

Nun who ministers to poor in mission diocese a ‘witness to God’s mercy’

CHICAGO - For Sister Mary Bernard Derayunan, the essence of her ministry in the heart of U.S. mission territory is “to be a witness to God’s mercy and compassion.”

She encourages those she helps to “look for what is truly good in their lives,” the Good Shepherd sister told a conference in Chicago in describing her work at Good Shepherd Center in Holbrook, Ariz., on the Navajo reservation. It is in the Diocese of Gallup, N.M., which includes part of Arizona.

Many of the women to whom she ministers have struggled with poverty, alcohol and drug abuse, she said. “When we see them really down, we try to help them get up and to realize they should not despair, God is merciful and forgiving.”

Sister Mary Bernard, a native of the Philippines, was among the speakers at a mid-October conference held in Chicago under theme “The Leadership and Philanthropy of Women Religious: A Life of Passionate Service to the Home Missions.”

It was sponsored by Catholic Extension and FADICA, which stands for Foundations and Donors Interested in Catholic Activities.

The conference drew 40 foundation trustees, Catholic Extension personnel and women religious from rural Mississippi as well as from Navajo and Apache communities in the Southwest. The gathering focused on their work running Catholic schools, parishes and social service programs in poor communities in the 88 home mission dioceses of the United States.

Speakers at the conference included laywomen who have been helped by the sisters or trained by them to serve in home missions.

One of the women was Lourdes Garza, a native of Mexico City who is now director of Hispanic ministry for the Diocese of Knoxville, Tenn.

“There’s a lot of training that has to be done,” she said. “I am running a Bible institute and it’s amazing when you open your doors and see how many want to learn more about their faith and to be prepared to serve it.”

There is a great hunger for learning and faith formation, but “I don’t have the teachers that I need,” she said.

Sister Donna Gunn, a Sister of St. Joseph, is director of advocacy at Sacred Heart Family Center in Camden, Miss. She spoke about the lay witness and leadership that she has found in her decade of service in a rural, low-income Catholic community.

She said she has been proud of what nuns and clergy have done in mission dioceses, but with their numbers diminished, “our church needs new leadership now.” But “not just because the religious are not there, but because the Holy Spirit is pushing us forward,” she said.

In his remarks to the conference, Father Jack Wall, president of Catholic Extension, said that women religious “recognize the power of risen life. ... Where others see death, these women see something new being born.”

He urged foundation trustees and members of FADICA at the conference to work with his organization in furthering the work and ministry of the sisters in the country’s rural areas and in thinking about the need for future leadership development and training.

U.S. mission dioceses “are laboratories for the future where something new is taking shape,” he said.

“Extension invites all of FADICA members to join them in launching some new ways that knowledge, skills and formation can prepare laity to be powerful witnesses to hope in our home missions in the tradition of the powerful, loving ways patterned by our religious,” Father Wall said.

The evening before the conference FADICA honored Bishop Ricardo Ramirez of Las Cruces, N.M. He is the founding bishop of the diocese, established in 1982, and a Catholic Extension board member.

Bishop Ramirez described Las Cruces as “a frontier church,” where the “greatest pastoral challenge is the geographical distances that separate our parishes” in the nearly 45,000-square-mile diocese. But its “treasure is the people whose faith inspired hope and generous service to promote the reign of God,” he said.

Home mission territory includes much of the South and West, and all of Alaska. Dioceses in these areas need money to maintain and build adequate worship space, to support priests and lay ministers, to educate seminarians and to provide social services.

Catholic Extension and the U.S. bishops’ annual collection for the home missions provide much of the funding the dioceses need.