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Doctrinal congregation convokes meeting on role of women in the church

by Cindy Wooden by Catholic News Service



Vatican City — Leaders of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith spent three days in late September listening to women theologians, canon lawyers, Scripture scholars and specialists in other academic fields talk about roles women have played in the Catholic church and roles they could play in the future.

After the symposium Sept. 26-28 was over, the congregation issued a brief statement outlining the topics discussed and listing the women who made formal presentations. The congregation said the papers will be published at a later date.

Cardinal Gerhard Müller, prefect of the doctrinal congregation, opened the meeting, which involved about 50 people, mostly women, and officials and consultants to the congregation, the statement said.

The theme of "the role of women in the church" was explored first by looking at "the definition of the feminine vocation in Catholic tradition," and proceeded to a discussion about concrete roles women have played and can play within the church.

All of the main papers were presented by women, several of whom are or have been members of the Vatican-related International Theological Commission or the International Biblical Commission. Others serve as consultants to Vatican offices or professors at Catholic universities.

The doctrinal congregation did not provide specifics about the content of the talks. It said, for example, that Barbara Hallensleben, a theologian teaching in Switzerland, looked at the "feminine vocation" starting from the idea of the priesthood of all the baptized and in the sacrament of marriage. Margaret Harper McCarthy, a professor at The Catholic University of America in Washington, gave the formal response.

French biblicist Anne-Marie Pelletier and Mary Healy, a professor of Scripture at Sacred Heart Seminary in Detroit, spoke about the important contributions of women scholars to biblical studies, the statement said.

Other topics included the role of women in the education of priests; women as spiritual directors and retreat directors; canon law provisions regarding women's roles in church decision-making bodies; and "sexual difference," a theme treated by Spanish anthropologist Blanca Castilla Cortazar and Australian theologian Tracey Rowland, dean of the John Paul II Institute for Marriage and Family in Melbourne.

The doctrinal congregation statement said that in addition to the formal presentations, participants "listened to interesting and moving testimonies" of the experiences of women in the church, in theology, working in the Roman Curia or for bishops' conferences, in interreligious dialogue and ecumenism and in the field of Catholic charity.

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