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Evangelize through pilgrimages, justice efforts, bishops tell synod

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Pilgrimages, processions and other forms of popular piety, as well as the Catholic church's traditional works of charity and commitment to justice and peace all can promote the new evangelization, members of the Synod of Bishops said.

At the synod on the new evangelization Saturday, several bishops cited pilgrimages and public celebrations of religious feast days as important moments to respond to people's longing for real spirituality, even if those people think they are simply going on a trip or celebrating local culture.

Latin Patriarch Fouad Twal of Jerusalem told the synod that a pilgrimage to the Holy Land "is an excellent method of reviving our faith and that of the pilgrim, knowing better the cultural, historic and geographical context" in which the mysteries of the Christian faith were born.

To a large extent the small Christian community in the Holy Land relies materially on the jobs created by religious tourism, but they also are "the living stones" of the faith in the land where Jesus was born, ministered, died and rose again, he said.

A prayerful pilgrimage to the sites associated with Jesus and an encounter with the local Christian community, he said, "can strengthen believers of little faith and enable the rebirth of faith in those in whom it has died."

In the midst of the tensions in the Middle East and recent vandalism of Christian churches in Israel, "the presence of pilgrims is a true testimony to faith and communion with our church," he said. "We need you, your prayers and your solidarity."

Mexican Archbishop Jose Martin Rabago of Leon said the work of purifying popular piety of festive excess and superstition continues, but the church cannot ignore the thousands of people who turn out for the celebrations.

When "left at the mercy of pure sentimentalism and folklore," he said, the events do little to call people to faith and to a faith-based response to "the social inequalities, violence, justice and other manifestations that contradict human dignity and fraternal cohabitation."

On the other hand, he said, carefully prepared events -- such as the Queretaro Diocese's pilgrimage to the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe, which involved 40,000 people this year -- change lives and lead to a greater faith commitment.

Archbishop Jose Ruiz Arenas, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization, told the synod that in countries where vast numbers of Catholics no longer go to church, processions and other forms of popular piety are "an enduring witness of the undeniable thirst for God present in all mankind."

Bishops and priests, he said, have a responsibility to ensure that public events celebrating a Christian holy day or a saint are surrounded by and imbued with Catholic teaching and by explicit invitations for people to go to Mass.

Other bishops emphasized the importance of Catholic social teaching and its work for justice and peace as being both a response to the Gospel and proclamation of it.

Bishop Francois Lapierre of Saint-Hyacinthe, Quebec, said there is an "intimate bond" between evangelization and the church's activity on behalf of the poor and oppressed.

When the church's outreach to the suffering is ignored, he said, new evangelization appears "to be more of an answer to internal problems of the church" and less of a response to God's call to minister to people's needs, hopes and desires.

"The great missionaries throughout the centuries have known how to join the audacious proclamation of the Gospel of Christ" with concrete assistance to the poor and the defense of their human rights, he said.

Cardinal Peter Turkson, president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, said evangelization must take into account individual as well as societal social ills because the Gospel is addressed to the whole human person and contains the values needed to transform societies.

Especially today, he said, "the social question has radically become an anthropological question," going to the heart of what it means to be human. That, in turn, touches on religious questions, specifically, what it means to be made in God's image.

In addition, Turkson said, the church's social outreach is an evangelizing outreach to other people of good will concerned about the "questions of human rights, ecology, the fight against poverty, the themes that touch upon the concrete life of the individual and the common life of nations."

Turkson said a good first step for the church would be to add the Vatican's Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church to the Vatican website's "resource library" of basic texts, which already include the Bible, the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

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