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

Dolan: 'Catholics who criticize engaging Obama probably didn't like the Incarnation'

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 15, 2012 NCR Today
Synod of Bishops 2012

Cardinal Timothy Dolan of New York is one of six American prelates taking part in the Oct. 7-28 Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization, and he sat down today with English-speaking reporters at the Vatican press office to discuss the event so far.

Unlike some participants who may have had nothing better to do, Dolan squeezed in the session with the press amid hosting lunches and receptions for other participants, and preparing to head home for the Oct. 18 Al Smith Dinner in New York featuring both President Barack Obama and Republican challenger Mitt Romney. (Dolan plans to return to Rome immediately afterwards for the conclusion of the synod.)

The outing was vintage Dolan ? full of humor, but no backing down on substance. For instance, in response to critics who blasted his decision to welcome Obama to the upcoming dinner, he bluntly suggested the same crowd probably would have questioned the ?wisdom and prudence? of God?s decision to send his Son into a sinful world.

The following is a transcript of Dolan?s exchange with the media early this afternoon.

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Dolan: Keep in mind I?m somewhat of a rookie when it comes to synods, because this is the first time I?ve ever attended one as a delegate. When I was rector of the North American College I would often host [bishops taking part in synods]. During my seven years, there were at least two if not three synods. Even though I didn?t attend synods, I heard a lot about them, pro and con, especially from the bishops we were hosting.

Question: Are there things you?re hearing that you didn?t expect?

Dolan: I would say there hasn?t been much information that I have not heard before or that would surprise me, but there are emphases I?ve detected at this synod I would not have anticipated.

For instance, I?m not surprised at the number of synod fathers who have commented on the power of secularism in our culture today, because nobody could doubt that. What I have been tantalized by, and pleasantly surprised by, is the number who would say that it?s time we stopped wringing our hands over this. Perhaps we?re at our best when we listen to *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes* [documents of the Second Vatican Council] and adopt a posture of engagement in dialogue with secularism. That bishops find secularism to be a challenge to the church isn?t surprising, but what I find more surprising is the emphasis that instead of whining about it, or running from it, perhaps we should think about ways to better engage it.

A second thing I find somewhat novel would be the bluntness and candor with which my brother bishops from countries with an Islam majority are speaking about the challenges they have. Factually I knew that, but to sense

their frankness has been enlightening.

Another surprising thing to me has been how many of our challenges are the same. Let?s say if I?m listening to a bishop from Congo, if I didn?t know where he?s from and I?m just listening to the English translation, I?d say this guy could be from Chicago! He?s speaking about difficulties with marriage and family, progressive secularization, people falling away from the faith.

A fourth thing would be that in countries where the church has towering internal problems, infrastructure problems, where they?re facing hunger or persecution or not enough resources to respond to the imperative of charity ? in countries where bishops have those internal problems, externally they?re thriving. They?re growing, they?re expanding. In other words, churches with severe temporal problems seem to be spiritually flourishing, while countries that don?t have the same material problems, like us, have a lot of spiritual ad extra problems. That?s not new either, but in listening to the speeches I was struck by it. We bishops in the United States will spend a lot of time thinking, you know, about merging or consolidating parishes, or where we have enough temporal resources we?re thinking about building new parishes, we have spiritual problems filling the churches. In countries where they could fill a hundred more [parishes] than they have, they?ve got temporal, earthly problems, but spiritually they?re in a springtime.

Question: On this question of dialoguing or engaging with this secular culture, how do you do that without giving scandal to the extra-sensitive portion of your flock?

Dolan: You mean, how do you sit next to Barack Obama and Governor Romney?

Question: There are some people who would say you?re just wrong for doing that. How do you find that balance?

Dolan: There might be some people who would say that God the Father was misguided in sending his only begotten son to sinful humanity. Some might question the wisdom and prudence of the Incarnation, I don?t know. It seems to me that God the Father set a pretty good example of probably the best way to invite people to eternal salvation is to be in the midst of them, to be incarnate where they?re at. I don?t mean to be dismissive, because you do have to try to be sensitive to some of the feelings.

Question: People weren?t exactly sensitive to your feelings in the way they reacted.

Dolan: I don?t know if you noticed or not, but I?m pretty thick-skinned!

Question: You said you were surprised by the bluntness and candor with which some of the bishops talked about Islam. What have you heard?

Dolan: Of course, one of the reasons I was somewhat surprised at the frankness of their comments is because I thought it took some fortitude to say these things. Maybe for one of the first times in my life, I appreciated the wisdom of the confidence [i.e., secrecy] of the synod, because some of my brother bishops do go out on a limb to make very blunt comments about what they?re facing.

Without getting specific about names and places, they?ll speak about the New Evangelization, and obviously at its heart is calling people to conversion, or for people who have already heard of Jesus, calling them to a reconversion. These people will say that sure sounds good, but for us that could mean arrest, it could mean persecution, it could mean martyrdom, because we live in a country where that might not be legally prescribed, but culturally it is because of the Islamic majority. The other thing I should mention is that my brother bishops who exercise their ministry in a society with an Islamic majority do seem to speak with great reverence about Islam, and they rebel against any caricature.

For some of them, they find that members of the Islamic community approach them almost like Nicodemus [in the New Testament], in the middle of the night. They say what they find attractive about the Christian message is its emphasis on joy and freedom, interior freedom, that the essence of faith is the free act of love and a free will. For a bishop to stand up and say that took some courage, because it?s somewhat of a criticism of a more Islamic culture.

Question: Several speeches have talked about the importance of humility, saying that we need to look less imposing or imperial. What do you make of that?

Dolan: Yesterday I was working on the address that I?m supposed to give in November to the bishops? conference as president, and I think I?m going to talk about that. I was reminded of a beautiful story about St. John Vianney, that one time a group of his parishoners came to him and showed him a letter going around to the bishop saying you should be removed as pastor, because you?re a lousy homilist, you?re a sinner, you?re socially awkward, and on and on. John Vianney looked at it and signed his name, saying count me in, I agree, remove me! That?s humility.

Look, being humble isn?t just a pastoral strategy. It?s an evangelical demand. Sometimes we bishops haven?t been humble. If we?re going to be renewed and converted to Jesus Christ, we?ve got to be humble, because that?s his favorite virtue. Also, it?s honey, it attracts people when they see humble bishops. I was with Cardinal [Marc] Ouellet the other day [prefect of the Congregation for Bishops], who was Apostolic Delegate to the Eucharistic Congress in Ireland last July. He was speaking about his experience at Lough Derg, St. Patrick?s purgatory, the legendary isle of Irish penance. He spent a day there in penance, and he specifically said ?I am here as an act of penance for the sins of sexual abuse by Ireland?s priests and bishops.? He said that had an amazing credibility. He did it genuinely, and he implied that he did it because the pope suggested it. A humble posture is going to attract people.

I?m a church historian, and it often happens in an adult faith formation group that some people will bring up scandals in the church in the past. Remember that TV show in America on the Borgias? I was in group where somebody stood up and said I don?t know how we can remain faithful Catholics, because there was a TV show about Alexander VI and did you know that he had a mistress and on and on. Finally, I said, that?s not absolutely right, and he said, see, you?re going to defend the sins of the past. I said, no, it?s not right because Alexander VI happened to have a number of mistresses, not just one! We?re well aware of the mistakes, the sins, the failings of the past, so much so that it leads us constantly to penance and conversion of heart and interior renewal. I hope that?s what the New Evangelization is about.

You?re dead right. You hear the bishops say over and over again that a posture that can be looked upon as arrogance, or triumphalism in the worst sense of the word, is not only anti-gospel but it?s strategically ineffective.

Question: You talked about a return to the sacrament of penance, but we also keep hearing about how there?s whole generation of kids today who have no church language at all, such as ?sacraments,? ?salvation,? ?incarnation.? One of your brother bishops said we can?t keep on mouthing these same messages. What?s your

reaction?

Dolan: There?s some basic messages of the church we haven?t mouthed enough, and I think that?s one of them. It seemed a truism after the Second Vatican Council that the council did away with the sacrament of penance, which of course is not true. If you read the document, it called for a renewal of the sacrament, a deepening of it. I?m afraid that on so many levels we just gave up. We said, ?Well, that ain?t going over,? so we stopped trying. Jesus never did that, he never gave up. If you see the messages of the gospel, they?re constant, and he kind of had a bad habit of repeating himself. He didn?t give up on saying things over and over again.

What?s interesting is that one bait we have on the hook for attracting young people is precisely this sacrament. They will often say that the church seems impersonal to them, a little faceless, nameless, impersonal. Boy, you can?t find a more personal sacrament than penance. This is one-on-one. Remember the days of vast general absolution? People said they did it because the sacrament of penance become so impersonal. Is there anything more impersonal than a kind of vast drive-in carwash with general absolution? That seems pretty impersonal to me. There?s nothing more personal than one-on-one, actually articulating sins and hearing an unworthy ambassador of Jesus say you?re forgiven. That?s very personal, and young people like that.

Any parish priest will tell you that when you?re working with the RCIA, one of the things that attracts new Catholics is the sacrament of penance. Another is the role of the bishop of Rome, and another is devotion to the Blessed Mother. Those three things were kind of deemphasized after the council, but those are the things that work. If you?re talking about ?best practices,? there you go.

Question: What are the differences in the reality that New Evangelization responds to in America and Europe?

Dolan: The Europeans seem to be much more adept at theological vocabulary. We American bishops are already teasing ourselves. We new ones, going through it for the first time, already have a list of how we might improve things. You know, what we might do to make the synod more efficient. Well, baloney! The Europeans, and I would say the Africans and Asians, seem to have much more ability to articulate with ease an evangelical or theological vocabulary. We North Americans tend to be a bit more adept at what you might call the functional or pragmatic side of our faith. Both are important, both are needed, but one is the engine that drives the other.

Question: Can you talk more about differences in the reality of the society in Europe and America?

Dolan: You would see among the Europeans almost an acknowledgment that secularism is the dominant force in society, and that religion is a distinct minority. In North America, and among my brother bishops in the United States, I don?t think we?re yet ready to surrender. We do know that secularism has a lot of clout and that it offers us many challenges, but in general we also know in the United States that America at its core is still very spiritual and very religious. There are a lot of people of faith. A recent study said that Americans would have no trouble voting for a Mormon, Evangelical, Catholic, Buddhist, Jew or Hindu, but 91 percent said they wouldn?t vote for an atheist. That wouldn?t be true in Europe, would it? You find that among the bishops of the United States, there?s more hope that society itself still might have that transcendental directive that we?re not ready to give up on. We?re realistic in saying that it?s being threatened, but we?re not ready to give up on it.

Question: There?s a lot of talk at this synod about the role of ecclesial realities [movements]. Do you see a greater role for them?

Dolan: You bet, there?s an emphasis on the blessing of the movements. But what I find among the bishops, and it?s still too early to say how the propositions will go, but it?s more of a recognition that we?re in this together. Instead of fractioning the church into different segments ? bishops, clergy, religious women, religious men, movements, parishes, institutions ? perhaps the best thing is to emphasize the universal call to the New

Evangelization, that it?s a charge from which no one can escape if one takes discipleship and Catholic identity seriously. It?s a charge implicit in baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, and the sacrament of penance. I would see more of an emphasis that everybody has to be part of this.

Question: Among those who leave the church, you often hear that homilies are drab and don?t move me. Is there anything you can suggest to clergy?

Dolan: You?re sure right. A lot of people ask me what hot topics I hear from my people when I?m talking to them, and it?s rare that I would hear the hop topics that you see on editorial pages of newspapers. But boy, do I ever hear over and over again that we?ve got to do something about the homilies. Funny enough, the prescriptions are different. Everybody agrees they?re too long and they?re boring, but if you ask them for an antidote to make them better, then you get distinctions. Some say, ?They need to be more scriptural,? and others, ?All we hear about is the Bible.? Some say ?they need to be more doctrinal,? others ?we don?t like it when he just seems to be up there lecturing.? Some say, ?We need to hear about love,? and others, ?I?m sick of homilies that are like Valentine?s Day cards.? You will hear a variety of things from God?s people about what they would do to make the sermons better. Again, there are some general things ? they need to be short, they need to be to the point, they need to be delivered as if one believes it and isn?t just reading it. You?ll hear some very beautiful things from God?s people, who have an innate radar about good and bad preaching, that you can tell when it comes from the heart. You can tell if a man has prayed about it. You can tell if a guy?s giving a canned one. You?ll hear great wisdom from people, but as to the content of homilies, you hear a lot of diversity.

Listen, folks, there?s nothing worse than cold cannelloni. I?m hosting all the English-language bishops for lunch at 1:30 pm, so I?ve got to get up there.

Source URL (retrieved on *11/27/2015 - 18:42*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/dolan-catholics-who-criticize-engaging-obama-probably-didnt-incarnation