News



Rebecca Ann Gemma, a Dominican Sister of Springfield, Illinois, gives the presidential address at the Leadership Conference of Women Religious' annual assembly Aug. 9 in Dallas. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)



by Dan Stockman

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Nearly 900 leaders of congregations of women religious and their guests gathered here to reflect on their place in the universe, in the church, in religious life and in the hope of Jesus Christ.

The Leadership Conference of Women Religious' annual assembly, which runs Aug. 8-11, is a chance for community superiors to commune, learn from each other, and be inspired for the coming year, with this year's gathering focused on the theme of a journey into hope.

LCWR president Rebecca Ann Gemma, a Dominican Sister of Springfield, Illinois, told attendees at the assembly's opening she hopes it will be "a contemplative, deep and important experience." LCWR member congregations make up about two-thirds of the nearly 40,000 Catholic sisters in the United States.

Msgr. Séamus Horgan, charge d'affaires at the apostolic nunciature in the United States, greeted attendees on behalf of the nuncio, Archbishop Christophe Pierre, who was traveling.

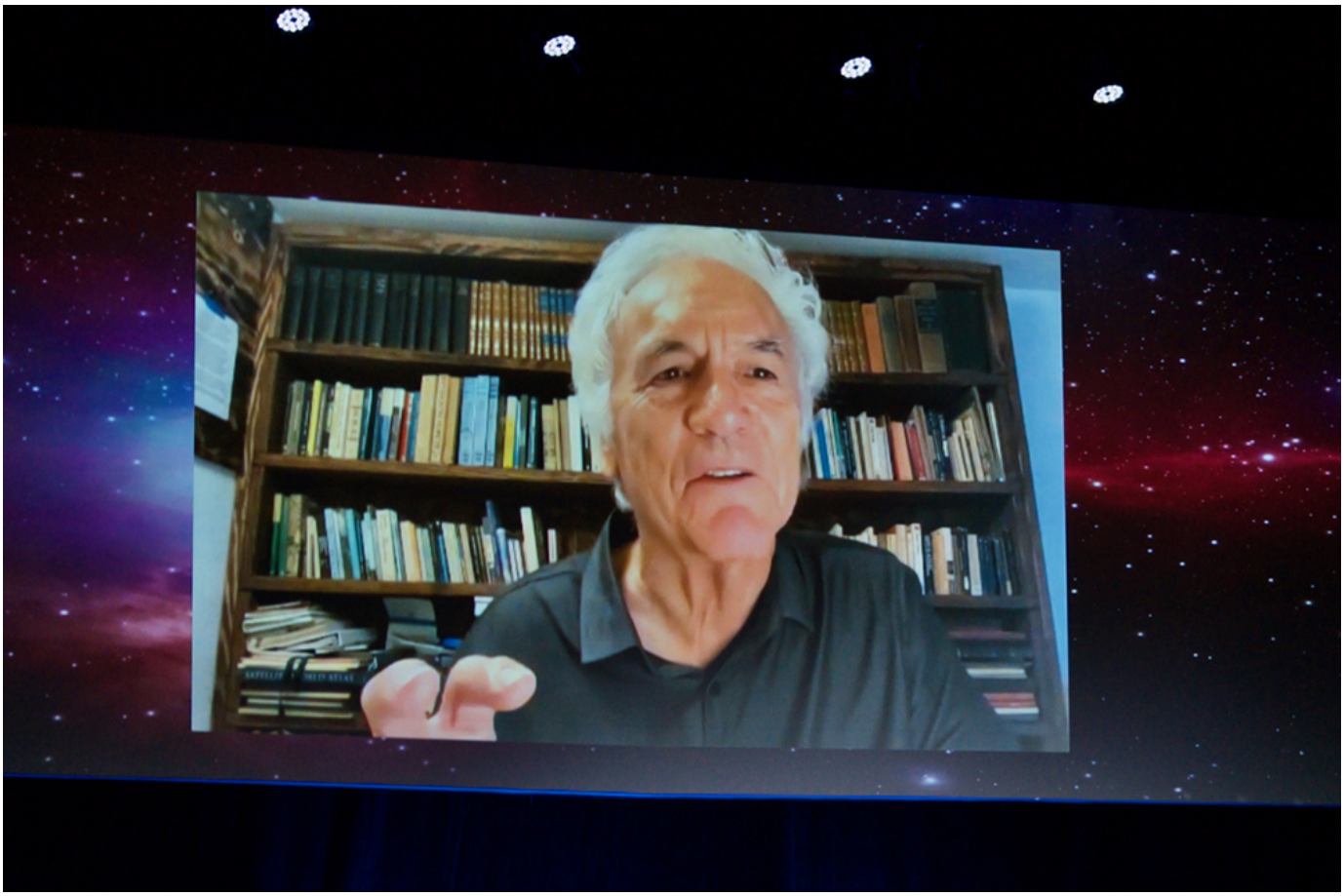
"The archbishop travels very widely in the United States, and everywhere he goes, he sees evidence of your work," he told the sisters, quoting Pope Francis telling religious superiors earlier this year that they must be "sowers of hope."

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Attendees were also read a letter from Cardinal João Bràz de Aviz, prefect of the Vatican's Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, saying the sisters are a "witness of unity in a church striding toward more synodality," and that "we know we do not walk alone."

Wednesday morning, keynote speaker Brian Thomas Swimme reflected on the connection between the creation of and relationships within the universe and the Paschal mystery and relationships among human beings. Swimme is a professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies, where he teaches evolutionary cosmology to graduate students in the philosophy, cosmology, and consciousness program, and interspersed his talk with images from the James Webb Space Telescope.

"We have come to discover that relationship is the most powerful force in the universe," Swimme said by livestream video, noting that for 3 billion years of Earth's existence, life consisted only of single-cell organisms, and only in the last 700 million years has life become complex creatures.



Brian Thomas Swimme, a professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies, addresses the Leadership Conference of Women Religious assembly on Aug. 9 in Dallas. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

More importantly, in only 7 million years, humans have gone from understanding basic survival to putting a man on the moon and building a telescope that can see billions of years into the past — a change that was only possible because of our relationships to each other, with each generation building upon the achievements of the previous ones.

"It is the collective 'we,' " he said, "the cosmic Christ."

And those complex organisms are only possible because the elements needed for life were spread across the universe by exploding stars — galactic-scale destruction that becomes new creation.

"The explosion of a star is the primary revelation of God's love," Swimme said. "The star dies — its final act of generosity — and in that gift, life in the universe is born. …The Paschal mystery is woven into the very fabric of the universe."



Participants at the Leadership Conference of Women Religious assembly bless the speakers during the gathering Aug. 9 in Dallas. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

Wednesday afternoon, Gemma gave the presidential address, telling the sisters they should never lose hope, even with the changes taking place in religious life.

According to statistics LCWR officials shared at their 2022 assembly, one-third of all congregations in the United States have fewer than 50 members, and the number of communities with enough members to hold a chapter and elect leaders is expected to drop dramatically after 2025.

Gemma said sisters must "use hope as a lens through which we reflect on religious life and the future," because with hope, "barriers are considered challenges, not roadblocks."

The way to hope, she said, is through prayer.

"Prayer is both an avenue to, and a reflective lens on, hope," Gemma said. "As leaders of congregations, do we — can we — invite all our sisters to make 'minister of prayer' more than a title for those no longer in active service? Prayer can stop wars. Praying can overcome evil. Prayer is an act of hope that love is alive and at work in the universe."

Gemma had framed her address around the family road trips she experienced as a child, noting how even when the view is not clear, hope drives us forward.

"My friends, our windshield is polished and the road beckons," she said. "Let us not fear to hope, because Jesus the Christ is behind the wheel."

This story appears in the **LCWR 2023** feature series. View the full series.