NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Pope talks openly about reform, sex abuse, Dutch bishop says

Joshua J. McElwee | Dec. 6, 2013
Rome

Pope Francis told a group of Dutch bishops this week that the Vatican must continue reforms undertaken by the Catholic church in the 1960s and '70s, according to one of the participants in the meeting.

Bishop Jan Hendriks, who attended the meeting Monday, later recounted that the pope said implementation of the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council is only half complete.

"We have been implementing the council only halfway," Hendriks recalled from the pope's words. "Half of the work has still to be done."

Hendriks, the auxiliary bishop of the Haarlem-Amsterdam diocese, was one of 13 Dutch bishops to take part in the meeting with the pope. They are in Rome for their *ad limina*, a formal visit bishops around the world are required to make to report to the pope on their individual dioceses.

The Dutch visit is one of the first for Francis, who has so far received visits only from bishops from several of the regions that make up the Italian episcopal conference.

Speaking Tuesday night at a small church dedicated to the Dutch community in Rome, Hendriks said Francis' style represented "a different way" of having an *ad limina* visit compared with his predecessors.

The pontiff and the Dutch bishops, Hendriks said, sat in a circle together. While the pope had a prepared text, the 14 instead spoke for about 90 minutes freely, with the pope answering a range of questions -- including how best to handle clergy sex abuse and how to go forward in closing parishes.

The meeting, Hendriks said, opened with Utrecht Cardinal Willem Eijk reading a report the Dutch bishops had prepared on the state of the church in their country. As part of that report, Eijk mentioned that they are preparing to close about two-thirds of the country's 1,500 parishes by the year 2020.

The pope, Hendriks said, did not reply with specifics regarding the Dutch circumstances, but instead likened their situation to Old Testament scripture readings on how the people of Israel responded to the destruction of the temple, historically the holiest site of the Jewish people.

"They would be very sad, and I think you must be very sad also because of this situation," the pope reportedly said.

"I would like to encourage you not to be sad," Hendriks recounted the pope as saying. "Never be immersed in feelings of sadness, but be hopeful people and look forward to the future."

The Dutch parish-closing plan has garnered controversy in the country, with lay Catholics in several dioceses alleging the scope of the closings is unnecessarily wide and is being undertaken without enough consultation of lay people.

Separate groups of Dutch Catholics launched petitions ahead of the *ad limina* visit, asking that Francis directly address the situation or even intervene in their bishops' plans.

One group released a 17-page report [1] concluding that the Dutch bishops had "shown a startling indifference toward members of the lay faithful, who have been denied of any voice in the church."

The group calls itself *Bezield Verband* -- roughly "Inspired Togetherness" in Dutch -- and its report included signatures of about 60 prominent current and retired Dutch theologians.

Hendriks said the pope "did not say whether what we did or wanted to do was right or wrong. But he stressed very much that we should share the sentiments of the people who have had their church closed down."

"He stressed most of all that we should be open and try to be in contact with people and try to use the pastoral opportunities there are to be in contact with the people and to transmit the faith," the bishop said.

The Dutch church has also been dealing in a particular way with the ongoing clergy sex abuse crisis in the Catholic church.

A 2011 report [2] by an inquiry commission created by the Dutch government said church officials had "failed to adequately deal with" abuse affecting as many as 20,000 of the country's children in Catholic institutions between 1945 and 1981.

Hendriks said the pope told the Dutch bishops to "really go on to care for the victims."

"We can't talk half-measures on this," Hendriks recalled the pope saying. "We have to be straight. We owe this to the victims."

In mentioning the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, Hendriks said the pope cited specifically *Lumen Gentium*, the council's dogmatic constitution on the church.

"His first thought was of the church," Hendriks said. "That means he thinks the reform of the church is only half-way done, that is clear."

At one point during the conversation with the pontiff, Hendriks said he mentioned to the pope how popular he is in the Netherlands, saying, "[You are] many times on the news, which is not something we have had in the last 50 years."

"Let us put aside what we think about this," Hendriks said the pope responded. "But use it. Use it to spread the Gospel."

Overall, Hendriks said, the feeling of the meeting was akin to a spiritual retreat. While tough subjects were addressed, the pope conveyed a "spiritual atmosphere," he said.

"Not so much of structures or of governing or politics or whatever but more spiritual radiance," he said.

Another Dutch bishop said Monday after the meeting that Francis had "strengthened" him and his peers.

"The pope has really strengthened us in the faith and in the way in which the Dutch bishops are working in the Dutch church," said Bishop Theodorus Hoogenboom, an auxiliary bishop of Utrecht, Netherlands' fourth largest city.

"The key word of what the pope said to us is the word *speranza*, which is hope," said Hoogenboom, who spoke outside St. Peter's Square after leaving the audience.

"The situation in the Netherlands with secularization is rather difficult, but the pope has strengthened us in the faith like St. Peter," he said.

Bishop Gerard de Korte of the northern Dutch diocese of Groningen-Leeuwarden said Monday the pope was most focused on telling the Dutch to be engaged in society.

Speaking to the Dutch Catholic broadcasting network RKK, de Korte said the Dutch bishops had focused in their written report to the pope for their *ad limina* visit on issues of catechesis, but Francis seemed more interested in issues of charity -- telling them to use charity as a way to attract people to Christianity.

[Joshua J. McElwee is *NCR* national correspondent. His email address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org [3]. Follow him on Twitter: @joshjmac [4].]

Source URL (retrieved on *11/30/2015 - 16:01*): http://ncronline.org/news/pope-talks-openly-about-reform-sex-abuse-dutch-bishop-says

Links:
[1] http://www.bezieldverbandutrecht.nl/files/07%20Publiciteit/contra_expertise_rapport.pdf
[2] http://www.onderzoekrk.nl/fileadmin/commissiedeetman/data/downloads/eindrapport/20111216/Samenvatting_eindrapp
[3] mailto:jmcelwee@ncronline.org
[4] http://www.twitter.com/joshjmac