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At Synod of Bishops, 'Ecumenism lives!'

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Synod of Bishops 2012

Once upon a time, there was almost no subject the Catholic church could raise more guaranteed to elicit fear and trembling among other Christians than ?evangelization?, which usually smacked of proselytism, competition, and a retreat from ecumenism ? in other words, going fishing in someone else?s pond.

From the point of view of many Orthodox, Protestants, and Anglicans, an ?evangelizing? Catholic church was seen as a menace.

This background makes it especially ironic that arguably the most distinctive feature about the Oct. 7-28 Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization, at least so far, is its strongly ecumenical flavor. On background, some bishops are saying that what they?ve seen and experienced has given them new ecumenical optimism -- especially, they say, in an era in which the main evangelical challenge doesn't come from other Christians, but from a profoundly secular culture which leaves all the churches in basically the same boat.

To a large extent, impressions of ecumenical momentum are the result of the simultaneous presence in Rome this week of Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople, recognized as the ?first among equals? in the Orthodox world, and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, head of the worldwide Anglican Communion.

Williams spoke to the synod on Wednesday, becoming the first outsider to address this edition of the event. On Thursday, Bartholomew and Williams both joined Benedict XVI at a Mass celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). During the liturgy Williams wore the bishop?s ring that Pope Paul VI gave his predecessor, Michael Ramsey, in 1966.

The next day, Bartholomew and Williams were the guests of honor at a lunch Benedict hosted for all the participants in the Synod of Bishops.

In brief remarks at the lunch, Benedict called their presence ?a sign that we are walking towards unity? and that ?in our hearts, we are making progress? ? expressing hope that this progress can also be expressed ?in an external way as well.?

In his speech to the synod, Williams said that the push for Christian unity is critical to evangelization, because ?the more we keep apart from each other as Christians of different confessions, the less convincing [the church?s message] will seem.?

For his part, Bartholomew said the Orthodox ?have appreciated the struggle [of the Catholic church] toward gradual liberation from the limitation of rigid scholasticism to the openness of ecumenical encounter.?

The ecumenical ethos of the synod has shone through in ways large and small.

There are fourteen ?fraternal delegates? attending the Synod of Bishops, representing other Christian churches, and in some ways they?ve become a bit like minor celebrities. Though synod rules technically forbid applause after speeches, the presentations by the fraternal delegates have been followed by sustained clapping. In another sign of deference, someone quietly has decided not to turn on the usual timer when they speak, so they can exceed the five-minute limit imposed on the bishops and other participants.

On Friday, the second outsider to speak at the synod took the stage ? Werner Arber, a microbiologist who shared the 1978 Nobel Prize for medicine and physiology for work that helped pave the way for recombinant DNA technology. Arber is also the president of the Pontifical Academy for Sciences, and as a Swiss Protestant, he?s the first non-Catholic to hold the position.

Arber?s topic was the relationship between science and faith, but his very presence also seemed, in context, a sort of ecumenical statement.

During the working sessions of the synod, several speakers have argued that the ?New Evangelization,? which in part is directed at reawakening a religious sense in a thoroughly secularized Western culture, must be an ecumenical enterprise.

Cardinal Peter Erdõ of Hungary, for instance, said that ?a practical general collaboration between the churches and the Christian communities in Europe is growing,? calling it a hopeful sign for the New Evangelization.

?Encounters with the representatives of all the Orthodox Churches have expressed a vast consensus on the family and life, as to the criteria of the relationship between State and Church and the economic crisis,? he said. ?The spirit of brotherhood and solidarity is growing even with the Protestant communities in Europe.?

From another part of the world, Auxiliary Bishop Milton Luis Tróccoli Cebedio of Uruguay proposed that whatever catechesis is developed for the New Evangelization be expressed ?in an ecumenical key.?

Bishop Petru Gherghel of Ia?i in Romania told the synod that ?the end of the atheist persecution has opened the doors to a promising ecumenical springtime,? and urged his fellow bishops to ?cultivate the ecumenism of prayer, in order that the unity of Christians might help the world to believe in Christ.?

Archbishop Józef Michalik of Przemy?l, president of the Polish bishops? conference, praised a recent joint appeal for reconciliation and hope addressed to the peoples of Russia and Poland, which was signed by both the Orthodox Patriarch of Moscow and the Catholic bishops of Poland.

?This common voice in the defense of the identity of the faith and the proclamation of the Gospel will have great possibilities in touching us more deeply, especially our hearts,? Michalik said.

To be sure, there have also been hints along the way that everything isn?t peaches and cream on the ecumenical front. Gherghel, for instance, also reported that the Orthodox church in Romania recently forbade any joint prayer with Catholics, so that technically Catholics and Orthodox can?t even say the Lord?s Prayer together.

Even in the Vatican, slight hints of ambivalence can be found. On background, sources say there had been hope that when Benedict XVI appeared at the window of his apartment overlooking St. Peter?s Square on Thursday night to address a crowd celebrating the anniversary of Vatican II, Bartholomew and Williams might be at his side, thereby providing one of the great ecumenical photo-ops of all time. In the end, it didn?t happen.

Nonetheless, the cumulative effect of the week?s ecumenical touches, both in symbols and in substance, has been striking.

Speaking on background, one Western bishop put it this way on Saturday afternoon: ?When I got here, I was fairly sure we were in a big chill. Now the only thing I can think is, ?Ecumenism lives!??

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