24.5.2011 - anglicanjournal.com

India's Catholics plan first synod for lay people

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Bangalore, India

Saying that lay people need a greater voice in the church, India's national Catholic lay network is preparing to hold the first synod, or national meeting, of lay Catholics in early 2012.

"The Second Vatican Council called for the empowerment of the laity. But after 50 years, there is not much to show," Remy Denis, national president of the All India Catholic Union (AICU), told ENInews. Vatican II, as it became known, was a gathering of church leaders in Rome in the early 1960s that liberalized a number of church rules, such as allowing Mass to be said in local languages rather than Latin.

Denis said the lay synod was proposed at a conference in early May that was attended by senior lay leaders of AICU which is recognised by Catholic Bishops Conference of India (CBCI), and has units in a majority of the 166 Catholic dioceses.

Lay empowerment in the Catholic church has been "so far cosmetic only," such as the ability of lay people to distribute Holy Communion in the absence of a priest, he said.

An active role for the laity in the management of the "financial and temporal affairs" of the church, as recommended in the worldwide church's canon law changes of 1983, have been ignored, he said. "With the synod, we want to gather the aspirations of the entire laity and put it before the church so that we can play a responsible role in the life and growth of the church," Denis explained.

According to Catholic church statistics, two thirds of the 28 million Christians in India are Catholics.

A spokesman for the bishops conference, Fr. Babu Joseph, told ENInews that "the laity is an organic part of the church and has rights and responsibility in the church. Any initiative that strengthens the growth of the church is most welcome."

A former AICU president, Chhote Bhai, who prepared the concept paper forthe lay synod, told ENInews that the current situation needs to improve. "Vatican II envisaged a fraternal relationship between the clergy and the laity. But the old paternalistic attitude still prevails."

Noting that "we do not want to impose anything," Bhai said a detailed questionnaire has been prepared in order to "gather the pulse of the laity." At least 2,000 paper copies of the questionnaire will be posted to lay leaders across the country and it will also be available through the Internet.

Responses will be presented at four regional consultations to be held in October-November. "The agenda of the synod (to be held in early 2012) will be finalized only after the regional consultations," said Bhai.

http://www.anglicanjournal.com/nc/news-update-items/article/indias-catholics-plan-first-synod-for-lay-people-9780.html

Zuletzt geändert am 25.05.2011