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Leadership Conference of Women Religious Assembly Examines Key Challenges and Opportunities

[Nashville, TN] At the annual assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), held August 12-15, the approximately 750 participants discussed some of the essential considerations facing religious life and its leaders under the theme of “Holy Mystery Revealed in Our Midst.”

In a reflection delivered at the opening of the assembly, biblical scholar Sister Nancy Schreck, OSF explored some of the long biblical history of God working with people in the mystery of darkness. Noting that mastery of navigating the dark takes time, she said, “all we need do is to ask the mystery of darkness to teach us, to follow the darkness wherever it leads, and to become intimate with darkness.”

Later in a keynote address entitled “However Long the Night,” she noted that religious life finds itself in a “middle passage” with the “in-breaking of something new, of major shifts in our world view with the concurrent breakdown of so much of what is familiar.” The task of remaining in the uncertain place, she added, “is to describe events that shatter all that one knows about the world and the familiar ways of operating within it.” It is from this middle space, she noted, that women religious are called to bear witness to what they know.

Sister Carol Zinn, SSJ delivered a presidential address using the metaphor of music to describe the challenges for Catholic sisters today. She noted, “This assembly comes at a time when our consciousness is increasingly heightened to the lamentations of our world, country, church, and vocation. We are called to stand in those lamentations singing the music in God’s heart.”

Actions for Justice

LCWR members from the local region led the participants in a justice action focused on a call to move toward use of renewable energy sources. Panelists spoke who have been advocating for an end to mountaintop removal in Tennessee and Kentucky and advocating against the pipeline in Kentucky as well as hydrofracking in Ohio. Following their presentation, the LCWR members signed postcards to persons in power positions who have led efforts for clean energy, protecting fresh water, and addressing global climate change issues, expressing gratitude and pledging support for these efforts. Throughout the United States, congregations that are members of LCWR have been making significant efforts to use renewable energy sources as well as to implement many other sustainable practices on the properties they own.

The conference passed a resolution to promote the national transition from fossil fuel energy sources to renewable energy sources as soon as possible. The members also passed a resolution to ask Pope Francis to formally repudiate the period of Christian history that used religion to justify political and personal violence against indigenous nations and peoples and their cultural, religious, and territorial identities.

More than 270 leaders also joined in a discussion about the needs of and responses to children and families fleeing violence in their home countries and seeking refuge in the United States.

LCWR Call for 2015-2022

The members unanimously affirmed a new LCWR Call, a seven-year plan for the conference. The call enumerates initiatives for working with the evolving realities facing US religious life which includes accompanying congregations in their transformational stages, as well as those immigrating to the United States. Other initiatives involve preparing Catholic sisters for leadership in the emerging intercultural, global reality. In addition, the plan pledges LCWR's collective voice, resources, and power in solidarity with others to establish economic justice, abolish modern-day slavery, ensure immigrant rights, promote nonviolence, and protect Earth and its biosphere.

CDF Doctrinal Assessment

During the assembly, the LCWR officers updated the members on their work with the bishops delegated by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to implement a mandate of reform. Following discussion of the update, the members offered direction to the LCWR national board and to the LCWR presidency for its work with Archbishop J. Peter Sartain.

Immediately following the assembly, the 21-member LCWR national board held a three-day meeting that began with a one-hour session with Archbishop Sartain. At the conclusion of its meeting, the board issued the following statement:

Our study, discernment, and prayer led us to reaffirm our strong belief that ongoing conversation with church leadership is key to building effective working relationships that enable both women religious and church leaders to serve the world. It is our deepest hope to resolve the situation between LCWR

and CDF in a way that fully honors our commitment to fulfill the LCWR mission as well as protect the integrity of the organization.

We will continue in the conversation with Archbishop Sartain as an expression of hope that new ways may be created within the church for healthy discussion of differences. We know that thousands of persons throughout the country and around the world long for places where they can raise questions and explore ideas on matters of faith in an atmosphere of freedom and respect. We believe that the ongoing conversations between CDF and LCWR may model a way of relating that only deepens and strengthens our capacity to serve a world in desperate need of our care and service.

Outstanding Leadership Award

During the assembly, LCWR bestowed the 2014 Outstanding Leadership Award on theologian Sister Elizabeth A. Johnson, CSJ, recognized by many as today's leading US Catholic feminist theologian. The conference honored her work as an educator, public lecturer, writer, and ground-breaking scholar, particularly in the areas of the mystery of God, Jesus Christ, Mary and the saints, science and religion, the problem of suffering, ecological ethics, and issues related to justice for women.

Election of Officers

At the conclusion of the assembly, Sister Sharon Holland, a member of the leadership team of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Monroe, Michigan, assumed the office of LCWR president for 2014-2015. Prior to her election to congregation leadership, she was one of the highest-ranking women at the Vatican where she spent 21 years on the staff of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.

The conference also voted in Sister Marcia Allen, CSJ as its president-elect. Currently, the president of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Concordia, Kansas, Sister Marcia had served as vice-president of her community for two terms (1979-1987); president for two terms (1987-1995) and re-elected to two more terms (2008 -2016); and is also a staff member of Manna House of Prayer.

The conference also elected Sister Mary Beth Gianoli, OSF, a leadership team member and congregational secretary of the Sisters of St. Francis of Oldenburg, Indiana as the LCWR secretary.

LCWR has nearly 1400 members who are elected leaders of their religious orders, representing approximately 57,000 Catholic sisters. The conference develops leadership, promotes collaboration within church and society, and serves as a voice for systemic change.

The texts of Sister Carol Zinn, Sister Nancy Schreck, and Sister Elizabeth Johnson, the full text of the LCWR Call 2015-2022, as well as photos of the event are available at <https://lwr.org/calendar/lwr-assembly-2014>.