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An Asian plea for humility at the Synod of Bishops

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic
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Anybody who's seen the movie "Pulp Fiction" probably recalls the scene where John Travolta explains to Samuel L. Jackson that in France, McDonald's calls the quarter-pounder a "Royale with cheese" because, in light of the metric system, the French wouldn't know what a quarter-pounder is.

(It turns out that the movie got the French slightly wrong. It's actually just the "Royal Cheese," but the point's the same.)

Although director Quentin Tarantino is nobody's idea of a Christian evangelist, there's nevertheless a missionary insight here: Whether we're talking about cheeseburgers or eternal salvation, the same product often has to be packaged in different ways for different audiences based on the languages they speak and the cultural worlds they inhabit.

That, believe it or not, is a way of introducing a report from the Oct. 7-28 Synod of Bishops in Rome on the new evangelization.

Whatever its defects, a synod is always a kind of graduate seminar about the realities of life in a global church, bringing together bishops and other church leaders from every nook and cranny of the planet. The opening week of this one has been devoted largely to surveying what works and what doesn't in terms of Catholic evangelization in various parts of the world, and some distinctive regional accents have already emerged.

To be sure, a bewildering variety of points are always made in the opening stages, and not all the voices from a given region are singing from the same hymnal. In broad strokes, however, here's what some leading Catholic voices seem to believe is required to make the church relevant in their neighborhoods:

- Asia: humility, simplicity and silence
- Africa: ministering to people scarred by poverty and violence
- Latin America: taking cues from what's already working, such as popular piety and small Christian communities (often called "base communities")
- Europe and the States: sound doctrine and sacramental practice as an antidote to the influence of a largely secular culture

Asia

On this landscape, the Asian voice so far probably has been the most compact as well as the most distinctive.

Tuesday morning, Archbishop Luis Antonio Tagle of Manila, widely considered a rising star among the Asian bishops, said for the church to be a place where people meet God, it needs to learn three things from the example of Jesus: humility, respect for others, and 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. In Jesus, silence becomes the way of attentive listening, compassion and prayer. It is the way to truth."

"The seemingly indifferent and aimless societies of our time are earnestly looking for God," Tagle said. "The world takes delight in a simple witness to Jesus -- meek and humble of heart."

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Irish Fr. Eamonn Conway, a theologian who's among the expert advisers to the synod, said Thursday that Tagle's presentation "had a certain resonance" in the synod hall, meaning people were favorably taken by it.

A fellow Filipino, Archbishop Socrates Villegas of Lingayen-Dagupan, made an equally strong plea for humility.

"Evangelization has been hurt and continues to be impeded by the arrogance of its messengers," Villegas said. "The hierarchy must shun arrogance, hypocrisy and bigotry."

"The Gospel cannot thrive in pride," Villegas said. "When pride seeps into the heart of the church, the Gospel proclamation is harmed."

Bishop Gervas Rozario of Rajshahi in Bangladesh, meanwhile, stressed the importance of "evangelical poverty" in Asia.

"We must learn not only to renounce worldly goods, but also to appreciate the simplicity and humility of the poor, their happiness with whatever little they have and their concern for others," Rozario said. "Church leaders must also open their hearts to be evangelized by the evangelical values of the poor."

Africa

In terms of the Africans, Bishop Nicolas Djomo Lola of Tshumbe, president of the episcopal conference in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, said a primary evangelical challenge is coping with the legacy of war and violence, which, he said, "have de-structured social and individual life on the psychological, moral as well as spiritual levels."

Among signs of this fragility, Djomo said, many Africans seek comfort in religious sects or in sorcery, sometimes with the consequence that they come to suspect evil spirits in friends and family members, "which destroys relationships even more."

In that context, Djomo said, the church must be committed to building a "pacified, just, secure and prosperous Africa."

Archbishop Joseph Atanga of Bertoua in Cameroon, president of his episcopal conference, also insisted that evangelization needs to embrace the wide panoply of Africa's challenges, "religious, cultural, socio-economic and ethical."

In his continental report Monday, Cardinal Polycarp Pengo of Tanzania, president of the African bishops, said evangelization in Africa has to come to terms with challenges such as "perennial conflicts on a tribal basis, diseases, corruption, human trafficking, the atrocity of child abuse and violence against minors and women."

Pengo also cited a rising threat from Islamic fundamentalism.

"Evangelizers must face the difficulty of dialoguing with the vast majority of good Muslims, who, however, are mute," he said, "and the small groups of fundamentalists who are not prepared to accept even objective truth which is opposed to their preconceived position."

Latin America

Several Latin American speakers have emphasized that in evangelizing their part of the world, the church doesn't have to start from scratch. There's a strong tradition of popular piety, such as Marian shrines and devotion to the saints. The trick, they seemed to imply, is to infuse that piety with a new missionary impulse.

Archbishop Rogelio Cabrera Lòpez of Monterrey, Mexico, said "the experience of popular religiosity" is still part of the cultural landscape, but argued that the church needs to do a better job of educating people into "maturity of faith."

Auxiliary bishop Milton Luis Tróccoli Cebedio of Montevideo, Uruguay, proposed "stimulating popular piety, very present among our simple people, above all in the Marian sanctuaries, as an opportunity to announce the Gospel in a kerygmatic key."

Those comments built on an overview of Latin America delivered by Archbishop Carlos Aguiar Retes of Tlalnepantla, president of the Mexican bishops, Monday.

"Religiosity remains alive and is the great potential reserve of our peoples," Aguiar said, pointing to "deep popular piety rooted in all the countries."

Aguiar suggested the new evangelization might involve lending a stronger pastoral dimension to this piety

and encouraging it to flow into a spirit of service.

"We must accompany the search for God, insisting upon catechesis and planning, so that these appointments may represent for the community a commitment to social transformation which contributes to the well-being of the most needy," he said.

"We cannot forget the simple prayer of the masses who, at shrines and in folk festivals, express their own devotion and unfortunately feel unwelcomed and unaccompanied," Aguiar said.

Several Latin Americans also flagged small communities as a way to evangelize on a human scale. Although at one stage the "base communities" were controversial because of their association with the liberation theology movement, by now they've become a widely accepted pastoral model in many parts of the continent.

Bishop José Dolores Grullón Estrella of San Juan de la Maguana in the Dominican Republic offered the most developed form of that argument Thursday afternoon.

"Among the subjects privileged to carry out the new evangelization ... are the small communities, formed by a small group of people who gather like the primordial cells of an ecclesial structure to live the faith, train themselves, evangelize and undertake community actions," he said.

Grullón praised these small communities as "the fruit of a real pastoral conversion."

The West

Although speakers from all points of the compass have talked about faith formation and catechesis, it's been mostly bishops from Europe and the States who have waded into doctrinal waters at any depth. It's another reminder that though no place is immune to the lure of secularism in a globalized world, it's still mostly in the West that the intellectual tug-of-war with secular thought is a top-shelf preoccupation.

Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington, D.C., who's serving as the relator, or general secretary, of the synod, set the tone with his "report before the discussion" Monday, warning of an "intellectual and ideological separation of Christ from his church" that he perceives in the culture as well as an effort by "secularism and rationalism" to "subjugate" the faith.

In the old days, Wuerl said, missionaries traveled vast physical distances to preach the faith. Today, he said, evangelizers "must surmount ideological distances just as immense, oftentimes before we ever journey beyond our own neighborhood or family."

To cope, Wuerl proposed four theological foundations for the new evangelization:

- Anthropology
- Christology
- Ecclesiology
- Soteriology (teaching on salvation)

Among other points, Wuerl insisted evangelizers need to be clear that while God wills all to be saved, at the same time, "the church is not one among many ways to reach God, all of them equally valid."

"Jesus has provided a clear and unique path to redemption and salvation," he said.

In a similar vein, Cardinal Peter Erdő of Hungary decried the influence of the mass media in the West on

popular opinion, blaming it for "a presentation of Christian faith and history that is full of lies," and also faulted schools for offering "an education in syncretism or indifference."

All that, Erdō said, is part of a spreading "de-Christianization" that sometimes leads to "juridical as well as physical attacks against the visible presence of the faith."

Other Western prelates have emphasized the importance of sacramental practice, especially confession.

"The Second Vatican Council called for a renewal of the sacrament of penance, but what we got instead, sadly, in many places, was the disappearance of the sacrament," said Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York.

"We have busied ourselves calling for the reform of structures, systems, institutions and people other than ourselves" while neglecting the need for personal conversion, Dolan said. He called confession "the sacrament of evangelization."

Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson, Ariz., cited one element of doctrine in particular as a resource for evangelization: the church's social teaching and the works of charity it inspires.

"Sharing and acting on our Catholic social teaching bring people to Christ," Kicanas said. We will move hearts when ... we all demonstrate our faith as Catholics with renewed energy for charity and justice at home and all through the world."

"People will wonder at the Spirit of Christ that moves us when we stand up for the lives, dignity and rights of the 'least of these,' " Kicanas said.

* * *

Now for a couple of nuggets that aren't necessarily part of any emerging themes or overarching concerns but that are interesting nevertheless.

First, the priest shortage has come up in a couple of ways. Pengo alluded to it in his report Monday on Africa, noting that Africa today is dispatching priests to the West, just as Western missionaries once came to them. That's a good thing, Pengo said, but it also carries at least two risks:

- Priests going abroad may be "seeking in the first place material gain before genuine evangelization, to the detriment of the church on either side."
- The West may be fueling a damaging brain drain at the expense of the developing world. "The church in Africa is deprived of its best qualified evangelizers, while the materially rich Western church receives evangelizers," Pengo said.

That's a danger especially worth pondering given the realities of priest distribution worldwide. In the States and Europe, the ratio of priests to baptized Catholics is 1-to-1,300, while in Africa it's more than 1-to-5,000. Globally, two-thirds of the Catholic people are in the southern hemisphere, but two-thirds of priests are in the north.

At some stage, Pengo appeared to be suggesting, Western Catholics might have to ask if their growing reliance on imported priests is actually an injustice.

Although a synod of bishops is hardly "Evening at the Improv," the priest shortage also occasioned an unintentional moment of comic relief Thursday. It came as Byzantine Archbishop Ján Babjak of Slovakia described the unique circumstances of his church, now experiencing a boom after long decades of

repression under Communism.

"We are able to thank God for the abundance of priestly vocations," Babjak said. "In the service of 250,000 faithful we have more than 450 priests and approximately 90 seminarians in the seminary."

In fact, Babjak said, they're actually turning guys away: "We cannot accept any more in the seminary because we have no more places to send them to carry out their priestly service," he said. (In part, that's because Eastern priests are often married, so there are restrictions on where they can serve outside their own tradition.)

A ripple of laughter spread in the synod hall as Babjak spoke, suggesting that for lots of bishops in other places, an excess of vocations is a headache they'd love to have.

Second, because the subject is evangelization, the focus has been almost entirely *ad extra*, meaning how the church presents itself to the world, rather than *ad intra*, meaning the church's inner life. It's not a topic that naturally lends itself to debates over internal reforms, but at least one prominent voice got there anyway: Archbishop Bruno Forte of Chieti-Vasto in Italy, a veteran theologian prior and widely regarded as one of the leading intellectual lights among the Italians.

In talking about the importance of reaching out to the young, Forte raised the chronically sensitive question of divorced and remarried couples, noting that their exclusion from the sacraments also often means their children don't experience the sacraments either. Without spelling out quite what he had in mind, Forte called for a "decisive turning point in pastoral care" on that front.

While he was on the subject, Forte also called for streamlining the annulment process.

"As a bishop and moderator of a regional ecclesiastical tribunal, I must admit that some requirements, such as the need for the conforming double sentence even if there is no appeal, seem to many people with problems who wish to resolve their situation to be difficult to comprehend," he said.

Friday morning, another bishop floated a more comprehensive reform program motivated by the sexual abuse crisis and focused on the role of women and laity. Details on the speech by Bishop Brian Dunn of Antigonish in Canada can be found [here](#).

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