

Anglican head on New Evangelization: 'Let us help'

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 10, 2012 NCR Today
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Archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury, leader of the worldwide Anglican Communion, today told the Synod of Bishops in Rome that evangelization of a post-Christian world is at odds with an "ambitious ego", and thus ought to be a shared project of the various branches of the divided Christian family.

By way of implication, the implied message was the the "New Evangelization" should not be a way for one form of Christianity to gain ground at the expense of another. In effect, Williams' message to the Vatican synod boiled down to: "Let us help."

"Wherever initiatives are being taken to reach out in new ways to a lapsed Christian or post-Christian public, there should be serious work done on how such outreach can be grounded in some ecumenically shared contemplative practice," Williams said.

Williams, whose almost ten-year run as Archbishop of Canterbury is set to end in December, was invited to address the synod by Pope Benedict XVI.

In his 3,000-word address, Williams insisted that the heart of Christian evangelization consists in showing a "distinctive human destiny" to the world, focused above all on one characteristic element of the Christian life: Contemplation.

"With our minds made still and ready to receive, with our self-generated fantasies about God and ourselves reduced to silence, we are at last at the point where we may begin to grow," Williams said.

The Anglican primate said that what Christians need to show the world is "a humanity so delighted and engaged by the glory of what we look towards that we are prepared to embark on a journey without end to find our way more deeply into it, into the heart of the Trinitarian life."

Contemplation, Williams said, is a key to a distinctively Christian way of life.

"Contemplation is very far from being just one kind of thing that Christians do," he said. "It is the key to prayer, liturgy, art and ethics, the key to the essence of a renewed humanity that is capable of seeing the world and other subjects in the world with freedom - freedom from self-oriented, acquisitive habits and the distorted understanding that comes from them."

Williams claimed that contemplation in this sense "is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourage us to inhabit."

Contemplation is not opposed to works of charity and justice, Williams said, but is more akin to the motive force which propels Christians to engage in those activities.

As examples of this contemplative spirit in the church today, Williams cited the ecumenical communities of Taizé and Bose, as well as Catholic movements such as Sant' Egidio, the Focolare, and Communion and Liberation.

All those groups, Williams said, "make space for a profounder human vision because in their various ways all of them offer a discipline of personal and common life that is about letting the reality of Jesus come alive in us."

An emphasis on the contemplative dimension of Christian life, Williams said, also has obvious ecumenical relevance.

"The contemplative habit strips away an unthinking superiority towards other baptized believers and the assumption that I have nothing to learn from them," he said. "We shall always be asking what it is that the brother or sister has to share with us — even the brother or sister who is in one way or another separated from us or from what we suppose to be the fullness of communion."

In that regard, Williams suggested that initiatives to reach out "to a lapsed Christian or post-Christian public" — which is a good working definition of what Catholicism means by "New Evangelization" — ought to be organized ecumenically.

Together, Williams said, the various Christian confessions can offer a model of "living more humanly" — living with less frantic acquisitiveness, living with space for stillness, living in the expectation of learning, and most of all, living with an awareness that there is a solid and durable joy to be discovered in the disciplines of self-forgetfulness that is quite different from the gratification of this or that impulse of the moment."

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