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Synod notebook: Vatican officials on transparency, discipline

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An old joke about theologians in India, who tend to be influenced by Hindu notions of multiple paths to God, goes like this. You can argue with them about some point until you're blue in the face, and then they'll say: "Yes, yes, everything you say is true ... but so is its opposite!"

In some ways, a Synod of Bishops is like that. By the time all the speech-making, small group discussions, messages and propositions are finished, pretty much every imaginable point has been made at least once, as has its opposite.

Before drawing the curtain on the Oct. 7-28 Synod of Bishops on new evangelization, there are two largely overlooked contributions from two powerful Vatican officials that merit being recorded -- not because they influenced the synod, but because they offer clues to the thinking in two important agencies of the church's central bureaucracy.

The first came Oct. 18 from Cardinal Giuseppe Versaldi, who heads the Prefecture of Economic Affairs of the Holy See, making him effectively the Vatican's top financial official. In effect, Versaldi argued that the administration of resources in the church has to respect the church's distinctive identity, and thus that simply photocopying "best practices" in the secular world won't cut it.

"These techniques are dictated by the world, and often are in contrast with the religious finality," Versaldi said.

For instance, he said, the outside world presumes bad faith and criminal intent when mistakes are made, whereas the church should presume goodwill and innocence until the contrary has been proven. Thus when there's a problem, he said, the first option should be "fraternal correction," not calling the cops.

"In cases of the possible bad administration of ecclesial goods, as therapy, the evangelical medicine of fraternal correction must be applied," Versaldi said. "Before denouncing to the authorities, personal confrontation must be applied to give the possibility of reformation and repairing."

He also put a new spin on transparency, arguing that it doesn't always mean making things public.

"Transparency does not automatically mean the publicizing of evil which leads to scandal," he said. "Only if conversion is not there, the proper authorities must be called, who have the task of verifying the accusations without them being already considered proof of misgovernment."

At a time when Benedict XVI seems to be trying to lead the Vatican, and the broader church, in the direction of a financial glasnost, it's interesting to note how his top financial officer interprets what "transparency" and "accountability" look like in a distinctly Catholic key.

On Tuesday, American Cardinal Raymond Burke, who heads the Apostolic Signatura -- in effect, the Vatican's Supreme Court -- submitted a speech in written form.

In it, Burke called for a greater emphasis on discipline and respect for law in the church as a way of resisting what he called a culture of "antinomianism," or disregard for tradition and authority in the church, after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65).

As a result of that disregard, Burke said, the reforms intended by Vatican II have been "hindered, if not betrayed."

Burke also argued that one of the most serious wounds in contemporary society is the separation of law from its moral foundations. He cited a series of things he believes reflect that collapse of a moral sense: "Abortion on demand, artificial conception of human life with the aim of carrying out experimentation on the life of a human embryo, the so-called euthanasia of those who have the right to our preferential assistance, legal recognition of same-sex unions as marriage, and the negation of the fundamental right to conscience and religious liberty."

Aside from religious liberty, the other issues flagged by Burke have not loomed especially large during the synod, except as part of a general critique of secularism. Nonetheless, his presentation offers insight into the thinking of the man who is, in effect, the Vatican's most important canonist, not to mention the lone American who currently heads a major Vatican office.

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