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Women share personal, traditional stories of faith at Vatican event

by Joshua J. McElwee

Vatican City — As Katrine Camilleri recounted the story, her eyes filled with tears.

In the fall, the Maltese lawyer spoke with families who had attempted to sail across the Mediterranean in search of safety. Refugees from the Syrian conflict, the families' craft had been shot while leaving. Approximately 260 of the 400 people estimated aboard lost their lives when the ship sank after taking on water about 60 miles away from the Italian island of Lampedusa.

Of those lost, about 100 were thought to be children. Camilleri recalled talking to a father who survived while his child had not.

The father, she said, told her he thought they had killed their own children by deciding to flee Syria. Choking on her words, Camilleri said she thought to herself then: "Your children are dead because of the walls we put up to protect ourselves."

"We're fighting walls that we built and we keep there," said Camilleri, the director of Jesuit Refugee Service in Malta, referring to European restrictions of aiding refugees. "Walls that are a reflection of our fears, our indifference ... even if it is at the cost of someone else."

Camilleri, the 2007 winner of the United Nations Nansen Refugee Award, spoke Saturday during a Vatican event to celebrate the role of women in the Catholic church and the wider world.

Co-sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications and the Fidel Götz Foundation, a Liechtenstein-based charitable trust, the event was titled "Voices of Faith." Camilleri and 10 other women shared their stories of faith and work.

Live-streamed online, it was something of a split between personal, touching stories of struggles women face in various parts of the world and conservative interpretations of church practices.

Another speaker, for example, was Augustinian Sr. Abir Hanna, a Lebanese monastic who used sexual imagery to discuss her opinions of the value of monastic life.

Focusing on the role of monastic life in birthing new understandings of the faith, Hanna referred specifically to the role of the uterus in female physiology.

"The uterus is a well-hidden organ in the body of a woman, but it is unique, irreplaceable in order to give birth to children," Hanna said. Calling the female reproductive parts "small but able to dilate for birth," she continued: "Our life is like that organ: It is secluded ... but what gets out is determined by one purpose, creating new life."

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Jocelyne Khoueiry, a Lebanese laywoman who led a battalion of women during the country's 1975-1990 civil war and later helped organize Christian chaplains, also shared her story.

Khoueiry said she joined a militia of other young girls in 1975 "in a spirit of competition" to show they could "defend our country exactly like men." She said she had a prayer experience during one battle in the conflict, where she found a sense of faith for the first time.

The experience, she said, occurred when she and her companions had run out of munitions and she made a sign of the cross and threw a grenade on their opponents.

Years later, Khoueiry said, she was asked to lead up a new group of chaplains in the militia. Khoueiry said as the numbers of women joining her group grew, "many young people changed their lives, their way of defending themselves."

The group, she said, learned "the difference between the right to defend oneself and being violent."

"We are defending our country by defending our community. We are not entitled to do more than that," Khoueiry said.

"We are Christians, and we are defending the Christian presence both in Lebanon and the Middle East," she said. "If we do not behave like Christians, we shall be charged for this wrong attitude."

The Voices of Faith event was held at the Cinema Vaticano, a small converted chapel right inside the Vatican walls near the Hotel Santa Marta, where Pope Francis lives.

Organizers tied the event to remarks the pontiff gave in an interview with Jesuit Fr. Antonio Spadaro in the fall, when Francis said it is "necessary to broaden the space within the church for a more incisive feminine presence."

Other speakers included Comboni Missionary Sr. Azezet Kidane, known for her work against human trafficking and a 2012 recipient of the U.S. State Department's Trafficking in Persons Heroes Award.

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