

## Sisters ask synod to promote women's dignity in Middle East

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VATICAN CITY (CNS) -- The Catholic Church in the Middle East should be a leading example of respecting and promoting women in a region where their rights often are limited, a Maronite nun from Lebanon told the Synod of Bishops.

Holy Family Sister Marie-Antoinette Saade, an observer at the synod for the Middle East, told the bishops Oct. 18 it "indeed would be true witness" if Catholics throughout the region worked to give women their "true and rightful place" in the church and society.

Sister Saade was one of a dozen female experts and observers at the synod, which included about 250 participants.

"Should the church not be at the leading edge in this area, given the practices in some Muslim communities where women are beaten, imprisoned, violated, abused, without rights, treated as domestic slaves?" she said.

Focusing on the needs of women, who are the heart of the family, will strengthen families and in turn strengthen society, she said.

Lebanese Sister Daniella Harrouk, superior general of the Congregation of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary, said she rejoiced at the opportunity to speak at the synod, "this immense ocean of men where I have been navigating for the past five days."

She pleaded with the synod Oct. 18 to support Catholic schools in the Middle East and ensure their ongoing survival, including by setting up a schools' fund to which all the dioceses and religious orders in the region would make "substantial, generous and regular" contributions.

The Middle East's Catholic schools, the vast majority of which are run by women's orders, not only provide a quality education, she said, but they also instill values and promote dialogue in a region where "religious freedom is contested" and fanaticism is growing.

Syrian Sister Clauda Achaya Naddaf, superior of the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, said she was surprised that the synod's working document and the vast majority of synod speeches did not mention "problems concerning women in a synod for the Middle East where women are second-class."

She asked the synod's voting members -- all bishops and priests -- to include in the synod proposals a commitment to working in the region for the full implementation of international agreements on the rights of women.

She also asked the bishops to make sure women were members of their diocesan and parish councils and asked them to give greater support to the important work women do in the name of the church's mission to teach and care for the sick and the poor.



Sister Clauda Achaya Naddaf from Syria and Msgr. Philippe Brizard, former director of the aid agency L'Oeuvre d'Orient, arrive for the Synod of Bishops for the Middle East at the Vatican Oct. 19. (CNS/Paul Haring)