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Leadership Conference of Women Religious Assembly Explores Concerns of the Global Community

[Orlando, FL] At the annual assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) held in Orlando, FL, August 13-16, the more than 820 participants discussed some of the critical issues facing the global community and how US Catholic sisters may respond to them.

In a keynote address, theologian Sister Ilia Delio, OSF spoke to the destruction of the planet and the need for recognition of the place of humanity in the evolutionary process. Noting that the decisions made today will shape the future direction of evolution, she said, "The choices we make in love and for love co-create our future. When we see ourselves as part of a larger whole, we act on behalf of the whole of which we are a part. Christian evolution is thinking and seeing in a new way.

"A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the whole biotic community," she continued. "It is wrong when it tends to do otherwise. We need a new way of being in the world that broadens diversity, deepens interiority, and strengthens the bonds of relationality."

CDF Doctrinal Assessment

Three executive sessions were held during the course of the assembly where LCWR members discussed the doctrinal assessment of the organization by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). The findings of that investigation resulted in the appointment by CDF of Archbishop J. Peter Sartain as the Holy See's apostolic delegate for the doctrinal assessment of LCWR. LCWR invited Archbishop Sartain to attend the assembly so that he could meet the members, experience firsthand the conference's annual gathering, and hear the members' concerns about the doctrinal assessment findings and plan for reform.

At the first executive session, the LCWR officers shared their impressions of the meetings that had taken place between themselves and Archbishop Sartain, as well as his two assistants, Bishop Leonard Blair and Bishop Thomas John Paprocki. LCWR invited Archbishop Sartain to address the assembly during the second session and then to listen to the members' response to his remarks. At a third session the members gave direction to the LCWR officers for next steps in working with the three bishop delegates. All sessions were conducted in a process of contemplative discernment where time was provided for prayer, silence, and respectful listening.

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

"The session with Archbishop Sartain allowed a profound and honest sharing of views. Due to time limitations during the assembly, Archbishop Sartain had little opportunity to answer the members' questions. Clearly, however, he had been listening intently and heard the concerns voiced by the members, and their desire for more information. The extraordinarily rich and deeply reverent conversation during the board meeting gave us a greater understanding of Archbishop Sartain, and we believe he now also better understands us. Although we remain uncertain as to how our work with the bishop delegates will proceed, we maintain hope that continued conversations of this depth will lead to a resolution of this situation that maintains the integrity of LCWR and is healthy for the whole church."

Presidential Address

In her address to the assembly, LCWR president Sister Florence Deacon, OSF presented reflections on what it means to be a faithful woman of the church as a framework for a way forward in LCWR's relationships with church leaders. Referring to LCWR's doctrinal assessment, she concluded, "Our situation reflects larger questions and concerns such as the ongoing implementation of the Second Vatican Council; the ecclesial roles of women religious and of the laity, especially women; understandings of authority, faithful dissent, and obedience; and the need for spaces where honest, probing questions about faith and belief can be raised and discussed."

Outstanding Leadership Award

During the assembly, LCWR bestowed the 2013 Outstanding Leadership Award on its past president Sister Pat Farrell, OSF, for the service she gave in her more than 20 years ministering to victims of violence and trauma in Latin America, and for her role in leading LCWR. In her acceptance speech, she reflected on the experience of being thrust into the middle of the polarization in the Catholic Church and offered possible ways to move through the divisions. One suggestion was "to really see another person and to really allow ourselves to be seen." She stated, "To see someone requires the simple gift of attention and that in itself is an affirmation. To allow ourselves to be seen is equally

as challenging. Expressing what we really think and feel, with transparency and vulnerability, is for the brave of heart. It is, however, what we are being asked to do in our current conflict. All of a sudden the world is looking to us. In response, we keep calling ourselves and one another to truthfulness and integrity, to a thoughtful sorting out of what that looks like concretely.”

Actions for Justice

Members of the Hope Community Center, Apopka, FL, a service learning community dedicated to the empowerment of Central Florida’s immigrant and working poor communities, shared in a panel presentation to the assembly their personal stories and struggle for commonsense reform of the broken immigration system. Eli Garcia, coordinator of the Sin Fronteras Youth Group at Hope Community Center and a farmworker, DREAMer, and activist, told of her own journey from silent fear to empowerment. Jose Luis Marantes, the service learning coordinator at Hope, reminded those gathered that the work of restoring relationships and opening the community to all will continue long after the passage of comprehensive immigration reform. Evelyn Rivera, a member of the national coordinating committee of United We Dream, shared the story of the loss of her mother to deportation more than seven years ago. Sister Ann Scholz, SSND, LCWR associate director for social mission, spoke about the state of comprehensive reform legislation and called the LCWR members to pledge to walk in solidarity with all who seek justice for immigrants. More than 800 members signed postcards imploring their representatives to pass comprehensive immigration reform.

The assembly also adopted a resolution that reads: “We, the members of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, are compelled to work toward a world where reverence for all living beings finds expression in an approach to life free from violence. We stand in solidarity with the victims of violence, with a majority of the American people, and with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) as we heed the Gospel call to nonviolence and seek to persuade our local, state, and federal officials to enact laws that will: require universal background checks for all gun purchases; restrict civilian access to assault weapons and high capacity magazines; and make gun trafficking a federal crime. The resolution further calls for laws that will improve access to mental health care and other services for those in need and fund programs that make available educational materials on the effects of violence and provide opportunities for youth and young adults to end gang violence.”

Election of Officers

At the conclusion of the assembly, Sister Carol Zinn, a member of the leadership team of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Chestnut Hill, Pennsylvania, assumed the office of LCWR president for 2013-2014. Prior to her election to congregation leadership, she was serving as the representative for the Congregations of St. Joseph, an NGO in general consultative status with the economic and social council of the United Nations.

The body voted in Sister Sharon Holland, vice-president of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary of Monroe Michigan, as the LCWR president-elect. Prior to serving in congregational 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 elected Sister Barbara Blesse of the Dominican Sisters of Springfield as conference secretary for a third year.

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.