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Leadership Conference of Women Religious Assembly Examines Key Challenges and Opportunities

[Houston, TX] At the annual assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), held August 11-14, the approximately 800 participants discussed some of the essential considerations facing religious life and its leaders under the theme of “Springs of the Great Deep Burst Forth: Meeting the Thirsts of the World.”

In a reflection delivered at the opening of the assembly, former LCWR executive director Sister Janet Mock, CSJ set the context for the assembly, acknowledging the suffering endured by people throughout this past year – globally, as well as in Houston, a city recently besieged by floods. “It is within this context – in this city, in our country, our church, and our world abounding with beauty and promise and challenges beyond measure, that we, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, meet, called by grace,” she stated.

Later in a keynote address entitled “Surprised by Joy: Springs from the Great Deep Illuminating Religious Life,” she named some of the realities facing communities of Catholic sisters today in these uncommon times. Noting some of the significant challenges, she posited that the times call for partnerships and companions in mission. “What you must offer, however, is your charism and the wisdom that has come from the years your sisters have practiced the congregational virtues that shape your charism,” Sister Janet stated. “The way you will move into the future must be influenced by those rich gifts which you still have to offer – and must for the good of the world.”

Sister Sharon Holland, IHM offered insights on the experience of working through the doctrinal assessment of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in her presidential address. She focused particularly on the concept of “cultural chasm” the gap in understanding that comes from familiar unexamined practices or thought patterns. “Bridging chasms,” she noted, “is more difficult when you don’t expect the chasm, assume there isn’t one, and/or believe that there should not be one. We have made

progress in checking our assumptions by asking questions and inviting them.” She also reviewed the LCWR Call for 2015 to 2022 and ended her address by asking: What do we wish to focus on, to empower as we go forward? By what attitudes of heart and mind do we wish to be characterized?

In another keynote address, Father Stephen Bevans, SVD spoke of thirst as a grace, as a yearning for something more – a yearning that can lead to growth. He spoke of four thirsts – the thirst for the water of integrity, the wine of hope, the nectar of justice, and the elixir of beauty. He noted that only the church that serves the cause of people who are poor or suffering can be considered the true church of Christ, and that the true church strives for integrity, offers hope, and practices and cherishes beauty.

Sister Janet and Father Steven later engaged in a conversation where they further explored some of the key questions facing religious life and LCWR in a rapidly changing environment.

Actions for Justice

LCWR members from the local region led the participants in a justice action focused on the plight of families seeking refuge in the United States from violence and death in their home countries. Participants viewed the testimony of three mothers from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala who had been held with their children and hundreds of other families in the for-profit detention facility in Karnes City, Texas. Attorney Jonathan Ryan, executive director of the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services (RAICES) also shared his experience of providing free and low-cost legal services to under-served immigrant families in Central and South Texas. Assembly participants then took time to contact President Obama and urge him to end family detention. They also made contributions to a fund established to assist families secure bonds for their release from detention while they await adjudication of their claims to immigration relief.

The conversation about family detention and efforts to end the practice of incarcerating mothers and their children continued over an informal lunch. Approximately 400 sisters shared information about their ministry to immigrants and explored strategies for ending family detention and establishing justice for immigrants.

The LCWR members also affirmed a resolution where they committed themselves to examine the root causes of injustice and their congregation’s complicity in injustice, and to work to effect systemic change as they seek to establish economic justice, abolish modern-day slavery, ensure immigrant rights, promote nonviolence, and protect Earth and its biosphere.

Aware as well of the two executions scheduled in Texas as the assembly met, the members remembered in their prayer all those who would be impacted by these deaths, and recalled LCWR’s commitment to work to abolish the use of the death penalty.

CDF Doctrinal Assessment

The assembly met for one afternoon in executive session to speak about the conclusion of the mandate of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), and to consider together the impact that CDF's doctrinal assessment of LCWR had on the conference, the church, and the wider world. The LCWR officers and executive directors who were serving from 2014-2015 reported on the steps leading to the mandate's conclusion, as well as on their April 16, 2015 visit with Pope Francis at the Vatican. They were then joined by the former LCWR presidents who were in office since March 2009, when CDF informed LCWR that it was conducting a doctrinal assessment. All 10 women spoke of both the suffering they bore during their years of working with the assessment, as well as the graces they received.

At the meeting of the LCWR national board that immediately followed the LCWR assembly, the board members issued the following statement:

We were pleased that we could commemorate the conclusion of the CDF mandate with our members during this assembly. The members were heartened by the reports of the frank and honest conversations held between the bishop delegates of CDF and the LCWR officers that helped CDF come to a more accurate understanding of the conference and its mission. As noted by Sister Sharon Holland, IHM in her presidential address, the work required the bridging of cultural chasms that had been caused by two groups that did not know each other's assumptions. The efforts of both the bishop delegates and the LCWR officers these past three years to engage in dialogue on critical questions of faith, spiritual practices, and religious life that had not been previously discussed with such depth and candor led to a significant narrowing of this gap.

We are profoundly grateful for the 10 women who served this conference as its presidents and executive directors from the time CDF informed us of the doctrinal assessment in March 2009 to the April 2015 conclusion of the subsequent mandate: Sisters J. Lora Dambroski, OSF; Marlene Weisenbeck, FSPA; Mary Hughes, OP; Janet Mock, CSJ; Florence Deacon, OSF; Pat Farrell, OSF; Carol Zinn, SSJ; Sharon Holland, IHM; Marcia Allen, CSJ; and Joan Marie Steadman, CSC. As they shared with the assembly some of the suffering, as well as the graces brought about through their engagement with the assessment and mandate, we developed an even more profound appreciation of and respect for the efforts these leaders made for the sake of religious life, LCWR, and the wider church and world – efforts often made at great personal cost. We acknowledge as well as contributions of the late Sister Mary Whited, CPPS who served as LCWR past president and the late Sister Jane Burke, SSND who served as LCWR executive director when CDF informed LCWR of its doctrinal assessment.

Our hope had been to thank Archbishop J. Peter Sartain in person at our assembly banquet, but due to a last-minute flight cancellation, the archbishop was unable to attend. Instead, he joined us through a phone connection that allowed the assembly as a body to express our gratitude to him. The spontaneous

and prolonged standing ovation that he received from our members spoke clearly of our appreciation for the manner in which he accompanied LCWR through these difficult and challenging years of public trial. We also recognize the commitment Archbishop Sartain made to wholehearted participation in this process and we are grateful for the time, energy, and openness he invested in the work of building bridges between CDF and LCWR.

We believe that the experience of these three years of respectful, honest, open dialogue about matters that are at the core of our life contributed significantly to a conclusion of the mandate that was agreeable to both CDF and LCWR. Our greatest desire now is that the positive outcome of these years of intense work at building relationships, establishing trust, inviting questions, and creating spaces for honest conversations -- even on topics that can be divisive -- will serve as a source of hope to others within the church and the world. Clearly, such work is demanding and difficult, but in this age of intolerance of differences and growing polarities, it may be one of the most indispensable tasks of these times.

Outstanding Leadership Award

During the assembly, LCWR bestowed the 2015 Outstanding Leadership Award on Sister Janet Mock, CSJ who had most recently served LCWR as executive director from 2011 to 2014. Previously, she had served as executive director of the Religious Formation Conference; as the general superior of her congregation, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden; as the formation and novice director of her community; and in various other leadership and educational roles.

Election of Officers

At the conclusion of the assembly, Sister Marcia Allen, the president of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Concordia, Kansas, assumed the office of LCWR president for 2015-2016. Prior to her election as her congregation's president, she had served as vice-president of her community for two terms (1979-1987); president for two terms (1987-1995); and is also a staff member of Manna House of Prayer.

The conference voted in Sister Mary Pellegrino, CSJ as its president-elect. Currently, she is the congregation moderator for the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden.

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, who represent approximately 80 percent of the 50,000 Catholic sisters in the United States. The conference develops leadership, promotes collaboration within church and society, and serves as a voice for systemic change.

The texts of Sister Sharon Holland, Sister Janet Mock, and Father Steven Bevans, as well as photos of the event are available at <https://lcwr.org/calendar/lcwr-assembly-2015>.