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Bishops, religious must dialogue, synod speakers say

by Cindy Wooden by Catholic News Service

Synod of Bishops 2012

Vatican City — Members of religious orders have been and continue to be at the forefront of the Catholic Church's evangelizing efforts; they are not just "resources" to be used for new programs, said the head of the international organization of women's religious orders.

Sr. Mary Lou Wirtz, an American who is the general superior of the Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary and president of the International Union of Superiors General, addressed the Synod of Bishops Wednesday.

The working document for the synod on new evangelization referred to religious as a "resource," but religious are more than that, she said. "For centuries, we religious have been a prophetic presence and witness in the church."

The synod discussions about evangelization, she said, seem to have overlooked the key role religious play in sharing the Gospel and educating Catholics.

Wirtz also spoke to the synod about the obligation to reach out to Catholics "who are hurting. Some have already left our institutional church because they cannot find a place to belong; others remain within the church but are struggling and searching for something that nourishes their soul."

Many Catholics, nominal or not, want to share their burdens in a nonjudgmental atmosphere, she said. "When Blessed Pope John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council, he said that the church was to become more 'pastoral and merciful.'"

Unfortunately today, she said, many people are "alienated by judgmental attitudes or issues of power and control. This only pushes them further away."

Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet, prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, also spoke about consecrated men and women in his Oct. 17 talk to the synod.

To be an effective witness of new life in Christ and of the catholicity of the Catholic Church, bishops and members of religious order must work together, he said.

Unity -- with God and with each other -- "becomes the most evocative part of the testimony that believers can offer to their peers," Ouellet said.

The cardinal did not mention specific areas of tension between the church's bishops and religious but acknowledged that, "in relations between the hierarchy and consecrated life, a certain unease has arisen: at times, due to the ignorance" of the gifts of consecrated life and their role in the church, and "at other times due to the inclination of some religious to contest the magisterium" and official teachers of the faith.

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Ouellet urged a new reading, and perhaps updating, of the Vatican's 1978 document on relations between religious and bishops and new efforts to engage in the dialogue the document recommended to promote a correct understanding of the roles of each in the church.

He quoted the document: "It would be a serious mistake to make the two realities -- religious life and ecclesial structures -- independent one of the other or to oppose one to the other as if they could subsist as two distant entities, one charismatic, the other institutional. Both elements -- namely the spiritual gifts and the ecclesial structures -- form one, even though complex, reality."

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