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Discussion a hallmark of meetings with pope

by Joshua J. McElwee

Rome — One difference between Pope Francis and his predecessors: He doesn't give speeches. He talks.

At events in late November and early December, the pattern was the same: Meeting with a group, the pope sat among them, gave no prepared remarks, but conversed freely and at length.

Describing the experience of meeting Francis, Honduran Cardinal Óscar Rodríguez Maradiaga said that "to speak with the pope face to face is a spiritual experience."

The pope has a constant "volcanic flow of ideas" and "loves to open doors and windows and be in dialogue," Rodríguez said Dec. 4 at a book launch event a few blocks east of St. Peter's Basilica.

Thirteen of the Netherlands' bishops were among those in December to witness the new papal experience, when they met Francis Dec. 2 for their "ad limina," a formal visit bishops around the world make every five years to report to the pope on their dioceses.

At a small church dedicated to the Dutch community in Rome Dec. 3, Auxiliary Bishop Jan Hendriks of Haarlem-Amsterdam spoke with *NCR* about the experience. He said that Francis' style represented "a different way" of having an "ad limina" visit compared with his predecessors.

The pontiff and the Dutch bishops, Hendriks said, sat in a circle together. While the pope had a prepared text, 14 men instead spoke for about 90 minutes freely, with Francis answering a range of questions -- including how best to handle clergy sex abuse and how to go forward in closing parishes.

At one point, Francis told the group that the Vatican must continue reforms undertaken by the Catholic church in the 1960s and '70s. Implementation of the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council is only half

complete, Hendriks recalled the pontiff saying.

"We have been implementing the council only halfway," Hendriks recalled from the pope's words. "Half of the work has still to be done."

Likewise, several participants in a Nov. 29 meeting between the pope and the heads of male religious orders around the world said they found Francis almost unbelievably open and willing to dialogue with them -- even cracking spur-of-the-moment jokes.

That meeting was between Francis and 120 leaders of the Union of Superiors General, the main international umbrella group for men's communities. Francis is a member of the Society of Jesus, and Fr. Adolfo Nicolás, the global head of the Jesuits, is the current president of the superiors' group.

Spanning three hours, the meeting between Francis and the superiors had no official prepared text. A brief Vatican release following the meeting outlined some of the basics of the conversation, saying Francis called religious life a "prophecy" and that consecrated women and men can "wake up the world."

But participants in the meeting, who asked to speak on condition of anonymity because it was a private gathering, said it was much more personal. The pope, one participant said, even fielded a question about why the Vatican does not allow brothers to serve in an order's top leadership posts.

Responding to the question, the participant recalled, the pope said he had visited one of the Vatican's offices recently to ask about that possibility and was told the dicastery was working on a document on the matter, "but it was not yet mature."

"Well, then it must grow and become mature," the pope reportedly told superiors he had said to the member of the Vatican office.

The issue of a brother leading a religious order was last in the U.S. public spotlight in 2009, when the Vatican vetoed the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers' election of Br. Wayne Fitzpatrick as regional superior for the United States.

In previous instances, the Vatican has said that in religious orders containing priests and lay brothers, priests must exercise formal authority because of the church's understanding of apostolic succession.

Another participant in the superiors' meeting said at one point Francis also joked about the roles of theologians and lawyers in the church, saying that "moral theologians lose modesty; canon lawyers lose time."

After the pope told the superiors that 2015 would be a year dedicated to consecrated life, one participant said several in the room thanked him for making the declaration.

Francis, the participant said, then pointed at Cardinal João Braz de Aviz and Archbishop José Rodríguez Carballo, the prefect and secretary at the Vatican's congregation for religious respectively, saying the idea was theirs. "When you put these two together, they're a public danger," the participant recalled the pope joking, mentioning that they come up with many helpful ideas.

Rodríguez spoke about the pope Dec. 4 at an event celebrating a new book-length version of the wide-ranging interview between Francis and an Italian Jesuit priest. Sixteen Jesuit publications around the

world printed the interview in September.

The book, *La mia porta è sempre aperta* ("My door is always open"), was released in November by a publishing house that also owns one of Italy's largest newspapers.

Rodríguez, archbishop of the Honduran capital of Tegucigalpa and coordinator of the Council of Cardinals, reflected on the pope's spirituality, both from personal experience and from Jesuit Fr. Antonio Spadaro's interview with Francis.

Rodríguez said for the pope, spirituality "is made of human faces," like those of Jesus, St. Francis of Assisi, the Virgin Mary, and St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order.

One of the "pillars" of Francis' spirituality is discernment, Rodríguez said.

Tying such discernment to the role of the Council of Cardinals, Rodríguez said, "Many think that the reforms and changes can happen in little time."

However, "the pope says we always need time, time to put the real foundations of a real change, and effective change," Rodríguez said.

The pope's spirituality was also in full sight at his meeting with the Dutch bishops, according to Hendriks.

Their meeting, the auxiliary bishop said, opened with Utrecht Cardinal Willem Eijk reading a report the Dutch bishops had prepared on the state of the church in their country. As part of that report, Eijk mentioned that they are preparing to close about two-thirds of the country's 1,500 parishes by the year 2020.

The pope, Hendriks said, did not reply with specifics regarding the Dutch circumstances, but instead likened their situation to Old Testament readings on how the people of Israel responded to the destruction of the temple, historically the holiest site of the Jewish people.

"They would be very sad, and I think you must be very sad also because of this situation," Francis reportedly said.

"I would like to encourage you not to be sad," Hendriks recounted the pope as saying. "Never be immersed in feelings of sadness, but be hopeful people and look forward to the future."

The Dutch parish-closing plan has garnered controversy in the country, with lay Catholics in several dioceses alleging the scope of the closings is unnecessarily wide and is being undertaken without enough consultation of laypeople.

Separate groups of Dutch Catholics launched petitions ahead of the "ad limina" visit, asking that Francis directly address the situation or even intervene in their bishops' plans.

One group released a 17-page report concluding that the Dutch bishops had "shown a startling indifference toward members of the lay faithful, who have been denied any voice in the church."

The group calls itself Bezield Verband -- roughly "Inspired Togetherness" in Dutch -- and its report included signatures of about 60 prominent current and retired Dutch theologians.

Hendriks said the pope "did not say whether what we did or wanted to do was right or wrong. But he stressed very much that we should share the sentiments of the people who have had their church closed down."

"He stressed most of all that we should be open and try to be in contact with people and try to use the pastoral opportunities there are to be in contact with the people and to transmit the faith," the bishop said.

In mentioning the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, Hendriks said the pope cited specifically *Lumen Gentium*, the council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.

"His first thought was of the church," Hendriks said. "That means he thinks the reform of the church is only halfway done, that is clear."

At one point during the conversation with Francis, Hendriks said he mentioned to the pope how popular he is in the Netherlands, saying he is "many times on the news, which is not something we have had in the last 50 years."

"Let us put aside what we think about this," Hendriks said Francis responded. "But use it. Use it to spread the Gospel."

Overall, Hendriks said, the meeting felt like a retreat. While tough subjects were addressed, the pope conveyed a "spiritual atmosphere," he said.

"Not so much of structures or of governing or politics or whatever but more spiritual radiance," he said.

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