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A Black woman wearing a colorful outfit and headscarf leans down to talk to Pope Francis, wh

Pope Francis greets Congolese Sr. Josée Ngalula, a Sister of St. Andrew and one of five women theologians on the International Theological Commission, a body that studies theological questions for the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, at the Vatican Nov. 30, 2023. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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Asking pardon for speaking plainly, Pope Francis told members of the International Theological Commission that "one of the great sins we have had is 'masculinizing' the church," which also can be seen by the fact that only five of the commission members are women.

The pope, who appoints the 28 members of the commission, said the church needs to make more progress in balancing such bodies because "women have a capacity for theological reflection that is different from what we men have."

Francis met members of the commission at the Vatican Nov. 30. He handed them a prepared text, which he described as a "beautiful speech with theological things,"

but said that because of his ongoing respiratory problems due to bronchitis, "it's better that I don't read it."

But greeting members of the group, the pope said that perhaps his conviction about the importance of women theologians comes from the fact that "I've studied a lot the theology of a woman," Hanna-Barbara Gerl-Falkovitz, and her work on Fr. Romano Guardini, a German priest, philosopher and theologian, who died in 1968.

Coincidently, Gerl-Falkovitz is one of four German women who wrote to Francis about their concerns regarding the German Catholic Church's Synodal Path. In a letter published by a German newspaper Nov. 21, Francis responded to the women saying, "I, too, share this concern about the numerous concrete steps that are now being taken by large parts of this local church that threaten to move further and further away from the common path of the universal church."

Francis told members of the commission that at the next meeting of his international Council of Cardinals, "we will have a reflection on the feminine dimension of the church."

Providing no other details, he repeated what he has said in the past: "The church is woman. And if we do not understand who women are, what the theology of a woman is, we will never understand what the church is."

The problem "is not solved in a ministerial way, that's another thing," he said, repeating his belief in the concept that in the church there is a "Petrine principle" and a "Marian principle" that describe the important but different roles women and men play in the Catholic Church.

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"You can debate this, but the two principles are there," the pope said. "It is more important to have the Marian [dimension] than the Petrine," because the church is the bride of Christ.

Francis said having more women on the commission would help, but the theologians also need to dedicate more energy to studying the issue and to "de-masculinizing" the church.

"I talked too much, and it hurt," the pope told them before joining them in reciting the Lord's prayer.

In his prepared text, Francis encouraged commission members to continue work on "an evangelizing theology that promotes dialogue with the world of culture," and decides what questions and challenges to focus on by listening to concerns that come from the grassroots.

The pope also focused on the commission's work helping the Catholic Church prepare to celebrate the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea.

A rediscovery of the council and its teachings, he said, can help the church in evangelization, in growing in synodality and in the search for Christian unity.

"At Nicaea, faith was professed in Jesus the only-begotten Son of the Father; he became man for us and for our salvation and is 'God from God, light from light,'" the pope said. His is "the light that illuminates existence with the love of the Father."

Theologians, the pope said, need to help "spread new and surprising glimmers of the eternal light of Christ" in the church and "in the darkness of the world."

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