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Synod notebook: Bishops to urge new religious freedom body

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Just days after a car bomb ripped through the Christian heart of Damascus, Syria, and as its own delegation to Syria was put on hold, the Synod of Bishops on new evangelization is poised to propose the creation of a new international body of cardinals and other senior prelates to raise religious freedom issues around the world.

NCR learned today that a proposition along those lines is among the 60-plus recommendations for the pope's consideration that will be put up for a vote in the synod later this week.

Described as a body that could both engage in public advocacy and act as a clearing-house for information, the agency would track both violent threats to religious freedom in global hot-spots such as Syria, and "comparatively mild" concerns in the West such as the recent standoff between the U.S. bishops and the Obama administration over insurance mandates.

It's not yet clear whether this new agency will be housed at the Vatican or in some other part of the world, or which prelates will be among its initial members -- though the idea is to include senior bishops from the most heavily affected zones, such as the Middle East.

Initial backing for the proposal came from the English-speaking world, including Cardinals George Pell of Sydney, Australia, and Timothy Dolan of New York. Pell told *NCR*, however, that the idea has been warmly received by bishops from other regions, including the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

"We hope that will be reflected in the vote," Pell said.

Pell said this new agency will have to make the case for religious freedom "sensitively," so that its good intentions "won't be counter-productive" or "provoke another Thirty Years' War." At the same time, Pell said, "it should be done", because "we've got to support the people who are suffering."

The following is a transcript of an *NCR* interview with Pell, conducted this morning outside the synod hall.

You and some others have floated the idea of creating a body of cardinals that could raise religious freedom issues around the world. Can you explain the concept?

I'm one of a number of people who support that possibility, and you'll see that it's emerged as one of the propositions. The idea would be for people to get together to be informed about what's going on, so they could inform their own governments and local public opinion, and also to be in contact with the people who might be having their liberty restricted, so that our well-meaning efforts won't be counter-productive. I suspect it'll be less a forum for making big, grand statements, though it might sometimes consider it appropriate to make statements, but more like a clearinghouse. There's the violence and the persecution in some particular countries, but there's also the more subtle long-term challenge to remove Christian points of view from the public square.

Will it take into view both the situation in the West, about the public role of religion and the freedom of faith-based institutions, and the more lethal threats in other parts of the world?

Yes, both the mild constraints, comparatively, and the more dramatic. I think that for those people who are in those desperate situations, it's some small consolation to know that others are thinking of them and might be trying to do something for them. The details are not worked out. I don't know what format it might take, who it might be attached to, all that's to be worked out.

Will it be based at the Vatican?

That's one possibility. It was mentioned that it might be attached to the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, and another possibility might be the Secretariat of State. Or, it might be more advantageous to have it separate from the Vatican.

Wherever it's housed, the idea would be to include prominent people to raise the profile of the issue?

Yes, including people from the troubled areas themselves.

The original movers behind this idea come from the English-speaking world, such as you and Cardinal Dolan. Are you finding support from other regions?

Yes, very, very strong support, from the Middle East and Africa, and there's support in Asia too. We hope that will be reflected in the vote!

I've also heard about the idea of a "Prayer for the Persecuted" to be used in dioceses around the world. Has that surfaced?

I would be supportive of it, but I haven't heard much about that.

You wouldn't expect it to be in the propositions?

I haven't noticed it.

Theoretically, it's something this new outfit could promote?

Certainly.

How quickly would you like to see this new body get off the ground?

I'm of a general cast of mind that if you're going to do something, you might as well get into it. But, you know, in the Eternal City sometimes things move more slowly. I don't know about timelines.

Religious freedom, especially with regard to Islam, has come up during the synod a fair bit. Do you expect any new idea about engaging Islam to surface?

I don't know about any new ideas, but I expect a renewed commitment to dialogue locally and nationally to support the moderates. In many places, I don't think we're at the stage where we can have a direct theological dialogue, but you can talk about things like religious liberty. You can also talk about the role of religion in society. Of course, they have very little sympathy for a radical separation of church and state, and there might in the long term be some convergence between us on that. While we have to retain the separation of church and state, which is a bulwark of our democracies, we also believe that for society to work well it's got to be permeated by notions of right and wrong, that people need to have a sense of purpose and direction, and we believe that Christianity is particularly well placed to provide those sorts of things. It's the interest, for instance, at some very senior levels in China, in finding a religion like Catholicism that won't attack their market and is open to modernity, but will strengthen their people's sense of right and wrong and of purpose.

You're saying that Islam and Christianity might be able to come together in support of some form of 'healthy secularism'?

I think that's a very, very long-term goal, but there are more people interested in it now. Of course, right now there are so many other things disturbing that possibility.

Any new ideas about how to deal with the things disturbing that possibility, such as Islamic radicalism?

No, I don't think I've got any useful thoughts. As always, it's not a question of being optimistic or pessimistic, but having a realistic understanding of what's going on and what's likely to happen. The immediate prospects for the Christians across the Middle East, for example, are bleak.

For those people who lost loved ones on Sunday in the bombing of a Christian area of Damascus, is the prospect of long-term convergence with Islam on healthy secularism of any immediate comfort?

No, it's not, but we don't abandon the effort. The Muslims I work with and meet with fairly regularly are very good people who want peace and are happy to live in a democracy. We have to continue to work with them and try to help those people in extreme situations. In the short term, the people of violence do have short-term advantages.

Have we done an adequate job of informing the Catholic grassroots about the realities facing Christians in various parts of the world?

I think we haven't, but it's got to be done sensitively, without worsening relationships radically. But it's got to be done because it's true, and we've got to support the people who are suffering. Still, it's got to be done with some sensitivity, because we don't want to provoke a new Thirty Years' War. It has to be done carefully, but it should be done.

Any update on the delegation to Syria?

It's not going to happen, in the immediate future at any rate. It certainly hasn't been officially abandoned, but they can't go ahead at the moment, and the composition of the body might have to change.

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