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Synod Notebook: Sex abuse, sound bites and silence

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Synod of Bishops 2012

Looking around in the early 21st century, one of the biggest evangelical challenges facing the Catholic church almost certainly is continuing fallout from the child sexual abuse scandals, and the story isn't over. Just yesterday, Pope Benedict XVI accepted the resignation of Bishop Marco Antonio Ordenes Fernandez of Iquique, Chile, accused of abusing a 15-year-old altar boy.

So far, however, there's been little discussion of the abuse scandals, or how to restore the moral authority and public standing they've eroded, during the Oct. 7-28 Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization. To date, there have been only two mentions, both fairly oblique.

One came from a locale you might expect: the United States. In his speech before the discussion, Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington, D.C., who is serving as the *relator*, or general secretary, made the first reference while surveying obstacles to evangelization.

"Tragically, the sins of a few have encouraged a distrust in some of the very structures of the church herself," Wuerl said.

The second allusion came from a less predictable quarter: Archbishop Scraton Villegas of Lingayen-Dagupan in the Philippines, which to date has not experienced a massive crisis analogous to the United States or Europe.

On Tuesday morning, Villegas argued that sometimes the church and its personnel get in the way of drawing others to the faith.

"Evangelization has been hurt and continues to be impeded by the arrogance of its messengers. The

hierarchy must shun arrogance, hypocrisy and bigotry," he said.

In that context, Villegas added: "We must punish the errant among us instead of covering up our own mistakes."

One could read the reticence in the synod to date on the abuse crisis a couple of different ways.

Negatively, it could be seen as a sin of omission or as a form of denial, a pretense that the church has left the scandals behind. Positively, it could be read as a healthy recognition that the moment for speech has passed, and that from here on out the church will be judged on its actions rather than its words.

It will be interesting to see if the topic surfaces in greater depth as the synod rolls on, perhaps especially when the small group discussions begin.

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During the first period of a synod of bishops, reporters and analysts are faced with a true tidal wave of verbiage. Mornings and afternoons are devoted almost entirely to speeches from the synod floor, one after the other. Tuesday alone there were thirty-five speeches, and that's not the only business they did that day.

Although reporters generally have to rely on summaries, that's still a tremendous amount of material, so every day the hunt is usually on for the sound-bite — that one memorable phrase that seems to capture the thrust of all that rhetoric, or at least an important piece of it.

On Monday, the sound-bite prize went to Wuerl, who referred to a "tsunami of secular influence" against which the church's message these days is forced to swim. It was the phrase that tended to dominate headlines and end up in the lead paragraphs of news reports, effectively capturing the cultural situation many bishops appear to perceive.

On Tuesday, the sound-bite of the day belonged instead to a Latin American, Bishop José Rafael Quirós Quirós of Limón in Costa Rica.

Arguing for parishes to be centers of "authentic human and Christian maturing of their members," Quirós said that it's important to avoid an "epidermic faith," by which, of course, he meant a faith that's only skin-deep.

"Epidermic faith" might well be styled as the central danger that any program of evangelization should seek to avoid, and as such, it's a terrific sound-bite for the 2012 synod.

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Though it's still early, we already have a candidate for the greatest sense of irony at the Synod of Bishops: Archbishop Luis Antonio Tagle of Manila in the Philippines, who's widely considered one of the rising stars among the Asian bishops.

As already noted, the early stages of a synod are formed largely by a tidal wave of speech-making. Yet Tagle had the temerity to float a truly novel idea, especially in that context, as one of the keys to successful evangelization: Silence.

‘The church must discover the power of silence,’ Tagle said.

‘Confronted with the sorrows, doubts and uncertainties of people she cannot pretend to give easy solutions,’ he said. ‘In Jesus, silence becomes the way of attentive listening, compassion and prayer. It is the way to truth.’

Tagle suggested that silence would be one signal of a new spirit of humility.

‘The church’s humility, respectfulness and silence might reveal more clearly the face of God in Jesus,’ he told the synod.

A synod of bishops, needless to say, is not exacted designed to promote a culture of silence. To make the irony even juicier, Tagle has been nominated vice-president of the ‘Commission for the Message,’ which will produce a statement to the world to be issued at the conclusion of the synod.

It will be fascinating to see if a spirit of ‘less is more,’ in keeping with Tagle’s appeal for silence, gains any traction.

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