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Synod notebook: Video on Islam rocks the house

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Synod of Bishops 2012

When Pope Benedict XVI introduced the custom of taking two hours every afternoon for free discussion in the Synod of Bishops, this probably wasn't exactly what he had in mind -- somebody deciding to show a YouTube video about Islam that produced the most raucous back-and-forth most synod veterans have ever witnessed.

The video was not, to be clear, the fictionalized portrayal of Muhammad uploaded on YouTube that recently produced a firestorm of protest across the Islamic world, but an older documentary-style video from 2009.

On Saturday afternoon, Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana, president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, decided to use his contribution during the free discussion period to show his fellow bishops a video. Screens in the synod hall proceeded to play a seven-minute film titled "Muslim Demographics," which created an Internet sensation in 2009 by offering alarmist projections of a future Muslim conquest of Europe, and even Canada and the United States, fueled by immigration and high birth rates.

On background, officials stressed that showing the video was Turkson's personal idea, rather than being an official decision by the synod or the Vatican.

Among other claims in the film:

- Forty-five percent of all Frenchmen under 30 are now Muslim, and sometime in the near future, "France will be an Islamic republic."
- In the United Kingdom there are now 1,000 mosques, "many of them former churches."
- By 2015, half of all Dutchmen will be Muslims.

- Soon, 40 percent of the Russian army will be made up of Muslims.
- A report of the German government concedes that the country "will be a Muslim state" by 2050.
- There are 9 million Muslims in the United States, and Muslim leaders are quietly planning to "evangelize America ... through journalism, politics and education."
- In five to seven years, "Islam will be the dominant religion of the world."

The film concludes on this note: "The world is changing ... it's time to wake up," and it calls on Christians to "share the Gospel message with the world."

Since the video first appeared three years ago, experts have questioned many of its assertions -- noting, for example, that fertility rates are actually dropping rapidly in the Middle East, and that most projections over the next 50 years do not show Islam surpassing Christianity in total population.

The BBC also quoted an official from Germany's statistics bureau denying that any government report refers to the country becoming an Islamic state.

Basilian Fr. Thomas Rosica, CEO of the "Salt and Light" Catholic media network in Canada, who's serving as the Vatican briefer for English-language reporters during the synod, said that the film produced "the most animated" debate of the synod so far.

An American cardinal speaking to *NCR* on Monday morning echoed that point, saying many bishops "not only wondered where some of the facts [in the video] came from, but they also wanted to know, since when can somebody just get up and show a movie?" Another Western prelate, however, had a more positive take, telling *NCR*: "At least it got us talking about something more important than what order confirmation and first Communion ought to be in."

In a Vatican briefing Monday, Rosica said several bishops Saturday afternoon rose to question the film's statistics, with one European prelate promising to provide recent projections prepared by the European bishops' conference that suggest a less imminent threat of an Islamic takeover.

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Another prelate, according to Rosica, said the synod ought to be more concerned with the 200 dioceses that have been suppressed in recent years, reflecting a decline in the faith in those regions, rather than an Islamic menace.

Other bishops, however, stressed the difficulties of the relationship with Islam -- noting, for instance, that in many majority Muslim nations, conversions to Christianity have to occur in secret for fear of persecution and even martyrdom.

Several bishops from the Middle East and other regions with a strong Islamic presence offered their personal experience of engaging Muslims. Some objected to unfairly negative caricatures of the faith, while others stressed the danger of a progressive "Islamicization" of the societies in which they live.

As it happens, this unplanned discussion of Islam was interspersed with a debate over the order of the sacraments of initiation, meaning baptism, first Communion and confirmation. Some bishops argued that logically speaking, confirmation should come before first Communion, and therefore should not be delayed until the teen years. Other bishops argued that pastorally speaking, offering confirmation in adolescence sometimes provides teens a motive for remaining in catechetical and formation programs

longer than they otherwise might.

Turkson, the cardinal who showed the film, comes from Ghana, where roughly 70 percent of the population is Christian and 15 percent Muslim, concentrated mostly in the country's north. He's seen as representative of a number of African bishops who feel the church sometimes takes too soft a line on Islam, partly because it's influenced by the situation in the Middle East, where Christians sometimes tolerate a kind of second-class citizenship as the price of survival.

Over the years, Turkson has said bluntly that theological dialogue with Muslims is basically impossible, so it's better to concentrate on solving social problems. During a 2010 Vatican Synod for the Middle East, Turkson also was among the voices calling for a stronger challenge to Islamic governments to respect the rights of religious minorities.

Although Turkson didn't exactly explain what his motives were for showing the YouTube video Saturday night, if his hope was simply to provoke a discussion, it would seem he certainly did that.

The "Muslim Demographics" video can be found here.

A critical BBC examination of its statistical claims is here: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/8189231.stm>

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