News
Spirituality



Sr. Maria Juan Anderson of the Religious Sisters of Mercy of Alma, Michigan, introduces the panelists at a session about consecrated life June 12 at the Given forum at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. The panelists are, from left, Sr. Maria Goretti, a member of the Carmelite Sisters of the Most Sacred Heart of Los Angeles; Sr. Gabriela Ramirez de la Rosa, a member of the Apostolic Sisters of St. John; Dorrie Donahue, a consecrated woman and member of the Totus Tuus Community, a secular institute in Pittsburgh; and Andréa Polito, a consecrated virgin. At right is moderator Sr. Josephine Garrett, a Sister of the Holy Family of Nazareth. (GSR photo/Gail DeGeorge)



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Among the keynote speakers, panelists, religious sisters and lay mentors at the Given Catholic Young Women's Leadership Forum were presenters with whom many of the 130 attendees particularly identified: alumnae of previous Given forums.

The June 9-13 event at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., brought together young adult Catholic women between the ages of 21 to 30 from 35 states, the District of Columbia, Mexico and the United Kingdom for five days of inspirational and motivational talks, leadership training, prayer workshops, and group and individual mentoring sessions.

In the opening address, Sister Bethany Madonna, a Sister of Life and a co-chair of the inaugural Given forum in 2016, reviewed the themes that were emphasized throughout the forum: "Receive the gift that you are, realize the gifts you have been given and respond with the gift only you can give."



From left: Nicole Fetterman; Sr. Josephine Garrett, a Sister of the Holy Family of Nazareth; Emily Harpole; Mary Anne Means; and Frances Gross take part in a mentoring group, an important part of the Given Catholic Young Women's Leadership Forum, held June 9-13 at Catholic University of America. (GSR photo/Gail DeGeorge)

Each of the young women selected to attend the forum submitted an action plan, their individual initiative to identify their particular gifts and practical ways to put them in the service of the church and the world. A yearlong mentoring program following the forum will help the women implement their plans.

This was the first forum in which Given alumnae were included in the speaker lineup, said Rachel Harkins Ullmann, executive director of the Given Institute. In total, seven alumnae spoke on panels, led a prayer workshop or gave testimony on the success of their action plans. Sixty women religious from 20 congregations, mostly belonging to the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious and two that are members of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, also participated, along with 30 laywomen who served as mentors.

The Given Institute, which organizes the forum and its related programs, announced June 11 an agreement with the OSV Institute for Catholic Innovation, which fosters church-related programs and activities, in which three of the 2021 Given action plan

projects will move into the semifinal round of the 2022 OSV Challenge, which provides funding to help Catholics bring artistic endeavors, business ventures, charitable initiatives and more to fruition.

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In addition to competing for the OSV Challenge's $100,000 prize, the three Given projects will be awarded $10,000 each in seed money donated by Given benefactors.

Anna Carter and Shannon Ochoa, alumnae of the 2016 and 2019 Given forums, respectively, were winners of the 2020 OSV Challenge, earning $100,000 for their nonprofit, Eden Invitation, which describes itself as "a movement for young adult Christian and Catholics on the LGBT spectrum seeking to follow Jesus Christ."

Carter was one of three Given alumnae who spoke on the June 12 forum panel "Millennials on Mission: Emerging Women Leaders." Carter led the group in prayer, noting that the day marked the fifth anniversary of the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida.

"It's important to remember and pray for all those who have died by violence motivated by their sexuality," she said.

She and the other panelists stressed the importance of prayer in their work. Carter also noted the importance of having a strong team and said to guard against "saying 'yes' to too many things and getting exhausted and not being in a good place to serve. Be attentive to what God is actually calling you to something particular, and in order to respond with a full-throated 'yes,' you have to say 'no' to other things."



Sr. Mary Madeline Todd, center, a Dominican Sister of St. Cecilia and assistant professor of theology at Aquinas College in Nashville, talks with her mentoring group during an afternoon break at the 2021 Given forum. Todd gave a keynote speech June 12 in which she explored the "feminine genius" through the example of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and the writings of St. John Paul II and St. Catherine of Siena. (GSR photo/Gail DeGeorge)

Lauren Costabile, another "Millennials on Mission" panelist, told of how she was volunteering with groups working with adults with Down syndrome when she attended the 2016 Given forum. A few months later, she was visiting a friend in Uganda and was prompted to visit and counsel families with children with Down syndrome, particularly to warn them about congenital heart defects that affect about half of children born with the syndrome.

Drawn in particular to help one child who needed surgery, "I did what any good millennial does: I started a GoFundMe page, I made a video, I put it on my Facebook page and Instagram," she said as the audience laughed in recognition.

She said she raised $5,000 in a week. She spoke of donors coming through just when they were needed; her intercessions of prayer, particularly to St. Mother Teresa; and how the opportunity came to have the surgery done at a hospital in India founded by the cardiologist who had been Mother Teresa's personal cardiologist.

Since then, through Costabile's nonprofit, Hearts of Joy International, 35 children have had surgery, and education and support are provided to families of those with Down syndrome.

When she came to the Given forum in 2016, she said, she knew her calling was to work with those with Down syndrome, but she wasn't sure of the details.

"Don't be afraid to be bold," she said. "You may not know the whole story, but you are going to change the world and make a difference. That's what you were created for."



Attendees of the Given Catholic Young Women's Leadership Forum, held June 9-13 at Catholic University of America, took precautions against COVID-19, including practicing social distancing, eating meals outside when possible and wearing masks inside. (GSR photo/Gail DeGeorge)

Laura Prejean told the "Millennials on Mission" panel of how attending the 2016 Given forum was instrumental in attending the Catholic University of America to get her degree in canon law. She spoke of being a woman in a male-dominated field, recognizing that she will never serve as a vicar general or a bishop because of the prohibition against women's ordination.

"The privilege of this job has been encountering the other in chaos, desperate, vulnerable, and they come to the law for clarity to find some order in what feels like the darkness," she said. "The Lord has invited me to bring my own feminine heart ... to be mother or sister, to accompany someone in their journey to order. It's a privilege to be a woman in that field in a way I didn't expect."

On a panel about consecrated life, attendees heard from two women religious about their journeys to religious life — Sr. Gabriela Ramirez de la Rosa of the Apostolic Sisters of St. John and Sr. Maria Goretti of the Carmelite Sisters of the Most Sacred Heart of Los Angeles — as well from Andréa Polito, a nurse and consecrated virgin, and Dorrie Donahue, a consecrated woman and member of the Totus Tuus Community, a secular institute in Pittsburgh.

Sr. Josephine Garrett, a Sister of the Holy Family of Nazareth who moderated the panel, told Global Sisters Report that the Given forum is important because "we're stewards of the kingdom, so this is a practical approach for people who love the church to be better stewards."

"As consecrated women who have the body of Christ as our spouse, I think it's important to be interested in nurturing others," she said.



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The conference was held with COVID-19 precautions in place, with wellness checks and rapid tests at the registration table; breakout rooms; readily available hand sanitizer and masks; and participants split across three auditoriums to enable social distancing. Last year's forum had to be canceled because of the pandemic, and a virtual event was held instead.

Participants expressed appreciation for the speakers and the opportunity to meet other young Catholic women leaders.

"The leadership training and mentorship part of this was very attractive to me because I don't know anybody who is in nonprofit women entrepreneurship stuff," said Katie Gramke, 26, of Melbourne, Florida, who noted that Sr. Bethany Madonna grew up a member of her parish. "I've been gladly surprised at all the graces and

spiritual nourishment here, too. It's a beautiful balance of spiritual nourishment and specific help when it comes to being a woman in Catholic leadership."