizations agree. We believe dialogue and maintaining our relationship with the Church is important."

Shinbaum said, however, it is "safe to assume" that the Good Friday prayer will come up in some form in the meeting.

The e-mail address for John L. Allen Jr. is jallen@ncronline.org[3]

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[1] <http://ncrcafe.org/node/1581>

[2] http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20070427_lineamenta-xii-assembly_en.html

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