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Contact: Sister Annmarie Sanders, IHM – LCWR Director of Communications

 301-588-4955 (office) -- asanders@lcwr.org

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**Leadership Conference of Women Religious Assembly Explores the Call to Foster Communion a Fractured World**

**[St. Louis, MO]** At the annual assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), held August 7-10, approximately 800 participants explored the assembly theme of “Being the Presence of Love: The Power of Communion.”

The assembly focused on the urgent need to foster communion and connection in a world plagued by polarization, division, and fractures of communion. Speakers explored insights from new understandings of Trinitarian theology and how those insights might help in the creation of new and more effective ways of strengthening and supporting the global community.

In her presidential address, Sister Teresa Maya, CCVI spoke of the need to be prepared for this unique time in religious life and what may be the new call to Catholic sisters. “Our new apostolic call is centered on meaning. We need to tell our story, the deep meaning of our lives, that allowed us to do everything we have done,” she said. “Our story needs to be shared with a world desperate for meaning and purpose. Sisters, our time in leadership will not be complete until we have called all of our sisters to share the ‘why’ of their extraordinary lives.”

Sister Teresa continued, “We will become lighter and itinerant, we will be fewer. However, we will be enough; we will be what God needs today. We will bring with us our call to community and our stubborn conviction that Christ suffering in God’s people requires our response.”

The first keynoter, Sister Gloria Schaab, a Sister of Saint Joseph of Philadelphia, professor of systematic theology, and chair of the department of theology and philosophy at Barry University in Miami, Florida, proposed that “living in Trinitarian relation in our world calls us to foster nonhierarchical relationships of inclusivity;

transform social, ethical, and political systems; and imitate divine solidarity with human suffering.” To the extent that we do this, she noted, is “the radical power of communion and love in the image of Trinity dynamic, emergent, and effective in the church and in our world.”

The second keynoter, Heidi Russell, an associate professor at the Institute of Pastoral Studies at Loyola University in Chicago, spoke of the interconnectedness of all of life, reminding participants, “At our core we are interconnected to one another and to God, and yet somehow we find ourselves limited in our relationality, finite in our capacity to connect to one another.” Sharing insights into racism that she has gleaned from her experience after adopting to two children who are black, she challenged participants to continuously ask themselves: “Whose voices do we not hear? What connections have we turned off? Who are those at the margins of our communities?”

Brother Simón Pedro Arnold, OSB, a professor of theology and communications sciences of Belgian descent who lives and works in Puno, Perú spoke of the freedom that arises when one accepts one’s own vulnerability and need for mutual dependence. Communion, he believes, is “not the end of rifts and divisions among us,” and it comes from “the choice to share with one another our vulnerabilities, fragilities, and wounds.” “For those in the ministry of leadership in religious life, the increasing fragility of institutions, persons, and communities is almost always seen as a dying…. Would this be a gospel attitude?” he asked. “The ministry of leadership is to believe, trust, and permit the providential and surprising fruitfulness of fragility, not to resist it.”

Participants practiced contemplative dialogue in small groups twice during the assembly, asking the questions: What ignites a spark in you about the power of communion as it relates to your life and ministry? What matters most for the future of our communities, religious life, and the world we serve? Throughout the assembly participants were also invited to commit to spending time each day in personal and communal contemplation that placed them in deeper communion with the world, especially the places of great suffering and pain.

**Being in Communion: Standing Against Racism**

The assembly unanimously recommitted to its 2016 assembly resolution which states:

In the presence of constant and painful reminders of the deep roots of racism in our country, we the Leadership Conference of Women Religious reaffirm the 2016 assembly resolution and pledge to go deeper into the critical work of creating communion, examining the root causes of injustice and our own complicity, and purging ourselves, our communities, and our country of the sin of racism and its destructive effects.

Following the passage of the resolution, the participants demonstrated their commitment by leaving the meeting area and walking outside to the steps St. Louis’ Old Courthouse where Dredd Scott sued for his freedom in 1846. There, the nearly 800 members stood in silent prayer to remember victims of racism and to pray for the systemic elimination of racism throughout the country and the world.

**Outstanding Leadership Award**

During the assembly, LCWR bestowed the 2018 Outstanding Leadership Award on Sister Anita Baird, a member of the Daughters of the Heart of Mary. The former director of the racial justice office of the Archdiocese of Chicago, Sister Anita made significant contributions to eradicating racism in the parishes, schools, and other institutions and agencies within the archdiocese. Today, she preaches and leads revivals throughout the United States and remains a strong proponent of racial justice.

**Election of Officers**

At the conclusion of the assembly, Sister Sharlet Wagner, a member of the leadership council of the Sisters of the Holy Cross in South Bend, Indiana, assumed the office of LCWR president for 2018-2019.

The conference voted in Sister Jayne Helmlinger as its president-elect. Currently, the general superior of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange, California, she has 25 years of experience as a healthcare executive, having served as vice-president of mission integration for several healthcare systems and hospitals.

LCWR has approximately 1350 members who are elected leaders of their religious orders, who represent approximately 80 percent of the 48,500 Catholic sisters in the United States. The conference develops leadership, promotes collaboration within church and society, and serves as a voice for systemic change.

Texts of presentations as well as photos of the event are available at <https://lcwr.org/calendar/lcwr-assembly-2018>.

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