News
Religious Life



Sr. Mary Peter Lillian Di Maria, director of the Avila Institute of Gerontology, speaks May 9 at a presentation announcing the launch of an initiative to help sisters caring for those with dementia. (GSR screenshot)



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Through a new initiative, congregations, federations and conferences around the world will work to ensure Catholic sisters with dementia and cognitive impairment will live their best lives both physically and spiritually until the end of their days.

In an in-person and livestreamed event May 9 hosted by the International Union of Superiors General, officials launched the Catholic Sisters Cognitive Impairment/Alzheimer's Global Initiative, aimed at ensuring that sisters with dementia are not shut away and forgotten. The global initiative is a joint project of UISG and the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in the United States.

The Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, which also funds Global Sisters Report, is committing $5 million both to this effort and to another aimed at helping congregations around the world care for aging sisters in general, which is called the Catholic Sisters Aging Initiative and is expected to launch soon.

It's about "ensuring our sisters live a dignified life as they age, not just physically, but spiritually," said Sr. Jane Wakahiu, associate vice president of program operations and head of the Catholic Sisters Initiative at the Hilton Foundation. Wakahiu is a member of the Little Sisters of St. Francis. "Our elderly sisters are one of our greatest blessings."

Wakahiu said the two initiatives may eventually be under one umbrella, and all of the efforts will focus on ensuring that "no sister will leave this world without experiencing the deep compassion and accompaniment they deserve until the end of life."

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Sr. Pat Murray, executive secretary of UISG and a member of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, said the initiative's advisory group needs more members from Latin America, Africa and Asia to ensure the efforts work across cultures and continents. St. Joseph Sr. Carol Zinn, the executive director of LCWR, is co-director of the cognitive impairment initiative.

The efforts will be guided by research by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University. At the May 9 event, Fr. Thomas Gaunt, CARA executive director, presented some of the research done through focus groups in the

United States, Mexico and Kenya, where major superiors said their biggest concern was providing for the well-being of their aging and ailing members, followed closely by financing the general needs of the congregation.

Sr. Mary Peter Lillian Di Maria of the Carmelite Sisters for the Aged and Infirm, the director of the Avila Institute of Gerontology, said much of the effort will be on education. Caregivers need to be trained to recognize what is — and what is not — dementia, and younger sisters need to learn that a healthy diet and healthy socialization can often prevent dementia.

"We also have to understand it's a vocation, it's a call" to care for elderly sisters, she said. "It's more than just a job that needs to be taken up."



Sr. Pat Murray, executive secretary of the International Union of Superiors General, and Jesuit Fr. Thomas Gaunt, director of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University, speak May 9 during a presentation announcing the launch of an initiative to help sisters caring for those with dementia. (GSR screenshot)

This story appears in the **Sustainable Development Goal 3: Good Health and Wellbeing**, **Sustainable Development Goal 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions**, and **Caring for Aging Sisters** feature series.