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Speakers call religious to prophetic lives

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Dominican Sr. Barbara Reid (NCR photo/Zoe Ryan)

KANSAS CITY, MO. -- For many religious sisters, brothers and priests, talk of diminishment isn?t anything new. With many religious growing older and becoming unable to continue their ministries, and with reduced numbers of young postulants looking to take vows, it?s just a lived reality.

But for a weekend here, as part of the Religious Formation Conference?s biennial congress, hundreds of religious order leaders and formation directors turned that discussion on its head -- focusing instead on how, with smaller numbers, religious orders are able, in the words of Marist Br. Seán Sammon, to ?renew ourselves, to reexamine the charisms of our orders, and to be nothing more and nothing less that the presence of the Holy Spirit.?

Sammon, a clinical psychologist who served as superior general for the Marists from 2001-2009, was just one of the voices heard during the Nov. 17-20 congress, using the theme ?Prophetic Religious Life: If Not Now ... When?? Speaking in a keynote presentation Nov. 18, Dominican Sr. Barbara Reid reminded religious that God?s messages to prophets often seem ?far beyond ... human capabilities.?

?But God always assures that God will be there and that God is able to overcome every obstacle,? said Reid, a professor at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago.

The Religious Formation Conference, which was founded in the 1950s as the Sister Formation Conference, is dedicated to supporting initial and continuing formation of religious in the U.S. and Canada. Representing some 236 men?s and women?s communities, it undertakes a number of programs -- including the compiling of an exhaustive four-volume resource manual for order staffs -- and hosts a congress every other year.

The theme of this year?s congress came from a desire to look at how today?s dynamics are calling orders to be more prophetic in their visions of religious life, Mercy Sr. Jeanine Tisot and Teresian Sr. Clarice Suchy, co-chairs of the conference?s executive committee, said in an interview.

In his talk Nov. 18, Sammon said orders have a unique opportunity today to reexamine their identities -- breathing new life into the charisms of their founders and challenging the church to stay true to the central

precepts of the Gospel.

Speaking in a seminar session titled ?Congregational Life and Mission: The Challenge of Communal Discernment,? Sammon told those assembled that if they undertook our age?s challenge of transformation they can ?reclaim their founding charisms? and encourage personal and congregation conversions.

?Every age has its challenges,? Sammon said. ?We need to rise to the challenges of today.?

Also speaking at the conference was Spiritan Fr. Anthony Gittins, who said there?s only ?one question worth asking? about religious life today.

?Numbers and age are of little consequence,? said Gittins in his Nov. 19 keynote address titled ?They Will Know Who We Are by How We Live: Prophecy or Pretentiousness??

?The only question worth asking,? Gittins said, ?is whether we are running, standing still, or just twitching nervously as we wait for death.?

Gittins, who is a professor of mission and culture at Catholic Theological Union, said ?now is the moment for religious to stand up and to stand fast.? Otherwise, he said, ?it remains a serious danger that the church of poverty and prayer will disappear.?

As part of the process of helping religious orders become more prophetic, Tisot and Suchy said the Religious Formation Conference is undergoing three phases of workshops across the U.S. to discuss the issue, with the first taking place in five locations last spring, the next set for this spring, and the final ones scheduled for some time in 2013.

Taken together, Tisot and Suchy said, the hope of this year?s congress and the workshops is to make religious life better at every level.

?At this time in the history of religious life, we?re excited to be able to be of service to the people and we really want to be involved with our members and to know how we can best meet their needs, so that we really can create a world that is better for everybody,? Suchy said.

For Gittins, that better world comes about when members of religious communities seek out the markings of ?Spirit-led? people to answer their call, including ?looking for trouble? and leading lives that are ?full and worthwhile and never boring.?

Those lives, he said in his talk, should be primarily concerned about the needs of the poor, and should ?fear at all times they are becoming blind to the poor.?

Offering concrete examples for how to go forward, Gittins encouraged religious to ?live God?s reign? in their lives. One of his suggestions: Find the marginalized and always work with and for them.

?Go from this place, seek, find and encounter marginalized and muted people within and on the fringes,? Gittins concluded his talk. ?Listen carefully to them, repent and think and act differently.?

[Joshua J. McElwee and Zoe Ryan are NCR staff writers.]

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