

LCWR members urged to maintain 'hope in the midst of darkness'

DALLAS - Contrasting events of the last year that have both spotlighted the accomplishments of women religious and focused broad attention on challenges facing the Catholic Church, the outgoing president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious urged the organization to maintain hope that the Gospel will guide members to articulate their mission with "inclusive love."

Sister Marlene Weisenbeck, a Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration, called upon the gathering of 750 women religious at the organization's annual assembly in Dallas Aug. 13 to let the world know that "Jesus Christ is the center of our lives."

She cited several events since the organization's 2009 gathering in New Orleans that she considered positive: the traveling "Women & Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America" exhibit that highlights the accomplishments of women religious in the United States; the passage of health care reform legislation by Congress in March after women religious supported the bill; and the "courage" of Bishop Kevin Dowling of Rustenburg, South Africa, for his recent questioning of the growing centralization of the church's power structure.

Sister Marlene contrasted those events with the public disagreement that arose between the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and women religious over the health care legislation, the clergy sexual abuse scandal that expanded around the world and the continuing apostolic visitation of U.S. women religious and the doctrinal assessment of the LCWR.

"Amidst all the systemic unrest that these explosive events engender, we have called ourselves to hope in the midst of darkness," Sister Marlene said. "We dare to articulate how our ecclesial role as women religious is calling us to mission.

"We do not have to mimic our founders to find the answer about how to do this. St. Francis said, 'I have done what is mine to do. May Christ show you what is yours.' In other words, the Gospel will show us what to do, how we must act with the attitude

of Jesus who emphasized an inclusive love of all in right relationships,” she said.

Sister Marlene encouraged the women to “get the word out ... that generosity and goodness are what the world thirsts for, that difference, diversity and dialogue are not dirty words but central to Trinitarian life at the heart of human relationships in community.”

She also called upon the women in their role as artists, ministers and healers to remember that the Holy Spirit works in “mystical exhortation to move people forward in a prophetic way.”

“The prophetic call is an individual quest for the holy that must lead to a communal quest for justice,” she said.

“As prophets for the future who move beyond pessimism and a culture of guilt and blame, we are prompted to see possibilities for healing, forgiveness, and to re-enact the actions of Christ as he witnessed to God’s tenderness. We bring our grain of sand in the wisdom of small steps that give imagination to charity,” she added.

Concluding, Sister Marlene said women religious remain grounded in the Second Vatican Council and “wait in stubborn hope for truth to impose itself by virtue of its essence as it wins over the mind with both gentleness and power.”

Before the close of the assembly, Dominican Sister Mary Hughes assumed the office of LCWR president for 2010-11.