

Synod Notebook: Salvation, the movements, and the poor

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 13, 2012 NCR Today
Synod of Bishops 2012

Whenever the Synod of Bishops meets in Rome, it's a bit like one of those old medieval trade fairs, as people with wares to peddle from all over the Catholic world haul them out for display. Books and videos, catechetical materials, academic programs and pastoral initiatives are featured in an endless series of screenings, receptions and roundtables, and one could probably fill every night just making the rounds.

Last night, for instance, Sacred Heart Seminary of Detroit hosted a reception at Rome's Dominican-run University of St. Thomas (universally known as the "Angelicum") to tout its licentiate in the New Evangelization, launched in 2004 and thought to be the first such post-graduate program dedicated to the New Evangelization. At the moment it has 26 students, drawn from places such as China, India, and Africa, as well the United States.

The program has the strong backing of Archbishop Allen Vigneron of Detroit, who offered a testimonial in a brief video played for the crowd at the Angelicum. In effect, the Sacred Heart program is probably emblematic of the sort of initiative likely to proliferate as a result of the ferment around "New Evangelization."

Its driving force is Ralph Martin, a longtime leader in the Catholic charismatic movement who today teaches theology at Sacred Heart and runs the seminary's graduate offerings in New Evangelization. In December 2011 Martin was appointed a consultor to the Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization, and is in Rome now serving as one of the lay experts at the synod.

Last night, bishops and others who attended the reception at the Angelicum, where Martin did his doctoral work, were given a copy of his recent book *Will Many Be Saved? What Vatican II Actually Teaches and Its Implications for the New Evangelization*, published by Eerdmans. Its endorsements read like a "who's who" of Catholic officialdom, including four cardinals: Timothy Dolan of New York, Donald Wuerl of Washington, Francis George of Chicago and Peter Turkson of Ghana, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. (Turkson, by the way, was at last night's event.)

In brief remarks last night, Martin laid out what he believes to be three chronic obstacle to the "New Evangelization," which, he suggested, the program at Sacred Heart is intended to address.

First, Martin cited "doctrinal confusion." In particular, he said, there's a "practical universalism" about salvation for non-Catholics and non-Christians which has taken hold in recent decades, and which, to some extent, has taken the wind out of the sails of the church's missionary efforts.

"The idea is that everybody's going to Heaven," Martin said. "The problem with that is that's clearly at odds with what Jesus said."

Martin's book is devoted to arguing that while Catholic doctrine acknowledges the possibility of salvation for those not formally incorporated into the church, it does not suggest that happens routinely or automatically.

Instead, he writes, salvation outside the church is "fraught with danger and uncertainty."

The bottom line, according to Martin: "It matters whether the gospel is preached or not. It matters if people believe and are baptized or not."

Restoring clarity on that point, Martin argues, would provide new momentum for the church's evangelizing efforts.

Second, Martin said that the link between the New Evangelization and a "new Pentecost" has not been made sufficiently clear. For a new missionary drive to take hold, he said, the church needs a new eruption of the Holy Spirit akin to the experiences of the early apostles described in the New Testament.

"We have to get people to think about whether that's just poetry, or if it's something real that could actually happen today," Martin said.

Third, Martin said that a change in pastoral strategy and emphasis is required to make the New Evangelization work, which he described as a shift from "maintenance to mission."

The job of a seminary inspired by the New Evangelization, he said, "is not to train seminarians simply to administer a parish, but to be leaders in missionary work."

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Yesterday I was interviewed about the synod for Dutch TV by a friend and colleague named Stijn Fens. He's a sharp cookie, and he asked a very perceptive question. One target audience for the New Evangelization, he said, is lapsed Catholics in the West, above all Europe. The last time the Catholic church launched an evangelizing campaign in Europe was the Counter-Reformation, he said, and the Jesuits were its foot soldiers. Whop, he asked, will be the foot soldiers of the New Evangelization?

Here's more or less what I said.

Listening carefully to what the bishops have been saying at the synod, the list of potential agents for the New Evangelization they've ticked off is bewilderingly long: the parishes, Catholic schools and universities, the media, laity, small Christian communities, and on and on. If the question, however, is who they really seem to believe will come through when the chips are down — in other words, who the Jesuits of the New Evangelization are actually likely to be — the answer seems clear: the New Movements.

By "new movement," we're talking about groups born mostly in the 20th century, and with their real growth coming mostly after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). These tend to be predominantly lay groups, with a strong *ad extra* flavor — meaning they're focused on engaging the outside world, not internal church affairs or reform. Well-known examples include the Focolare, Communion and Liberation, the Neocatechumenal Way, Schönstatt, the Emmanuel Community, and Sant'Egidio. (The usual list would also include Opus Dei, though technically it's not a movement but a prelature.)

I've been keeping a Word file of the summaries of Synod speeches released each day by the Vatican Press Office — as of today, it contains a staggering total of almost 100,000 words, and bear in mind these aren't the full texts. By my count, the new movements have already been mentioned 44 times, and we're not quite yet at the synod's half-way point.

One sign of the New Evangelization underway are the ecclesial movements and new communities that bring such blessing to the church today," Wuerl said during his report before the discussion on Monday.

All point to the work of the Holy Spirit engaging the church today with those who have drifted away," he said.

Likewise, Cardinal Peter Erdő of Hungary called the movements "a true blessing to the church," though he added that they need to "avoid the post-modern temptation of being content with particular feelings and perceptions."

Polish Cardinal Card. Stanisław Rylko, president of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, urged bishops and pastors to see the movements as "a precious gift rather than a problem."

Bishop Christopher Charles Prowse of Sale, Australia, called the movements "a great gift of the Holy Spirit," and said that they "assist in developing a culture of Pentecost."

Even Archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury, leader of the worldwide Anglican Communion, got in on the act. During his address to the synod on Wednesday, he cited the Focolare movement founded by Italian lay woman Chiara Lubich as an example of the "contemplative habit" he argued is essential for evangelization.

Of course, not everyone has exuded unqualified enthusiasm. A few speakers, such as Italian Archbishop Bruno Forte, have hinted that the movements could do a better job of supporting the overall pastoral plans and initiatives of the dioceses where they're located, rather than insisting on going their own way. Others have implied that in the enthusiasm for the movements, the church shouldn't forget about its traditional religious orders.

Still, to come back to Stijn's question, if you want to know who the bulk of the bishops seem to be counting on to quarterback the New Evangelization, the basic answer seems fairly clear.

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One of the more passionate speeches in the synod so far came yesterday from Bishop Jorge Eduardo Lozano of Gualeguaychú in Argentina, who made a strong case that the church's evangelizing efforts must include solidarity with the poor.

It's a special concern for Latin America, Lozano said, because the church there "lives and evangelizes in the most unequal region of the planet."

"Poverty is not merely an economical or sociological problem but an evangelical, religious and moral one," Lozano said, because "the faces of the poor and the excluded are the suffering faces of Christ."

This was the heart of Lozano's argument: "One cannot think about a New Evangelization without a proclamation of the integral freedom from all that oppresses man, sin and its consequences."

That commitment to the poor, Lozano said, must include a determination to "change the structures of sin."

Without a passion for justice, Lozano suggested, the New Evangelization won't take off.

"Any neglect or scorning of the little and the humble ones makes the message turn from being the Good News to becoming empty and melancholic words, lacking vitality and hope," he said.

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