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Talking about talking about church

Phyllis Zagano | Oct. 10, 2012 Just Catholic
Synod of Bishops 2012

I think it was the late Jeane Kirkpatrick, a former UN ambassador and sharp-tongued conservative, who said it. True quote or not, the thought remains: "There's no shortage of people willing to spend a week in Paris talking about poverty."

Now 262 bishops and 94 hand-picked others are spending three weeks in Rome talking about evangelization.

Pasta, anyone?

The 13th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on "The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith" will cost who-knows-what and give the various attendees an opportunity to talk about talking about church. Seven of the bishops and 10 experts and auditors are from the United States. The entire crowd presents all the outlooks in the church from right to far right.

OK, I spotted some moderates, and even maybe a liberal or two on the lists. But I'm not telling. Let the Holy Spirit quietly help them open the windows.

Something's got to give. The Pew Research Center reports [1] that one in five U.S. citizens claims no religion. Other statistics say 12.5 percent of U.S. Catholics are now ex-Catholics. The numbers are echoed around the world. "None" is rapidly becoming the affiliation of choice.

Even so, most Catholics would rather fight than switch. Inside the ropes, the issues line up pretty uniformly: the "official" church is worried about sexual mores while the working church is trying to figure out how to feed the poor. Everybody agrees on helping the needy, and people vary widely on most of the neuralgic issues. But the message of Christ is lost amid sex scandals and financial improprieties. The butler really did do it [2], but why?

So the new evangelization is supposed to fix things? It's being talked about in one of the world's most beautiful -- and expensive -- cities. The synod's marching orders -- the *Instrumentum Laboris [3]* -- is about 80 pages of Vati-speak interspersed with Bible verses. Much of it is lovely, if applied to everybody. But it mentions few women: the Samaritan woman at the well, the Syro-Phoenician woman who suffered Jesus' brush-off (feed the children's bread to the dogs?), some prostitutes and unnamed catechists.

There will be no new evangelization until everybody agrees we all are made in the image and likeness of God. That means everybody: the ones who talk back (even the dogs get the children's table scraps); the ones folks love to hate; the whole crowd -- warts and all.

And who will do all this evangelizing? Announcing the Gospel is the deacon's charge. The synod document mentions deacons in the same sentence with women: "deacons and many women who are involved in catechesis." That's not it. The diaconal charge is to carry the Gospel, to announce it in word and in deed, to explore it, to explain it, to teach it, to preach it.

When New York's Cardinal Timothy Dolan met with major superiors of religious institutes and orders working in his archdiocese not long before he left for Rome, one of the four women speakers had the temerity to suggest that women as deacons might move evangelization forward. It's not in her written remarks, but the more than 60 people there heard it. Did he?

What difference would it make anyway? Deacons barely get a mention in the synod's marching orders, which mainly include women as whiners or temptresses or sometime-helpers in the task. And therein lies the tale.

There are two ways of looking at the project of evangelization: 1) the catechism with a smile; 2) living the Gospel. The former involves more rules than real tools of evangelization. The latter takes the other's hand, listens and blesses. The former calls the law the admission ticket to Christianity. The latter is Christianity.

Benedict XVI finds the church at a loss in the face of secularism, and he is correct. The cardinal archbishop of Washington, D.C., Donald Wuerl -- the synod's relator -- blames bad catechesis [4] and worse liturgy. These all play a part, up to a point. If prospective and former Catholics stand behind the barrier of secularism, on the other side they see too many overweight men waving rule books and speaking strangely, calling it prayer.

Maybe the synod will work. Maybe, like the daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman, the church away from Rome will experience a long-distance miracle. Maybe it will get some of that life-giving water the Samaritan woman sought.

The bottom line is no one is going to follow Jesus unless the messengers act like Jesus. It is just not going to happen.

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