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Vatican tries to flesh out 'New Evangelization'

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NCR Today

ROME -- In a papacy sometimes accused of lacking administrative direction, the Vatican under Benedict XVI is at least in a full, upright and locked position on one point: The urgency of a 'new evangelization.'

In every way he possibly can, Benedict has signaled that he regards the 'new evangelization,' broadly understood as reawakening a missionary spirit in the church, as a towering priority.

Despite his well-known antipathy for bureaucracy, for instance, Benedict XVI recently created an entirely new Vatican department to carry forward the project, the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization. He appointed a veteran Italian heavy-hitter, Archbishop Rino Fisichella, to head the office, and what amounts to an 'A-list' of Catholic prelates from around the world as members, including Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna, Cardinal Angelo Scola of Venice, Cardinal George Pell of Sydney, and Archbishop Timothy Dolan of New York.

Benedict has also dedicated the next Synod, a gathering of bishops from all over the world, to the theme of the 'New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith.' The *lineamenta*, or draft working document, for the synod, to be held Oct. 7-28, 2012, was presented this morning in a Vatican news conference.

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For all the emphasis on 'new evangelization,' however, the term itself remains difficult to pin down. Commonly asked questions include:

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- Is the 'new evangelization' primarily directed at the Western world, where the faith has long been in decline? Or is it a broader, more global initiative?
- Is it basically about drawing people into practice of the faith ? in other words, filling up the churches on Sundays? Or is the aim also a renewed capacity to engage the grand cultural themes of the day, such as secularism, the rise of an interlinked global economy, new means of communication, and the biotech revolution?
- Is new evangelization largely an external effort, and in that sense almost an 'exit strategy' from the various crises and internal conflicts that have recently marred Catholic life? Or does it also involve an internal examination of conscience, asking whether there may be elements of the church's life and mode of thinking which represent obstacles to evangelization?

The *lineamenta* for the upcoming synod provides partial answers to these questions, while leaving plenty of space for debate during the synod and in the wider Catholic world.

First, the *lineamenta* tries to introduce some conceptual clarity. It distinguishes three forms of evangelization:

- Evangelization as a 'regular activity of the church,' and hence directed basically at practicing Catholics;
- The first proclamation *ad gentes*, directed at those who have never been Christians;
- New evangelization, which is 'principally directed at those who have become distant from the church [and] at baptized persons who are not sufficiently evangelized.'

In reality, the document says, given today's social mobility and migration patterns, quite often these three groups live in the same place, and local churches therefore have to have strategies for each. As a result, it says, geographic ways of thinking about missionary activity are outdated.

'Today, all five continents are fields of missionary activity,' it says.

Despite that framework, however, there's little doubt that Europe and the United States are a special preoccupation in the document ? in part because that's where a disproportionate share of those 'distant Christians' are found.

In the West, it says, 'many of the baptized lead totally un-Christian lives and more and more persons maintain some links to the faith but have little or a poor knowledge of it. Oftentimes, the faith is presented in caricature or publicly treated by certain cultures with indifference, if not open hostility.'

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Given those realities, the document declares: 'Now is the time for a new evangelization in the West.'

In response to the question of whether the 'new evangelization' is about transforming the world or drawing more people through church doors, the answer seems to be: Both.

The document makes clear that aggressive recruitment strategies are not what's meant. It notes that some fear the term because they associate it with "proselytism," and then quotes from John Paul II: "The new evangelization is in no way to be confused with proselytism."

The document then refers to a 2007 "doctrinal note" from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the difference between evangelization and proselytism. That text, in a footnote, defines proselytism this way: "The promotion of a religion by using means, and for motives, contrary to the spirit of the Gospel; that is, which do not safeguard the freedom and dignity of the human person."

In this morning's news conference, Croatian Archbishop Nikola Eterovi?, secretary of the Synod of Bishops, said that because the "new evangelization" is directed at people who are already baptized, the question of conversion doesn't really arise "in theory, they're already in the church."

The trick, he said, is to "help them discover the richness they already possess" and which they don't appreciate, he said, for reasons which "often are not their fault."

In general, Eterovi? said, the measure of success of the new evangelization "is not numbers, but quality."

Beyond boosting the usual measures of church vitality "attendance at Mass, regular prayer, and so on" the *lineamenta* seems to suggest that a core aim of a "new evangelization" is instead to engage broad social and cultural challenges through a distinctively Christian lens.

Among those challenges, the document ticks off secularism and relativism, a "hedonistic and consumer-oriented mentality," fundamentalism and "the sects," migration and globalization, the economy, social communications, scientific and technical research, and civic and political life as areas in need of vibrant Christian witness.

In that sense, the "new evangelization" could be understood as an effort to realize Benedict's vision of Christianity as a "creative minority," not collapsed in on itself.

"The new evangelization is the opposite of self-sufficiency, a withdrawal into oneself, a status quo mentality and an idea that pastoral programs are simply to proceed as they did in the past," the *lineamenta* says.

"Today, a "business as usual" attitude can no longer be the case," it says.

Exactly how to distinguish evangelization from proselytism could be one of the turning points in synod discussion, in part because it's at the heart of a growing number of tensions in the church.

Recently, the Vatican blocked the current head of Caritas Internationalis, a Rome-based confederation of Catholic charities around the world, from standing for a second term, and behind the scenes some have suggested that Caritas is insufficiently committed to evangelization through its work.

In a recent *NCR* interview, Lesley-Anne Knight, the Caritas head, said that the organization is waiting for clarity on how the Vatican distinguishes "evangelization" and "proselytism" -- in part because Caritas members are able to provide services and receive government support in many parts of the world precisely on the basis that they do not "proselytize."

Finally, the *lineamenta* clearly seems to suggest that success in the new evangelization implies an internal examination of conscience and a willingness to explore "new ways of being church" and "new models."

Though the document does not explicitly refer to the sexual abuse scandals that have rocked the Catholic church, it does argue that a missionary spirit also implies pushing the church to confront its internal problems.

“Another fruit of transmitting the faith is the courage to speak out against infidelity and scandal which arise in Christian communities,” it says.

Other such fruits, the document argues, include “the courage to recognize and admit faults” and a “commitment to the work of purification and the will to make atonement for the consequences of our errors.”

Failures in evangelization, the document says, may reflect the church’s own incapacity to become “a real community, a true fraternity and a living body, and not a mechanical thing or enterprise.”

Exactly what “new models” of church might look like will, presumably, also be a point of discussion during next year’s synod.

John Allen is in Rome for the next week. Check back to NCRonline.org frequently for more reports and exclusive coverage.

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