

Synod: Around the edges, Catholic stars come out to shine

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

Rome

In Washington, the pace always picks up when Congress is in session, or when the Supreme Court is hearing cases. In a similar fashion, the church's stars always come out to shine in Rome whenever the Synod of Bishops is in town.

Around the edges of the Oct. 5-26 Synod of Bishops, it seems that just about everyone in the Catholic world who has something to say is finding a way to say it.

The line-up of events, press conferences, and even artistic performances over this three-week period is fairly staggering. The following are just a few illustrative examples of the activity Rome is witnessing in these days.

Bible Marathon

For the first eight days of the Synod of Bishops, Italian TV broadcast a round-the-clock marathon of Bible reading. All 73 books of the Catholic canon of scripture were read aloud, some 800,000 words in total, by an all-star cast. The marathon was kicked off by Pope Benedict XVI himself, who read the first chapter of the Book of Genesis, and was concluded on Saturday by the Vatican's number two official, the Cardinal Secretary of State, Tarcisio Bertone. An estimated 70,000 people flocked to the Basilica of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem to hear the readings, which were presented by a total of 1,500 readers drawn from 64 countries. (Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Houston, for example, read from First Kings last Tuesday morning before the morning session of the synod.) The marathon even had an inter-faith flair, as seventeen Jews and six Muslims took part.

The Catholic Vote

On Tuesday, Oct. 14, the Knights of Columbus, a U.S.-based lay movement for men with an estimated 1.7 million members, will release the results of a new survey of Catholic voters in the United States, just three weeks away from election day. The Knights commissioned the survey from the Marist College Institute for Public Opinion, and press materials say it's designed to assess ways in which the so-called "Catholic vote" is similar to, and different from, the general public. The data apparently provides a look at which kinds of abortion restrictions are favored by Catholics and the population at large, as well as other issues including the economy, the Iraq war, the death penalty, global warming, and school choice. The results will apparently distinguish between practicing and non-practicing Catholics. Supreme Knight Carl Anderson, who is taking part in the Synod of Bishops as one of the lay "auditors," will present the survey Tuesday evening in Rome, during a press conference at the headquarters of the European Broadcasting Union. Anderson will simultaneously be hooked up by satellite with a press conference at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C.

Ordination of Women

On Wednesday, Oct. 15 – the feast day of St. Theresa of Avila – a group promoting the ordination of women in the Catholic church is scheduled to hold a press conference at the headquarters of the Adista news agency, located across the Tiber River from the Vatican. Press materials say that representatives of pro-women's ordination groups from the United Kingdom, Germany, Japan, Holland, Portugal and the United States will be on hand, to make the argument that "there is no scriptural reason to prohibit the ordination of women." (The American is identified as Aisha Taylor of

the Women's Ordination Conference.) On the same day, an international petition requesting that women be ordained deacons is supposed to be presented to the Vatican. A press release says it will be accompanied by a demonstration in St. Peter's Square, featuring "women dressed in ancient Greek/Hellenist clothing representing women deacons of the early Church."

Evangelizing Families

The Apostolate for Family Consecration, a lay movement best known in the United States for running a sort of pro-family theme park called "Catholic Familyland" set in Bloomington, Ohio, came to Rome last week to present a program of religious formation and evangelization of families and parishes to members of the synod. The group set up shop Oct. 8-10 in the auditorium of the Augustinianum, which is located immediately across St. Peter's Square from the Synod Hall. Among other things, the program of evangelization draws heavily upon commentaries on scripture from Cardinal Francis Arinze, a Nigerian who serves as Prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship, and who has long been a big draw at Catholic Familyland.

Remembering John Paul II

Tonight, Oct. 13, the Lateran University is hosting the presentation of a new book on Pope John Paul II, titled John Paul II, Pastor of Rome. The author is Angelo Zema, who heads a monthly magazine dedicated to the beatification and canonization of John Paul II called Totus Tuus. (The phrase, which means "entirely yours," was the late pope's motto, a reference to the Virgin Mary drawn from the spiritual writings of St. Louis de Montfort.) Among the other speakers at the event will be Monsignor Slawomir Oder, the postulator for the late pope's beatification cause. Also tonight, an art exhibit organized by the Polish embassy to the Holy See opens, with the title "Goodness and Beauty: In Memory of John Paul II." On Thursday, which marks the 30th anniversary of John Paul II's election to the papacy, a new film on his life and work will be presented in the Vatican. Titled "Testimony," the film is based on a memoir by Polish Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz, the former private secretary of John Paul II.

Human Rights

On Thursday, Oct. 16, the United States Embassy to the Holy See will host a conference titled "For Everyone, Everywhere: Universal Human Rights and the Challenge of Diversity." An invitation for the event says it marks the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, as well as "the shared commitment of the United States and the Holy See to protect and promote human dignity." Speakers include Mary Ann Glendon, U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See, a Harvard law professor and former president of the Pontifical Academy for Social Sciences; Cardinal Renato Martino, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace; and Fr. Thomas Williams, a member of the Legionaries of Christ and a noted writer on themes of morality and public life.

Music and Faith

Also tonight, Pope Benedict XVI will attend a special concert organized for the Synod of Bishops at the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls. (A bus is scheduled to take members of the synod to the basilica at 4:30 pm Rome time. A spokesperson today said that formally speaking, going to the concert counts as attendance at the synod.) Benedict XVI will hear the Vienna Philharmonic, directed by Christoph Eschenbach, perform Anton Bruckner's "Sixth Symphony." The concert is sponsored by the Foundation for Sacred Music and Art, and is part of the seventh "International Festival of Sacred Art and Music" currently underway in Rome through Nov. 29.

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