

Maeve Heaney, director of the Xavier Centre of Theology at the Australian Catholic University, speaks at the conference, "Women Leaders: Toward a Brighter Future," March 6, 2024, at the Jesuit headquarters in Rome. The conference was sponsored by the Australian and British embassies to the Holy See and Caritas Internationalis in anticipation of International Women's Day March 8. (CNS/courtesy Kathrin Ziegler)

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Vatican City — March 7, 2024

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International Women's Day has long been an occasion for women and men connected to the Vatican to gather to discuss the role of women in the church and society.

But with the full participation of women at the synod on synodality and the assembly's reflection on the dignity and responsibility of all the baptized, many of the questions raised this year were more focused than in the past and it was clear that the "women's" issues were not set aside just for that one special day.

The two major events taking place in Rome for the March 8, 2024, celebration of International Women's Day were a daylong conference on "women leaders" sponsored by the British and Australian embassies to the Holy See and Caritas Internationalis and a two-day conference on women as "builders of humanity" hosted by the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross and co-sponsored by several pontifical universities.

Pope Francis met March 7 with people participating in the universities' conference and sent a brief message to the embassies' March 6 conference, praying that it would "bear fruit in an ever-greater commitment on the part of all, in the church and across the world, to promote respect for the equal and complementary dignity of women and men."

The discussions at the conferences ranged from the example of women saints to ways women, lay and religious, are promoting development, dignity and inclusion among women in Africa, Latin America and Asia.

Chiara Porro, the Australian ambassador to the Holy See, began her introductory remarks by paying "homage to those who have opened pathways before us, those who paved the way by championing values, many of which we now take for granted."

"I think sharing our experiences and elevating the voices of women is so critical, and having women as role models is as well as," she told Catholic News Service March 6. Quoting Marian Wright Edelman, she said, "Really, 'you can't be what you can't see,' so I think for the new generation, it's so important to see that these things are possible."

The conference on women leaders, sponsored by Caritas and the embassies, included a healthy dose of theological reflection.

"Theology can sound like a specialized field reserved for minorities who study a lot and like obscure terms. I beg to differ," said Maeve Heaney, director of the Xavier Centre for Theological Formation at the Australian Catholic University and a consecrated member of the Verbum Dei community. "I contend that theology affects how we live, move and breathe and that it feeds off real questions; 'Women in leadership, why not and how?' is one of them."

As the church tries to promote a more synodal, collaborative way of being, one in which all the baptized take responsibility for its life and mission and place their gifts at the service of the whole, Heaney said, the traditional tie between ordination and governance or authority requires further study.

"We need some robust scriptural, theological and historical reflection on baptism and on the ministerial presbyterate so as to untie the knot between governance, power and ministerial priesthood and thus allow women and other laity to help us make church structures and agencies more effective, collaborative and, hopefully, more in line with how Jesus imagines his body."

Heaney praised the late Swiss Father Hans Urs von Balthasar as a theologian, but said that like other theologians, she had problems with his reflection on "the Marian and Petrine principles in the church," notions which Francis himself has used to explain why only men are priests, but women, like Mary, have a "more important" role.

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The discourse about "complementarity" between men and women and their roles in the church also needs further study and nuance, she said. While the gifts of each baptized person should complement the others, some people use complementarity to "name the contribution of women as essentially different to that of men, pitching love, spirituality and nurturing against authority, leadership and intellect."

"I'm not suggesting that there are no differences between women and men," she said. " I'm simply asking us not to radicalize, or essentialize them."

Xavière Missionary Sister Nathalie Becquart, undersecretary of the Synod of Bishops, said the whole process of the synod on synodality -- from local listening sessions to the synodal assemblies last October and this coming October -- has been "a process to give more voice to women."

"The synod is trying to highlight and foster this vision of the church as a church of brothers and sisters in Christ with this new ecclesial style of listening, dialogue and encounter and really insisting on a key word, which is inclusion, because it's about participation of all," she said.

The synod process, SBecquart said, also made clear that just as all the male participants did not have the same position on key issues, neither do the women, but they do want to be heard.

The same goes for women in religious orders, said Loreto Sister Patricia Murray, executive secretary of the International Union of Superiors General. "We care about the church and its mission. We want to bring our experiences, insights and perspectives to shaping the mission of Christ in the world."

"We have welcomed the appointment of women, both religious and lay, to positions within Vatican dicasteries, knowing that they bring with them a diversity of perspectives and experiences," she said.

The discernment necessary to answer the doctrinal, liturgical, canonical and pastoral questions the synod has raised -- including about the possibility of ordaining women to the diaconate, for example -- "is not a quick process," Murray said, and that process of prayer, dialogue and study will need to continue even after the synod assembly in October.

"We as women have set out on the synodal journey with hope as the participation and leadership of women begins to flourish within the church and within society," she said. "But there is still much to be done."