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Synod: Bishops hear the voices of women

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.
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Given the all-male nature of the Catholic priesthood, a Synod of Bishops is, inevitably, something of a gentleman's club. Nevertheless, because the business of a synod is, at least in part, to take stock of what's happening in the church around the world, each synod also makes efforts to hear the voices of women.

Yesterday morning, eleven women taking part in the Oct. 5-26 Synod of Bishops, dedicated to "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church," gave speeches from the floor. In their own ways, each offered a perspective that might not otherwise have been part of the mix.

Not everyone outside the synod, however, was prepared to applaud its sensitivity. Representatives of pro-women's ordination groups gathered in Rome on Wednesday to ask that women be ordained as "deacons, priests and bishops."

Perhaps the most eloquent statement focused specifically on the contribution of women inside the synod hall came from Dominican Sr. M. Viviana Ballarin, Superior General of the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena, and President of the Union of Superiors Major of Italy.

Her thesis was that there's a "mysterious and very close bond between the Word and woman."

"In an orphaned society, turned inward onto itself, consecrated women become a living exegesis of the Word of God," Ballarin said. The Word of God "continues to embody itself in the concreteness of their lives – consigned, itinerant, filled with good works, completely dedicated, at times even to the point of martyrdom."

"They are this for all people, even for those who do not recognize them, for those whom it is difficult or even dangerous to approach, those avoided," she said. "Reaching the most hidden corners of human existence, spaces or situations where homilies cannot be given, but only shouted with the power of silence which becomes presence and following, action and service, caring caress."

"Many consecrated and religious women [are"> tireless witnesses, dispensers of the Word of God, which is Father and mother," she said. "They live amidst school desks and prisons, hospital beds and on the streets, near the drug addicts, those suffering AIDS, women exploited by prostitution, by the side of the elderly and of abused children, close to destroyed families, or the homeless or the unemployed, close to all the sick of any sort, the tender presence in every corner of the world."

"This multitude of untiring women, dispensers of the Word, is the face of the Mother Church. With their mother's hands and heart, they are her fruitful womb, they are the place where God can meet man, and man can meet his God," Ballarin said.

Agnes Kam Leng Lam, President of the Catholic Biblical Association of Hong Kong, offered perhaps the most home-spun image of the synod, suggesting that "reading the Bible is like eating."

"A home-made soup prepared with love and time is delicious," she said, "while fast food is tasteless."

Lam also floated an intriguing, if slightly improbable, proposal: that Pope Benedict XVI should enter the blogosphere.

“I invite the Holy Father to open a multi-language blog to shepherd today’s world,” she said, suggesting that a papal blog could include a “daily scriptural verse with a simple reflection, brief texts, and plentiful images.”

Ewa Kusz, President of the World Conference of Secular Institutes, issued a call for more confidence in the laity.

“I ask that those responsible [in the church"> give the laity more trust,” she said, “because we truly practice in our daily lives the hidden ‘service of the Word.'"

“I think it is important that the experience of the laity committed in the church should be taken seriously, and [that"> together we should find proper ways of proclamation, since, in life, we are closer to those to whom the Word is proclaimed,” Kusz said.

Natalja Fedorova Borovskaja, a Russian professor of fine arts, offered a thoughtful meditation on the link between faith and art. Growing up in Soviet Russia, she said, she had no direct religious instruction, so her only real contact with spiritual imagery was through her study of art.

“I never thought about God, and nobody spoke with me about Him, except the works of art, music and literature,” she said.

Fedorova also made the provocative suggestion that art is itself something of a theological mystery – especially the question of how sublime beauty and deep spiritual insight can come from artists whose own lives often seem anything but sublime.

“We see that often the painter’s biography is the way of the cross, and the content of the cross consists of his sins, mistakes and temptations, that unfortunately are too well-known,” she said. “Why, in spite of the dark circumstances of their lives, could they create their highly spiritual works?”

“This is a history of art as a history of the Word of God,” Fedorova argued.

French Sr. Evelyne Franc, Superior General of the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, emphasized the link between the Word of God and the poor.

“The Word moves us to serve not only to fight material hunger, poverty, it moves us to work for a world where all are respected, it moves us to denounce injustice,” she said.

“A dual reading of the Word imposes itself,” Franc said: “To live the life of the poor in the light of Scriptures, and to read Scriptures from the viewpoint of the poor.”

“They are sacrament of Christ among us, these poor who evangelize us,” she said.

Other women who spoke yesterday included:

• Maria Voce, President of the Focolare Movement
• Michelle Moran, President of International Catholic Council of Charismatic Renewal Services
• Sr. Jocelyne Huot, General President of the "Les Brebis de Jésus" Movement in Québec
• Teresa Maria Wilsnagh, Regional Director of the Catholic Bible Foundation of Cape Town, Durban and

Johannesburg, South Africa
• Sr. M. Clare Millea, Superior General of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in the United States
• Silvia Sanchini, National Woman's President of the Italian Catholic University Federation

Aisha Taylor, a 27-year-old American Catholic representing the "Women's Ordination Conference," said that while the presence of women in the synod is welcome, they still represent no more than ten percent of participants.

"None of them has a vote, and few of them have a voice," Taylor told a Rome press conference Wednesday morning.

Taylor said women's ordination advocates "understand the political situation in the church," and therefore do not expect this synod to address the topic. Nonetheless, she asserted that women will be ordained in the Catholic church "within my lifetime."

Recent popes have repeatedly said that the Catholic church cannot ordain women, because Jesus did not call women to the priesthood and because the priest stands in persona Christi, representing Christ, who was himself male.
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