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Catholic women focus on actions to address issues locally, globally

Laura Dodson Catholic News Service | Oct. 8, 2013
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Attendees at a regional conference of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations focused on how Catholic women can take action, locally and globally, on "all forms of poverty" -- hunger, domestic violence, human trafficking and the needs of migrants.

"We come together to pray and work for a world of peace, a world in which all of our brothers and sisters will live lives of dignity, free from all forms of poverty, with souls filled with the love that our Savior taught us as we follow his command to love our neighbors as ourselves," said Mary Elizabeth Stewart from the archdiocese of Hartford, Conn.

She is the National Council of Catholic Women's representative to the union, which held its North American regional meeting Sept. 29-30 in Fort Lauderdale, right after the NCCW annual convention. Stewart is also vice president representative from North America to the union's Executive Committee.

The North American regional, which is held every four years and rotates between the U.S. and Canada, drew 164 participants. Their focus was a better understanding of some of today's most pressing issues; their challenge was to develop actions that could be implemented at the parish level and on the international front.

"I wish you all the very best and a rich and fruitful conference," said Maria Giovanna Ruggieri, the union's president-general, who arrived from Italy. "Each conference has been a gift of the Holy Spirit and that's what I wish for you all. The work that you do here, I wish for the benefit of everybody."

The World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations began as a committee in 1910 in Brussels to unite leagues of Catholic women throughout the world. Today it is made up of 100 Catholic women's organizations from 66 countries in five regions: Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe, Latin America, and the Caribbean and North America. In 2006, it was granted canonical status by the Vatican as a public international association of the faithful.

"We are all neighbors now, but we are yet to learn to live as brothers and sisters," said Miami Archbishop Thomas Wenski, who addressed immigration. "To be a Christian is not a burden, but a gift and to share that gift with others is our greatest joy."

The union's aim is "to promote the presence, participation and co-responsibility of Catholic women in society and the church, in order to enable them to fulfill their mission of evangelization and to work for human development, particularly by increasing educational opportunities, reducing poverty, and advancing human rights beginning with the fundamental right to life."

Speaker Alexis Torres-Fleming said when she was growing up in the South Bronx, she was "exposed to all the 'at risk' factors of poverty. I knew that the measure of success in the world would be how far I could escape from my family and culture."

Torres-Fleming left home -- considered the poorest district in the U.S., with more than 70,000 people living in one-square mile and 50 percent of them living below the poverty level -- and entered the banking world of corporate America.

"I enjoyed European travel, nice clothes," she said, "but a still small voice said this is all false. I recognized that there was something specifically mine to do that was not important in the world. I had everything to live with, but nothing to live for. I was empty inside."

She quit her job, returned to the South Bronx and founded Youth Ministry for Peace and Justice to helping others to overcome "at risk" factors that result in a life of poverty.

"I was pregnant -- such a miraculous experience that you can't help but meditate and ponder -- with my son who's now 12," Torres-Fleming said. "He lived in me, breathed in me, ate of me. His entire existence was dependent upon me and he was unaware of his need for me. That is the way we are with our God. We are totally unaware of existing in God's moment.

"It is the poverty from the place of belonging to one another," she continued. "The expression on my baby's face as he was nursing -- desperately wanting and we as mothers say 'take and eat -- this is my body for you.' Jesus understood that -- what it means to be food for another. We belong to one another as we belong to God and we have the capacity to be food for one another."

Attendees divided into groups to formulate concrete actions they could take back to their parishes. The general consensus was that material poverty was the foundation of so many problems, and that overcoming a "poverty of complacency" is the foundation for resolving problems.

The group addressing violence told the rest that the resolution to that is to begin is "by practicing being peacemakers ourselves."

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