

Women at synod for Africa urge bishops to face reality of discrimination

VATICAN CITY - The superior general of the Missionary Sisters of Our Lady of the Apostles invoked something at least one bishop thought was a nightmare: She asked members of the Synod of Bishops for Africa to imagine a church without women.

Sister Felicia Harry, the superior general from Ghana, told the synod Oct. 9 that women are happy to “teach catechism to children, decorate parish churches, clean, mend and sew vestments,” but they also want to be on parish and diocesan councils.

Women want to collaborate “not only when already-made decisions are to be implemented,” but when the decisions are being made, she said.

“We do not want to take over the responsibility of the parish priest; we just want to be equal partners in the Lord’s vineyard,” Sister Harry said before asking the bishops to spend two minutes that evening trying to imagine what their churches would be without the presence and involvement of women.

“I am not even daring to imagine” such a thing, Archbishop Charles G. Palmer-Buckle of Accra, Ghana, told the press after Sister Harry spoke.

“In Africa, 75 percent of the churches’ population are women - we have to be honest about that - and it’s not only the Catholic Church; all the Pentecostal churches and all the rest acknowledge that. Without the women, I think most of the churches would be boring and we would not have prayers being offered seriously for issues that are very relevant,” the archbishop said.

Archbishop Palmer-Buckle said Sister Harry was “dead right” to call the bishops to recognize the contributions of women and to find better ways to ensure their voice is heard and talents used at all levels of the church.

Sister Pauline Odia Bukasa, superior general of the Ba-Maria Sisters from Congo,

told the synod that women are “marginalized at every level,” excluded from development programs and the first victims of war.

“At this moment, when the church in Africa is engaged in working for the reconciliation of its sons and daughters, women can no longer be ignored,” she said.

“We, mothers and consecrated women, ask the fathers of this church-family to promote the dignity of women and give them the space needed to develop their talents in the structures of the church and society,” she said.

Notre Dame de Namur Sister Genevieve Uwamariya, a survivor of the genocide in Rwanda, told the synod that her life was changed through the work of a Catholic women’s group called the Ladies of Divine Mercy.

Three years after most of her family members died in a massacre amid the Hutu-Tutsi violence of 1994, the Ladies of Divine Mercy came to town telling those imprisoned for genocide to ask forgiveness from survivors to free the survivors of the weight of hatred and a desire for vengeance. The women asked survivors to offer their forgiveness to free the accused of the evil that dwelt within them.

When she agreed to go into the prison, she said, “one of the prisoners rose in tears and fell at my knees, begging out loud, ‘Mercy.’ I was petrified.”

Sister Uwamariya said she recognized the man as someone she had grown up with and was moved with pity. She said she told him, “You are and will remain my brother.”

The wisdom of the Ladies of Divine Mercy and the institution of parish-based associations bringing together survivors and those accused of participating in the genocide demonstrate that “it is possible to reestablish love and begin the healing that permits mutual liberation,” she told the synod.