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Participants return to their seats after a break during an international symposium on the pries

Participants return to their seats after a break during an international symposium on the priesthood at the Vatican Feb. 17, 2022. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

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VATICAN CITY — Promoting better collaboration between women and men in the Catholic Church is not primarily about equality but about allowing the church to fulfill the mission given to it by God, said women speakers at a Vatican conference on priesthood.

"The church needs women and must call them to serve" for the good of all people, said Michelina Tenace, a professor of dogmatic theology at Rome's Pontifical Gregorian University and consultant for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

"If the church does not make this call, a ministry risks being seen as a right. But serving is not a right, it is a duty," she said Feb. 18 in a panel on "Women and ministry — the state of investigation."

Tenace was joined on the panel by Salesian Sister Alessandra Smerilli, an economist, interim secretary of the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development and an adviser to the governing office of Vatican City State; and Martha Olavarrieta de Gómez Serrano, who had been appointed along with her now late-husband Enrique to the Pontifical Council for the Laity by St. John Paul II in 2004.

The Feb. 17-19 international conference was organized by Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet, prefect of the Congregation for Bishops, to look at the theology of the priesthood and its relationship to consecrated life which, together with lay vocations, are the three ways in which the faithful of Christ realize the call to holiness inscribed in baptism.

In her talk, Tenace spoke about the work of the commission she was appointed to by Pope Francis in 2016 to study the women referred to as deaconesses in the New Testament and the role of women deacons in the early church. A second commission with different members was set up in 2020 after the first commission said more study was needed and it was unable to reach a full consensus on whether there was an ordination with the same form and same aim as the ordination of men.

The disappearance of women deacons in the Latin-rite church did not mean women disappeared from the church or no longer had a place, she said. Their holiness continued to be recognized and their service was absolutely utilized.

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All the baptized are called to serve humanity, she said, so the question is not about restoring what existed in the past, but "what ministry do the people of God need today?"

"And why is it so urgent to establish ministries for women?" she asked.

"Please," she said, "let it be not to recognize the dignity of women, but to recognize the true identity of the church."

It is through this duty to serve, like Jesus, that the church must constantly be asking itself, even looking at its structures and hierarchies: "How can we better serve humanity seeking salvation and in the way most in compliance with the mandate of the Lord," she said.

Sister Smerilli told the conference ministry should be examined not from a perspective of "claiming" rights or powers, but from the "logic of communion" as part of the covenant between God and human beings.

The Book of Genesis describes the covenant as beginning with God entrusting the care of the garden of creation to both a man and a woman — a responsibility that remains today.

"How would our relationships and the carrying out of our duties and roles change, even within the church, if we were to take seriously this assertion," that God has entrusted the earth to the covenant of both men and women, she asked.

"And why do we rarely succeed in doing this?" she said.

While the number of women at decision-making levels in the church is still "too low," she said, the issue is not simply about "making room for women" or seeing the problem as a "competition for power."

The essential point is "that it is not simply and only women who suffer from this situation, but the church and its mission," too, when women's gifts and call to service are underutilized, Sister Smerilli said.

Just as God's image shines brightly in the duality of male and female, "only together as baptized men and women will we be a reflection of him," she said. It is a vocation for men and women to be together in reciprocity and dialogue, in communion and fruitfulness in every area of human experience.

"Women are a rightful part of this advancement toward the truth," inspired by the Holy Spirit, she said. Even during those times in history that were marked by a strong patriarchal culture, women in the church and "female charisms" achieved "extraordinary things."

The church is called to seek "alliances" between men and women, as they both move forward on this common earthly journey, despite any resistance to change, she said.

Constructive, unifying and mission-oriented collaboration among men and women, both religious and lay, and of multiple generations, already happens in many places, parishes or associations, Sister Smerilli said.

But it will require continuing to observe and listen more to the Holy Spirit who "will suggest new paths and choices that are courageous and not divisive" because they will arise from thoughtful reflection and lived communion, she said.

Olavarrieta, who is a mother of nine children, was active in family ministry in Mexico City and helped organize the World Meeting of Families there in 2009, spoke of the ways families cultivate the faith among its members and reach out to evangelize and serve the larger community.

It is a vocation of saying "yes" to the gifts and graces of life and marriage and journeying together with priests.

"Women have always walked alongside Jesus, reaching out to him as mothers, sisters, daughters, and this is how he addressed them," she said through a translator. And priests today continue to need the many kinds of women like Jesus encountered and relied on for carrying out his mission.