News



A dancer from the Fe y Alegria School escorts Sr. Silvia Flores, right, to the opening of the board meeting of the Confederation of Latin American and Caribbean Religious June 2, in Lima, Peru. Flores, of the Mercedaries of the Blessed Sacrament, took part in the four-day meeting about issues affecting consecrated life in the region attended by conference presidents and general secretaries of religious orders of Latin America and the Caribbean. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)



by Rhina Guidos

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They called out the names of their friends, sometimes their predecessors, some of them martyred, some having lived long lives, others short, but all rooted in radical closeness to the Gospel. Fr. Jose Luis Loyola gently told them not to worry if tears came.

But mostly tranquility filled the Mass that closed the 48th board meeting of the Confederation of Latin American and Caribbean Religious, or CLAR, in Lima, Peru. They ended late on June 5, with flags from throughout Latin America and the Caribbean draped over an altar, remembering their fallen friends, giving thanks for their lives.

Women and men religious gathered June 2-5 to tackle some of the toughest issues facing Latin America and the Caribbean or "the night," as Sr. Liliana Franco, president of CLAR, called the social, ecclesial and other conditions affecting consecrated life in the region. To some, those conditions, such as religious persecution, abuse and dwindling vocations, look like a crisis, she said, but to those with religious convictions, they are opportunities of grace.

"They can't become justifications for paralysis," Franco, of the Company of Mary, told Global Sisters Report June 5.

Instead, she hoped they would be reasons to continue the work that remains. She encouraged members to go forward with renewed enthusiasm, compassion and greater joy amid challenges. And they certainly did that, sprinkling poetry, inspirational passages from the Gospel, and popular religious tunes between talks about human trafficking, climate change, as well as the persecution of some of their members.



CLAR members from Nicaragua and Haiti did not attend the gathering. Nicaraguans were afraid that if they traveled outside the country, they wouldn't be allowed back in because the government has been steadily pushing out members of religious orders. Members from Haiti are dealing with escalating violence. Those who attended from places such as Cuba and Venezuela shared details of the deteriorating conditions at home: lack of food, medicine.

Among it all, they also spoke with great enthusiasm for the synod — a three-year process of listening and dialogue that Pope Francis has called the church to take part in from 2021 until 2024, and what it would mean for consecrated life.

"Another (type of) church is possible," Sr. Daniela Cannavina, CLAR's general secretary and a member of the Capuchin Sisters of Mother Rubatto, told the group.

The CLAR meeting included general secretaries and presidents of religious conferences from Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as consulting theologians, who spoke of new structures and systems, customs and practices to champion the mission of the church among the poor and vulnerable. Their vision is one of transformation, where clericalism, personal interests and power-seeking are

set aside. Some, like Sr. Isabel Ramirez, donned black rings made from a palm tree on her left ring finger, a sign of "commitment to the poor," she said.



Fr. Gregory Gay, of the Congregation of the Mission, carried the Nicaraguan flag June 5 during the closing day of a board meeting for the Confederation of Latin American and Caribbean Religious in Lima, Peru. Nicaraguan women and men religious did not attend the meeting because they were afraid they would not be allowed to reenter the country. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

Echoing the language used by Francis, members repeated the need to reach out to the "peripheries," to run toward those broken by poverty or abuse, where the church's evangelizing mission can be carried out. The Catholic Church can become a "Samaritan church," said Loyola, a member of the Missionaries of the Holy Spirit in Mexico.

And part of that Samaritan church needs to start with them, they said, in calling for greater transparency when it comes to harm caused to and by their own. They

openly spoke about different types of abuse suffered as well as caused by consecrated men and women, in particular the recent discovery of sexual abuse of minors by a Jesuit and its potential cover-up in Bolivia.

Late last year, CLAR published a groundbreaking report on abuse of different kinds among women religious in Latin America, revealing that the majority of those who responded said they had experienced some form of abuse.

Cuzco Auxiliary Bishop Lizardo Estrada Herrera, an Augustinian who was appointed in May as secretary general of CELAM, the Latin American bishops' conference, celebrated Mass with the group June 3, and told them to heed the words of Francis at Pentecost this year and "listen to the (Holy) Spirit" and listen together.

"Let's carry out what the Spirit is inspiring us to do in our communities, in CLAR," the Peruvian bishop told them. "May the Spirit guide us in that journey, a journey to be carried out in communion."



Sr. Rosa Margarita Mayoral listens during a group activity June 5 at a board meeting of the Confederation of Latin American and Caribbean Religious in Lima, Peru. Mayoral, a Carmelite of the Sacred Heart, gathered with other general secretaries and presidents of religious conferences in Latin America to talk about issues affecting consecrated life in the region. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

But it's a journey, members said, increasingly filled with pain as Latin America and the Caribbean suffer political convulsions, large-scale migration, violence and persecution — situations that have increasingly affected consecrated life in the region and documented in a CLAR report.

"We felt that this year has been marked by many goings-on and we wanted to remember the murder of several of our compañeros in Mexico and Haiti. We wanted to specifically remember in this report the stolen lives of those who are no longer here," Franco explained.

"We also wanted to recognize that we are gathered here in a moment of persecution of so many of our (religious) brothers and sisters, which is increasing on various shores of the continent," she continued. "Some are threatened because of their commitment to the land or because of their explicit defense of cultures or because of their support for popular movements or simply because they are denouncing the tangle of corruption or the growth of mafias."

They spoke about how to best help their members and tossed around the possibility of traveling to Haiti to be with women and men religious there until other members told horror tales of others with similar intentions that went wrong and ended up kidnapped.



Men and women from the Confederation of Latin American and Caribbean Religious pose for a group photo June 5 at the end of a four-day meeting in Lima, Peru. General secretaries and presidents of religious conferences in Latin America gathered for the annual meeting to talk about issues affecting consecrated life in the region. (GSR photo/Rhina Guidos)

They also spoke of the dwindling number of vocations, the aging of religious communities across the Americas as an invitation to live through that "night," what some might see as darkness, with greater joy even while facing limitations, Franco said.

"Let's show that even in our minority (status), we have the possibility to generate life … and to live with greater passion this gift that God has given us in the form of religious life."

They placed a group of crosses on vibrant red and purple fabrics typical of the Peruvian region where they held the meeting. Then they gave each member a cross to remember the gathering and the ultimate reason they chose "the life."

"It's this cross that puts us in touch with our people and we're going to see what feeling the contemplation of this cross produces," Franco said. "We ask God to give us the grace of a simple faith … that while contemplating this cross during our daily ins-and-outs, we remember that we owe ourselves to God, to the kingdom, to people and that it is up to us to give over our lives."

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St. Joseph of Carondelet Sr. Carol Zinn, executive director the U.S.-based Leadership Conference of Women Religious, attended the meeting. Addressing the group in English June 5 said she felt as if she needed an extra seat on her flight home for her heart.

"I have been deeply touched by the movement of God in this experience," she told them, one that came after meetings with similar groups of women religious in the U.S. and Canada in a matter of days. "As I experienced these days with you, I felt as if I was in one conversation, from North America to Lima. We are one. We are one. We live one consecrated life. I've experienced that oneness here and I take that oneness with me."

"My experience these days has been going far, deep, into the heart of God. I am so grateful. Thank you, thank you, thank you," she said.