Blog
Religious Life



Sisters in the Adrian Dominican auditorium in Adrian, Michigan, give Dominican Sr. Elise García a standing ovation at the conclusion of her Aug. 11 presidential address to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. (GSR screenshot)



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Hundreds of members of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and guests convened at the organization's annual assembly Aug. 11-13, which was as much a retreat as a meeting. Global Sisters Report had daily coverage of the talks and presentations, but the week went so fast, it was hard to catch all of our stories.

Now, in addition to a new Q&A with LCWR's new president-elect, Dominican Sr. Rebecca Ann Gemma, we offer readers a look back at what they may have missed.

On the assembly's opening day, Dominican Sr. Elise García, now past president of LCWR, gave a presidential address that chastised the church, its bishops, vowed religious and institutions for participating in "our nation's perduring sin of racism." She and other LCWR leaders acknowledged "these sinful acts by our congregations and institutions" and offered "a profound apology."



Sr. Elise García, an Adrian Dominican and president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, gives the presidential address Aug. 11, during the group's annual assembly. (GSR screenshot)

"We as Americans have cheated ourselves of the full truth of our history, ignoring or eliding the painful stories that inextricably interweave and form the full fabric of our lives as African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Euro Americans, Latinx Americans," García said. "There is a direct through line of oppression and

white supremacy in our history, from the first enslaved Africans disembarking the White Lion, an English privateer ship, in Hampton, Virginia, in late August of 1619 to the murder of George Floyd on a street corner in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in late May of 2020. We need to know this."

García's address reflected the reckoning LCWR, its member congregations and sisters across the United States are undertaking in regards to their role in the country's systemic racism. Prior to the assembly, GSR national correspondent Dan Stockman did a deep dive into the anti-racist work of white sisters nationwide grappling with their own failures.

"We as women religious are absolutely called to this work. It's fundamental to who we say we are, and the first step is to revisit our history, all our collective history and our specific history," García told Stockman before the LCWR assembly. "We have to admit and recognize the ways we have been complicit in this."

Related: 'Our reckoning': US sisters take up call to examine their role in systemic racism

In addition to working to eliminate racism, LCWR and its members are also looking to the future of religious life. This has been a common theme at recent LCWR assemblies, and on Aug. 12, Sr. Mercedes Casas Sánchez of the Daughters of the Holy Spirit of Mexico in her keynote address to the 2021 assembly wove together wisdom from poets, popes and philosophers in a literary and mystical reflection on what the future may hold.

Though religious life today can feel frail, Casas told the attendees, she reminded sisters that "we are not starting from scratch," offering Pope Francis' warning that they ought not "give in to the temptation of numbers and efficiency."

Through its first Lifetime Achievement Awards, LCWR celebrated the lives and ministries of three sisters who in their decades of religious life have advocated for those on the margins: Presentation Sr. Joyce Meyer, Immaculate Heart of Mary Sr. Amata Miller, and St. Joseph Sr. Helen Prejean. The three officially received the awards on the final day of the assembly; the awards had been announced last year, but the presentation was pushed back in hopes they could be given out in person.

Related: LCWR's Lifetime Achievement Award winners have spent decades advocating for others

Also on the final day of the assembly, LCWR bid adieu to St. Joseph Sr. Jayne Helmlinger, who ended her time in the presidential triumvirate.

"We're deeply grateful for your thoughtful approach to every conversation, for your thorough reflection on every matter that came before us," St. Joseph Sr. Carol Zinn, LCWR executive director, told the assembly. "We thank you for your listening ears, your listening heart, your deep, contemplative spirit."

In a column for GSR, Helmlinger reflected on the highlights of her three years in LCWR leadership, almost half of which was spent navigating the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Our collective response to the mounting needs of our brothers and sisters were met with ingenuity, creativity, daring and grace," she wrote. "Networks formed over the decades were accessed to assist our brothers and sisters from around the world — and often accomplished through emails, phone calls and virtual meetings. It brought home to all of us the fragility of life and the importance of the ministry of presence."



Sr. Jane Herb in her office July 19 at the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary motherhouse in Monroe, Michigan. On Aug. 13, Herb will become president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

The LCWR presidency now passes to Sr. Jane Herb of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. In interviews with GSR, friends and former co-workers of Herb's described her collaborative approach to leadership, which could also have its roots in the years Herb spent playing then coaching sports.

"What she tries to do is listen, to take the experience she has and what's happening and see how it all fits together," said Sr. Marianne Gaynor, who joined the leadership team of the Immaculate Heart of Mary sisters in 2018.

Herb is also not shy about addressing problems, Gaynor said: "She doesn't let things simmer too long. If there's something she needs to address, she usually addresses it pretty directly. But she tries to hear both sides, basically saying, 'Where are we going with this?' "

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Joining the presidential triumvirate for 2021-2022 is president-elect Gemma of the Dominican Sisters of Springfield, Illinois, who is prioress of her community and has been a member of LCWR for 16 years. She was also a founding member of the Springfield Dominican Anti-Racism team and has been working in anti-racism at the community level for almost two decades.

"The work doesn't get easier, it gets harder, because we recognize our relationships with people of color aren't what they should be," she told GSR in a Q&A after her June 28 election. "You can hide a lot, but when you are in a real relationship and accountable to other people, there's no hiding."

Overall, LCWR's second virtual assembly provided food for thought for everyone and felt more like a retreat than a three-day conference, as the organizers hoped before the assembly opened. If the ongoing coronavirus pandemic abates, LCWR hopes to hold its August 2022 assembly in person in St. Louis. Whether in-person or virtual, Global Sisters Report will be there.

This story appears in the **LCWR 2021** feature series. View the full series.