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Editorial: Evangelization requires bishops? self-examination

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Synod of Bishops 2012
Editorial

On Oct. 6, 262 bishops gathered in Rome for the 13th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to discuss "The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith." One of the gathering's primary concerns, particularly for those leaders of churches in the prosperous North, is how to reach out to disaffected Catholics.

That same day, half a world away in Bethesda, Md., researchers for the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life were telling a gathering of religion writers that two new markers had been reached in the religion landscape in the United States: For the first time since the organization had begun surveying about such matters, the country was no longer majority Protestant, and one in five American adults now claimed no religious affiliation.

Though Catholicism showed no significant drop in overall membership -- thanks in large part to the influx of immigrants -- we also know that Catholics in the United States have been exiting the church in recent years by the millions, the younger ones before they reach age 18.

For years now "the new evangelization" has been lurking about in search of its own identity, more aspirant than actual in its determination to be relevant and "new." The awkwardness that surrounds discussion of the elusive term was captured in a wire service story depicting the setting and content of the synod's opening address, delivered by Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington.

The church must reach out to former members, showing them both the relevance of the faith "without losing its rootedness in the great living faith tradition of the church," Wuerl said. He was speaking in Latin to a gathering of celibate male clerics. He lamented that too many Catholics don't know basic prayers and teachings and don't understand why it's important to go to Mass and confession. His solution: reach out to them and teach them the contents of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

Perhaps that's a plan. But it sounds, instead, as if the analysis and proposed solution are as lifeless and lacking in blood and imagination as the church from which so many are exiting. The new evangelization will remain a stilted and cerebral exercise unless those most invested in its success are willing to take risks.

Too much of what we hear of "the new evangelization" is a one-way proposition. It's saying, "We have the answers, we know what these poor, lost souls need." By rushing in with answers, we may be missing the questions.

The Pew study made clear that the unaffiliated are not angry at organized religion; they just don't want anything more to do with it. Most "nones" believe in God and many call themselves spiritual. At the synod, Filipino Archbishop Luis Antonio Tagle of Manila noted: "The seemingly indifferent and aimless societies of our time are earnestly looking for God." Is it possible that "nones" can teach us something about God? Or at least can we learn something from listening to their questions? The church's challenge is not to supply answers but to

accompany people on their spiritual quests.

There were hints around the synod that some realize what needs to be done. Tagle said that for the church to be a place where people meet God, it needs to learn three things from the example of Jesus: humility, respect for others, and "the power of silence." Tagle said, "Confronted with the sorrows, doubts and uncertainties of people, she cannot pretend to give easy solutions. In Jesus, silence becomes the way of attentive listening, compassion and prayer. It is the way to truth."

Bishop Brian J. Dunn of Antigonish, Nova Scotia, whose diocese was shattered by the sexual abuse crisis, spoke of the resulting "great disorientation that leads to forms of distrust of teachings and values that are essential for the followers of Christ." Regaining trust requires more than steps forced by an outraged public. Dunn acknowledged the call for a change in church structures and advocated, in addition, the need for "a profound change of mentality, attitude and heart in our ways of working with laypeople."

Archbishop Socrates Villegas of Lingayen-Dagupan, the Philippines, made an equally strong plea for change. "Evangelization has been hurt and continues to be impeded by the arrogance of its messengers," Villegas said, adding, "When pride seeps into the heart of the church, the Gospel proclamation is harmed."

Some readers will question this editorial, asking why we dwell so much on the bishops. Last issue, after all, we editorialized on being the people of God and finding power in our baptism. We're not walking back from that viewpoint, but we also have to acknowledge that the bishops continue to hold the reins. We have to address these criticisms to them because they have yet to make the laity an integral part of their planning.

The new evangelization, at its heart, asks laypeople to go deep inside and examine their most essential instincts, their yearnings for a connection with the God of life. It also requires some deep interior digging on the part of the bishops themselves -- the kind of sacramental examination they'd like to see flower again among the faithful. Providing a model of that kind of work might be a good place to restart the discussion of the new evangelization.

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