

# New S.S.N.D. leader outlines priorities

In the face of what she sees as an increasingly polarized and splintered world, the newly-elected global leader of the School Sisters of Notre Dame said she hopes to promote a sense of solidarity among humanity.

Sister Mary Maher, S.S.N.D., was elected general superior of her international women's religious community during the congregation's 22nd General Chapter held in São Leopoldo, Brazil, in October. She had been in her second year as provincial leader of her order's Baltimore-based Atlantic-Midwest Province in the United States.

"The world is fractured by an inability to deal with difference except through violence," said Sister Mary, a New York native who entered the School Sisters in 1968 and professed her final vows in 1979.

"We School Sisters have a mission to bring all to the oneness in God," she said. "Education is our response to the cries of the world."

During the General Chapter, School Sisters approved a directional statement, "Call to Solidarity," that will guide the order during the next five years. Sister Mary said she will work closely with a team of six general councilors elected from five countries to enact the principles of the statement. She said there will be a special focus on protecting the environment, deepening the international character of the order, promoting education for all and living "eucharistic lives" that are "broken and shared" for others.

Although the School Sisters have seen increasing vocations in Poland, Hungary and parts of Asia and Africa, the overall numbers have declined in the last three decades. When Sister Mary entered the congregation, there were about 13,000 School Sisters. Today there are 3,700 School Sisters in more than 30 countries.

Smaller numbers mean that the order will need to act increasingly as one international body and "make the most of the fact that we already have global

reach,” Sister Mary said.

The new leader has much experience drawing diverse regions together. She was involved in the merging of three S.S.N.D. provinces in America, Baltimore, Chicago and Wilton, Conn., to form the Atlantic-Midwest Province. With 642 sisters, the Atlantic-Midwest Province is the second-largest province in the congregation after the founding province in Bavaria.

Reconfiguring the three American provinces was a way of better utilizing resources, streamlining administration and uniting “for the sake of ministry,” she said.

“The congregation is definitely looking to reconfigure and it will look different in different cultures,” said Sister Mary. “It’s not an easy thing. But I find our sisters will do anything for the sake of ministry.”

Sister Mary said it is an exciting time for her community as it prepares to mark its 175th jubilee. Asked what it was like to be the 11th successor to Blessed Mother Theresa of Jesus Gerhardinger, Sister Mary smiled and said it was difficult to think in those terms.

“I have a deep sense of peace knowing the School Sisters are very committed to the direction we set at our General Chapter,” she said.

Sister Mary, who holds a doctorate in theology from the Catholic University of America, will be installed as general superior on Jan. 20 in Rome. She will live at her order’s international headquarters in that same city.

Sister Mary succeeds Sister Rosemary Howarth, S.S.N.D., a Canadian who led the order for 10 years.