World & Nation

As world synod approaches

Layta called ‘vibrant, active’

Washington (DC) — When Pope John Paul II comes to北京 the World Synod of Bishops opens on the layta this October in Rome, one of the freshest images in his mind will be the Catholics he has just met during his 10-day visit to the United States Sept. 10-19.

The theme of the Rome synod, which is to run Oct. 1-10, is “The Vocation and Mission of the Church in the World.”

What will he see on that trip? What do Catholics along the papal route think and feel? What would they like to see happen at the synod in Rome or at Church dealings with lay people in the United States?

Lay leaders interviewed this summer by National Catholic News Service in papal-visit cities across the country described the church as a vibrant, active, U.S. Catholic laity — lay Catholics strongly committed to the Church even if they are critical of some positions. They described a community-oriented laity involved in both social action and ecclesial ministry, a laity both self-starting and searching for guidance around issues such as greater legalism with less emphasis on personal relationships.

Indifference and alienation were described, too — often expressed, especially by women, in terms of being overlooked or unneeded, or in terms of personal disagreements with Church positions on such issues as sexuality, the role of women, priestly ministry, and social justice.

Martha Whelan of Miami, the first stop on the papal visit, said she would like to see at least two things to the Rome synod: “Emphasize the role of the lay people in evangelization,” she said, and “seek the role of the lay people in the Church as a whole.”

When the Archdiocese of Miami’s evangelization director and president of the National Council for Catholic Evangelization, Ms. Whelan said that the bishops synod currently underway in Miami have proposed a lively discussion of such generally controversial Church issues as women’s role in the Church and sexual morality. Among the issues, she said, the role of the lay people in the parish was a central concern, she said.

Mary Crook, coordinator of the synod in the Miami Synod, parish eucharistic minister and full-time volunteer in the diocesan papal visit office — said she agreed 100 percent with issues that she considers women’s ordination, and strongly supports greater lay involvement in ministry within current Catholic structures.

Citing her own experience as a eucharistic minister, Ms. Crook said that the diocese lay ministry serve other people but “it doesn’t come to the major” to the person involved in the ministry.

On Sept. 11, when Pope John Paul visited Columbia, S.C., in the Diocese of Charleston, he will be the most rural and sparsely populated part of his tour. The thought abounds with tales of lay people doing the day-to-day work of parishes because there aren’t enough priests to go around.

“These people don’t ask,” she added. “They just do it, and they tell you what they need.” Said Trinitarian Father Vernon Danenmann, who heads Hispanic migrant workers by providing grass-roots material aid and by forming small groups of prayer and discussion on Gospel values.

Valencia said that through his volunteer work he discovered a basic truth of Catholicism: “For ordinary people to understand that of woman — her role, how she’s treated, undervalued or in terms of personal disagreement.”

Federal Judge John Boalt of Washington, D.C., who was on the papal route, said he feels that the diocese synod is a unique opportunity to present the Church to the pope. “The laity have a vibrant, abiding love for the Church,” she said. At the same time, “there is no other church whose layta is as well educated.”

She believes U.S. Catholics today are suffering “a sense of confusion” — as the Church seems to be returning to a greater tradition with less emphasis on pastoral concerns for the signs of the times. One of the most ignored signs is the faith and commitment of the people themselves.

While Pope John Paul is likely to see and hear about the many contributions Catholic lay leaders, he is less likely to have contact with those who feel alienated from the Church. Among those the pontiff is unlikely to meet is Kathy Crook, a Phoenix Catholic who claims no particular parish affiliation.

“As far as women in the American Church, the pope consistently makes statements that show he doesn’t understand,” she said. “If he can’t validate me as a person, I don’t feel like I belong.”

Citing her own experience as a eucharistic minister, Ms. Crook said that the diocese lay ministry serve other people but “it doesn’t come to the major” to the person involved in the ministry.

Others, however, have found that a sense of alienation disappears when they are involved in Church life. Anselmo Valencia of Los Angeles said that he felt alienated from the Church before he became a volunteer in Proyecto Seminario ("Project Sower"), an archdiocesan program to reach out to Hispanic migrant workers by providing grass-roots material aid and by forming small groups of prayer and discussion on Gospel values.

Valencia said that through his volunteer work he discovered a basic truth of participation in the Church’s mission: “Evangelizing others we evangelize ourselves... My whole life is going better now.”

Contributing to this story were Liz Schwarzbach, Barb Frazee, Stephanie O’Keefe, Laurie Hansen, Julie Asher and Mary Ann Walsh.

Perkins, who has worked 20 years for the archdiocese on its massive involvement in housing for the elderly and poor, said that during New Orleans’ synod consultation the “concern that surfaced over and over is that of woman — her role, how she’s treated, what her responsibilities are.”

Another top lay concern was Church treatment of minorities, he said. “People do not recognize the needs of black Catholics, as far as their position within the Church.”

Although some efforts to correct such discrimination have been made, Perkins said such efforts were not enough.

From a similar grass-roots consultation on Church questions in the Los Angeles archdiocese, ministry to youth emerged as the Catholics top priority. Social justice, education, shared responsibility in the Church, family-life support and help for families in crisis were other chief priorities.

A nationwide consultation conducted in preparation for this fall’s synod showed that the same issues and priorities are among top concerns of Catholics across the country.

Jean Wolpoff of Detroit, who headed archdiocesan adult religious education for more than 20 years, thinks that in U.S. Catholics the pope will see a unique blend of education and commitment to the Church.

“Although some efforts to correct such discrimination have been made, Perkins said such efforts were not enough.”

From a similar grass-roots consultation on Church questions in the Los Angeles archdiocese, ministry to youth emerged as the Catholics top priority. Social justice, education, shared responsibility in the Church, family-life support and help for families in crisis were other chief priorities.

Although some efforts to correct such discrimination have been made, Perkins said such efforts were not enough. From a similar grass-roots consultation on Church questions in the Los Angeles archdiocese, ministry to youth emerged as the Catholics top priority. Social justice, education, shared responsibility in the Church, family-life support and help for families in crisis were other chief priorities.