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Sr. Liliana Franco Echeverri, a member of the Company of Mary and president of the Latin American Confederation of Religious, speaks during a briefing about the assembly of the Synod of Bishops at the Vatican Oct. 10. (CNS/Lola Gomez)



by Rhina Guidos

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Any discussion on the mission of women in the church needs to be accompanied by reading the Gospel and examining how Jesus treated women, and that is what should be imitated, said Sr. Liliana Franco Oct. 13, making history at the Synod of Bishops by being one of more than 80 women present for the first time at an event usually attended exclusively by men.

Franco, president of the Latin American Confederation of Religious (CLAR), the largest organization of women and men religious in Central and South America and the Caribbean, admitted — in a reflection to the more than 400 participants of the historic synod — that "the journey of women in the church is full of scars" as well as pain, but God has always been there with women, she stressed.



Una monja asiste a una sesión del Sínodo de los Obispos en el Aula Pablo VI del Vaticano, el jueves 5 de octubre de 2023. (Foto: AP/Andrew Medichini)

And what's evident is that the love of God, "remains beyond the efforts of some to make invisible the presence and contribution of women in the construction of the church," said Franco, a member of the Company of Mary.

In her reflection, the sister told stories of exclusion of women. The first was about a 70-year-old female parishioner who had been taking food and Communion to the

sick in her neighborhood until a new parish priest arrived and told her that this was no longer "a mission for her" and "that Communion would be taken [now] by the eucharistic ministers, men" that he had outfitted in uniforms.

The second story was about a woman who "finished her doctorate in theology, with better grades than her male classmates, but the pontifical university where she graduated from decided it could not give her a canonical degree because she [was] a woman."

Despite the exclusion, if one pays attention, one can see that the church "has the face of a woman," evident by those who carry out the functions that keep it going, Franco said.

> 'The journey of women in the church is full of scars' as well as pain, but God has always been there with women, said Sr. Liliana Franco, president of CLAR.
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"Gatherings, parish groups, liturgical celebrations, apostolic ministries in the communities, the quality of the reflections and the warmth of the dedication of the church is woven many times — and most of the time — in the womb of women," she said.

She added, "The church is mother, teacher; she also is sister and disciple; she is feminine, and that does not exclude men, because in everyone, men and women, dwells the strength of the feminine, of wisdom, kindness, tenderness, strength, creativity, parrhesia and the ability to produce life and to face situations with daring."

Yet the mission of women in the church is often seen solely as "maternal, basic," she said.

The synod opens a path, however, to contemplate a new way of instituting relationships that make renewed identities possible, "more circular, fraternal and sisterly" and with a new way of carrying out ministries, in which relationships of solidarity and closeness are woven, said Franco.

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"That bond is established beyond the hierarchical and functional, in that existential space called community and in which we all feel" brothers and sisters, part of a common humanity, she added.

Her address came on a day in which synod members heard more about the topic of the mission of women in the church. It was a day in which Cardinal Jean-Claude Hollerich of Luxembourg asked in a reflection, "How can we ensure that women are an integral part of the church? Do we feel threatened? Are we ready to accept that all parts of the body [of the church] are important?"

Certainly, Jesus saw women as important people, Franco said, saying that those who want to imitate Jesus, when it comes to women in the church, need only to look at how he acted toward them.

"When it comes to thinking about the mission of women in the church, it is important to look to Jesus, to learn from him," she said.

> 'True reform comes from the encounter with Jesus, in the echo of his word, in learning from his attitudes and criteria, in the assimilation of his style' of doing things, Sr. Liliana Franco explained.
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The Gospel gives accounts of Jesus' disposition toward women, considered outsiders at that time. And as he did with others who were outcasts, he raised them from the depths, dignified them, and "sent them," said Franco.

"True reform comes from the encounter with Jesus, in the echo of his word, in learning from his attitudes and criteria, in the assimilation of his style" of doing things, she explained.

Behind the much-talked-about desire for the greater presence and participation of women in the church, there is no ambition of power or seeking to alleviate a feeling of inferiority, nor are women looking for recognition, said Franco.

"There is a clamor to live in fidelity to God's plan and that he wants everyone to recognize [others] as brothers and sisters," particularly among those with whom he made a covenant, Franco said.

"It is about the right to participate and [share] equal co-responsibility in discernment and decision-making, but fundamentally it is a desire to live consciously and coherently, with the common dignity that baptism gives to all. A desire to serve," she argued.

Franco, one of more than 40 women religious participating in the synod, said she is hopeful that at the conclusion of the synodal process there will be a recognition that to receive Communion is "to walk in the condition of brothers and sisters and with our eyes fixed on Jesus."

It will bring to our present the banquet he offers, "in which there is room for everyone," she said, [because] "love is translated into works and the truth that embraces us all is, simply and plainly, the Gospel."

This story was originally published in Spanish Oct. 17, 2023.

This story appears in the **Synod on Synodality** feature series. View the full series.