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Transparency on money and the New Evangelization

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Rome

Although the Synod of Bishops on New Evangelization is almost over, Rome heard an appeal today for one factor in the church?s missionary success that hasn?t yet had much echo among the bishops: transparency and responsibility when it comes to handling the church's money.

?It?s important to be transparent and responsible for the sake of the New Evangelization,? said Fr. Daniel Mahan, director of the O?Meara Ferguson Center for Catholic Stewardship at the Marian University of Indianapolis.

?Holiness is the fruit of transparency,? he said.

Mahan made his comments at an Oct. 24 conference in Rome titled ?Rendering an Account to the Faithful,? a reference to canon 1287 of the Code of Canon Law, which obliges church administrators to account for their use of resources.

The conference was held at Rome?s University of the Holy Cross, which is sponsored by Opus Dei, and was organized by the ?Center for Co-responsibility, Administration and Economic Support of the Church? at the University of Navarra in Spain.

Mahan argued that being transparent and accountable in how the church uses its money is important for two basic reasons.

- First, he said, it causes those assets to grow. ?That?s not a miracle, but a simple fact of life,? he said.
- Second, he argued, ?when the members of the church, especially the laity, have a clear and accurate understanding of the temporal realities of the church they love, they?re much more likely to support the church and its mission.?

In that sense, Mahan said, good financial administration is not only valuable for the bottom line, but it also helps laity grow in the faith.

Mahan told the Rome meeting that to this day, the best-selling pastoral letter of the American bishops is their 1992 document on stewardship, which has not only been translated into Spanish but also brought out in an Australian edition. Its signal idea, he said, was inviting laity to support the mission of the church not only with their money, but also their time and talent.

Catholics who are invited to help the church by drawing on their secular expertise, Mahan said, are also more likely to take part in Bible study groups, service to the poor, and the liturgical life of the church, especially the Mass.

Mahan offered the example of two parishes where he served in Indianapolis, where he had the chance to talk to

lay people invited to help out in some capacity about the importance of perpetual adoration. Not only did those laity commit themselves to a 24/7 schedule for adoration, he said, but in both cases they actually built the chapels to make it possible.

?Because of our commitment to transparency, these parishioners were more willing to get involved,? he said. ?That?s the transforming power of transparent and responsible stewardship.?

Moreover, he said, transparency and lay empowerment is healthy for church finances. Research shows, he said, that involved parishioners give three times more than those who aren?t, which means the more people a parish or diocese involves, the more it?s likely to collect.

Especially in a time when the church is trying to revive its missionary energies, Mahan said, a commitment to transparency ? such as annual reports by parishes and dioceses, subjected to independent outside audits ? is critical.

He told a story about a pastor of a church where the roof was leaking, who had to tell his congregation that it would cost $250,000 to make the repairs.

?The good news,? he quoted the pastor as saying, ?is that we have the money.?

?The bad news,? the pastor said, ?is that it?s still in your pockets.?

It?s the same situation, Mahan said, with the New Evangelization. It?s going to require financial support, he said, and it has to be elicited from the laity.

?When presented with an opportunity to build up the church, and when given an accurate accounting of its needs, the laity will respond,? he said.

When people are ?shown credible evidence of real needs, and they?re convinced the money will be used for noble purposes and won?t be squandered,? he said, Catholic laity will usually pony up in a way that ?far exceeds expectations.?

As a case in point, Mahan noted that despite the galling sexual abuse scandals that have rocked the American church over the last decade, nationally giving to the church has actually increased rather than decreased. The reason, he said, is that most American dioceses and parishes have moved in the direction of transparency.

?If we ever face a similar crisis again,? he said, ?the solution will be to trust the laity. If we give them the facts in a spirit of humility and invite them to greater responsibility, if we embody transparent and responsible stewardship, they will respond,? he said.

Further, Mahan argued, in a time when religious liberty is menaced and the church is ?mocked and ridiculed? in some quarters, a commitment to transparency will ?give the laity greater confidence in standing up for the faith.?

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