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Bishops at Synod on Bible to hear cardinal speak of need to anchor biblical study in doctrine

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 3, 2008 All Things Catholic

[Note: Beginning Monday, Oct. 6, John Allen will be filing daily reports from Rome about the Synod of Bishops. You can find his coverage at **johnallen.ncrcafe.org** **[1]**.]

The synod was created by Pope Paul VI in 1969 to give the bishops of the world a regular voice in the governance of the universal church. Though complaints have surfaced over the years that it's an expensive talk shop with no actual authority, it's nonetheless a unique sounding board. For roughly the first week and a half, each participant will have a few minutes to deliver a message to the pope himself, and to the wider world, about the state of the church.

The synod is thus a unique gauge for taking the temperature, so to speak, of the global church.

The subject this time around is the Bible, with discussion likely to oscillate between lofty matters of theology and exegesis and more practical concerns about how to foster greater Biblical literacy and a deeper passion for scripture at the grass roots. Here we'll take a brief look at each.

Lofty matters

In broad strokes, the Catholic church's approach to scripture can be said to steer a middle course between two extremes -- Evangelical-style fundamentalism on the one hand, and secular skepticism on the other. In a sound-bite, Catholicism falls somewhere between the Southern Baptist Convention and the Jesus Seminar.

To the extent that there are any divisions at the synod, they will likely pivot on which end of that continuum the bishops find most worrisome.

Some will be concerned with a perceived tendency among biblical scholars to adopt the tools and worldview of secular science, treating the Bible as a merely literary and historical artifact, thereby decoupling it from the faith and lived spirituality of the church. Others will tend to emphasize the danger of treating the Bible as an oracle

for personal morality and devotion, failing to put it into conversation with broader social, political and cultural currents in order to discern the signs of the times.

The former camp clearly includes Pope Benedict XVI. In fact, this synod is a first in at least one crucial respect: It marks the first time bishops have been summoned to Rome to discuss a subject after the pope himself has already published a bestselling book about it -- Benedict's 2007 volume, *Jesus of Nazareth*.

(Here's a sucker bet, by the way: I've got a dollar that says *Jesus of Nazareth* easily will be the non-magisterial text most cited in the synod hall over the next three weeks.)

As should be clear, three and half years into his papacy, Benedict XVI has a passion for putting back together things he regards as having been divided for too long -- one could whimsically call this the "Humpty-Dumpty" dimension of his theology. For example, he has insisted on not separating faith from reason, or the Second Vatican Council from the previous two millennia of church history. In a special way, he has also stressed that scripture cannot be separated from the community that gave it shape and to which it is addressed -- the church.

Benedict and the man he's tapped as the key figure of this synod, Cardinal Marc Ouellet of Quebec City, share a basic diagnosis that over the last 40 years or so, Catholic scripture scholarship has become progressively divorced from theology, ecclesiology, and liturgy. In *Jesus of Nazareth*, the pope extolled what's today known as "canonical exegesis," meaning an approach that takes the unity of the Bible for granted and aims at a theological, rather than a simply literary-historical interpretation. It's also sometimes called "kneeling exegesis."

On Monday, Oct. 6, Ouellet, the synod's "relator," will deliver a major opening address known in the technical argot of these events as the *relatio ante disceptat ionem*. Sources close to Ouellet say that the need to anchor Biblical study firmly in the context of Catholic doctrine and spirituality will loom large.

From this broad concern, several specific points are likely to flow:

- One can expect much encouragement during the synod for *Lectio Divina*, a traditional practice of prayerful contemplation of scripture, which many bishops and other spiritual guides in the church would like to revive.
- In a similar vein, there probably will be considerable discussion about locating scripture within the context of Catholic liturgy, above all the Eucharist -- stressing what sacramental theologians call the link between breaking the bread in the Eucharist, and breaking open the bread of the Word of God.
- Several speakers may focus on the missionary dimension of the Bible, emphasizing that the Word of God is meant for all places, cultures and times.
- At least some participants are likely to call for greater collaboration among scripture scholars, theologians and liturgists. That clearly is on the mind of organizers. Sr. Sarah Butler of St. Joseph's Seminary in Dunwoodie, N.Y., recently told *Catholic New York* that when she received an invitation to the synod as an

expert she expressed surprise because she's not a Bible scholar. She said synod officials told her the subject "is larger than scripture -- it's about divine revelation, and how scripture is interpreted in the church and used in theology."

Yet not everyone rates the link between the Bible and the church as their top concern. Some are more focused on the relationship between the Bible and the wider world, especially the use of the Bible to frame a Christian perspective on contemporary social and political challenges.

The Catholic Biblical Federation, the main umbrella group for Catholic scripture scholars around the world, recently published an essay on the upcoming synod by Fr. Lucien Legrand, a French scholar and member of the Paris-based Foreign Mission Society who has lived in India for more than 50 years. Though he is not a participant in the synod, Legrand nonetheless represents perspectives held by some bishops and other delegates, especially those who come from religious orders.

Though applauding some aspects of the preparatory documents for the synod, Legrand nevertheless charged that they betray a "one-sided," "church-centered" emphasis.

"What is the message of God's Word to a world torn between fundamentalist radicalism and irreligonist rationalism, consumerism and poverty, hedonism and anxiety, racism, caste-ism and sexism, a world manipulated by media, themselves controlled by financial power?" Legrand asked. "Development and liberation, feminism and ecology belong now to the theological and scriptural agenda."

"We hope that the sharing of the bishops ... will enlarge the perspectives accordingly, and present a message relevant to a world in search of reconciliation, justice and peace," Legrand concluded.

Obviously, concern for the Bible *ad intra*, meaning its relationship to the church, and *ad extra*, meaning its relevance for the world outside, are not mutually exclusive. In fact, one can make a very persuasive theological argument that the two depend upon one another. Nonetheless, people may weigh which one gets priority differently, and at least some of the drama of this synod is likely to pivot on how participants do exactly that.

An equally thorny matter that may arise is the relationship between scripture and church tradition. This was a subject of fierce debate at Vatican II, focusing on what was then called the "two-source theory." In essence, it referred to the tendency to see church tradition -- such as magisterial teaching, popular devotion, and so on -- as a "parallel" source of revelation alongside the Bible. Arrayed against the two-source theory was the "material sufficiency" view, which holds that the Bible contains everything necessary for salvation, and that tradition is simply an elaboration of scripture.

Then-Fr. Joseph Ratzinger, now Benedict XVI, was an active participant in those debates as a theological expert at the council. His approach hasn't changed much over the years, and in broad strokes it's another instance of

his passion for putting things back together: Scripture and tradition, he argues, are interdependent, and thus attempts to drive a wedge between them are out of bounds.

Practical and Pastoral Concerns

At least some voices hope that the synod steers clear of such big-picture questions, devoting its attention to more practical matters. That was the advice of Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, the emeritus archbishop of Milan, in an essay last February in the pages of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, a Jesuit-run journal in Rome that enjoys a semi-official Vatican status. Martini is not a delegate in the synod, but he is a widely respected Biblical scholar.

In preparation for the synod, the Catholic Biblical Federation commissioned GFK Eurisko, Italy's leading market research organization, to poll 13 countries about attitudes toward the Bible. It was billed as "the most systematic scientific undertaking yet attempted to compare, on an international scale, levels and forms of familiarity with the scriptures."

In broad strokes, the survey found that even in highly secularized nations, people have a basically positive attitude towards the Bible, finding it "interesting" and wanting to know more about it. Yet across the board, Biblical literacy is often astonishingly low. For example, large numbers of Americans, like people in the other countries surveyed, mistakenly believe Jesus authored a book of the Bible, and they can't correctly distinguish between Paul and Moses in terms of which figure belongs to the Old Testament.

In light of such findings, there will undoubtedly be considerable attention to meat-and-potatoes questions of how the church can boost study and prayer with the Bible on the pastoral front lines.

Homilies, and the broader subject of Catholic preaching, will almost certainly be one focus. Martini kick-started the discussion in February by proposing that the synod call for a three-minute explication of the readings from scripture every time daily Mass is celebrated.

"Experience shows that it's possible in three minutes to give an 'input' that will help shape the day," Martini wrote.

One source of heartburn in this area is the question of preaching by the non-ordained. Parishes in various parts of the world, especially in Europe and North America, have occasionally experimented with inviting lay men and women to preach at Mass, but the practice is prohibited by the church's liturgical rules and the tendency these days is to tighten up. The Cleveland, Ohio-based group "FutureChurch" has organized a paper and electronic postcard campaign designed, among other things, to encourage delegates to the synod to support preaching opportunities for women.

Some advocates of lay preaching argue that the Mass is hardly the only occasion when one can preach. They see the challenge as finding occasions for lay preaching outside the Eucharist, such as para-liturgical celebrations or catechetical programs. It will be interesting to see how much support that approach attracts.

The synod should also hear considerable talk about how to make the Bible a central element of catechesis, adult faith formation and spiritual direction. Inevitably, there may be a lament or two about misrepresentations of the Bible in popular culture, ala *The Da Vinci Code*.

Another focal point is likely to be the ecumenical and inter-faith dimension of the Bible. Some 15 “fraternal delegates” from other Christian churches will take part in the discussion, emphasizing that all Christians share scripture.

Along those lines, one striking finding from the GFK Eurisko survey was that there no longer appear to be major differences in reading patterns and Biblical familiarity between countries with Catholic majorities and those with Protestant majorities, suggesting that, in the words of Bishop Vincenzo Paglia of Terni, Italy, the president of the Catholic Biblical Federation, the Bible has become “the ecumenical book of all believers.”

A highlight of the synod is that for the first time, the bishops will also be addressed by a representative of another faith. Rabbi Shear-Yashuv Cohen, co-chair of an Israeli-Vatican dialogue commission and the chief rabbi of Haifa, will lead a discussion on Jewish interpretation of scripture on Monday, the second day of the synod.

It’s a safe bet that all the points summarized above will surface in one way or another. The beauty of a synod, however, is that’s impossible to predict in advance everything that will bubble up, nor the passion with which various speakers will advance their concerns. There’s an unpredictable alchemy that happens when 240 people with strong views come together for three weeks, which means there’s only one real way to discern what it all adds up to: Stay tuned.

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Delegates to the synod include 180 bishops representing episcopal conferences around the world, 24 members of the Roman Curia, 10 heads of religious orders, and 32 clerics appointed directly by the pope. There are also 37 observers, of whom 19 this time are women, and 41 experts who will advise the members during their deliberations.

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops will be represented by five delegates: Cardinal Francis

George of Chicago and Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson, Ariz., the president and vice-president of the conference, as well as Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Houston, Archbishop Donald Wuerl of Washington, and Byzantine rite Archbishop Basil M. Schott. American Cardinal William Levada will serve as one of three co-presidents of the synod in his capacity as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Two Americans have been named by the pope as "auditors," meaning non-voting observers: Carl Anderson, supreme knight of the Knights of Columbus, and Sr. M. Clare Millea, superior general of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Three Americans will also be among the expert advisers: Fr. Peter Damian Akpunonu of Our Lady of the Lake University in Mundelein, Ill.; Msgr. Timothy Verdon, a canon of the cathedral in Florence, Italy; and Butler, from Dunwoodie.

Online resources for those interested in background on the synod include:

- The official Vatican working paper for the synod, called the *Instrumentum Laboris*: **www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20080511_instrlabor-xii-assembly_en.html[2]**
- A United States Conference of Catholic Bishops site on the synod: **www.usccb.org/synod[3]**

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It's unlikely that the synod will gain much traction in the American media, given that both the economic crisis and the drama of the looming election are blotting most other stories out of the sky these days.

Seen through Catholic eyes, perhaps the most interesting feature of the '08 election is the emergence of a cluster of individuals and groups attempting to make the case that the church's pro-life teaching can be reconciled with a vote for Obama. How much impact this cluster may have on the much-ballyhooed "Catholic vote" remains to be seen, but it has at least added a few new voices to the national conversation about faith and politics.

Prominent in that universe is a Pepperdine law professor and former White House counsel during the Reagan and first Bush administrations, Douglas Kmiec. This week I took part in a conference call with Kmiec, asking his take on what an Obama victory might mean for U.S./Vatican relations. (Anyone who remembers the mixed relations between Rome and Washington during the Clinton years will recognize this as an obvious question.) I also asked Kmiec if he would be interested in serving as Obama's ambassador to the Vatican, a prospect which has already been discussed in some Catholic circles.

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