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Remembering the women of Vatican II

John L. Allen Jr. | Oct. 12, 2012 NCR Today
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Yesterday marked the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council in 1962, and Benedict XVI marked the occasion with a Mass to open the ?Year of Faith,? featuring a special message from Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople.

That may have been the biggest event in Rome yesterday dedicated to the memory of Vatican II, but not necessarily the most interesting. A strong candidate for that distinction came with a small gathering hosted by the Lay Centre and presented to a visiting group of American lay ministers, because it lifted up the memory of an otherwise largely forgotten cohort: the women of the council.

(The Lay Centre was co-founded by American theologian Donna Orsuto, who teaches at the Gregorian University, originally with the idea of offering a toehold for laity studying in Rome. Over the years, it?s become a venue for all sorts of interesting events and conversations.)

Thursday night, Orsuto spoke about the women of Vatican II.

In one sense, she conceded, it?s a short story to tell. Not a single woman actually spoke during any of the four sessions of the council, and early on, a female relative of Cardinal Giovanni Battista Montini (who would go on to become Pope Paul VI) was actually denied entry when she showed up for a Mass.

Yet by taking a broader view of things, Orsuto said, it?s clear that the voice of women was actually heard. She distinguished three phases of influence ? the run-up to Vatican II, the council itself, and the reception afterwards, which she described in terms of ?planting,? ?nourishing,? and ?harvesting? the fruits of Vatican II.

In the years leading up to Vatican II, Orsuto said, women were active in international lay movements, playing a key role in the ?Congress of the Lay Apostolate? which helped set the stage for the council?s thinking on the lay role in the church. She quoted a 1951 dispatch from a French journalist covering the congress, noting the ?most scrupulous equality reigned between nations, classes and sexes?.

Orsuto described how Pope Pius XII created a ?Permanent Committee for International Congress of the Lay Apostolate,? again featuring the leadership of a number of prominent lay women such as Maria Vittoria Donadeo from Catholic Action in Italy and Rosemary Goldie from Australia. (Orsuto also noted that when John XXIII once gave a blessing to the group, he tripped over its cumbersome name, and eventually just said he wanted to bless ?this committee ... it ends with ?laity?.?)

Orsuto also cited the World Union of Catholic Women?s Associations as another venue in which thinking percolated on issues such as the relationship between the hierarchy and the laity, and the broader relationship between the church and the world, eventually helping to shape documents such as *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*.

?Long before the council, these were forums for shared reflection among the hierarchy, clergy and laity, and the bishops and *periti* (theological experts) at the council shared this experience,? she said.

During the council, Paul VI initially appointed 15 women as ?auditors? in September 1964. By the end, 23 such women (including both religious and laity) served at the council, and their contributions have now been documented in a new Italian book titled *Madri del Concilio* (?Mothers of the Council?) by historian and theologian Adriana Valerio.

Three Americans were among these ?mothers of the council?:

- Loretto Sr. Mary Luke Tobin
- Basilian Sr. Claudia (Anna) Feddish, of the Byzantine rite
- Catherine McCarthy, president of the National Council of Catholic Women

Orsuto added a couple of comic footnotes. For one thing, Paul VI gave a talk welcoming these women to the council on Sept. 14, 1962, which was certainly a nice gesture, but with this small hiccup: The women weren?t there yet. The first to arrive didn?t join the council until several days later.

Women also inspired a bit of conciliar doggerel. As is well known, the popular coffee bars during breaks at the council had been dubbed ?Bar Jonah? and ?Bar Abbas.? Orsuto explained that a third bar was opened to accomdate the auditors, and because several were women, wags took to calling it ?Bar Nun.?

Officially speaking, the auditors had no role in the council?s deliberations, and in fact the female delegates were supposedly there only to track issues of ?special concern to women.? In reality, Orsuto said, they found creative ways to make themselves heard. (She cited Tobin?s reaction when told that her pass would get her into sessions of ?particular concern? for women: ?Good,? Orsuto quoted her as saying, ?that means I can attend them all.?)

In practice, Orsuto said, the women auditors were treated as *periti* by many participants, and freely attended the meetings of subcommittees working on council documents, especially texts that dealt with the laity. The women also met together on a weekly basis, reading draft documents and commenting on them.

Referring to these trailblazers as ?valiant women,? Orsuto said ?they worked within the structures of the church and out of love for the church, often in a very hidden way,? doing it all with ?humility, humor and integrity.?

Time didn?t allow for extended consideration of the role of women in the aftermath of the council, but Orsuto did note that the wheels are slowly grinding in the direction of an expanded role, even in Rome. Once upon a time, she noted, women needed special permission just to use the library at a pontifical university such as the Gregorian; today, she and other women are valued members of the faculty.

?Sometimes in a quiet way, women are making a contribution,? she said.

As a footnote, there has been some discussion of the church?s perceived ?woman problem? during the Oct. 7-28 Synod of Bishops, devoted to the ?New Evangelization.?

One of the most provocative speeches so far has come from Belgian Archbishop André Léonard, who noted on Wednesday that ?two-thirds of active members of the church are women,? yet ?many feel discriminated against.?

The Belgian prelate acknowledged that the ban on women priests has a lot to do with those perceptions, and argued that it needs to be better explained: ?It is time to clarify that, if the church does not ordain female priests, this is not because they are less capable or less worthy!? he said.

?On the contrary! It is solely because the priest is not only a ?minister of the rite?, but a representative of Christ the groom who came to wed humanity,? he said.

Léonard expressed gratitude for ?the massive contribution of women to evangelization? and called for ?strong gestures? from the church to underscore their importance.

?Without joyous women, recognized in their own being and proud of belonging to the church, there would be no new evangelization,? he said.

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