

The Bible and the New Evangelization

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The recent Synod and an upcoming exhibit at the Vatican make clear the Church's emphasis on the importance of Sacred Scripture.

Alberto Carosa



Pope Benedict XVI leads a closing session of the Synod of Bishops on the new evangelization at the Vatican Oct. 27, 2012 (CNS photo/L'Osservatore Romano via Reuters)

Rome. The positive effects of the recent **XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops** on “the New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith” (Oct. 7-28, 2012) should be seen and experienced for a long time to come. As a follow-up to the Synod's reflections, the proceedings of the second meeting of the XIII Ordinary Council of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops on November 26 were also focused on the topic of the evangelisation for the transmission of the faith under its General Secretary Msgr. Nikola Eterovic.

According to the agenda, Msgr. Eterovic presented a thorough and detailed analysis of the main issues emerging from the recent **58 Propositions of the XIII Synod Assembly**, grouping them into three main sections. In the ensuing discussion, firstly in two Italian and English groups and then in plenary session, the senior prelates worked the various

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matters into suitable information to be submitted to Pope Benedict XVI in view of the Post-Synodal Exhortation the Assembly has asked the Pope to promulgate. After having set the date of the following meeting for January 23-24, 2013, the Council wound up this second meeting with the Angelus, beseeching the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church and Star of the new evangelization, for the fruits of the Synod to reach the entire ecclesial community and support the work of those who convey the Christian faith to the people of our time through the proclamation of the Gospel.

The Indispensable Role of Scripture

Sacred Scripture is no secondary part of such proclamation, as shown by the **Synod's Message to the People of God**, where it stresses how indispensable is constant access to the Word of God for the life of Christians: "The frequent reading of the Sacred Scriptures – illuminated by the Tradition of the Church who hands them over to us and is their authentic interpreter – is not only necessary for knowing the very content of the Gospel, which is the person of Jesus in the context of salvation history. Reading the Scriptures also helps us to discover opportunities to encounter Jesus, truly evangelical approaches rooted in the fundamental dimensions of human life: the family, work, friendship, various forms of poverty and the trials of life, etc."

The importance of the Word of God was also emphasized in Proposition 11 of the Final List of Propositions for the Synod under the heading "New evangelization and the prayerful reading of sacred scripture". "God has communicated himself to us in his Word made flesh", the unofficial English text reads, a provisional version prepared under the auspices of the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops and published in the Bulletin of the Holy See Press Office. According to the Synod Fathers, this divine Word, heard and celebrated in the Liturgy of the Church, particularly in the Eucharist, strengthens interiorly the faithful and renders them capable of authentic evangelical witness in daily life.

Thus, the Synod Fathers desire that the divine word "be ever more fully at the heart of every ecclesial activity" (*Verbum Domini*, 1). Therefore, the document further states, "the gate to Sacred Scripture should be open to all believers. In the context of the New Evangelization every opportunity for the study of Sacred Scripture should be made available. The Scripture should permeate homilies, catechesis and every effort to pass on the faith". It is precisely "in consideration of the necessity of familiarity with the Word of God for the New Evangelization and for the spiritual growth of the faithful", that "the Synod encourages dioceses, parishes, small Christian communities to continue serious study of the Bible and *Lectio Divina* – the prayerful reading of the Scriptures" (cf. *Dei Verbum*, 21-22).

The American Bible Society

Such emphasis on the importance of the Bible and its reading explains the presence of one of three special guests who were called to deliver a speech in the Synod: Lamar Vest, president of American Bible Society, who spoke at the end of Synod's October 9, 2012 session about the grandeur and freshness of the Bible, which remains the same despite the changing world.

Mr Vest (who will be succeeded by March by **S. Douglas Birdsall**) was supported by

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observer Mario Paredes, who was responsible for liaising with the Catholic world and who was instrumental for the largest “Verbum Domini” Bible exhibition to be ever held in the Vatican in 2012’s Eastertide, in conjunction with Hobby Lobby’s President Steve Green’s and his unique Bible collection, *Passages*.

Mr. Vest was so kind as to give CWR a recount of his recent experience as guest speaker at the Synod, outlining further prospects of a closer and more solid cooperation with the Vatican (and the Catholic Church at large) in so far as this primary aspect of the new evangelization’s emphasis is concerned.

But first of all, as already made it clear in his intervention at the Synod, he wished to reiterate once more “my heartfelt gratitude for being invited to address the highest pastors of the Roman Catholic Church”. As a matter of fact, it was “the first time in nearly 200 years of mission that a president of American Bible Society has been offered this opportunity” and “this represents for me a deep privilege and joy”.

Recalling the important strides made working side by side with new Bible translations, new programs of biblical studies, and global renewal for the practices of Lectio Divina, the American Bible Society’s president also said he is looking forward to the opportunity of going even further.

He made it clear that “our hopes, our prayers and our desires are to join the Catholic Church in a rediscovery of the heart of evangelization in the frame of a mission lies at the heart of American Bible Society’s ABS cause: the experience of Christian faith as the encounter with Jesus Christ, God the Father’s Gospel to humanity—which transforms us”.

Despite the fact that contemporary evangelisation calls for new methods and new means, “this remains ever the same: the transmission of faith rooted in an encounter with Christ by means of sacred Scripture and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit”.

He is profoundly convinced that “at the deepest level of our commitment to the Christian faith, we all agree that the Word of God is the foundation of our common work—the witnessing for Christ in our world”.

The Challenge of De-Christianisation

And the need of such cooperation in promoting a new evangelisation is all the more relevant precisely in the light of the challenges in today’s world. American Bible Society’s president went on to explain it is obvious that the world has changed and has new realities which the Church must address. “One of the facts that leads the Church to reflect on this topic is the question of de-Christianisation, how the Christian faith is pushed aside, is being considered irrelevant, is being denied the value, the role and the mission that for centuries it has had in the life of many, many countries around the world”, he contended. “So the effort of looking for new ways, how to bring Jesus Christ’s teachings is a big challenge, it is a challenge in light of the growth of other faiths and religions, is a challenge in front of a secular society, is a challenge in a society that has grown to be indifferent about religion and God and the Church. So these challenges are, I think, the ones that the Church is confronting today and the synod has been an excellent

platform to formulate recommendations, how to go about in this process of the new evangelisation”.

In the Angelus on Sunday, October 28, 2012, the Pope himself pointed out that “the coincidence of this Synodal Assembly with the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council” was “very significant, and thus with the start of the Year of Faith”. In particular, the Pope remarked, “the conciliar season ... helped us to remember that the new evangelization is not of our invention, but rather it is a dynamism that developed in the Church in a special way over the past 50 years, when it appeared evident that even those countries of ancient Christian tradition had become, as the saying goes, ‘mission territory’”.

For his part, the American Bible Society’s president could not agree more with the Pope’s words regarding the close connection between the Year of Faith, the Synod and Vatican II. “When we reflect that the Synod was convoked on the 50th anniversary of the Vatican Council and the Holy Father calling for a Year of Faith, he is asking us all committed Christians to renew our faith, to renew the creed we have embraced, this I think is the vision of the Pope, how he is bringing the Church to a more consistent coherent formulation of her teachings”, the president said. “No one can deny the fact that this Pope, being a theologian fifty years ago at the Vatican Council and now being the Holy See, he certainly has an experience of the Church that very few people have and so he realised that it is urgent to convoke the Church to renew her spirit in bringing Jesus and His teachings to the public square, to the public arena and to the life of the struggling families and to a world that is being pressed by economic constraints due to the financial crisis. So all these aspects I think they are summarised in what was that spring of faith that was Vatican II and is summarised by calling the Church to recommit to faith and at the same time to look for new ways how to evangelise the world”.

Largest-Ever Bible Exhibit at Vatican in 2014

Therefore this means there is also much more work in store for the American Bible Society. “Indeed, I think we have a great deal to contribute. As you know, our work is to promote the Word of God and more important, I would say, the work is to engage people with the Word of God. It is not sufficient that the people read the Bible, but people need to discover the God of the Bible and to discover in the Bible the Word incarnated in the person of Jesus. Thus, a prayerful reading of the Bible is an encounter with Jesus, the revealed God in history and that is our work today, to engage people with the Bible. It is not just to promote the Bible, like we have done for decades in the past until now, but today’s call for us is to engage people with the Bible. By engaging people with the Bible, especially for us Christians, it is to discover a new way of praying with the Bible, of dialoguing with God in the Bible and open ourselves to be guided and to be inspired by his Word”.

Among other things, after a most successful Bible exhibit in March-April 2012 in the Vatican, a renewed Vatican-American Bible Society cooperation under the new evangelisation efforts is bound to take the shape of a second, largest-ever Bible exhibit in 2014, as confirmed by American Bible Society’s president. “It has been so exciting for us to come to Rome and speak to the Vatican authorities. We have an invitation to come back and present a new Bible exhibit. In the month of December we plan to sign

contracts with the Governatorato and the Vatican Museum in order to present a Bible exhibit in the season of Easter 2014 under the title 'the Bible in the World and in the new Evangelisation'."

"We want to contribute," said Mr. Vest, "to the efforts of the Catholic Church by bringing historical artifacts that not only prove the historicity of the Bible, but also how the Bible has served the faith of the people and how the Bible has helped to evangelise around the world and so we are working on putting together this exhibit for 2014".

About the Author

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