



Reflections on the Congress on Consecrated Life and the Assembly of the Confederation of Latin American Religious (CLAR) June 2015

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We were privileged to represent the Leadership Conference of Women Religious at two events in Bogotá, Colombia to which the Confederation of Latin American Religious (CLAR) invited LCWR. The first was CLAR's Congress on Consecrated Life held from June 17-21, planned as part of the continent's commemoration of the Year of Consecrated Life, and the second was CLAR's triennial assembly of delegates held from June 21-24.

The congress on consecrated life was open to all consecrated persons in the church and was attended by approximately 1340 people – women and men religious, consecrated lay persons, and bishops. The event was held at a high school in Bogotá, and we were honored to experience the wonderful hospitality of the Sisters of St. Francis of Rochester, Minnesota who hosted former LCWR president Pat Farrell, OSF and us in their home as we commuted to the event. Our time spent with these three remarkable Sisters of St. Francis -- Valerie Usher (a former LCWR member) and two Colombians, Carolina Pardo and Clara Ines Ordoñez -- afforded us an opportunity to understand more about the reality of women religious ministering in this country that has been torn apart by great violence and economic disparity.

Each morning we took a one-hour journey across the city from the Franciscan convent to the meeting site, giving us the chance to see some of the daily life of Bogotá's citizens, and to understand the tremendous transportation problems facing this growing city.

Our days at the congress were filled with plenary sessions, all based on the theme "We Listen for God

Where Life Cries Out." Outstanding among the presentations were those by Bishop Pierre Jubinville, a Canadian now serving as bishop in Paraguay; theologian Father Victor Codina, SJ; and Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. We had the pleasure of conversations with each of these men and were especially grateful that we and Pat Farrell had the opportunity to personally thank Cardinal Braz de Aviz for his support of US women religious and of LCWR.



Annmarie Sanders, IHM; Marcia Allen, CSJ; Cardinal João Braz de Aviz; and Pat Farrell, OSF.

The afternoons were spent participating in one of 42 workshops, organized around 10 general themes impacting consecrated life: new generations of consecrated life; the poor; systemic change; justice, peace and the integrity of creation; intercultural realities; inter-congregational realities; ecclesial communion; charism and the laity; and missionary life. Each participant chose one workshop and spent the three afternoons interacting with the same 30-35 other participants in that setting. Pat Farrell was

one of two people from the United States invited to lead one of the workshops and developed hers on Women's Leadership in Consecrated Life, which was appreciated immensely by those who attended.

Other significant parts of the congress were a beautiful reflection on the symbol that was the center of CLAR's study and reflection these three years: the story of Jesus, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany delivered by CLAR president Mercedes Casas, FSpS; a panel of young women and men religious; and reflections on the proceedings at various points by CLAR's team of theologians.

As representatives of LCWR, we were invited to participate on a panel with representatives of seven other conferences or organizations serving religious life outside of Latin America. While all of the panelists were invited to share their insights as to how religious life is evolving in their countries, we

people of Latin America for supporting LCWR and praying with us during those challenging years.

Repeatedly, men and women religious – new and more seasoned members alike – sought us out to express their gratitude to LCWR for the way in which the conference worked through the CDF mandate. We heard many stories and saw evidence of how closely people followed this story from Latin America and how much solidarity they felt with LCWR. Some told us that after hearing how LCWR approached this challenge, they came away with new ideas for working through difficult tensions in their own settings. Perhaps most heartening was the enthusiasm and hope expressed by young women and men religious that they experienced after learning how LCWR handled this situation and hearing the conference's hopes for how all in the church may work together in the future. We promised all who approached us to communicate both their gratitude and their hope to the conference leadership and membership.

We were happily surprised as well to discover that several LCWR members were present at the congress and can now share this experience with their communities and with LCWR. Among those we met were leaders of the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word of both Houston and San Antonio, as well as Missionary Guadalupanas of the Holy Spirit, along with many sisters from congregations with members in the United States.



Panel on religious life in other countries

were asked specifically to speak about the doctrinal assessment of LCWR by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, since there was such great interest among women and men religious in this matter. We were able to share about the manner in which LCWR worked through the mandate with contemplation, consultation, respectful dialogue, and careful discernment. We spoke as well of the conscious way in which LCWR kept the hopes and desires for this process, expressed by religious and committed laity from all over the world, very much in the center of all its deliberations, and thanked the

Other events of the congress included exquisitely celebrated Eucharistic liturgies, including one to which the public was invited held at a nearby sports stadium, which was followed by a concert of music written for the Year of Consecrated Life.

Of particular note during the congress was the frankness and honesty by which people spoke about the urgent and indispensable need for an infusion of new life, ideas, and energy into religious life. Their concerns echoed those we hear in the United States – that despite all the strategies that have been tried to revitalize the life, few have been successful.

For this reason, the congress chose to emphasize the strong signs of life that do still exist within religious life and focused on how to fortify these realities. Repeatedly, presenters and attendees spoke of their dreams for a religious life that:

- incarnates mysticism, prophecy, and hope
- values the presence and the questions of its young members, referred to as the “New Generations”
- constantly looks ahead to the horizons to observe what is new and innovative
- is marked by communion, openness, and a welcoming spirit
- works consciously to strengthen its intercultural nature and its inter-congregational collaboration
- is characterized by mercy and compassion for those living in poverty
- lives in harmony with creation (The congress participants celebrated with great hope the release during the congress of Pope Francis’ encyclical *Laudato si’*)
- relates to a church that is characterized by servant leadership, is a community of communities, and is poor and belongs to those who are poor.

The congress concluded with expressions of hope for how CLAR may be guided by this vision and with a commitment by the attendees to a serious and urgent renewal of consecrated life. Following the conclusion, we traveled with other



Annmarie and Marcia with the leaders of the Missionary Guadalupanas of the Holy Spirit visiting Montserrat

congress attendees to visit Montserrat, a pilgrim destination in Bogota more than 10,000 feet above the sea level that hosts a church built in the 17th century and a shrine, and provides a magnificent view of the capital.

The CLAR Assembly

From there, we moved to the headquarters of the Colombian bishops’ conference where we stayed from June 21 to 25 as attendees of the CLAR assembly. This gathering of approximately 80 men and women religious brought together delegates of 19 countries from throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. During those days the delegates and CLAR’s team of theologians engaged in further reflection on the congress and its call to CLAR as it moves into the future. The time included presentations on the realities of the national



CLAR assembly held at the Colombian bishops’ conference

conferences represented in the assembly, providing us insight into some of the grave situations in which men and women religious are ministering throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. Many delegates spoke of increasing violence and crime, destruction of land and natural resources, intensifying poverty, and critical healthcare needs.

Following reports from CLAR, the delegates nominated and then elected new officers. Particular care is taken in CLAR to elect a presidency that includes sisters, brothers, and priests who represent a variety of geographic regions, and with at least one Portu-

guese speaker among them. Elected for three years were:

- President: Hna. Mercedes Leticia Casas Sánchez, FSpS (México) (Re-elected)
- First Vice President: Padre Alberto Cristóbal Luna Pastore, SJ (Paraguay)
- Second Vice President: Hna. María Altagracia Ortiz Mena, SSCC (Dominican Republic) (Re-elected)
- Third Vice President: Hno. Leonardo Enrique Tejeiro Duque, FSC (Colombia)
- Fourth Vice President: Hna. Elsie Auzier Vinhote, ASC (Brazil)
- General Secretary: Hna. Luz Marina Valencia López, STJ (Colombia)

CLAR also engaged in the selection of a new symbol for the next three years that will focus its work. After discussion and reflection together, the delegates voted for the icon of the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth, noting the joyful proclamation of the presence of God that came from these two women who embraced as an expression of their deep affection for one another. CLAR noted that the God they proclaim is one who does not disappoint humanity, who can topple from their thrones the oppressors who hold back the coming of the Reign of God, and who hears the cries of the people. This symbol will be at the center of CLAR's work from now until 2018 when the assembly reconvenes.

Our time with the CLAR delegates included a trip to the Salt Cathedral in the town of Zipaquirá where a Roman Catholic church was built within the tunnels of a salt mine more than 600 feet underground, as well as a lively fiesta filled with music, dance, food, and gifts from many of the countries represented in the confederation.

At the close of the assembly, we were offered the opportunity to address the delegates. In addition to thanking the CLAR members for their

support of LCWR through difficult times and for their extraordinary hospitality at the congress and assembly, we had the opportunity to share an observation. We noted that although the CLAR members prayed frequently that the fire of God's Spirit would come and burn in their hearts, it was absolutely clear that the fire was already burning passionately within them as evidenced by their zeal, their convictions, and their unwavering commitment to the desperate needs of the people they serve. We also handed to Mercedes Casas, the newly re-elected president of CLAR, an invitation to attend our 2015 LCWR assembly, underscoring our deepest hope that CLAR and LCWR can continue to find ways to deepen our relationship.

Much information on both the congress and assembly is available in Spanish on CLAR's website:

Daily Chronicles of the Congress Proceedings
www.clar.org/clar/index.php?module=Pagesetter&tid=2&pubcnt=8&tpl=list-old-block

Final Message of the Congress
www.clar.org/clar/index.php?module=Contenido&func=viewpub&tid=2&pid=873

Final Message of the Assembly
www.clar.org/clar/index.php?module=Contenido&func=viewpub&tid=2&pid=874

