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**Leadership Conference of Women Religious Explores Critical Issues Against  
Backdrop of Vatican Studies**

[New Orleans, LA] Meeting in assembly in New Orleans from August 11 to 14, approximately 800 leaders of US orders of Catholic sisters engaged speakers and one another on some of the most critical issues facing Catholic orders, the Catholic Church, and the people they serve.

Aware of the devastation of New Orleans, the restoration of the coastal wetlands of Louisiana, and climate change, the members of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) met under the theme “Women of Spirit: Creating in Chaos.” The assembly began with 250 members touring the work sites and housing of Catholic sisters that had been destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. LCWR had co-sponsored a recovery project that raised more than \$7 million which enabled sisters to remain in New Orleans and restore their works in education, healthcare, and social services.

Several hundred of the leaders held an outdoor public prayer service on the banks of the Mississippi River where they learned more about the ruinous effects of coastal wetland erosion. They also unanimously affirmed a resolution to take measurable steps to reduce their orders’ carbon footprints.

ABC News and NPR analyst Cokie Roberts, a New Orleans native educated by Catholic sisters, addressed the assembly. She offered a historical perspective on the resiliency and creative contributions of Catholic sisters to the nation since they landed in this city in 1727. Roberts referenced the study being conducted on the quality of life of Catholic sisters by the Vatican saying that while she was not qualified to speak on the quality of life of these women, she could speak with authority to the quality of life of those changed by them and solidly endorsed the spirituality and mission of sisters today.

The assembly body also discussed the Vatican study, as well as a separate inquiry being conducted by the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on the position of LCWR in matters pertaining to Catholic Church doctrine. Following analysis of the experience of these studies thus far, the leaders noted that while their orders have always been fully accountable to the church and plan to collaborate with the Vatican in these studies, they request that those conducting the inquiries alter some of the methods being employed. Among the expressed concerns are a lack of full disclosure about the motivation and funding sources for the studies. The leaders also object to the fact that their orders will not be permitted to see the investigative reports about them that are being submitted directly to the Vatican.

Throughout the assembly, the leaders emphasized that their orders have remained faithful to the reform and renewal of their communities called for by the Second Vatican Council that urged women and men religious to adapt their lives, prayer and work so they may most effectively fulfill their mission. They reclaimed their commitment to what they believe is the unique and needed role of religious life which includes serving at and speaking from the margins of the Catholic Church.

The leaders noted that this study of their lives has drawn national and international attention and provided them the opportunity to explain the substance and focus of religious life, not only to those conducting the probes, but also to the public. In a presentation on a recently conducted national study on vocations to religious life, Brother Paul Bednarczyk, CSC and Sister Mary Bendyna, RSM emphasized the need to increase public understanding of religious life. Bednarczyk, executive director of the National Religious Vocation Conference, and Bendyna, executive director of the Center for Applied Research for the Apostolate (CARA), addressed the assembly on the findings of the national study their two organizations conducted over the period of two years on vocations to religious life.

As LCWR outgoing president Sister J Lora Dambroski, OSF called the assembly to move forward together, she also pointed out the potential inherent in the Vatican studies. In her address to the assembly she called the inquiries a “unique invitation to ongoing creativity in the living of Gospel commitment” and said they provide “another defining moment in our conference and our collective histories and future.”

President-elect Sister Marlene Weisenbeck, FSPA assumed the office of LCWR president for 2009-2010 after the members voted in Sister Mary Hughes, prioress of the Dominican Sisters of Amityville, New York, as the new conference president-elect; and reelected Sister Ellen Dauwer, a Sister of Charity of Saint Elizabeth of Convent Station, New Jersey as conference secretary. They also approved a five-year plan for future conference studies and planning.

In other assembly business, the conference heard findings from a study commissioned by LCWR and conducted by CARA on the policies and practices in place in orders of Catholic sisters for responding to allegations of sexual abuse and for prevention of abuse. The findings showed the vast majority of orders have appropriate policies in place.

The assembly closed with the conferring of LCWR’s highest honor, its Outstanding Leadership Award, on Sister Sharon Holland, IHM, who until June 2009 was one of the highest-ranking women at the Vatican, and Sister Helen Garvey, BVM, project coordinator of LCWR’s traveling museum exhibit “Women & Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America.”

LCWR has approximately 1500 members who are elected leaders of their religious orders, representing approximately 59,000 Catholic sisters. The conference develops leadership, promotes collaboration within church and society, and serves as a voice for systemic change.

The addresses from this assembly will be available at [www.lcwr.org](http://www.lcwr.org).