

Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) Explores Dismantling Racism and Reimagining Religious Life for New Times

[Silver Spring, MD] The Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) welcomed nearly 1000 people from across the United States and 14 other countries for a three-day virtual gathering, held August 11-13.

Using the theme, “The Realm of Transformation: Creating Space for the Future,” the participants looked at the pressing need to dismantle racism in society and within religious communities as well as the call to reimagine how religious life may be restructured to best continue its mission.

The LCWR presidency (Sisters Elise García, OP; Jane Herb, IHM; and Jayne Helmlinger, CSJ) and executive director (Sister Carol Zinn, SSJ) welcomed a larger body of attendees than normal to the assembly. To broaden and diversify the participation, LCWR took advantage of the virtual platform and included more than 300 guests as full participants. The guests came from a variety of organizations including the National Black Sisters Conference, the Association of Latin American Missionary Sisters, Giving Voice, Nuns & Nones, the Leadership Collaborative, and more. In addition, every institute had the opportunity to invite up to two additional persons to attend, with the belief that the voices of multiple stakeholders at this assembly would enrich the conversation about where religious life is being called.

The LCWR assembly opened with a ritual that invited participants to mingle the tears they have shed this past year over the grief of the world’s pain with the tears and prayers of all who have known loss. The first session included a recorded message from Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, prefect of the Vatican’s office on consecrated life and the first of six breakout sessions where participants met in groups of eight to nine.

In her presidential address, Sister Elise García drew upon the works of both contemplative Sister Constance FitzGerald, OCD and theologian Shawn Copeland to call women religious to “carve deeper grooves of conscious relationality in evolution” by:

- Learning and telling the truth of our history
- Dismantling artificial constructs of race and caste
- Knowing Christ crucified through the dark wisdom of the enslaved
- Walking the talk of our radical relationality as women religious

She said in part, “Our human ancestors – those great mystical beings both in religious life and in the dark hollows and riverbanks of our nation’s yesteryear – carved into evolution a pathway of Christ consciousness available to us today. Let us now make our own evolutionary contribution by intentionally carving deeper and wider grooves of conscious relationality among us all ... Prophets of communion! Let us leave as a legacy for the future of religious life – and for the common good of our whole blessed Earth community – permanent capabilities for creative communion and deep cosmic tendencies for transforming love.”

Sister Elise was joined by Sisters Jane, Jayne, and Carol in a rite of repentance acknowledging our complicity in racism and praying for forgiveness to all those harmed by actions of racism committed today and throughout the centuries.

Following the presidential address, three LCWR members (Sisters Josita Colbert, SNDdeN; Pascazia Kinkuhaire, DMJ; Linda Romney, OSB) offered insights as to how to respond to the challenges posed by Sister Elise as religious life leaders.

On August 12, the assembly began with a keynote address by Sister Mercedes L. Casas Sánchez, FSPS entitled, "Creating Space for the Future." She called the assembly to look at what is essential in our lives and what can sustain us. She proposed that women religious contemplate:

- Being women of the Spirit, moved by a law of freedom
- Giving new meaning to our communal life
- Creating spaces to transform the mission, creativity and collaboration
- Creating spaces for hope
- Revisiting the signs

She said in part, "What today sustains us and helps us to withstand the night that we have long been experiencing, will not be the longing for the past, but rather a hopeful, faithful and loving focus on the future. Revitalizing the motivating force that has sustained our life to date: Passion for God and for Humanity. We ask ourselves: Why are we here? For whom are we here? Why do we do what we do? We would love for that motivating force that for years has sustained us in our vocation to continue to attract more young people, that the strength of our charisma would continue to be a source of enthusiasm and life energy. The challenge then will be, together, to forge a new religious life that un.masks this motivating force that in itself is attractive, that in itself is a powerful force."

LCWR members -- Sisters Ricca Dimalibot, CCVI; Monica Gundler, SC; and Mary Thomas, PBVM -- responded to Sister Mercedes' address.

Also on the second day, three LCWR members -- Sisters Cecilia Canales, OP; Maureen Erdlen, SSJ; and Pushpa Gomes, CSC -- gave personal testimony on the transformative experiences they have encountered as religious life leaders.

On the final day, the conference continued its work on the national discernment on the emerging future of religious life which seeks to assist religious institutes to explore how they may collaborate to find new ways of supporting religious life in the future as demographics rapidly shift.

The conference also bestowed Lifetime Achievement Awards on three women religious whose contributions to ministry and religious life have been extraordinary. Sisters Helen Prejean, CSJ; Joyce Meyer, PBVM; and Amata Miller, IHM.

The assembly closed with a blessing of the LCWR presidency, national board, and 15 regional chairs. This included a thank you to its outgoing officers including past-president Sister Jayne Helmlinger, CSJ. The assembly welcomed the new president-elect Rebecca Ann Gemma, prioress of the Dominican Sisters of Springfield, Illinois who had served previously on the

LCWR national board and on several committees. Additionally, the members welcomed new board members Kathleen Brazda, CSJ; Maureen Geary, OP; and Pushpa Gomes, CSC.

The addresses of Sisters Elise and Mercedes can be found on the [LCWR website](#) in English and Spanish.

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