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Synod notebook: Catechists and 'pastoral conversion'

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Synod of Bishops 2012

Rome — Synods of Bishops are often long on exhortations and vague appeals, but short on concrete ideas. One such notion that seems to have some traction in this synod on new evangelization, however, is a call to institute an office of "catechist" as a stable, permanent and officially recognized ministry of the church.

That suggestion surfaced five times during the opening round of speeches, and was endorsed in the reports of four of the 12 working groups that helped prepare draft propositions to be presented to the pope -- one Italian group, one French and one English.

Many dioceses around the world, including the United States, already recognize the ministry of catechist in some form, often providing training and even certification. According to the "General Instruction of the Roman Missal," bishops' conferences may petition Rome to allow them to create the office of catechist if they feel it's warranted.

The idea at the synod, however, is that "catechist" would now become a recognized ministry of the whole universal church, open to laity -- and, in a particular way, to women.

For some in the synod, support for the office of catechist is thus a kind of double play -- not only a way of promoting evangelization, but also of boosting the profile of laity and women in the church.

Although ferment around the office of catechist has come from many quarters, it has been especially strong from the developing world. During the opening phase of the synod, calls for a stable office of catechist recognized by Rome came from Brazil, Ethiopia, South Africa and Uganda.

To a large extent, that reflects the practical realities of Catholic life in the southern hemisphere. While Catholics in the north often complain of a priest shortage, as a statistical matter, there is one priest for every 1,300 Catholics in Europe and the United States, while in sub-Saharan Africa the ratio is 1-5,000, in Southeast Asia it's 1-5,300, and in Latin America it's 1-7,100.

As a result, delivery of direct pastoral care in many parts of the global south is largely a lay enterprise. Massive Catholic growth across Africa in the late 20th century, for instance, resulted in the creation of many new dioceses but not a corresponding number of new parishes, because there aren't enough priests to staff them. Instead, the church in Africa often created "pastoral centers," led on a daily basis by lay catechists, whether formally recognized as such or not.

During the small group discussions, support for recognizing "catechist" as a stable ministry of the universal church came from:

- An Italian group led by Fr. Renato Salvatore, superior of the Camillian fathers
- An English group led by Archbishop Philip Tartaglia of Glasgow, Scotland
- An English group led by Archbishop Bernard Longley of Birmingham, England
- A French group led by Bishop Dominique Rey of Fréjus-Toulon, France

"In many places, notably in French-speaking Africa, with exemplary generosity, [catechists] practice roles of animation of the community, for teaching, for the preparation to the sacraments," Rey's group said. "Could we not give this body of lay missionaries a stable ministerial statute, well-articulated with the ordained ministry, as well as a specific solid formation?"

The synod is set to debate a draft set of propositions today.

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On the subject of women, some in the synod have also called for another way to raise their profile: allowing women to be officially installed as "lectors," meaning readers at the Mass, as opposed to "temporary deputation" as lectors, which is technically how it works under current church law.

That idea was floated during the synod itself by Bishop Brian Joseph Dunn of Antigonish, Canada, and came up again in the report prepared by Salvatore's Italian-speaking working group.

Even if that idea makes it into the propositions, however, it wouldn't necessarily signal a watershed. In 2008, the Synod of Bishops on the Word of God voted to recommend allowing women to be officially installed as lectors, but to date the idea is still under consideration.

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One of the most popular buzzwords floating around this synod of bishops is the call for "pastoral conversion," roughly meaning a change of heart and mind as to how the church does business. The term arose 18 times during the floor speeches, and surfaced again in the working group reports.

References to "pastoral conversion" were especially common among the Latin Americans, since it was one of the top notes from a 2007 assembly of CELAM, the Latin American Episcopal Conference, in

Aparecida, Brazil. Yet the term was also invoked by bishops and participants from Poland, Togo, France and Italy, as well as a couple of Vatican officials.

Usually, what people mean by it is a shift from maintenance to mission -- that is, from keeping the machinery of the institutional church grinding along, to a renewed focus on missionary outreach and conversion "one person at a time."

In some cases, however, "pastoral conversion" can also be a marker for another idea: that the church's missionary difficulties don't stem merely from external problems, such as secularism or media hostility, but also from its own internal defects and failures.

In that sense, a call for "pastoral conversion" can betoken a self-critical spirit and a willingness to concede that perhaps the church needs some internal housecleaning.

That self-critical spirit was hinted at in a report by an English-language group headed by Bishop Kieran O'Reilly of Killaloe, Ireland, which suggested that perhaps the growth of secularization reflects "our own mediocre life as Christians."

In a similar vein, a Spanish group headed by Archbishop Ricardo Blázquez Pérez of Valladolid, Spain, concluded its report by calling on everyone in the church to "conscientiously recognizing their faults and sins."

It came to the fore, however, in the report of another Spanish group headed by Auxiliary Bishop Santiago Jaime Silva Retamales of Colombia, who serves as the General Secretary of CELAM.

Silva's group said the time has come for "a profound examination of conscience of the church with regard to herself."

"We do not speak of the New Evangelization only because the others have changed," the report said. "The moment has arrived in which to ask ourselves: What are the sins of the church which have led us to a New Evangelization?"

"A *status quaestionis* of the church in herself, and her place in the world, is inevitable," the group said.

It will be interesting to gauge the extent to which this willingness to train a critical spotlight on the church's shortcomings -- and the extent to which they represent an obstacle to evangelization -- survives in the propositions.

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While the small groups were making their reports over the weekend, they heard a strong appeal for a sort of "pastoral conversion" from a consecrated Polish lay woman, Dr. Ewa Kusz, a former president of an international association of secular institutes in the church.

"In my work, in the environment which surrounds me, I meet wounded individuals who hunger for love, who not infrequently feel resentment or indifference with regard to God," Kusz told the bishops. "I meet people who yearn for fullness, love, beauty and harmony, seeking it in many different places -- unfortunately, only rarely in the church."

"At times, their experience of the church, their encounter with 'persons of the church,' have, for one reason or another, hurt them," Kusz said.

She suggested that members of secular institutes, who live their vocation in the secular world, can offer presence and comfort to people who feel they've been wounded by the church.

"[We can] bring hope to the live of individuals who initially, wrapped up in their own pain, found themselves facing an abyss of solitude and desperation, often without even the hope of discerning a concrete solution, or facing enormous difficulty in forgiving those who had wronged them," she said.

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