

Women

Continued from page 1

God," he said.

Cardinal James A. Hickey of Washington, leader of one of the smaller language groups whose sessions occupied the third week of synod proceedings, echoed that view in reporting on his group's conclusions. "Whatever is to be done in the church, except when it involves jurisdiction and holy orders, should be done by the most competent person regardless of gender," he said.

He said his group believed that in a culture marked by discrimination and the treatment of women as objects, the church must make clear its teaching on the equal dignity of men and women and promote collaboration between men and women.

Archbishop William H. Keeler of Baltimore, leader of the U.S. delegation to the synod, called the women's movement a significant factor in development of U.S. religious life in recent decades.

In an Oct. 14 synod speech he said that "tensions continue over the understanding of the role of women in the church and in society and of how best to foster collaboration in planning and action in the particular church."

Despite those tensions, he added, U.S. men and women religious "continue to make magnificent, generous contributions of leadership and service in education, health care, parish and diocesan ministries across our country."

Another U.S. synod member, however, struck a different note on the tensions affecting religious life. Bishop James C. Timlin of Scranton, Pa., called for a return to "a traditional understanding of the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience" and an end to ex-

perimentation.

"We have dialogued enough. We have experimented enough. Some would say too much," he said.

U.S. Mercy Sister Doris Gottemoeller, head of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas and a papally appointed observer at the synod, told synod members that apostolic women religious such as those in her order "understand feminism — the integral development of the full potential of women — as a sign of our times and as gift to the church."

"Our identification with women and as women animates and shapes our mission," she said.

The proposed statement of the U.S. bishops on women in the church, to be debated when the bishops meet Nov. 14-17, calls for a churchwide dialogue on women's "leadership in the church, equality of women and men, and diversity of gifts."

"We commit ourselves to enhancing the participation of women at all levels of the church," it says.

Several U.S. women religious from the National Coalition of American Nuns, in Rome for the synod, set up an electronic information exchange network on synod developments for women religious around the world and hosted discussion sessions on the synod and the church and women.

Three U.S. women religious with NCAN walked across St. Peter's Square Oct. 22 carrying banners protesting the exclusion of women as voting members of the synod.

There were 59 women at the synod as observer or experts, but synod rules restrict voting membership to ordained persons — selected bishops from around the world, top Roman Curia officials and a few heads of male religious orders.

Contributing to this story were Cindy Wooden in Rome, Jerry Filteau in Washington and Sue O'Brien in Chicago.

Synods assemble leaders to discuss major themes

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — The October Synod of Bishops is the ninth general assembly of the synod, which is convened every few years to explore a specific theme and make recommendations to the pope.

Although its advice is generally reflected in an eventual papal document, a synod of bishops is not a decision-making body.

The current synod brings together church leaders from around the world to discuss the role of religious orders and their estimated 1.2 million members.

The focus on the church's men and women religious — priests, women religious and brothers who have consecrated their lives to God through a specific religious community — is what distinguishes this assembly from the others. Almost three-fourths of religious today — about 866,000 — are women religious. Religious priests — as distinct from diocesan priests — number about 145,000.

Two previous synods, in 1971 and 1985, dealt with the ministerial priesthood and priestly formation, while a synod on the laity was held in 1987. This is the first time since the Second Vatican Council that representatives of the whole church have examined the challenges facing the approximately

3,700 active religious orders.

Another unusual aspect of this synod is the fact that of the 224 bishops participating, 94 are themselves members of religious orders. Although only bishops and about 20 priests are full voting members of the synod, Pope John Paul II named 59 women religious as auditors or consulting experts to the assembly.

The synod schedule featured nearly two weeks of speeches followed by small-group discussions. Throughout, specialists have been working to draw together a document reflecting the content of the debate. Most synods end with the approval of a set of propositions, which are then sent to the pope for possible elaboration into a document.

The first synod was held in 1967 and dealt with a number of faith and doctrine issues. Other topics covered by subsequent general assemblies included evangelization, catechesis, the family and peace. Two extraordinary assemblies of the synod have been convened: in 1969 to discuss relations with other religions and the implementation of Vatican II. In addition, special synods were called to examine specific local issues for the Middle East in 1980, for Central and Eastern Europe in 1991, and for Africa in April.



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