

World & Nation

Synod intends to challenge sleeping giant — the laity

By Albina Aspell

Vatican City (NC) — This seventh general assembly of the world Synod of Bishops is concentrating its collective energy on ways to revitalize the church.

As one of 60 lay men and women participating in unprecedented fashion in the consultation process, I, too, look ahead to what may be, but find I am more encouraged by what is happening now, here at the Vatican.

We all listen. We all speak. Cardinals, archbishops, bishops, Religious, priests, lay women, lay men. The results of our dialogue will take a long time to analyze, and documents that will result from the synod are still far off, but the general focus of what we are about is expected to animate the Catholic laity — described here by some as "a sleeping giant" — to full participation in their role.

The cover of an Italian magazine, *Vita Pastorale*, reveals the church as made up of 99 percent laity and 1 percent clergy. That sleeping giant, the laity, has been waking slowly, perhaps too slowly in some parts of the world, and thus this synod on the "Vocation and Mission of the Laity in the Church and in the World 20 Years After the Second Vatican Council" is important to the future of the church and might even be overdue.

There is a wealth of good happening here at the synod. I see it within the hall, knowing nothing of how our proceedings are perceived outside. Our daily contact, the personal testimony we bring to each other

and to the whole, has given us all a sense of the universality of the Church and of the common bond of baptism the laity share in equal measure with the clergy in all parts of the world. Someone here has gauged the bond of faith as 90 percent of our being; the remaining 10 percent makes up our cultural differences.

The decision to include the laity in the synodal process, although it might seem to have been an obvious necessity, was nonetheless a stroke of inspiration, for it has brought together men and women who are poles apart in culture and experience. I cannot think of another place or time when such a gathering would be called.

Add to this rich representation of God's family the bishops from all continents, and you begin to appreciate the intellectual, spiritual and cultural mix in which we pray and dialogue. We are a group, said Archbishop Jan Schotte, general secretary of the synod, that reflects "the true reality of the church."

Archbishop Schotte, an erudite man who speaks all our languages fluently, briefed us as the plenary sessions began and said that while we represented a broad spectrum of lay activity and service, he was sorry there was no one among us from the many who do not belong to any church group. However, he expected the men and women here, who all have access to others, to bring the experience and sense of the church of all other Catholics to this meeting. He urged us to take an active part in the discussions — among ourselves



Albina Aspell, editor of the Catholic Post in Peoria, Ill., and president of the Catholic Press Association, is greeted by Pope John Paul II. In early October, Aspell, a lay observer at the synod, addressed the synod on the topic of Catholic media.

and with the bishops — that are expected to deepen our understanding of what we hear at the plenary sessions and urged us to keep in mind the universality of the church.

The synod was not called to solve the problems of one diocese or one church, he said, but those of the whole church, that we may all become more deeply aware of what it means to be a baptized Catholic. "The Spirit speaks through these events," he said. "Listen to what the Spirit says through the synod experience; it is speaking to the church at this moment."

This is a spiritual experience in which we

pray, talk, listen, discuss and dialogue, and something happens that goes on beyond our external senses. "We must forget our preoccupation with other matters," he said, "and pass into the true dimension of our universality ... the way we hope to see it realized in our church."

Put simply, Archbishop Schotte said our participation in the synod will work profound changes, and he was right. I may lack the vision to see the church of the future, but I am keenly aware of the worldwide family of God, the "Christi Fidelis," of which I am a member.

Lay organizations seek synod's support for varied views

By Greg Erlandson

Rome (NC) — As the world Synod of Bishops gathered in Rome Oct. 1-30 to discuss the vocation and mission of the laity, so also did groups ranging from Women for Faith and Family to a conference of self-identified U.S. lay leaders.

Representing a broad variety of viewpoints, they came to shake hands with bishops, lobby for particular viewpoints or simply be "affirmative."

The largest group consisted of participants in "Synod '87 Conference: A Gathering of American Catholic Leadership." Organizers said they assembled in Rome not to "lobby" but as a sign of "affirmation" of the bishops.

Sponsored by the Pallottines and three lay Catholic organizations, the conference brought 250 Catholics to Rome Oct. 17-25 for a mix of talks, panels, receptions and workshops running from morning to night.

The conference's three goals, according to Joe Holland of the Pallottine Institute for Lay Leadership and Apostolic Research, were to "meet and dialogue with" Vatican officials, meet with Catholics from around the world, and discuss the American Catholic experience during three days of "think tanks."

Holland said organizers had received a "nice letter" from the synod's general secretary, Archbishop Jan Schotte. Although the archbishop wrote that he did not recommend such a conference be held in Rome during the synod, the group was well received in the Vatican offices visited during the week.

The conference had no intention of being a "rump synod," said Donna M. Hanson, executive director of Catholic Charities in Spokane, Wash., and chairwoman of the U.S. bishops' National Advisory Council. Hanson chaired the proceedings.

"We have come in prayerful solidarity" with the synod delegates, she said. "In our presence here we say that we love the church."

One of the values of the conference was the opportunity it gave for "networking" among participating groups, Hanson said. At its end, participants voted to study ways in which U.S. Catholic lay groups could further collaborate.

Other groups present in Rome during the synod also acknowledged the value of forming networks, but sought primarily to make themselves heard through techniques ranging from press conferences to decal reading "U.S. Roman Catholics (heart symbol) Pope John Paul II."

Helen Hull Hitchcock, an organizer of Women for Faith and Family, came to Rome with a computer printout of 40,000 names on a petition pledging support for Pope John Paul II and church teachings.

She called the petition — which affirms

church teachings on sexuality and the family, and rejects calls for women priests as an "aberrant innovation" — a "very explicit statement."

The petition's grass-roots distribution shows strong support for the church, Hitchcock said. She expressed "disappointment" at reports that "some Catholic bishops feel most Catholic women are unhappy with the church or church teaching."

On Oct. 23, Hitchcock met with Cardinal Edouard Gagnon of the Pontifical Council for the Family outside the synod hall and presented him with the names.

Cardinal Gagnon told Hitchcock would give the names and statement of support to the pope, who was aware of their efforts, he said.

Joining Hitchcock at the early morning presentation were members of the Chicago-based National Catholic Coalition, headed by Kathleen Sullivan. She and Phyllis Schlafly, a member of the coalition, held a press conference Oct. 5 criticizing the bishops for having "deviated" from the synod's working document.

The synod should address the "holocaust"

of abortion rather than focus on women's rights, Sullivan said.

Members of the National Catholic Coalition were widely dispersed in their effort to spread their message of support for the pope and criticism of specific issues raised during the synod. They attended Vatican and U.S. bishops' press conferences and spoke with delegates outside the synod hall.

Also in Rome for the synod was Angela Grimm, director of the Catholic Center, a Washington-based project of the Free Congress Foundation.

Grimm said she came to express "wherever I could" her views on the role of the laity and the dangers of clericalism and politicization in the church.

Questioning whether the U.S. bishops' elected delegates represented the views of the Catholic laity, Grimm said she was "struck by the poor level" of their contributions to the synod.

She said the issue of altar girls was perceived by feminists as a tactical step toward women's ordination and therefore was a matter of prudential concern. However, she believes that the issue was being blown out of proportion, "especially in the

context of a synod on the laity."

While the role of women in the church attracted attention inside and outside the synod hall, it was by no means the only issue of concern.

Throughout the synod, R.V. Cortlandt Herbst handed out press releases signed by Regina Publications of Ireland and the Cardinal Mindszenty Foundation of the United States. The press releases called on the synod to issue a statement on the "intrinsic evil of communism" and a "message of solidarity" with believers "behind the Iron and Bamboo curtains."

Also present was Frank Brown, a retired DePaul University economics professor who is chairman of the National Association for Personal Rights in Education. Members of the association seek fairer education taxes for parents with children in private schools.

Brown, who came to Rome after being unable to get a hearing during the U.S. bishops' consultations on the laity, said his goal was to "help write the final synod document on the role of the laity in the temporal order."

"I just want to help," he said.

Information slows to trickle as synod's end nears

By John Thavis

Vatican City (NC) — As the Synod of Bishops on the laity approached its conclusion, public information about its work slowed to a trickle.

Departing this year from the procedure of previous synods, the Vatican offered no publication of summary reports from the 12 language groups as they worked to synthesize the issues in a final list of propositions. Instead, during a Vatican press conference, five synod participants made brief introductory remarks about those groups' general conclusions. At previous synods, the summary reports were a main source of information about the synod's second phase.

Delegates were expected to publish a message at the synod's conclusion. But the much longer and detailed "propositions" are expected to remain secret. One reason for this secrecy, synod officials have said, is that publication would restrict Pope John Paul II as he writes his own follow-up document based on the synod conclusions.

Press briefings, which had been scheduled twice a day October 1-13, ceased during the subsequent two-week period of debate and discussion. At least one scheduled briefing was cancelled without explanation.

During the first phase of the synod, summaries of speeches by bishops and lay people were released. But the four reports by lay participants on the synod's work were not

made available, even in summary form.

As a result, even the Vatican newspaper, *L'Osservatore Romano*, frequently limited its daily coverage of the synod's second phase to a brief photo caption.

U.S. Archbishop John P. Foley, president of the Pontifical Commission for Social Communications and of the synod's information commission, said that group moderators decided not to publish language-group summaries.

"They felt that their clearly refined positions were in their speeches and that remarks made in the synod group meetings were less precise, and confusion could have resulted," he said.

The archbishop added that he had been in favor of publishing the discussion-group reports, but thought that the synod press conferences had helped make up for the lack of information. More such press conferences should be held during the group discussions, he said.

More than one synod source spoke of a high sensitivity this year to rules on secrecy. The sources said synod officials reminded bishops to use discretion in speaking to the press. Bishops were also warned against holding their own press conferences. When they did meet the press — as in the case of U.S. bishops — the event was usually billed as a "discussion" rather than a press conference.

Synod briefing officers, too, have been

told not to compromise the bishops' freedom of speech by reporting too much to journalists.

"I sense that there is a real backing away from the press," said one bishop who has attended three synods. The change has prompted grumbling among some synod participants, he added.

During two press conferences, journalists complained about a lack of access to bishops and the lack of published information. Before the synod began, a statement signed by 15 international religious publications spoke of "non-communication" during synods, and requested that the synod make available more complete information.

Archbishop Foley said that on the positive side, bishops were encouraged this year to write more complete summaries of their speeches. He also said he was pleased with the three official synod press conferences that had been held. A fourth was scheduled for the synod's final day.

The main concern with other "unofficial" press conferences, the archbishop explained, was that bishops would talk about what others have said in the synod hall. Making the proceedings more open could thus inhibit the freedom of speech of bishops from totalitarian countries since they might have to answer for those remarks once they return home.