News
Religious Life



by Sarah Mac Donald

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Sr. Norma Pimentel of the Missionaries of Jesus, executive director for Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley with her godchild at the migrant camp in Matamoros, Mexico, during the COVID-19 pandemic. She was among six speakers at the July 15 "Sisters Empowering Women" webinar on advocacy hosted by the International Union of Superiors General. (Courtesy of Sr. Norma Pimentel)

The time has come for a new way of doing things, forming new partnerships and new alliances, and being creative through new arrangements, a July 15 webinar on advocacy sponsored by the Rome-based International Union of Superiors General was told.

In her introduction to "Advocacy: Linking Local to Global," one in a series of online events with the theme "Sisters Empowering Women," Sr. Eilís Coe told 158 participants that sisters empower others because they themselves have been empowered.

"As sisters, we empower people to live their lives fully, becoming the person God intended them to be," the Religious Sister of Charity said from Dublin. "Over the years, we have done this in education, in social work, in advocacy, in nurturing creativity, and many other ways. We take to heart in the words of Jesus, 'I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.' We work and campaign against anything which would lessen the human rights and dignity of our brothers and sisters."

Six speakers described their work as women religious living *Fratelli Tutti* in the world and opening paths of empowerment and hope through their mission.

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In her address, Sr. Norma Pimentel, executive director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley, described her work at the U.S.-Mexico border in South Texas as "a story of encounter" with thousands of "brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers and children whose faces bear the weight of the extreme abuse of corrupt and failed societies, families who are desperate for escape." She said the cries of "Help me" from women, men and children stir her to action daily.

"Women's resilience against all odds is what we share with one another," said the Missionaries of Jesus sister, whom Time magazine named as one of the 100 most influential people of 2020. "As women of today, I would encourage you to imagine yourself as a gift to the world so that you can be a voice for those who do not have a voice, so that you can offer help where help is needed."

In 2014, Pimentel was instrumental in organizing community resources to respond to the surge of Central Americans seeking asylum in the United States through respite centers in McAllen and Brownsville, Texas.

"As advocates of today, we are defenders of human dignity, working together for the common good," she said. "We are heralds of truth, of justice and mercy, that bring about peace to our world."

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Urging sisters to make possible Pope Francis' "revolution of tenderness" through the "miracle of kindness," Pimentel told webinar attendees that they could make a difference in restoring the spirit of communities.

"You can help them heal from brokenness. You will be key in weaving together with other women strong lines of unity in our communities," she said. "In the midst of all the confusion and anger and distress and pain, suffering, there is hope. Today, you are that hope."

Coe spent most of her 60 years in religious life teaching in Ireland, Zambia and Botswana. Since retiring from teaching, she has been involved in outreach to women in street prostitution as well as awareness activities with anti-trafficking networks such as Act to Prevent Trafficking, or APT, in Ireland as well as Religious in Europe Networking Against Trafficking and Exploitation, or RENATE.

"In our security, we are called to reach out to those whose lives are threatened at this time," she told the webinar. "Alongside COVID, deeply embedded in every country of the world, the scourge of human trafficking and modern-day slavery continues to destroy lives. Many of us have been working to combat this evil using

all means at our disposal to help eradicate this.... No country has defeated trafficking. We are just triaging the most evident symptoms of the disease rather than treating the disease itself. This is very discouraging."

"More than ever, we need our networks to keep on working and empowering one another to find new and better ways to bring this evil disease out of shadows, where it devours the lives of the most vulnerable, and expose it to the healing life of a community determined to eradicate it," she said.



Sr. Sheila Kinsey, a member of the Franciscan Sisters, Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary and executive co-secretary for the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Joint Commission of International Union of Superiors General and the Union of Superiors General, speaks during the webinar. (Screenshot by Sarah Mac Donald)

The remedy, Coe suggested, begins with each individual sister resolving to take the first step in creating a new order, acting at the most concrete and local levels, and expanding to the farthest reaches of their countries and the world.

Mercy Sr. Angela Reed works for the social justice section of the Mercy International Association. While living in the Philippines, she focused her research on giving voice to Filipino women who have been trafficked for sexual exploitation. Over the years, she has adopted an interdisciplinary approach to research, service provision and public advocacy on gendered violence and human trafficking.

She described women's advocacy as a prophetic activity of the church. The other speakers, she said, had shown how advocacy involves speaking up for those who are silenced. Advocacy is one way in which the church participates in its ongoing mission.

Reed shared information about Mercy International Association's work in New York with the United Nations and other international and faith-based organizations, as well as the tools for advocacy and publications such as *Inherent Dignity*, an advocacy guidebook.

"Often, people think advocacy is about taking banners on walks, writing letters, and protesting and rallying. And yes, that is part of advocacy," Reed said. "But we can never, ever do any of that kind of work unless we are in close proximity to the people and to the Earth."

Pimentel's talk, Reed said, had reminded her of the "power of proximity and never losing sight of the people with whom we work and walk alongside."

It's important for sisters to recognize that they work with, not for, those who are oppressed and experiencing injustice, she said.

Sr. Donatus Lili of the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd addressed the webinar from Kenya, where she is vice coordinator for Religious Against Human Trafficking. A former designate to the U.N. Economic Commission for Africa, she gave an overview of how sisters can take action at regional and at global levels.

She stressed the importance of women religious gathering information and connecting globally with non-state actors to have impact. Religious congregations delivered ministries in silos in the past, leading to a duplication of services, she said. But today, she added, they need to galvanize collectively to lobby states on adopting just laws and policies that consider the less fortunate.

"The church has realized that it's no longer that time for Moses and Aaron to continue being mouthpieces for the vulnerable," she said. "It's now time to pass on the mantle, enabling the vulnerable to state their issues. It is time to realize that dishing out money and food is not the solution, but rather, empowering individuals to voice their own solutions."

The advocacy webinar also included video testimony from Manila by Sr. Judith Padasas, a Carmelite Sister of Charity who is coordinating team member for Talitha Kum Philippines, and an address from Sr. Sheila Kinsey, a member of the Franciscan Sisters, Daughters of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary and executive co-secretary for the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation joint commission of UISG and the Union of Superiors General. It was the fifth in the Sisters Empowering Women series; the next webinar will be Sept. 29.