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Sister, NCR contributors discuss religious life with LCWR

Joshua J. McElwee | Aug. 10, 2012

ST. LOUIS -- With exhortations to "live on the edge," "give hope" and be open to those who feel "spiritually homeless," the gathering of about 900 representatives of U.S. Catholic sisters considered questions of the future of religious life Thursday.

Starting off the agenda Thursday was *NCR* publisher Tom Fox, who was part of a panel discussion called "Religious life in the future: What might it look like?"

The sisters are "the living paschal mystery in our times," Fox told the annual assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

"It's very, very important for you to know that you are the most prayerful, the most experienced, the most professional, the most learned, the most creative women to sit under one roof at any time in history," Fox said.

"And you must understand the obligations and the responsibilities that entails. You are speaking for the future and you are speaking to give us hope."

Sr. Jennifer Gordon, a member of the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth, Kan., followed Fox on the panel.

Gordon, a member of Giving Voice, an organization that focuses on listening to younger Catholic sisters, repeatedly urged the sisters to "live on the edge."

Gordon showed the gathering an image of a man standing in a river at the edge of Victoria Falls in Zambia. "One misstep and he would be swept over to his death, and yet he stands tall, seemingly at peace with himself and with his place in the world," she said.

"I believe we are called to follow this man's example," she continued. "Our thing is to go the edge and risk standing there with our brothers and sisters who call that edge home."

The third panelist was Jamie Manson, an *NCR* columnist, speaker and lay minister.

Manson focused partially on a question she said she found lacking from the discussion about the future of religious life: "What about all of the young adults, many of whom hold degrees in theology and ministry, who have not taken vows, but are currently doing what we here would consider traditional work of the church?"

Manson asked the sisters to focus on the "hundreds of young Catholic women" who graduate each year from graduate programs in religion. Many of them, she said, will work on the margins of society, helping those in poverty or facing homelessness.

Yet, Manson said, "unlike males who seek the priesthood, the institutional church does not support their education or their profession -- even though they, too, spend their lives studying and serving the church."

Gordon, an 11-year member of her community, said in preparing her remarks, she came across notes she had taken at an LCWR regional gathering in 2003 at which St. Joseph Sr. Janet Mock, now LCWR's executive director, had spoken.

Gordon said Mock had asked then, "Why live this life if we're not living it at the liminal edge?"

Gordon, who doesn't hold a leadership post in her congregation, said she understood her leaders "have a unique call within our shared call to live at the edge" and "must interpret these turbulent times" before leading their congregations.

"Don't play it too safe," she said to the congregational leaders in front of her. "Nudge us, please, toward that edge. Challenge us to be our very best selves. Remind us who we are and whose we are. Remind us that we know how to swim. We will follow your lead."

Manson encouraged the women religious to see the significant cultural differences between today's younger women and the women in the audience, who joined religious orders when people still lived in the "traditional communal structure" of villages, where local Catholics "identified their parish as their neighborhood."

Today, Manson said, young adults live in a "post-communal individualistic culture" where the needs of the individual are paramount.

In the new culture, she said, people seek community in marriage, which becomes a certain rite of passage to "mark a young person's entry into adulthood."

Manson encouraged the women religious to incorporate married women into the conversations regarding their future and to give those in lay associate programs a significant voice in the direction of their orders.

"I would invite women religious to expand their contemplation to include the voices of young adult women who share a deep understanding of their calling and charism," she said. "Even though they may not be ready or willing to profess vows, these young women may hold significant insight into how this prophetic life form might continue to give life to future generations."

Fox asked the sisters to "share insights, experiences, love and wisdom" with "younger sisters throughout the world."

He encouraged U.S. sisters to "always think globally," especially about sisters ministering in difficult or dangerous situations in other countries.

"It's a responsibility to the sisters and the entire church," he said. "What happens to their lives is going to determine what happens to humanity and happens to the planet."

"Continue at all times to focus on the hope that you mean to all of us," he concluded. "Never, ever, ever relinquish that hope and spread it around the world. We need it. Please, please, please, give us hope."

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NCR will be reporting on the LCWR assembly all week. Previous reports:

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- **Keynote: LCWR 'seed bed' for 21st century** [2], Aug. 8
- **LCWR 'gathers collective wisdom' of members to discern next steps** [3], Aug. 8
- **LCWR past presidents reflect on Vatican mandate** [4], Aug. 7
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