

The Synod on the Bible looks for middle ground; A 'poignant' press conference

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 17, 2008 All Things Catholic

As the Oct. 5-26 Synod of Bishops on the Bible moves into its "sausage-grinding" phase, working on propositions that will be submitted to the pope and a concluding message to the world, it already seems possible to anticipate several of its conclusions, at least at a fairly high level of magnification.

One might say that the synod, dedicated to "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church," is trying to steer a middle course between two extremes: Biblical fundamentalism, and secular skepticism. Cardinal William Levada, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, told *NCR* on Thursday that he regards these seeming opposites as, in a sense, symbiotic: When fundamentalists make claims about the Bible that can't be reconciled with reason, he said, it feeds skepticism about the Bible in the broader culture.

The aim of the synod could therefore be phrased as awakening a renewed passion for scripture, while simultaneously encouraging Catholics to read the Bible within the living tradition of the church -- thereby, or so the theory goes, holding faith and reason together.

I'll give a quick summary of the proceedings so far, first looking at areas of general agreement and then three tensions that, at this stage, remain unresolved.

General agreement

In many ways, what's most remarkable about this synod is the widespread agreement on most of the big-picture points, which has allowed discussion to quickly move into the realm of the pastoral and the practical. The following ideas have been repeatedly affirmed in the synod, virtually without dissent:

- The "Word of God," in the Catholic understanding, is broader than the written texts of scripture. It refers principally to a person, Jesus Christ, so it is theologically inaccurate to describe Christianity (at least in its Catholic form) as a "religion of the book."
- Scripture must be read in the context of the church, meaning its tradition, doctrinal teachings and worship. Among other things, this point implies a greater accent on the link between the Bible and the liturgy, especially the Mass.
- The Bible is not simply a piece of ancient literature, and therefore can't be interpreted exclusively through

the lens of history and literary criticism. Biblical interpretation has to press deeper, towards a "theological exegesis," which relates specialized study of the Bible to the faith life of the church and the personal struggles of real people.

- The Bible is a natural bridge for better relations with other Christians and with Jews, since it represents a shared "common home," despite obvious differences in interpretation.
- The church is obligated not merely to proclaim the Word of God, but also to listen to it. This is a special challenge, several speakers have pointed out, in a world where listening is often a lost art.

Several practical points were stressed so often that they're also safe bets to be among the final propositions: the need for better homilies; wider practice of *Lectio Divina*, meaning the use of the Bible in prayer; the need to make translations of the Bible available in all languages, especially in isolated areas of the developing world where there's no edition in the local language -- or where the local language is still entirely oral.

Tensions

(1) Lay Ministers of the Word

One flash point simmering in the synod, without ever really erupting into open debate, concerns the growing practice of liturgies of the Word, led mostly by lay people, in various parts of the world -- especially in regions of the developing world, where the priest shortage is most acute. On Thursday, Bishop Luis Tagle of the Imus diocese in the Philippines said that this subject has "made people pause" in the synod.

The caution is both theological and practical. Theologically, if the Eucharist is supposed to be the "source and summit" of Christian life, no one wants to capitulate to the idea that it won't be regularly available to a growing swath of the Catholic population; practically, some bishops fear that promoting lay ministers too aggressively could actually compound the problem by discouraging some young men from pursuing the priesthood.

On the other hand, the hard fact is that in some regions, many Catholics would have no contact with the church at all, at least on a regular basis, if it were not for liturgies of the Word. The reality is that in some places, a priest is now seen somewhat like a bishop traditionally has been: an authority figure and an important point of reference, but not somebody you expect to see every Sunday. In that sense, Tagle said, the real question is probably how to best form and train the lay ministers, so that they can help people see liturgies of the Word as a preparation for the Eucharist "when it's available."

One Western archbishop told *NCR* this week that discussion in this synod over lay ministers of the Word has been a "proxy" for debates over the *virii probati*, meaning the ordination of married men to the Catholic priesthood. If so, that might help explain why the synod isn't quite sure what to say.

(2) The Historical-Critical Method

If all that mattered on this point were generalizations, there would be no problem. Some formula like the following would command almost overwhelming assent: The historical-critical method is valuable, but it's not

enough. It has to be integrated into the broader theological reflection of the church, which implies that theologians and exegetes need to work and play well together.

The devil, however, is in the details. Some in the synod clearly strike a more positive tone with regard to academic study of the Bible, using the essentially secular tools of historical research and literary criticism, than others. Levada characterized the contrast: "Some have criticized the historical-critical method, on the grounds that it's difficult to overcome the philosophical suppositions which formed its basis for many of the method's original followers," he said. "Others see it as a useful tool for coming to a better understanding of the literal and historical sense of scripture."

In his lone talk to the synod so far, Pope Benedict XVI touched on precisely this point, essentially arguing that scholars using the historical-critical method need to take the faith of the church as their point of departure.

On this point, two challenges present themselves.

First, the proper balance has to be struck in the synod's concluding documents. If there's too much criticism of exegetes and the historical-critical method, Catholic Biblical scholars may feel under attack, or that the clock is being rolled back on tools they now take for granted. If the language is too soft, however, then the clear desire for a more "theological" reading of scripture could get lost in the mush.

Second, there's the practical question of how, exactly, to put theologians and exegetes into deeper conversation, especially given the hyper-compartmentalized nature of academic life these days. This may well be the point upon which much drama turns -- will the synod restrict itself to a fervorino about the relationship between exegesis and theology, simply echoing the basic points made by Pope Benedict XVI on Tuesday, or will it actually offer concrete suggestions for fostering closer links among Biblical specialists, theologians, and pastors?

Basilian Fr. Thomas Rosica, a Canadian who's handling press briefings for the synod in English, and who is also a biblical scholar himself, offered a memorable metaphor for what's at stake.

"Most of us were trained as surgeons," he said on Thursday, by which he meant that exegetes learn to make very precise cuts on the Biblical text -- determining what the exact meaning of a given verb form is, for example, or detailing the social contexts of the Johannine and Lucan communities.

"What we sometimes forgot is that we're operating on a living body, not a corpse," Rosica said. "We're supposed to be heart surgeons, not coroners. Success is defined by whether the body survives the surgery."

(3) Inerrancy of the Bible

Some bishops, such as Cardinal George Pell of Sydney, Australia, have floated the idea that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith produce a document on the inerrancy of the Bible, in order to resolve what has been an open question since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and its document on divine revelation, *Dei Verbum*

This point gets technical in a hurry, but in essence, here's what's at stake: How much of the Bible is "inspired" and free from error? Is it just what one might call the Bible's "theological" content, meaning what it teaches about salvation? Or is the whole Bible inerrant, and therefore "true," even if that doesn't necessarily mean literally, factually true?

Cardinal Francis George of Chicago, widely seen as one of the leading thinkers at the senior levels of the church, said in an interview this week that the second option better represents "where we're at today," but acknowledged that the issue hasn't been resolved.

There's something of a Scylla and Charybdis dynamic inherent to this debate. Veer too far towards saying that only the theological parts of the Bible are inspired, and it can seem like the church is flirting with skepticism; go too far toward saying inerrancy applies to every jot and tittle, and it can end in a kind of Catholic fundamentalism.

Whatever view one takes, there's also the practical question of whether now is the right time for the Vatican to say something. Though this is admittedly a fairly cynical view of things, it's often the case that people clamor for a Vatican statement when they think they'll get the answer they want; otherwise, they tend to suggest that it's not yet "opportune" to put out a document.

Exactly how the synod phrases its recommendation on this point -- should it choose to make one at all -- will therefore be fascinating to watch.

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This week, I conducted interviews with four bishops representing the United States at the synod: Cardinals [Francis George of Chicago](#) [1] and [Daniel DiNardo of Houston](#) [2], Archbishop [Donald Wuerl of Washington](#) [3], and Bishop [Gerald Kicanas of Tucson](#) [4]. (I didn't have time to track down Archbishop Basil Schott of Pittsburgh of the Byzantine Rite.) George and Kicanas are the president and vice-president, respectively, of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

I also had a chance to speak with Cardinal [William Levada](#) [5], an American who serves as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (the post the current pope held before his election), as well as bishops from other parts of the world, including Cardinal [George Pell of Sydney, Australia](#) [6], and Archbishop [John Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria](#) [7].

Links to the full texts of those interviews can be found among the links to other synod stories, found at the bottom of this column.

With the Americans, our conversations touched not only upon the synod, but a wide variety of other subjects.

Given the proximity to the elections, inevitably the topic of the church and politics, especially debates over abortion, were part of the mix; I'll be focusing on that subject in an upcoming article for the print edition of *NCR*.

The following is a sampling of interesting points on other matters to emerge from the interviews.

The Inerrancy of the Bible

Levada: "One of things about inerrancy is that it also has a pastoral dimension. It's not simply a doctrinal issue. In the light of the wide range of readings -- the liberal, you might even call it the modernist, exegesis and critique of scripture, over against the fundamentalist ideas on the inerrancy of the Bible -- I think that there is an apologetic value to some attempt to clarify that question. What I could call the view of an uncritical literalism is the kind of view that the modern, aggressive atheists hold up as the basis of their critique. How can there be a God, if this is what he's speaking, what he's revealing? They look at that as a kind of negative proof. ? The teaching of the Bible is a teaching about what God wants us to know for our salvation. How that teaching is proposed, with all of its human clothing, and, sometimes, its lovely language -- what you might call its warts -- doesn't take away, I don't think, from the central point."

Catholic Losses to Evangelicals

DiNardo: "I suppose if I have any criticism it's that some of the Evangelicals, out of their concern for knowing Jesus Christ, will take advantage of people coming from, let's say, Mexico or South America. These people come into a place like Houston ? you're new, you're frequently illegal. [Evangelicals] are going to offer you some help, some assistance, and of course I have no objection to that. Then they read the Bible, and they tell you that this is the only way to know Jesus Christ. May I also add that they're not totally without some sense of the background. We have churches in Houston that are Protestant Evangelical, and they have pictures of Our Lady of Guadalupe! A lot of people are attracted to them, and maybe part of that is our fault. Our formation in the faith, particularly, perhaps, in Central and South America, is not as well developed as theirs. So, they get 'em. ? I wouldn't use the word 'exodus' in Texas. I might use the word 'trickle.' Maybe even a big trickle in some areas."

Relations between theologians and Bible scholars

George: "The fact that a distinction exists, which sometimes becomes a chasm, is quite clear. I've heard a professor at a Catholic university say that she just does exegesis. Sometimes it supports Protestant doctrine, sometimes it supports Catholic doctrine. For her, it's a totally independent discipline, without any relationship to what any particular church does. That means that the churches are all, in some sense, not scriptural. That completely abstracts from the fact that these are all books written by people of faith, for a community of faith, and meant to be read within a community of faith. In a sense, it's bad scripture study. But that does pass for professional scripture study in some circles. It's going to be very hard for us [in America] to move beyond that immediately, because we do it very well. The Germans have gone beyond that now, and the French were never into it in the same way. We're the last outpost of that kind of thinking. We'll just have to wait a while, I suppose, to catch up with the rest of the church."

Creationism and Intelligent Design

DiNardo: "If 'intelligent design' is used as a philosophical argument to talk about the foundations of how we understand science, I have no problem with it. Some people are using it as a scientific explanation per se, but it's really not. It's a philosophical explanation trying to show the presuppositions by which we can talk about divine purpose or providence in the world. I think that's great, that's very important. The problem I see on both sides - both with some of those who are pushing the evolution agenda, and with intelligent design -- is that they're really arguing philosophy, they're not arguing science. ? The Bible tells us the 'why' of things. The importance of the Book of Genesis is on the ordered character of God's creation. For the rest, the Catholic church is receptive to the role of reason, and reason tells us 'how' things go."

The Bible in Popular Culture

Wuerl: "I'm not sure that ten years from now, The Da Vinci Code is going to be shaping very much, but Matthew, Mark, Luke and John will still be in people's hands. Mothers and fathers will still be helping their children to come to grips with the Bible. Today across the world, there are more people familiar with the story of Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection than anything else. It doesn't have the same attraction as a flash in the pan, but I think it is capturing people's imaginations. ? How many people have given their lives to follow The Da Vinci Code? Look at the people who give their lives every single year to follow the gospel. I'm staying at the North American College, where there more students this year than since sometime in the 1960s. In the Archdiocese of Washington, we have 72 men studying for the priesthood. ? These are people for whom the gospel message has not only captured their imaginations, it's captured their hearts."

Preaching by Laity

Kicanas: "I think there are opportunities for laity to preach, though they're not liturgical moments in terms of the homily at the Mass. There are many times and places where laity can preach, and I think we should look for those opportunities and encourage them, because laity do have things to say. I think the issue [regarding the ban on lay preaching at Mass] is more in terms of the particular presiding role of the priest, and the responsibility to be the one who breaks open the Word of God at the liturgy in the homily. I think that's not going to change. I think what can be developed and fostered more is finding extra-liturgical ways to encourage preaching by laity. ? For example, at wake services or devotional experiences. Those are not moments when the preaching has to be done by the priest. I think those could be opportunities for the laity to use their gifts. Preaching retreats or days of renewal, things like that, are formative moments in people's lives and very important spiritual opportunities. Preaching does take place by others in those settings, and, I think, in an effective way."

The Legacy of John Paul II

George: "I think he was part of the Second Vatican Council, and he wanted above all to see that the council's effects were part of the ordinary life of the church. Primarily, I think, for him that meant we should understand how the church is global. It's always been universal, but it's now also global -- a "world church," as Karl Rahner called it at the time of the council. For John Paul, that was a lived reality. He organized his papacy around that, he helped bring us into it with the World Youth Days, the synods dedicated to the continents, the celebration of

the Great Jubilee. ? It would be very, very difficult now for Catholics to retreat into a kind of nationalist religion. That was the temptation at the time of the collapse of monarchies and through the 19th century. I think we're past that, and we've moved past it before most of the world is past it."

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"Poignant" is not a word that naturally comes to mind to describe most Vatican press conferences. "Interesting," sometimes; "dull," on a few occasions; "informative," almost always, but these events are rarely charged with feeling. The cynicism of the press corps, combined with the reserve of the Vatican, is hardly a prescription for catharsis.

On Wednesday, however, the air in a packed press hall was thick with nostalgia. Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz of Cracow, Poland, presented a new documentary titled "Testimony," based on his memoirs about his 39 years as John Paul's private secretary (published in English, by Doubleday, under the title *A Life with Karol.*)

Thursday of this week was the 30th anniversary of the election of John Paul II to the papacy on Oct. 16, 1978.

The new film offers revelations on two small points:

- A knife attack on John Paul II in 1982, during a trip to the Marian shrine of Fatima in Portugal, actually drew blood. It was reported at the time that a right-wing priest named Juan Maria Fernandez y Krohn had charged the pope, but the impression was that John Paul emerged unscathed. In the film, however, Dziwisz says he can now reveal "what we kept secret until now. That priest wounded the Holy Father, but the Holy Father was able to conclude the ceremony. When he returned to his room, we saw blood on his vestments. He was wounded by that knife."
- After John Paul's last public appearance in St. Peter's Square in the spring of 2005, when he was unable to speak to the crowd, Dziwisz said the pope was wheeled back into his apartment and said: "If I can't be with people, if I can't celebrate the Eucharist on Easter Sunday, if I can't even pronounce one word, then it is better for me to go."

To be honest, however, these points weren't the attraction of the press conference for most Vatican correspondents. Instead, it was the chance to reconnect with a man most regard as an old friend -- because for almost 27 years, Dziwisz was the direct link to the mind and heart of the pope.

During the John Paul years, Dziwisz never gave interviews -- that's not the role of any bishop's private secretary, let alone the bishop of Rome -- and for that matter, he almost never spoke in public. (Indeed, many reporters who have been around a while were trying to remember if Dziwisz had ever appeared at a Vatican press conference before Wednesday.) Behind the scenes, however, Dziwisz offered background on what the pope was thinking and doing. Toward the end, he would also bring us up to speed on how the pope was feeling.

In the press conference on Wednesday, a longtime Vatican correspondent began a question to Dziwisz by referring to him as "Your Eminence." Then, with emotion in his voice, he said that he still couldn't get used to

that title, since for the press corps Dziwiesz would always be "Don Stanislaw."

Dziwiesz smiled and said, "For me, too ? call me Don Stanislaw."

Looking out on a room full of faces he knows better than most, Dziwiesz said: "I want to say hello to all of you. We're friends. We've shared so much history, so many trips, so many conversations."

Dziwiesz said that his affability with the press was a direct reflection of the attitude of his boss. The late pope, he said, had a "great love for journalists."

In that regard, Dziwiesz told a classic John Paul story. One trip early in the pontificate, he said, didn't go so well, and the Italian papers afterwards were full of criticism. Dziwiesz said he had tried to keep the papers away from the pope, but he came in on John Paul and saw him reading an especially negative account.

Dziwiesz said he started to say something about how terrible it was, but John Paul looked up at him and smiled: "Actually," the pope said, "I deserved much worse!"

This was one of those rare press conferences that are less about today's story, than yesterday's.

For example, I asked Dziwiesz about how John Paul made spiritual use of the Bible, given that we're in the middle of a synod on scripture. Don Stanislaw did offer one tidbit -- for several years, he said, John Paul made a habit of reading the Bible in Russian, presumably with a possible trip to Moscow in mind. For the most part, however, Dziwiesz dwelt on the final moments of John Paul's life, recalling that the dying pope wanted to hear a reading from scripture before the end came, so a close friend and Polish professor read nine chapters of the Gospel of St. John aloud to the pope in bed.

Wednesday's reunion with Don Stanislaw offered a reminder of what a remarkable story we had in John Paul II -- a once-in-a-generation virtuoso with the media who brought the Catholic church into the age of instantaneous global telecommunications with verve. It also offered a chance to reconnect with the loyal majordomo who stood by his side, informally opening doors for the press that historically have been firmly shut.

The e-mail address for John L. Allen Jr. is jallen@ncronline.org [8]

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