

LCWR looks to future with 'sturdy strength'

Doris Benavides | Aug. 16, 2011



Updated and corrected

GARDEN GROVE, Calif. -- The vice president of the Sisters of St. Francis of Dubuque, Iowa, is the new president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, and a Sister of St. Francis of Assisi from Wisconsin was chosen as president-elect.

Sister Patricia Farrell assumed the role of president for 2011-2012 at the conclusion of LCWR's Aug. 9-12 assembly. She was voted in as president-elect last year.

The president-elect is Sister Florence Deacon, director of her St. Francis, Wis.-based congregation. She has represented Franciscans at the United Nations and around the world, including as director of the New York office of Franciscan International. She has been an LCWR leader for the past 10 years at the regional and national levels.

"Mystery Unfolding: Religious Life for the World" was the theme of the annual assembly. According to organizers and participants who had attended previous conventions, this year's gathering of 650 leaders represented a wide variety of congregations across the country, with a predominant number from the East Coast.

But attendees concluded that decreasing membership in a large number of religious communities requires a review of the regional structure of LCWR, which has about 1,500 members, who are elected leaders of their religious communities.

A survey conducted by LCWR's Strategic Operational Planning Committee projected that by 2012 there will be at least 100 fewer women religious in each region. Currently, there are a total of 46,451 women consecrated to religious life in the country, down from 60,642 in 2007.

In her address to the assembly, outgoing president Dominican Sister Mary Hughes talked about the future, asking, "What is the 'new' that is emerging even as the ground shifts beneath our feet?"

She also talked about situations of "intense suffering" around the world, urging LCWR members to be agents of forgiveness and reconciliation. She gave examples of saints who endured suffering and oppression but still conveyed a message of forgiveness and reconciliation.

"Forgiveness emanates from freedom," she said, "from tapping into a wellspring of compassion and it never pretends that all is well."

She described four conditions needed for forgiveness: having a willingness to abandon the right to resentment;

seeking not revenge but reconciliation; letting go of hoping for a better past; and letting go of negative attachment to hurt.

Throughout the assembly participants contemplated how they might best respond collectively to the current needs of the world and what that response might require of those in religious life today.

One action they took was to unanimously approve a resolution to actively seek to strengthen bonds with sisters throughout the world.

Two members of LCWR's Contemporary Life Committee identified trends they said they have seen developing within the organization, such as embracing change and being willing to put everything on the table for the "sake of realigning it in service for God's mission in the world with complete selflessness."

The assembly stage was set up like a living room for "reflective presentations," and unlike previous assemblies, no rally was held this year.

It was replaced by a panel on immigration with lay activists who talked about, among other issues, the struggles of undocumented immigrant and their families who are forced to live in the shadows or are facing deportation. In response the assembly called for U.S. immigration policy reform and urged Congress to pass the DREAM Act, or the Development, Relief and Education for Alien Minors Act DREAM. The federal legislation would allow students brought to the United States as children the chance to legalize their immigration status by attending college or serving in the U.S. military.

The assembly passed a second resolution urging lawmakers to return to "civil discourse that promotes the common good, reaches out to others, engages in constructive dialogue and seeks together the way forward."

"We weep to see our country torn asunder by partisanship, increasing disparities in wealth and power, and a refusal to acknowledge the positive role government should play," it said. "We commit ourselves to this same call and to hold these concerns at the center of our prayer and to respond in love."

Benedictine Sister Maricarmen Bracamontes, a Mexican theologian, gave the assembly keynote address in Spanish. It was the first time the keynote was delivered in a language other than English.

"Your contributions to theology and spirituality have favored Latin America and Caribbean countries," said Sister Bracamontes, coordinator of a theology advisory team to the Latin American and Caribbean Confederation of Religious, which includes men and women religious.

Her religious community is based in the northeastern Mexican state of Coahuila, which shares a border with Texas and is an area that has become a fertile field for organized crime.

"The apostolic visitation had to do with your intellectual formation in different areas and your involvement in civil organizations that has increased our respect toward you," she said, referring to a Vatican study of U.S. women's religious communities conducted over the last couple of years.

In her address, titled "A Reflection on the Twilight of Traditional Institutions," Sister Bracamontes said the world is passing through "extraordinarily great change" that "questions the very methodology that we use to face our problems and see new possibilities. To ignore this radical transition, to refuse to assume the tasks that it implies is to give up our identity and to opt for irrelevance."

"We live in crucial times in every sense of the word," she said. "We must not, we cannot turn back, we have to follow God's dream in terms of values, relationships, institutions and systems. We have to question ways of

facing problems and how to respond."

She added, "There is power in Jesus as a creator and re-creator of life that helps develop a healthy growth to reach a fullness of life; a source of being and life. It's not to impose or force dominion or leadership, but rather develop creative capacity."

As the assembly came to a close, LCWR conferred its Outstanding Leadership Award on Sister Carol Keehan, a Daughter of Charity, who is president and CEO of the Catholic Health Association.

The 2012 LCWR national assembly will be held in St. Louis.

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