

## Women religious take the podium at Africa synod

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 9, 2009



Bishop Joachim Ntahondereye of Muyinga, Burundi, talks with Marguerite Barankitse, a synod participant from Burundi, as they leave a session of the Synod of Bishops for Africa at the Vatican Oct. 8. (CNS/Paul Haring)

### Rome

The Synod for Africa is primarily a gathering of bishops, so it's only natural that in its early days, male voices have dominated the discussion. Friday morning, however, a handful of women finally had their turn at the microphone -- and by all accounts, they certainly made the most of it.

Synod participants told *NCR* that the women made star turns, earning strong rounds of applause from the roughly 300 bishops, members of religious congregations, lay experts and other listeners inside the synod hall.

Those participants spoke on background, since they are not authorized to discuss what happens in the synod hall with the press.

One of the women who made an impression today was Saint Mary of Namur Sr. Geneviève Uwamariya of Rwanda, who argued that reconciliation (which is a key element in the synod's official theme) is possible, even in the wake of horrific violence such as the genocide in her country in 1994.

Uwamariya described her work in prison ministry, saying that she visits inmates who have been charged with war crimes and crimes against humanity for their roles in the Rwandan genocide. Among other things, she said, she sometimes carries letters written by the inmates to the families of those whose deaths they caused, asking for forgiveness.

Uwamariya, who lost family members herself in the violence, said that she was initially unwilling to carry such letters, until she met an inmate who had been involved in the murders of her own family members. That inmate asked her forgiveness, she said, adding that the experience changed her profoundly.

Her own life story, Uwamariya told the synod, proves that reconciliation is possible, even in the most improbable circumstances. According to people present in the hall, her speech was greeted by a strong round of applause.

If anything, sources said that the roar of approval was even more tangible for Our Lady of the Apostles Sr. Felicia Harry of Ghana, who devoted her talk to the role of women in the church.

Among other things, Harry stressed that most Catholic women are eager to collaborate with the church's clerical authorities -- but "collaborate" not just in the sense of carrying out instructions, but also in terms of being involved in the decision-making process.

Sources said that when Harry came to the end of her allotted five minutes and the bell rang indicating it was time to wrap up, she closed by inviting the bishops to a thought exercise. She asked that before they went to bed tonight, they spend just a couple of minutes contemplating "what the church would be like without women."

That line, sources said, brought laughter, and then a volley of applause.

A third woman also spoke this morning, Sr. Pauline Odia Bukasa of the "Ba-Maria" Sisters in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. According to participants in the synod, Bukasa told synod members that women disproportionately bear the brunt of the various crises that sometimes plague Africa, particularly violence and poverty.

Congo in particular has been wracked by several cycles of violence in the last two decades. The center of a regional war centered on the Great Lakes, Congo has seen an estimated one and a half to two million people killed over that span of time, and tens of millions turned into refugees and displaced persons.

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