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An anti-racism banner created by the Sisters of St. Dominic of Amityville, New York, is seen July 22 near the main gate to the religious community's motherhouse. (CNS/Gregory A. Shemitz)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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August 12, 2021

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Women religious congregations across the country are engaged in difficult conversations about the future. While these discussions have gone on for years, in some cases decades, the need to address hard questions on what to do with buildings, institutions and ministries is getting more urgent as the number of women religious in the U.S. continues to dwindle even as new members enter. The stark reality of religious life in transformation means this reckoning can no longer be ignored.

While creating space for the future, it is heartening that congregations are also reckoning with their past. As a recent Global Sisters Report article pointed out, congregations such as the Adrian Dominicans, Religious of the Sacred Heart, Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, the Sisters of Loretto and others are examining their complicity in excluding Blacks from their membership, participating in the enslavement of people and perpetuating systemic racism.

This painful but necessary process is an implementation of the resolution adopted during the 2020 assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, in which members were invited to participate in a "five-year commitment to work on dismantling racism." Throughout last year's virtual assembly, as the nation and world reacted to the brutal murder of George Floyd, speakers emphasized the need for racial justice in their addresses, prayers and reflections. During the 2021 Assembly, being held virtually Aug. 10-13, that message is being heard again.

For several congregations, as the article pointed out, this isn't the first time they are confronting their biases or their participation in the abomination of slavery. The Sisters of Charity of Nazareth had gathered with more than 150 former enslaved people and their families in 1912 as part of its centennial commemoration, 47 years after 30 people were emancipated from the congregation. For the Nazareth bicentennial in 2012, a plaque and monument to their forced work was dedicated, and a headstone with the names of the 28 buried there was placed. Work on a permanent exhibit on that part of the congregation's history is in progress.

In 2018, the Society of the Sacred Heart, also known as the Religious of the Sacred Heart, held an event planned by the descendants of people the congregation had once enslaved. The congregation has put records online for anyone wanting to study the genealogy. The Adrian Dominicans tried to address racism in the 1970s but declined a request of Black sisters to set up a Minority Commission to oversee the

changes and create a formation program for Black vocations. Now the Adrian Dominicans are establishing an Office of Racial Equality and Cultural Inclusion which will examine the congregation's structure, policies and practice.

And it was the painstaking research of Shannen Dee Williams, a historian at Villanova University, of how women religious congregations had discriminated against Black women and barred them from entering their communities, presented at the 2016 LCWR assembly, that jarred the organization to adopt resolutions that year, and prompted at least five congregations to open their archives to Williams.

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In this more recent effort, LCWR officials asked for a partnership with the National Black Sisters' Conference. They hired Kathy Obear, a facilitator and the author of *... But I'm Not Racist!: Tools for Well-Meaning Whites*, to help leaders in the organization confront their own racism.

Sr. Patricia Chappell, of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, and former executive director of Pax Christi USA who has also served as a president of the National Black Sisters' Conference, has long been involved in anti-racism work. Demand for her expertise is increasing: Since Floyd's death, she has personally worked with 30 religious communities to confront racism as they now feel a renewed urgency to address the issues.

A series of online sessions in the fall of 2020 and this past spring co-hosted by the Center for the Study of Consecrated Life at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago and the National Black Sisters' Conference examined the complicity of congregations and racism, and the role of the Catholic Church in slavery and racism.

Contrast all of this with the recent conference by the Napa Institute, a conservative Catholic organization, during which speakers repeatedly urged the 700+ participants to reject the Black Lives Matter movement and critical race theory, developed by African American legal scholars in the 1980s to examine institutional racism throughout society.

Participants sipped fine wine, sampled cigars and decried what they see as dangerous currents in society and Catholicism against those who are part of "an oppressor class," inured to the signs of an America and world in crisis: huge

swatches of forests and small-towns in California and the Northwest are being destroyed by conflagration; a pandemic is causing unbearable grief and lasting societal changes; and cries for racial justice echo throughout the U.S. and abroad. Instead of solace, the remaining Catholic faithful are left with a church hierarchy that is increasingly insular, a cadre of bishops beholden to big money interests who ignore the needs of those to whom they are supposed to minister.

We could ask that the bishops follow the lead of LCWR and undertake a deep review of racism in the U.S. church — but that's been sought before with little to show for it. What is needed is for moneyed progressive Catholics to counter the influence of the Napa Institute adherents.

While women religious congregations are bravely forging ahead in addressing deep issues of racism, the official church hierarchy remains in denial. It is a sad reminder of the state of the U.S. church to see the gulf between what LCWR is doing and what the bishops' conference is not.

With churches emptied during the pandemic and polls showing Catholics, particularly younger Catholics, becoming increasingly disaffected with the church and finding spiritual sustenance elsewhere, the bishops may soon well have far more empty buildings to deal with than the women religious do.

A version of this story appeared in the **Aug. 20-Sept. 2, 2021** print issue.