NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Synod hears call for reform on laity, women

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 12, 2012 NCR Today
Synod of Bishops 2012

Benedict XVI raised some eyebrows last night when, addressing a crowd in St. Peter's Square recalling Pope John XXIII's famous "discourse on the moon" on the eve of the Second Vatican Council fifty years ago, he said the church's joy today is "more sober" than it was then, because in the meantime "we have learned and experienced that original sin exists."

"We have seen that even in the Lord's field there is discord," Benedict said, "that even in the net of Peter we find bad fish, that human weakness is present even in the church."

Though the pope didn't say so out loud, it's difficult not to imagine he had the child sexual abuse scandals at least partly in mind when he crafted those lines.

Today, awareness of the impact of the church's "bad fish" found a clear echo in the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization, in the form of a speech delivered by Bishop Brian Dunn of Antigonish in Canada. The diocese has been among the epicenters of the scandals, in part because Dunn's predecessor, Bishop Raymond Lahey, was charged in 2009 with having child pornography on his laptop as he tried to reenter the country. Lahey eventually pled guilty in 2011, and was laicized by the Vatican in May.

Against that backdrop, Dunn obviously felt he could not avoid the abuse scandals in his speech to the synod.

"How can we evangelize those who have been deeply hurt by men of the church involved in sexual abuse?" Dunn asked, becoming the first synod participant so far to deal with the fallout of the crisis at length.

Dunn proposed a four-point reply to his own question.

First, he suggested a "ministry of listening" to those affected by abuse crisis, concretized in an "reconciliation office" which he suggested every diocese ought to have, where people can "vent their hurt and seek an appropriate reconciliation."

Second, he called for implementing all necessary measures "to create safe environments for children and the most vulnerable" in the church.

Third, Dunn urged a greater "spirit of communion" in the church, directed especially at "all those who believe their voice is never heard."

Fourth, Dunn endorsed "appropriate changes in some structures of the church" in the direction of more shared authority and responsibility, especially with regard to laity. Those structural reforms, he said, need to flow from a change in "mentality," based on "close contact with the laity."

Specifically, Dunn endorsed:

- The creation of pastoral groups composed of priests and laity
- Official recognition of lay ecclesial ministry
- A "deliberate and systematic involvement of women, giving them positions of leadership at every level of ecclesial life"
- Permitting women to be officially recognized as readers and acolytes
- Instituting a "ministry of catechesis"

Such reforms, Dunn argued, would mean "our faith will be transmitted more effectively" and "our witness will seem more authentic in our contemporary world."

Of course, this is no more than one bishop's take, albeit a bishop who's been compelled by circumstances to reflect on the abuse crisis and what it takes to recover more than most. It remains to be seen what other participants will make of it, especially the concrete agenda Dunn sketched for lay empowerment.

Still, on the day after Benedict XVI virtually invited a self-critical reflection on the "human weakness" of the church, nobody seemed to take him up on it more than Dunn.

This afternoon, the synod is scheduled to hear from Swiss microbiologist Werner Arber, winner of the 1978 Nobel Prize in medicine, on the relationship between science and faith. The Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization continues through Oct. 28.

Source URL (retrieved on *04/19/2015 - 09:31*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/synod-hears-call-reform-laity-women