9.10.2012 - NCR Today

On day two of synod, reminders of a steep climb

John L. Allen Jr.

As the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization wraps up its second day of work, participants today got two fresh reminders of just how steep a hill they face -- one that speaks to a tough external climate for the church's message, and the other reflecting divisions within the Catholic community itself.

Today, the Pew Forum released a new study showing that the number of Americans who have no religious affiliation is at an all-time high, including a full third of Americans under the age of 30. This cohort of "nones" is, in percentage terms, the most rapidly swelling movement on the American religious landscape.

Also today, "We Are Church," the most visible Catholic reform group in Europe, issued a new call for "profound renovations" in church structures and its relationship to the world, including a more "collegial and democratic church", "gender equity and the acceptance of diverse sexual orientations," and "the ordination of women and married people."

While neither the Pew study nor the "We Are Church" manifesto were specifically directed at the Oct. 7-28 Synod of Bishop, both nonetheless speak to the challenges facing the bishops and other observers, both inside and outside the church.

Yesterday the synod heard the "report before the discussion" from its general secretary, Cardinal Donald Wuerl of Washington, D.C., as well as five presentations about the situation on the various continents.

In his speech, Wuerl decried a "tsunami of secular influence" in our time which has produced, he said, a spreading "gloom of religious ignorance." He called for a three-fold response from the church: a deepened faith, both "both intellectually and affectively"; renewed confidence in the truth of the faith; and the will to share it with others.

That implies, Wuerl said, getting past "a syndrome of embarrassment" in asserting the basic teachings of the Christian faith.

In the afternoon, the synod heard Archbishop Carlos Aguiar Retes of Tlalnepantla, Mexico, president of the Latin American bishops' conference, insist that it's time to set aside the "gray pragmatism" of day-to-day life and to stop depending on the "institutional organization" of the church to spread the faith. Instead, Aguiar called for greater attention to "the art of living," especially the need to form vibrant Christian communities as a platform for new evangelization.

Both Aguiar and Cardinal Polycarp Pengo of Tanzania, speaking on behalf of the African bishops, endorsed small Christian communities as a resource for the new evangelization, with Aguiar saying they're a reminder that the vocation to being a missionary is always a "con-vocation," meaning a mission that has to express itself in community.

Though no one has yet mentioned it out loud on the synod floor, the "We Are Church" initiative offers a reminder that while the church may well be a community, it's clearly not one marching entirely in lockstep.

Launched with a Rome press conference today, the new statement from the reform group insists that "in 2012, clergy and lay people are still defined in terms of hierarchical priorities rather than as partners, members and colleagues," and that "the institutional church has developed a non-democratic structure reflecting the Roman Empire rather than the Kingdom of God."

The statement also calls on the synod "to consider dialogue with Catholics who long to be part of the church even when they differ on some issues."

If the "We Are Church" effort is a reminder of the internal difficulties the bishops face, the new Pew Report documents the challenging external landscape.

Its key findings include that one-fifth of the U.S. public is now religious unaffiliated, the higher percentage ever in Pew polling, representing a spike from 15 to 20 percent of the population in just five years. Nearly six percent of the U.S. public, some 13 million people, now describes itself as "atheist" or "agnostic," while 33 million people fall into the category of "believing without belonging."

While the Pew study is focused on the United States, the growth of the "nones" has long been even more advanced in Europe. Speaking in the synod, Cardinal Péter Erdõ of Budapest, Hungary, decried a European media "full of lies" about the church, a spreading "de-Christianization" of the continent, and even "juridical and well as physical attacks" again visible expressions of the faith.

Yesterday's discussion also brought a reminder of the different global realities of the church. Both Pengo of Tanzania and Cardinal Oswald Gracias of India cited religious fundamentalism as a major threat to evangelization – reflecting the fact that in Africa and India respectively, Islamic and Hindu extremism often represent serious threats to Christian life.

http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/day-two-synod-reminders-steep-climb
Zuletzt geändert am 11.10.2012