



Archbishop William Lori of Baltimore gives a keynote address Sept. 18, 2026, at the National Assembly of the Conference of Major Superiors of Women Religious in Florissant, Mo. The theme of the Sept. 17-20 assembly was "250 Years of Freedom: Daughters of the Church from One Generation to the Next." (OSV News/Courtesy of CMSWR)

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At a time of deep political division and declining trust, Archbishop William Lori of Baltimore told a national gathering of women religious leaders that renewing American political culture requires more than better politics. It requires a renewal of human character, relationships and spiritual life, a task to which he said women religious make a unique contribution.

In a Sept. 18 keynote address to the 2026 National Assembly of the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious in Florissant, Missouri, Lori said the Church has always understood that the renewal of society begins "not with structures, but with saints."

"Before there can be renewal of institutions, there must be renewal of persons," Lori said. "Before there can be civic friendship, there must be conversion of heart, and before there can be lasting peace, there must be reconciliation with God."

He said religious life must remain "above politics" in the sense that the Church must never become captive to partisan ideologies, but that transcending politics does not mean withdrawing from the world.

"The evangelical counsels are not an escape from history — they are a way of redeeming history," Lori said. "Consecrated women do not flee society; they bless it."

The vocation of women religious matters not only to the Church but also to the nation because "every authentic consecrated life becomes a living argument that another way of being human is possible," he said.

The annual national assembly, held Sept. 17-20 at the Augustine Institute in Florissant, Missouri, brought together major superiors from across the country for prayer, reflection and dialogue aimed at deepening their understanding of consecrated life.

Drawing on his recent pastoral letter, "In Charity and Truth: Toward a Renewed Political Culture," Lori suggested the nation's deeper problem may not be bad politics, but expecting politics to accomplish what only holiness can achieve.

"We increasingly look to government to provide what families once provided," he said. "We ask for legislation to heal wounds that require forgiveness. We expect institutions to restore trust that can only be rebuilt through virtue. We seek policies to solve crises of meaning. Politics has become burdened with expectations it was never intended to bear."

Citing Pope Benedict XVI, he said government can guarantee justice in certain respects, but cannot create love, manufacture virtue or replace moral formation within families, communities and the Church.

"Democracy depends upon virtues that democracy itself cannot produce," he said. "It depends on honesty, mutual respect, sacrifice, patience and mercy. It depends on generosity in seeking the common good over private advantage."

Those virtues are learned in communities that embody them, he said. The contribution of women religious to democracy, he added, has never consisted primarily in political advocacy but in the formation of virtuous citizens.

"Long before America debated civic education, sisters were forming consciences," he said. "Long before people spoke of 'social capital,' sisters were building communities of trust. Long before commentators worried about polarization, women religious were teaching children to recognize Christ in one another."

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Lori presented the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience as witnesses to authentic freedom and sources of renewal for American public life. Drawing on St. John Paul II's 1995 homily at Oriole Park at Camden Yards in Baltimore, he said the vows proclaim a freedom deeper than the ability to satisfy every desire.

Evangelical poverty, he said, challenges a culture in which the religious sister stands before the world and quietly declares: "My security does not come from accumulation, my identity does not come from ownership, and my future does not

depend upon what I possess. My treasure is Christ."

"Evangelical poverty reminds us that societies flourish when people ask not first, 'What belongs to me?' but rather, 'To whom do I belong?'" Lori said.

He pointed to St. Frances Xavier Cabrini, whose trust in divine providence enabled her to establish schools, orphanages, hospitals and charitable institutions serving immigrants and the poor. In a culture increasingly tempted to confuse security with accumulation, he said, her example shows that poverty is less about having little than about being owned by less.

He also highlighted Mother Mary Lange, founder of the Baltimore-based Oblate Sisters of Providence, whom Pope Francis declared "Venerable."

Despite racial prejudice in both society and the Church, she founded institutions that restored dignity through education, hope through community and confidence through faith, Archbishop Lori said. Her witness challenges a political culture that reduces people to categories, he said, noting that before people are identified by race, wealth or political ideology, they are beloved children of God.

Consecrated chastity, Lori said, offers a witness against reducing people to labels, objects or political identities. He held up Servant of God Sister Thea Bowman as a model of joyful, truth-filled engagement.

She confronted racism and challenged the Church to embrace the richness of African American spirituality while remaining rooted in Catholic tradition, and never abandoned truth for popularity or charity for anger. Instead, he said, she "challenged, invited and loved."

"Because she belonged completely to Christ, she was free to belong to everyone," he said.

Her example offers a model for public life marked by "conviction without contempt," disagreement without dehumanization and criticism animated by hope rather than hostility.

Laws and institutions alone cannot create trust or virtue, he said. One of the greatest gifts women religious can offer the nation is a witness of "communion without uniformity, conviction without hostility and truth without triumphalism."

He presented holy obedience as a school of listening and discernment. Christian obedience, he said, begins with receptivity: asking what God is saying before deciding what one must do.

"Social media rewards immediacy — discipleship requires discernment. Political rhetoric rewards certainty — Christian wisdom often begins with silence," Lori said. "Commentary rewards speed — prayer rewards patience. Our nation does not simply suffer from a deficit of information — it suffers from a deficit of contemplation."

He highlighted St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, who responded to personal loss and uncertainty by trusting providence and allowing obedience to become a source of creativity.

"Perhaps political renewal begins not with louder voices but with quieter hearts," he said.

While historians often emphasize the schools, hospitals and orphanages built by women religious, Lori suggested their greatest achievement may be shaping the nation's moral imagination.

"Before children learned algebra, they learned mercy," he said. "Before they learned history, they learned gratitude. Before they debated political questions, they learned to examine their consciences. Before they became voters, they became disciples."

As the nation marks 250 years of independence, he asked what kind of witness women religious will offer in the next 250 years.

The natural questions, he said, are whether membership, institutions and the Church's cultural place will match the past. The deeper question is whether sisters will be as available to Christ as the saints who came before them.

The Church, he said, needs women religious who can build bridges, accompany others and remind the Church that it is not "a collection of competing interests but the Body of Christ."

Every generation of consecrated women has faced uncertainty, he said, but they had confidence in providence.

"The world needs women who have been seized by Christ," Lori said. "It needs women whose lives bear unmistakable witness to the truth that God is real, that holiness is possible, that sacrifice is fruitful and that love poured out in communion

with Christ can transform the world."