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Synod of World Bishops

Women take center stage in sessions

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — Advancing the role of women in the church was one of the hot discussion topics at the world Synod of Bishops in Rome this October.

Each of the synod's 14 small working groups, where the groundwork is laid for the meeting's final propositions, called for greater involvement of women in decision-making positions in the church.

The same issue will confront the U.S. bishops when they meet in Washington this November. They are scheduled to debate and vote on a statement on women drafted by their Committee on Women in Society and in the Church.

In the wake of the recent papal declaration that women cannot be priests, the proposed U.S. statement says, "we need to look at alternative ways in which women can exercise leadership in the church."

The issue of women and the church came up at other meetings as well:

— At a national convention of U.S. canon lawyers in Atlanta, one of the topics of discussion was the increasing role of lay people, mainly women, in parish leadership.

— In the Chicago suburb of Schaumburg, the Theresians, an organization of Catholic women devoted to deeper spiritual life, held an international meeting on the theme, "Women of Witness, Wisdom and Wit: The Challenge of Christian Women in the '90s."

— In Vienna, Austria, a Vatican official attending a planning session for next year's U.N.-sponsored Fourth World Conference on Women said he saw "signs of a positive change, of greater realism" among conference planners, with renewed attention to issues of family values and women's role as mother.

The official, Bishop Paul Cordes of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, said the change of atmosphere reflected a diminishing influence of the "ideological feminism" that he considered prevalent in earlier world conferences on women.

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At the bishops' synod in Rome — a monthlong meeting held about every three years to discuss a major concern in church life — this year's topic was consecrated life.

But women religious outnumber men religious by more than 4-to-1 worldwide, and sisters are central figures in the whole question of how women serve the church. So it was no surprise that questions of women's roles and sisters' roles converged at the synod.

African Bishop Ernest Kumbo of Owando, Congo, made the biggest news splash in the first two weeks of the meeting, when he proposed Oct. 10 that women should be made lay cardinals.

He said he hoped the synod would be inspired with "a prophetic attitude, which could lead to the nomination of women ... to positions of responsibility, including to the highest posts in the hierarchy, as lay cardinals if possible."

Current church law requires cardinals to be ordained, but in past centuries lay men have occasionally been installed as cardinals.

British Cardinal George Basil Hume of Westminster, the synod's recording secretary, told

reporters at an Oct. 14 press conference that women have always played important roles in the church, but that there is a need to involve them more completely, especially in decision-making positions.

"The criticism is that we are a masculine-led church," he said, so the real question is "how do we share power. It's power we're talking about."

In the synod hall, Archbishop Maurice Couture of Quebec struck a similar note. The church teaches the equality of men and women, he said, and "one can rightly expect the deeds of the church to be consonant with its discourse."

It is fidelity to church teaching, not a concession to secular values, to "give women a status (in the church) which will witness to a healthy equality of persons in the eyes of the people of

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Look for more on religious life in the Vocations pullout.