Vatican



by Heidi Schlumpf

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Although women's voices are welcome and included at the ongoing Catholic Synod of Bishops in Rome, women should not be allowed to vote during its deliberations, a Dutch bishop said.

"This is a bishops' synod," said Dutch Auxiliary Bishop Everard de Jong. "We have to listen to women, but there are no women bishops. We don't have women cardinals. We have to live with that."

De Jong, an auxiliary for the diocese of Roermond, Netherlands, spoke at a midday press conference Oct. 12, just hours after 10 organizations launched a petition calling for religious women superiors "to work and vote as equals alongside their brothers in Christ at meetings of the Synod of Bishops."

"As Pope Francis calls for 'a more incisive female presence' in the Church while calling the Synod 'a suitable instrument to give voice to the entire People of God …' (*Episcopalis communio* 25), we urge you to bring women into meaningful decision-making in every body of the Church, including the Synod," the petition said.

On its first day, the petition had garnered more than 2,000 signers. Organizers plan to hand deliver the petition to bishops, cardinals and all voting members at the synod, as well as to Cardinal Lorenzo Baldisseri, the synod's secretary general, beginning Oct. 18.

The petition noted that the 2015 synod on the family and this year's synod include nonordained voting members who are religious brothers.

"If male religious superiors who are not ordained can vote, then women religious superiors who are also not ordained should vote. With no ontological/doctrinal barrier, the only barrier is the biological sex of the religious superior," the petition said.

But De Jong insisted that while "the presence of women is so clear and their voices so much heard" at the synod, they should not be allowed to vote at the Oct. 3-28 gathering, during which 267 prelates and 72 auditors are considering the needs of young people today.

Voting "is about who's going to be in charge," De Jong said, adding later that bishops "are responsible in the church. I can't help it; that's Jesus' choice," because he chose male apostles.

The bishop also said that women and men are different, joking: "They say man is the head of the family, but the woman is the neck and they turn the head, where we go."

But the bishops take women's concerns seriously, he said, and women's voices have been included in the pre-synod and as auditors at the month-long event. He also said he received input from women he knows, including his three sisters.

"We listen to women, I think," he said.

"Women's voices should be heard and they should be taken into account in the final document," De Jong added. He suggested that perhaps women could organize themselves into a "constitutive council" to communicate what they are thinking to the pope.

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Among the organizations coordinating the petition are Catholic Women Speak, New Ways Ministry, Voices of Faith, Women's Ordination Conference and FutureChurch. Deborah Rose-Milavec, executive director of FutureChurch, attended the press conference and asked about women and voting.

De Jong addressed her directly, asking her to "clarify your real reasons" for the question. "Is [it] the male castle you can't conquer?" he said. "Or is it a real concern that women's cases and the real issues of women are not addressed?"

If there were important issues the bishops weren't addressing, "please let us know," he said.

"Let women speak up. Don't let them be suffocated in their voices," De Jong said.

Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Robert Barron said at the Oct. 12 press conference he agreed that at a synod of bishops, the "bishops alone" should vote. But he said women — especially young women — were "absolutely" present in the small groups at the synod.

Barron's small group includes South Korean Sr. Mina Kwon, one of eight women religious allowed to attend the synod in an advisory capacity.

Kwon, a member of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Paul of Chartres, said her impression as a woman religious is that "the situation is getting better."

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