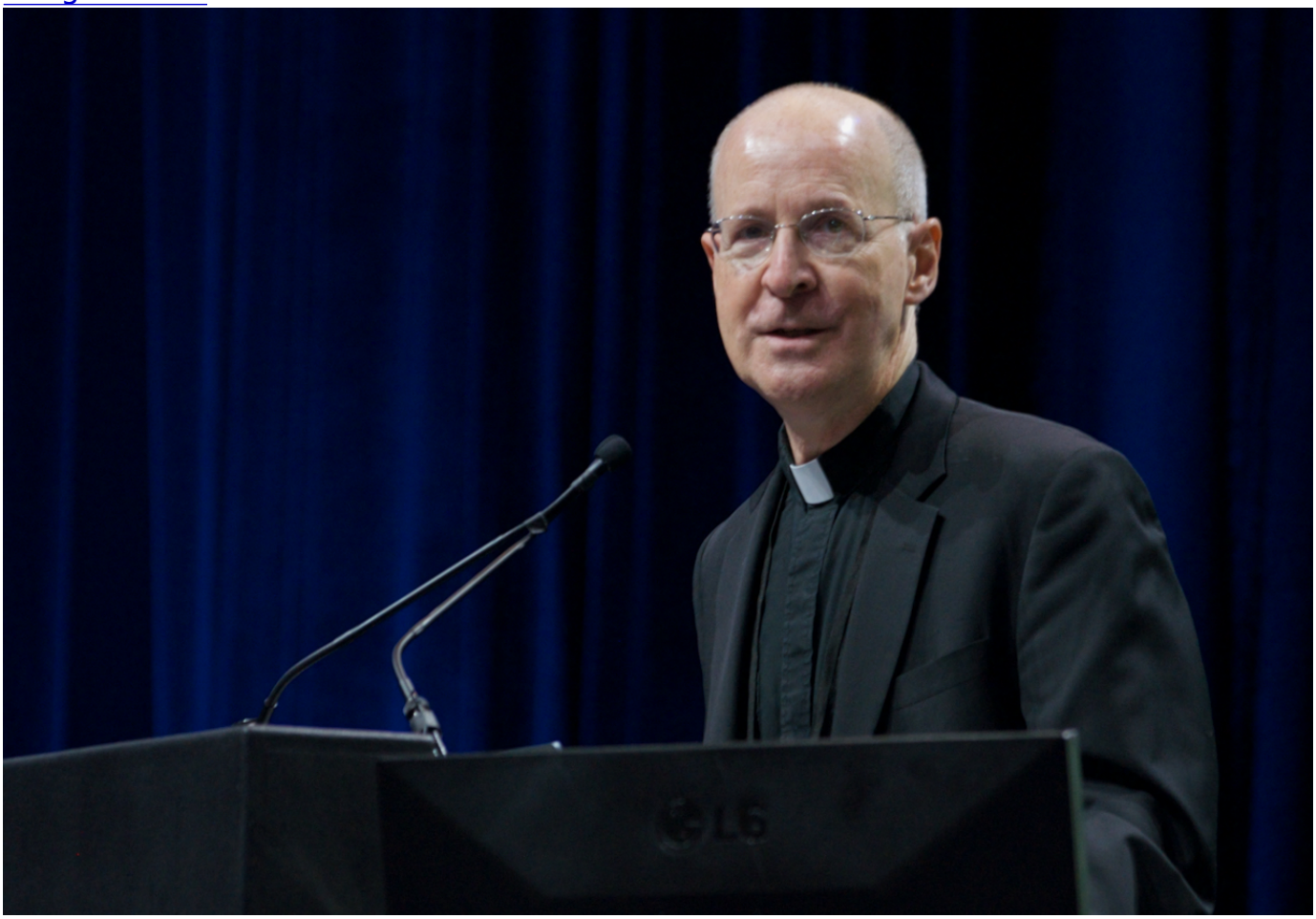
News
Religious Life



Fr. James Martin gives his keynote address at the LCWR assembly Aug. 14 in Atlanta, showing the parallels between the story of Lazarus and the place my religious congregations find themselves in. (GSR/Dan Stockman)



by Dan Stockman

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While the circumstances many congregations of both men and women religious find themselves in may be new, the feelings of fear, grief and doubt certainly are not, said Jesuit Fr. James Martin.

Martin, delivering a keynote address to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious' assembly, Aug. 14, used the story of Lazarus rising from the dead to show how faith, trust and love defeat those feelings.

The conference, held Aug. 12-15, brings together leaders of Catholic sisters from around the United States. This year nearly 600 sisters are attending, plus nearly 300 guests. LCWR represents about two-thirds of the nearly 35,000 U.S. sisters.

Martin, editor at large of America Media, a consultor to the Vatican's Dicastery for Communication, the author of many books, and well known for his work to encourage the church to reach out to and embrace LGBTQ+ Catholics, got a warm welcome from the sisters, which he returned.

"I am with you both in spirit and in person," Martin said. "Now, before I go any further, I want to say a few things. First, Catholic sisters are my heroes, period. Maybe you don't need to hear that, but it's true."

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He also acknowledged that sisters may not need whatever wisdom he has to share.

"I am aware of the incongruity of a priest giving advice to sisters. Just what you need, right? A man giving advice to women, once again, in the church," Martin said to laughter. "But I hope you see this as recompense for the graces that sisters have given me in my life."

As for Lazarus, he noted that when Martha and Mary send word to Jesus that Lazarus is sick, they don't say their brother is sick or that Jesus's disciple is sick. They instead point out that someone Jesus loves is sick.

Love "is the foundation of all our vocations, all our communities, all our ministries and all our futures," Martin said. "So we must start with that in any discussion and rely on the sure and certain knowledge of his love for all of us, even when things look confusing as they did for Martha and Mary,"

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> - Fr. James Martin
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Mary and Martha must have been surprised and hurt that Jesus didn't come right away, just as many religious are confused and hurt that they are forced to sell property and close ministries and convents, he said.

"What I want to highlight here, though, is the essential unknowability of God's plans. 'Why is this happening?' is often a question that for now, is unanswerable," Martin said.

He also pointed out that Martha is very blunt with Jesus, telling him he should have arrived sooner so Lazarus would not have died. He said Martha could be so honest with Jesus because she knew him so well.



Fr. James Martin takes a video of the crowd of sisters at the LCWR assembly Aug. 14 in Atlanta before his keynote address. (GSR/Dan Stockman)

"We can be honest only with people we know well," Martin said. "Martha and Mary could be honest with Jesus about [those] feelings because they knew him. I think it's an invitation for all of us to be honest with God about pain and loss. And also about our hopes for the future."

Many congregations are like Mary and Martha standing with Jesus before Lazarus's tomb: Afraid of a future without their brother, fearing what they will find — and smell — when the stone is rolled away, but also still believing, still hopeful, he said.

"When my dad was diagnosed with the cancer that would kill him, I confessed to my friend [Religious of Jesus and Mary] Sr. Janice Farnham that I didn't know if I was going to be able to handle it," Martin said. "She said, 'Can you surrender to the future God has in store for you?' This is our invitation, no matter who we are and no matter what congregation we belong to."

He said that the suddenly alive Lazarus — like many congregations — had to do what had never been done before. But he was able to do it because he knew Jesus was calling him.

He closed by saying the story of Lazarus asks us who we are called to be.

"Lazarus leaves the tomb because he knows who is calling him. Lazarus is able to say yes to that voice because he knows that voice," Martin said. "This is what enables us to move ahead in our own lives and in our community discernment: knowing who is calling us forward: Jesus."

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"Can we, like Lazarus — fully trusting in Jesus, confident in the future because we are confident who it is calling us — say yes to God?"

The assembly continues through Aug. 15 with a panel discussion on leadership, the changing of LCWR officers, and closes with the presentation of the Outstanding Leadership Award.

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