

# Bishops Synod Starts in Vatican Junk Room

By FATHER ROBERT A. GRAHAM, S.J. Special Correspondent

Vatican City—(RNS)—Up to a few days before the deadline Vatican workers were still busily putting final touches on the assembly hall where, beginning today Friday, Sept. 29, nearly two hundred bishops will gather for the historic first Synod of Bishops.

The architects have done their best with what they were given, but the hall is already being called by commentators "the Church of the Catacombs."

The decor is anything but triumphalistic. Instead of the regal and phrotogenic Basilica of Saint Peter's of Council days, the Synodists will find themselves in a basement of the Vatican Palace formerly used for storing unusable art objects—in short, the junk room.

Visibility is reduced by massive pillars in the bishops' midst while the acoustics remain a question mark. In the unpretentious surroundings of unfaced brick walls will begin one of the noble experiments suggested by the Vatican Council.

The Synod was conceived as an expression or sign of the bishops' participation with the Pope in government of the Universal Church.

It is also a mechanism by which the national hierarchies can have direct and immediate access to the pontiff. From the Pope's standpoint it is also a means of sharing some of the awe-inspiring responsibility that weighs on his shoulders in one of the greatest transformations in Church history.

Responsibility also means blame, for nobody contemplating the turmoil of the post-Conciliar decade dares to say that serious miscalculations are not going to be made at top level. The Synod was also thought of as a counterbalance to the influence that the Roman Curia has long had on the papal office. This factor, however, has been much diminished by the changes now in the offing and announced by Paul VI.

Inevitably the natural instinct is to think of the Synod of Bishops in the same terms as Vatican II. But there are many differences and not simply the smaller number of members. The new body is only advisory and does not have the Council's legislative powers. The number of questions on which its advice has been asked is limited and these cover relatively practical bread and butter matters.

This is especially true of such agenda items as the liturgical changes, the revision of canon law and the reform of seminary education.

Some crucial recommendations may be reached on the question of mixed marriages. On this matter if not uniformity at least consistency is much desired for circumstances vary sharply in different countries.

The potentially explosive question is in the field of doctrine. An issue regarding what Secretary General Bishop Stanislaus Rubin calls the "theological ferment" may prove to be the most interesting.

Until the show starts, pre-

Synodal debate in the press centers not so much on what the bishops are going to do as what the Synod is supposed to be or become. One school of thought regards the novel assembly as the germ of a permanent ecumenical council in which the episcopal collegiality will have a continuing visible representation. In this case, the Synod will have legislative powers and be endowed of course with its own curia or administration.

Another group is determined that the bishops will come to Rome as advisers and nothing more. The less the synod meets, in the eyes, the better.

Extremists on both sides are watching each other like hawks. For instance, the French ultra-conservative "New Man" published a special issue very pointedly dedicated to the primacy of the Pope. The editor stresses that contrary to the insinuations of some writers the collegiality of bishops is not the sole form of Church government. With ample quotes from the Conciliar decrees he shows that the Pope is still Pope. He suspects that those who envisage a greater role for the Synod intend by

this to reduce the Pope to the status of a monarch who reigns but does not rule. Chief object of "New Man's" suspicion at this moment is the French priest-journalist, Rene Laurentian, whose new book on the Synod foresees eventual emergence of the Synod as a quasi continuing ecumenical council.

A boosting of the Synod's role is based on the thought that this will help reduce the obstacle that papal primacy presents not only to Eastern Orthodox Churches but also to Prot-

estants. The reality of this obstacle Pope Paul has himself conceded. But anyone who thinks that a permanent Synod will necessarily be liberal is surely under misapprehension. Such a large body of bishops from all over the world working under unanimity rule would end up a citadel of reaction, neutralized by divided opinions within its own ranks and within their respective national conferences.

Against a deadlocked legislative Synod of this kind no Pope, however liberal, could move a finger.

## Priests Senate a 2-Way Street

Wayne, N.J.—(NC)—Priests' senates are essential for better communication between the bishop and priests of a diocese. Bishop Lawrence E. Casey of Paterson told the first meeting of the Paterson Priests' Senate at Neumann Preparatory Seminary here.

Describing the type of cooperation he intends to give the senate, Bishop Casey said that the "consultative" nature of senates does not mean that their recommendations, reached as a result of much study and debate, are to be considered by the bishop as pious exhortations.

"I do not believe it means," he said, "that the bishop should arbitrarily accept or reject the sound proposals of the senate. I believe that the statement 'consultative in nature' means that the deliberations of the senate will be an effective means of renewal and reform in the diocese."

"I believe that the proposals of the senate, when they are the fruit of sound study, when they are practical and can be implemented effectively, when they are according to the accepted teaching of the Church, constitute a mandate which I must follow."

## Birth Control Issue 'Urgent' for Bishops

New York — (RNS) — "As the bishops meet in Rome to discuss the problems of the Church, there are few questions as urgent as those surrounding the use of contraception for the achievement of a truly Christian marriage," America, the national Catholic weekly, said in an editorial.

The statement appeared in America's Sept. 30 issue, timed to coincide with the opening of the Synod of Bishops in Rome, Sept. 29.

Contraception is not among the five items on the Synod's formal agenda. America said that a growing number of Catholic doctors "see positive as well as negative human values in the use of contraception in certain situations."

These doctors "are not challenging the teaching authority of the Church," the editorial said, but they are trying to "contribute to the theological discussion the data they are particularly qualified to ob-

serve: the physical and psychic impact of contraception used, not for self-centered pleasure, but for the creation and conservation of Christian family values."

"They are making a natural law argument based on medical observation," the editorial said.

"They are hopeful that they can assist the hierarchy in seeing the compatibility — and even necessity — of some use of contraceptives in the life of the genuinely Catholic family."

These doctors hope that research on reproduction will enable Catholics "to control fertility in ways more consonant with a sound interpersonal wedded relationship than some current contraceptive methods," the editorial said. It added that such research "deserves the highest priority."

"It is obviously too early to determine whether the doctors who hold these views will prevail on the rest of the Church," America said. "In our judgment, they should."



Hometown Salutes Cardinal

Whitman, Mass.—(RNS)—Francis Cardinal Spellman, Archbishop of New York, returns to his hometown, Whitman, Mass., to be honored by the community's veterans organizations. He is shown at the unveiling of a marker on the Whitman Public Library lawn.

## Ecumenical Publication

Kimberley, South Africa — (NC) — The 11-year-old Kimberley diocesan magazine has become an ecumenical publication as an experiment in South African religious journalism.

In the future the magazine, Kehilwenyane, will be administered by a joint editorial board composed of three Catholics and three Anglicans.

The purpose of the new setup is to improve and enlarge the magazine and increase its distribution among the Tswana peoples in South Africa.

The Tswanas are a Bantu-speaking people of the western Sotho group of South Africa, inhabiting the Bechuanaland protectorate. Their population is estimated at 280,000.

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