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A woman with light brown hair and wearing a pink and orange scarf and orange shirt smiles i

Mónica Santamarina, president general of WUCWO, poses for a photograph at WUCWO's Vatican offices June 1, 2023. (CNS photo/Lola Gomez)



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The Catholic Church's synodal process is an invitation to invest in the pastoral and professional formation of women in the church, said the newly elected president of a global network of Catholic women's associations.

In a weeklong general assembly that she called an "exercise in synodality," Mónica Santamarina was elected president general of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations, WUCWO, by 832 representatives of Catholic women's organizations from 38 countries.

The assembly gathered in Assisi May 14-20 for the first time since the COVID-19 pandemic under the theme, "Women of WUCWO: Artisans of human fraternity for world peace."

"When you have different nationalities and cultures come together there are difficult moments, but you see how dialogue moves forward with understanding and coexistence," she told Catholic News Service in WUCWO's Vatican offices June 1. "It all contributes to an environment of synodality, of prayer and openness."

As a network of organizations that represents some eight million members worldwide, WUCWO has a bird's eye view on the state of Catholic women around the world. In its general assembly, participants set priorities for the organization's next four years focusing on religious freedom, the global food crisis, promoting family love, solidarity with migrants and what Santamarina said is particularly pertinent in the church today: increasing women's formation and participation in the church through a spirit of synodality.

In Africa, Latin America and Asia, she said, "women don't feel capable of participating" in the church; "they are insecure." That phenomenon is linked to gaps in education, salary, work formation and study opportunities, only worsened by the pandemic, which prevent women from fully developing themselves, Santamarina told CNS.

"One way to close those gaps is through greater formation of women in all ways, theological, pastoral, professional, so that they have a larger and better presence in the different spheres of the church," Santamarina said. "We have to work so that each woman recognizes all the dignity she has, all of her potential, since the first person to recognize it has to be the woman herself. She needs to be aware of her worth."

Already, she said, the church's synodal process has been an important step in making women feel that they have a significant role to play in the life of the church.

In March, the World Women's Observatory, a WUCWO project that seeks to gather data on the state of Catholic women worldwide, published a survey of 459 women who played a leadership role in the synodal process at the diocesan, national or continental levels.

The observatory is meant to give visibility to vulnerable women and develop strategies to support them with church, state and non-governmental partners. It was adopted to become a permanent undertaking of WUCWO during its general assembly.

In an audience with WUCWO representatives May 13, Pope Francis asked the hundreds of women gathered at the Vatican "to listen to the lament of so many women in the world who suffer injustice, abandonment, discrimination, poverty or inhuman treatment since childhood in some cases."

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The results of the synod survey, Santamarina said, show that the majority of women involved in the synod felt they had been listened to -- 55% of women said they were "always" or "usually" listened to -- but also that an important percentage felt their opinions had not been taken into consideration. Of those surveyed, 19% said they were rarely listened to and 2% said they were never listened to, while 20% said they were not effectively involved in decision-making during the synodal process.

Among the biggest obstacles to women's participation in the church that arose in the survey, Santamarina said, is clericalism -- a sense of ecclesial superiority on the part of the clergy often condemned by Francis -- coupled with a fear of men by some women in the church. One way to combat that, she proposed, is through a greater presence of women in seminaries and throughout priestly formation, to allow women and men, and clergy and laity, to "walk together as church."

"It's not about substitution or 'taking something away,' it's about working together with women to bring their gifts to the table and giving them a greater voice in decision-making," she said, "otherwise, the church is losing a real richness, the church needs to rely on the experience of women."

The survey showed that while certain regions, namely Europe and Latin America, called for the female diaconate, Santamarina said that the most prevalent theme in

the results was the call for increased involvement of women in decision-making in the church.

While Santamarina welcomed changes in structures of the church that give women increased responsibility in the church -- she called the pope's decision to make some three dozen women voting members in October's Synod of Bishops "very important" -- she stressed the need for Catholic women to remain united in church teaching throughout the synodal process.

"When you begin to open a door, all of the sudden you want to push it wide open. But you need to find a balance which is important," she said. "For us, it is the magisterium of the pope that guides us. We are always under the light of the pope's magisterium, and that is what helps us not become polarized, to not go to the extremes."

Santamarina noted that a recurrent and "natural" fear is that once the synod ends in October 2024, "the church will again close its doors," which is why she said the push for women to become more active participants in the church should not be limited to the synod. While women need to be encouraged to advocate for themselves, "they also need the ongoing opportunity to do so," she said.

Ensuring a lasting push for women's participation in the church involves engaging with young women today, Santamarina said, which will be one of WUCWO's priorities over the next four years. She told CNS that Catholic organizations today must implement flexible ways of working to create space for young people to get involved.

"Women today are overworked, they have long workdays and demanding family responsibilities, so the options for their participation in the church need to be adjusted to these realities," she said.

Although she recognized that the slow pace of change in the church can be frustrating for young people, "the best changes happen from within, even if it moves slowly and requires some patience," Santamarina said.

"This synodal process is showing us what synodality is," she said. "There are still many challenges, but the process is progress."