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Mary's Pence marks 25 years of women's gifts

Heidi Schlumpf | May. 2, 2012

Keynote speaker Edwina Gateley, lay missioner, points to the future for the assembled Marys Pence supporters. (NCR photos/Schlumpf)

CHICAGO -- If the founders of Mary?s Pence thought women?s gifts would be more valued by the Catholic church a quarter century later, the Vatican?s recent ordering of the reform of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) was hardly evidence of such improvement.

But the LCWR news didn?t dampen the 25th anniversary celebration of the non-profit organization that provides grants to women?s ministries and projects ? and whose name is a take-off on the church?s annual Peter?s Pence collection for the Vatican.

In the crowd of nearly 150 supporters who gathered April 28 at Loyola University Chicago to ?Give Thanks? and ?Move Forward? were lay women (and a few men) and a number of women religious, including two in short habits. From its beginning, Mary?s Pence has served as an example of collaboration among religious and lay women. The anniversary program listed 56 women?s congregations that made special gifts this year, some of $1,000 or more.

The Mary?s Pence board and staff were ?appalled? by the Vatican order, according to a statement read by executive director Katherine Wojtan during the celebration.

?The prophetic leadership of women religious birthed our organization based on the gospel values of justice and equality for all. Women religious, and in particular the leadership of LCWR, continue to challenge us to this day to keep alive the vision of Vatican II,? the statement said. ?We give thanks for these women and their congregations. We say to them, ?You have taught us well.??

Dominican Sr. Maureen Gallagher, founded Mary?s Pence in 1987 in Chicago. She recounted its history at the anniversary celebration, recalling a young woman who walked out of a prayer service saying, ?I can?t belong to a church that doesn?t recognize my gifts.?

?She was so angry,? Gallagher said. ?I thought, ?We have to take that anger and put it into a positive action.??

That?s exactly what Gallagher -- and the group of other women who joined her, did. In its first year, Mary?s Pence raised and distributed $20,000 in grants to women in ministry or in graduate study. Today it grants $60,000 to $100,000 a year to women throughout the Americas.

Three years ago, Mary?s Pence started giving renewable grants to poor women?s coops in Mexico and Central America through the ESPERA (Economic Systems Promoting Equitable Resources for All -- or ?she hopes? in Spanish) Fund, which has already funded 500 women?s projects, Wojtan said.

?We focus not just on charity, but on justice -- how to change to the world so it?s a better place for women,? said Wojtan.

In Palo Grande, El Salvador, a $1,000 Women?s Pence grant helps women receive loans to start or expand a small business. ?These women had survived war, and now they need to survive economically,? Sister Pat Rogucki, SFCC, of Baltimore said. Those El Salvadoran women were gathering that same day to mark Mary?s Pence?s anniversary, she told the celebration.

Also on the program was another Mary?s Pence-funded group, Still Point Theatre Collective of Chicago. Formerly incarcerated women from Still Point performed ?Sisters Rising,? a play based on their own experiences.

Keynote speaker Edwina Gateley, lay missioner, author and one of the founding ?mothers? of the organization, recalled Mary?s Pence encouraging donors to put wooden nickels in the collection basket during the annual Peter?s Pence collection. The wooden coins indicated a donation was made to Mary?s Pence instead.

?What we do in Mary?s Pence may not seem huge, but it is transformative,? said Gateley. ?It is the widow?s mite. It is the light, the leaven, the salt of which Jesus spoke.?

During the party?s reception, Gateley called the LCWR investigation ?absolute nonsense.?

?How dare they turn on the most productive people in our church,? she said. ?Women are a threat to them because we work with the poor and speak the truth. We?re about ministry and poverty. They?re about power and control.?

Others in the crowed agreed. ?It?s sad and disheartening,? Mary Fishman said of the LCWR mandate. Fishman is creating a documentary about religious women called ?Band of Sisters? expected to be released in the fall. ?But I know the sisters are very strong and have many supporters. They will figure out what to do.?

Nancy Olson of Champaign, Illinois, who has been donating to Mary?s Pence for 20 years, believes the fund is even more important now. ?It means more than ever to me,? said Olson. ?Women are so marginalized in the church, and now it feels like we are being even more marginalized.?

Former Mary?s Pence executive director Karen Flotte of St. Louis said she stood in solidarity with the LCWR women. ?It?s not only a mandate against them, it?s against all of us who work for justice,? she said. ?We need to stand with our sisters.?

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NCR featured Mary's Pence in this story last year: **Mary's Pence: Fund focuses on empowering women for social change** [1].

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