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Synod on the Bible: Shaping the imaginations of 1.2 billion Catholics

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 10, 2008 All Things Catholic

From a distance, the Synod of Bishops on the Bible, currently meeting in the Vatican, may seem an oddly esoteric distraction from the unfolding global drama. After all, the world's economy is in meltdown, and America is facing a crucial election in just 25 days. Against that backdrop, bringing together 400 bishops, clergy, lay leaders, Bible experts and delegates from other Christian churches to discuss how fast lectors read scripture passages during Mass, or the precise sense in which the Bible is "inerrant," can seem like fiddling while everyplace other than Rome burns.

For better or worse, however, competing interpretations of the Bible can move armies, shape what's taught in science courses, determine who can marry and who can't, and influence whether convicts are put to death. Sometimes, how people read the Bible affects the outcome of elections. It may even influence how a broad swath of humanity interprets the present economic crisis. Given all that, the conversations over these three weeks about how to shape the biblical imaginations of 1.2 billion Catholics around the world are well worth following -- even if it takes wading through a bit of minutiae in order to glean the big picture.

One could phrase the towering challenge of the synod this way: How to stress that the Bible is fundamental -- that it's the living Word of God, an essential touchstone for Catholic faith and life -- without turning Catholics into fundamentalists?

The synod, devoted to "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church," meets Oct. 5-26. I'm posting daily reports, which can be found here: johnallen.ncrcafe.org [1]. In summary form, the following points are the essentials of what's happened so far.

Pastoral Emphasis

Nobody disputes what might be called the synod's "major premise," which is that Catholics ought to know more about the Bible and have a deeper spiritual relationship with it. Cardinal George Pell of Sydney, Australia, one of three co-presidents and a veteran of four previous synods, told *NCR* in a Friday interview this is the "least divided" synod he's ever seen. Thus, much of what the bishops have been talking about has a practical, pastoral focus. For those wondering how the synod might reach down into the lives of ordinary Mass-goers -- into parishes, Bible study groups, Catholic schools and seminaries -- this is where the rubber meets the road.

1. Better preaching

Bishop Gerald Kicanas of Tucson, Arizona, has said that at times Catholic preaching is so woeful that it induces little more than slumber; Bishop Desiderius Rwoma of Tanzania blamed bad preaching for escalating defections from the Catholic church to Evangelical and Pentecostal movements. Kicanas proposed that 2009 be declared a "Year of Preaching," in which bishops, priests and deacons sit down with laity in order to study how preaching can become more dynamic, more relevant to people's real-world struggles. Some have also floated the idea of a "General Directory" for homilists, bringing together resources for preaching. To date, no one has touched the hot-button question of preaching by laity.

2. *Lectio Divina*

Calls for a revival of *Lectio Divina*, meaning prayerful meditation on scripture, have been almost ubiquitous. At the same time, participants from religious orders have warned that in its traditional form, *Lectio Divina* is a monastic practice, and to make it work on a wider scale will require imagination. Several participants have suggested that before the synod is over, a model be presented of how to do *Lectio Divina* in a contemporary pastoral setting -- somewhat like Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini used to do in Milan, attracting overflow crowds to his urban cathedral, including a striking percentage of youth and young adults.

3. Better liturgies

If celebration of the Mass is dull, speakers have suggested, then it's hard to foster passion for the Scripture which is proclaimed at Mass. Perhaps the most stirring appeal so far has come from Fr. Glen Lewandowski, a Minnesotan who serves as Master General of the Crosier order, who lamented a tendency to turn the joyful message of the Eucharistic prayers into "prosaic mutter." Others have stressed that the relationship goes both ways -- if a priest is not solidly rooted in Scripture, then no amount of attention to the ars celebrandi will make the Mass come alive. This link between liturgy and scripture forms a natural bridge between the 2005 Synod on the Eucharist and this year's edition.

4. Making the Bible accessible

In some parts of the world, just getting Bibles into people's hands, in their own language, represents a daunting logistical challenge. Archbishop Douglas Young, for example, a Verbite from Mount Hagen in Papua New Guinea, told me that there are 837 distinct languages in Papua New Guinea (with 10 of them extinct), and the Bible is presently available in roughly 240 -- "which leaves just 500 to go," as Young put it. Cost is also an issue; Archbishop John Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria, pointed out that in some parts of Africa, even inexpensive Bibles go for the equivalent of a whole month's wage. Pell said he intends to promote the creation of an "Institute for Bible Translation," perhaps based in Rome, to address this challenge.

5. Bible study

Some bishops are concerned that Bible study offered to ordinary people too often resembles miniature graduate seminars, rather than offering spiritual nourishment and insight into the concrete problems of daily life. Bishop Benôit Alowonou from Togo said that in his experience people tend to get excited about Bible study, but then lose interest because it doesn't seem relevant. "It must be useful to Christians in resolving their elementary

problems, or at least it has to offer a source of inspiration," he said. Alowonou said Bible study should address the "spiritual, economic, political and social" challenges of the day.

6. Lived Witness

Several speakers have stressed that if the church wants to promote scripture, it must offer credible examples to the world of lives rooted in biblical values -- compassion, concern for the poor, humility, and joy. Cardinal Crescenzio Sepe of Naples cited the famous line from Paul VI: "Modern people listen more willingly to witnesses than teachers, and if they do listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses." In other words, promotion of the Bible can't simply be about better methods of exegesis, or more inspired preaching; in the first place, it has to be about the way Christians live.

Doctrinal Questions

The "preferential option for the practical" at this synod doesn't mean there aren't a few interesting theological conversations bubbling. There are at least three areas where the Synod of Bishops on the Bible could leave a doctrinal imprint.

1. Spiritual Exegesis

There's a clear insistence that exegesis of the Bible should draw upon, but ultimately transcend, historical-critical methods and literary analysis. Cardinal Polycarp Pengo of Tanzania, speaking on behalf of the African bishops, asserted that a tendency among exegetes to treat the Bible as just an "ordinary piece of literature" has "frightened some Catholics out of the church," driving them into the arms of mushrooming Pentecostal movements. In a not-so-subtle jab, Pengo said that occasionally it seems "the more an exegete contradicts the truth of scripture, the more he is regarded as objective."

In that light, one big idea is "spiritual exegesis," a way of reading the Bible that plumbs its theological and existential depths. It also implies that the faith life of the church -- its liturgy, saints, sacraments, teaching, and prayer -- is the context in which the Bible must be interpreted. In effect, "spiritual exegesis" amounts to an applied version of what the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar once called "kneeling theology." (It's no surprise that Cardinal Marc Ouellet of Quebec City, the realtor of the synod, is a disciple of von Balthasar -- as was the relator for the last Synod on the Eucharist, Cardinal Angelo Scola of Venice.)

Along these lines, several speakers have expressed the desire for a "healing" of a sometimes fractured relationship among theologians, exegetes and the bishops -- though, it must be said, so far this has been more a pious wish than the source of concrete new ideas.

2. Not a religion 'of the book'

There's an equally clear, and related, push to underline the classic Catholic understanding of the relationship

between scripture and tradition. The main point seems to be that while the Bible is a privileged vehicle of revelation, tradition in the church is a living thing. As Italian Bishop Salvatore Fisichella put it, quoting St. Paul, God's Word cannot be "imprisoned" on the printed page.

In that spirit, here's one prediction about the long-term impact of this synod: It may well mark the official demise of Catholic use of the phrase "religions of the Book" to characterize Christianity, Judaism and Islam. The unsuitability of that vocabulary was first raised by Ouellet, and was then hammered home in a memorable speech on Tuesday by Fisichella. Christianity, both men stressed, is a religion not of the Book but of the Word -- in the personal sense of Christ as the living Word of God.

3. Inerrancy

Although it's too early to predict how this might shake out, there's an interesting discussion about the inerrancy of the Bible. There's long been debate in Catholicism between "restricted inerrancy," which holds that only some portions of the Bible are free from error (usually understood as that which concerns salvation), and "unrestricted inerrancy," meaning that everything in the Bible is true, although in the sense of truth which the Bible itself intends.

Prior to the synod, as well as during discussion this week from the floor, there has been some complaint from more traditional voices about the treatment of the topic in the *Instrumentum Laboris*, or working paper, for the synod, especially its English translation, which some saw as an implicit endorsement of "restricted inerrancy." It will be interesting to watch how the language is handled in the synod's concluding documents. No one is proposing a fundamentalist version of biblical literalism (e.g., that the world was actually created in six days). Rather, the question revolves around what it means to call a given passage of scripture "inspired" and "true."

Cardinal Francis George of Chicago has suggested that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican's top doctrinal agency, might consider preparing a document on inerrancy. Pell told *NCR* that such a document might be useful in explaining the Bible to "educated young Western people," who may struggle with its scientific and historical claims.

Regional Differences

Synods of Bishops are also interesting for the regional contrasts they reveal. To some extent, these differences in accent and emphasis reflect varying perceptions of who the cultural "other" is facing the church.

1. Africa/Latin America

Africans and Latin Americans tend to stress the challenge of the "sects," meaning fast-growing Evangelical and Pentecostal movements, whose inspired biblical preaching and morality sometimes attracts large numbers of Catholic converts. Pengo, for example, bluntly described an "appalling phenomenon covering a great part of the African continent: namely, the exodus of the Catholic faithful who abandon the church to join Pentecostal sects." During free discussion Tuesday night, one Latin American bishop said that in his diocese, everything

closes at 5:00 pm when the Evangelical and Pentecostal churches begin their missions, with fiery preaching that sometimes lasts through the night. Several Africans also discussed the relationship with traditional tribal religions, including practices of sorcery and divination.

2. Asia

Asian voices tend to gravitate around what the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences has called the "triple dialogue" -- dialogue with the great religious traditions of Asia, with its cultures, and with the poor. That note was struck in eloquent form on Monday by Bishop Luis Tagle of the Imus diocese in the Philippines, whose speech has been one of the few to draw applause. The Bible, Tagle said, shows a God who not only speaks but also listens -- "especially to the just, widows, orphans, persecuted, and the poor who have no voice." In that spirit, Tagle said, "the church must listen in the way God listens, and lend its voice to the voiceless."

3. Europe/North America

Europeans and North Americans often point to the challenges created by secularism, and the consequent need to rebuild a Christian imagination in a culture in which the link with a living Christian tradition has often been ruptured. Cardinal Francis George of Chicago, for example, lamented the "disappearance" of biblical imagery from popular culture, such as art and theater. He said that at one time familiarity with images such as the Good Samaritan, or Sodom and Gomorrah, could be taken for granted, but that's no longer the case.

Of course, things are inevitably more complex than brief summaries make them sound. Two examples make the point.

On Monday, Archbishop John Onaiyekan argued that indigenous religious beliefs created a welcoming environment for the biblical message. Yet when I asked Cardinal Peter Turkson of Ghana on Tuesday what he made of Onaiyekan's presentation, Turkson wasn't exactly sold. In Ghana, he said, the predominant tribal deity is a god of the earth, which makes the transition to the transcendent deity of Christianity not quite so seamless. In other words, Turkson said, the extent to which African traditional religion is truly a "welcoming environment" depends on where you are, and who you're talking about.

Another illustration: I bumped into Cardinal Daniel Di Nardo of Houston outside the synod hall on Wednesday, and we compared notes about what we've heard so far. Di Nardo expressed admiration for George's speech on the disappearance of a biblical vocabulary, but added: "Of course, that's not true in Houston." His point was that the overwhelming cultural influence of the mega-churches, as well as more traditional forms of Evangelical and Pentecostal spirituality, means that the biblical imagination in his part of the country is alive and well.

All of which goes to show, I suppose, that religion, like politics, is often local.

Overall Tone

While it's too early to say much about the final direction the synod might take, it's striking that in the first important ballot, which wrapped up on Thursday, the bishops and other clergy who have the right to vote struck a broadly moderate tone.

The synod was asked to elect members of a "Commission for the Message," which will produce a brief message to the world on behalf of the synod at the end of the meeting. The president and vice-president of that commission are named by the pope, but the other members are elected. Those elected were:

- Cardinal Godfried Danneels of Brussels, Belgium;
- Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Maradiaga of Tegucigalpa, Honduras;
- Cardinal Walter Kasper, a German who heads the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity;
- Archbishop Anthony Sablan Apuron of Agaña, Guam;
- Archbishop John Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria;
- Archbishop Thomas Menamparampil of Guwahati, India;
- Bishop Zbiginiew Kiernikowski of Siedlce, Poland;
- Metropolitan Archbishop Basil Schott of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, of the Byzantine rite;
- Bishop Louis Pelatre, Apostolic Vicar of Istanbul, Turkey;
- Fr. Carlos Azpiroz Costa, General Master of the Dominican Order.

Danneels, Rodriguez and Kasper, the three cardinals elected, are generally seen as among the more "center-left" members of the College of Cardinals. Interestingly, there are no high-profile conservatives. Rodriguez, Onaiyekan and Menamparampil are also known as strong social justice advocates. To some extent, these results may reflect the fact that many of the bishops and clergy at the synod are biblical scholars -- who, as a general rule, tend to avoid theological extremes and appreciate the nuances of complex questions.

It's important not to over-interpret these results, since elections in the Vatican rarely pivot on highly charged ideological debates. Moreover, some bishops reportedly asked not to considered for the Commission for the Message because they had already been elected as chairs or secretaries of the small language groups in which they're participating. Nonetheless, the outcome suggests that the synod's message is likely to carry a doctrinally moderate tone, perhaps with a social emphasis.

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In the abstract, if Pope Pius XII were to come up at a Synod of Bishops on the Bible, by rights it should have been for his 1943 encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, which opened the door to the use of the historical-critical method by Catholic scholars. In fact, Benedict XVI issued a reminder of *Divino Afflante Spiritu* on Thursday, saying that at a time when historical-critical study was "seen with some suspicion" in Rome, Pius XII paved the way for its application to both the Old and New Testaments.

A confluence of factors, however, has meant that the on-going debate over Pius XII's record during the Second World War, and especially his alleged silence about the Holocaust, has also clearly made its presence felt.

First, Thursday was the 50th anniversary of Pius' death, and the occasion was marked not only by a special liturgy led by Pope Benedict XVI, but by a series of press conferences, newspaper articles, book releases, and other events in Rome intended to commemorate (or, in some cases, rehabilitate) the late pope. Ironically, the anniversary fell precisely on the Jewish feast of Yom Kippur, the "Day of Atonement."

Second, because this is a synod on the Bible, the decision was made to invite a rabbi to speak on the Jewish approach to scripture. Rabbi Shear-Yashuv Cohen, the Chief Rabbi of Haifa in Israel, became the first non-Christian to address a Synod of Bishops on Monday, and although the bulk of his remarks was indeed devoted to the Bible, he also addressed two "contemporary issues." One was a plea for help in the battle against contemporary anti-Semitism, focusing especially on Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and the other was Pius XII. In neither case did Cohen name the target of his criticism, but in both cases the reference seemed abundantly clear.

"We cannot forget the sad and painful fact of how many, including great religious leaders, didn't raise a voice in the effort to save our brethren, but chose to keep silent and help secretly," Cohen said of Pius XII. "We cannot forgive and forget, and we hope you understand our pain, our sorrow."

Over the next few days, I asked several synod participants what the reaction had been to Cohen's words. Some reported a degree of offense, suggesting that it was "rude" for a guest to publicly criticize his hosts. Others, however, actually saw it as a sign of progress, in that Cohen was at least willing to concede that Pius XII had helped Jews behind the scenes -- something that other critics have been unwilling to do.

On Thursday, Benedict XVI in effect fired back, issuing his strongest defense to date of his controversial predecessor. Pius XII, Benedict said, "often acted in a secret and silent way, because, in the light of the concrete situations in that complex historical moment, he understood that only in this way could he avoid the worst and save the greatest possible number of Jews."

What impact any of this may have on the cause to declare Pius XII a saint remains to be seen. (During Thursday's liturgy, Benedict XVI offered a prayer that the cause may "move forward happily.")

Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesperson, released a brief statement to journalists on this point: "With the words he pronounced in his homily with regard to the cause for the beatification of the Servant of God Pope Pius XII, which is currently underway, the pope meant to explicitly express his spiritual union with a widespread desire among the People of God," Lombardi said.

"However, the pope did not express himself on the successive steps in the process or their timing, such as the signature of the degree recognizing heroic virtue, or, in its turn, the successive process for the recognition of a miracle," Lombardi said.

Last year, the Congregation for Saints voted to approve a declaration of "heroic virtue," the first step in the process, and that document is awaiting the pope's signature.

For his part, Pell said he is not in favor of delaying the canonization of Pius XII, because doing so, Pell told *NCR* , "might suggest somehow that Pius was guilty." Pell said he has enormous respect for Jewish sensibilities, but in this case finds them "misdirected."

In any event, this week's developments offer a reminder that, fairly or unfairly, the debate over Pius XII remains an open wound.

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Finally, a few bits of color by way of "sights and sounds" from the Synod of Bishops.

Just to illustrate that Rome can sometimes be a mystery even to princes of the church, Di Nardo had a frustrating stretch early on. For one thing, Continental Airlines lost his luggage en route to Rome. For another, Di Nardo was scheduled to take part in a round-the-clock marathon of Bible reading on Italian television, but his contact information was in his luggage, so he had no idea of when he was supposed to be on the air. He tried calling RAI, the Italian national network, but those calls got lost in the network's bureaucracy. As fate would have it, I was able to put him in touch with Giuseppe Di Carli, who heads the "Vatican Structure" for RAI and who was the main organizer of the Bible telethon. In the end, Di Nardo made it on time, and his bags eventually arrived.

Speaking of the vicissitudes of technology, during recent Synods of Bishops the voting on matters such as the election of members of commissions, or approval of the final propositions, has been done using electronic keypads. As has sometimes been the case in the past, however, the keypads didn't work well in the early stages. On Monday, the votes from one side of the room weren't counted. Archbishop Nikola Eterovich, the secretary of the synod, had to inform the participants that *Non si registra la sinistra ?* "the left isn't registering."

I leave it to readers' imaginations to make metaphorical hay of that comment.

If you want a more intra-ecclesiastical irony, consider that the Patriarchs of the Eastern churches are sitting on the left side of the synod hall, meaning it was their votes that didn't show up ? some of them might ruefully joke that the voices of the Eastern churches have long had difficulty registering in Rome!

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