

## Reflections on the Synod of Bishops October 2001

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This was the second time that I have participated at a synod. My reactions are very similar to those which I expressed in *Vincentiana*\* after the Synod on Consecrated Life in 1994.

Like General Assemblies, synods are a long, sometimes tedious experience. During the month, there were morning and afternoon sessions every day except Sunday. Almost all participants found the methodology rather trying. Many criticized it and asked that it be changed in future synods. Basically, we listened to 250 discourses in a row, each taking five to eight minutes. The general topic was “The Bishop, Servant of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the Hope of the World,” but within that framework a participant could talk about any subject that interested him. There was no particular order to the talks, so that a first bishop might talk about ministry to the poor, a second about the importance of prayer in the life of a bishop, a third about the diocesan curia, a fourth about the need for financial help in poor dioceses, and so on. The reader can imagine how difficult it is to concentrate on 250 talks about scattered topics. After that the synod broke up into language groups, each of which had about 20 members. The groups formulated propositions, which were then amended and voted upon by the entire assembly. These were presented to the Holy Father as advice. Over the next year or two, a commission will prepare a document that will be examined and ultimately approved by the Pope. It will then be published. There have been many outstanding synodal documents, like *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and *Christifideles Laici*.

For me personally, there were some notable differences between the Synod of 2001 and that of 1994. The topic of this synod (the ministry of bishops) was much less interesting to me than the theme of the first one in which I took part (on consecrated life). Moreover, in the 1994 synod I was a full member, whereas in this one I was an auditor. That difference, however, did not actually affect my participation very much, except that I did not vote on the final propositions. This time, for the group work, I was a member of an Italian-speaking group (since too many participants asked to be put in the English-speaking groups). That, I found, hindered my ability to contribute to the precise formulation of propositions, though I must say that group members were quite helpful whenever anyone (there were others like me!) was struggling to find the right word or grammatical construction in Italian.

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\* *Vincentiana*, Year XXXVIII (1994) 361-367.

In spite of the difficulties that I and many others encountered, there were many positive aspects to participating in the synod. I list these below:

1. The bishops and other participants came from every country in the world. I met many outstanding people and had opportunities to talk with them each day in the synod hall and during the coffee breaks. There were 50 cardinals, about 200 bishops, around 15 superiors general, five observers from other Christian Churches, and about ten lay observers, both men and women (the very limited participation of women was one of the synod's weak points).
2. The Holy Father took part in all the plenary sessions, which were numerous. That meant, in the concrete, that he was there from 9 until 12:30 in the morning, and from 5 to 7 in the afternoon, almost every day during the first two weeks and on scattered occasions after that.
3. Many bishops spoke quite freely, a number in their own name, and others in the name of their bishops' conferences. There was great emphasis on the ecclesiology and spirituality of communion. Much hope was expressed about the life of the Church. Some bishops criticized the methodology of synods and called for greater collegiality. Some expressed frustration about the functioning of some of the branches of the Roman Curia. Some questioned the weight given to the voice of nuncios in the appointment of bishops.
4. There were some striking talks. I was very moved when a bishop from Sudan related how more than three million people in his country have been killed in the civil strife there, though few in the world have hardly noticed. I was also quite struck as a bishop from Cambodia described how his entire country was transformed into a huge concentration camp under the rule of the most radical Communist government in history. In this tragic, fatal experiment millions died, as all were moved from their native villages to communal work sites. Books were burned and intellectuals were exterminated. A stark revolutionary ideology became the only accepted thought pattern. I was also quite moved as African bishops spoke of the ravages of AIDS and malaria in their countries.
5. During the synod, each participant is invited to dine, at lunch or supper, with the Holy Father. As the reader might imagine, that is a moving, impressive occasion. I went one evening for supper, along with eight other people. During supper, it was clear how much the Pope's health has declined. Though he is quite alert, it is evident that he is at times very weak physically. I admired his courage in continuing to invite groups of people twice a day to eat with him.

6. A “message” is composed during the synod and voted upon by the members (this is different from the post-synodal document, which is published a year or two later). I liked the message very much. It is filled with hope and at times quite eloquent. I found the section on youth particularly striking.
7. During the last week of the synod I was also participating, in a limited way, in the First International Meeting of the Miraculous Medal Association. All its members were able to come to the closing Mass of the Synod for which, fortunately, we were able to obtain very good tickets. Basically, the representatives of the Association sat in the first row, right behind the concelebrating bishops. They were delighted to be there.
8. After the closing Mass, the Holy Father hosted a final dinner for all the synodal participants, at Santa Marta where the Daughters of Charity serve. There was no particular seating order. At table, on my right was the Superior General of the Marianists and on my left was the Archbishop of Chicago. Also at the table were a bishop from New Zealand, the Archbishop of Utrecht in Holland, and a laywoman from South Africa. At the end of the banquet, the Holy Father shook hands with each person to say good-bye. By that time, he looked exhausted, as were many of us!