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Hope stirs in religious life

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

Summer is conference season, which makes it a great time to get a sense of what's stirring at the grass roots of the Catholic church in America. I'm speaking this week at a couple of Catholic events, and Thursday brought me to the annual assembly of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men, representing the leadership of more than 20,000 vowed religious priests and brothers in the United States, some 10 percent of whom are now foreign missionaries.

The assembly took place in St. Louis, at a downtown hotel with a dramatic view of the Gateway Arch and the Old Courthouse where the Dred Scott case began to work its way to the U.S. Supreme Court in the mid-19th century.

It's no secret that in many ways, these are tough times for religious orders in America. From its peak in the late 1960s, the number of active religious order priests in the country dropped by 2005 by almost 4,000, representing a decline of 22 percent. (The decline in diocesan priests over the same period was 24 percent.) One sign of the times in St. Louis was a flyer for an upcoming CMSM conference in November on "Supervision and Support for Aging Members."

Membership isn't the only challenge. Benedictine Abbot Jerome Kodell of the Subiaco Abbey in Arkansas acknowledged that the orders have also been badly shaken by the sexual abuse crisis. In part, Kodell said, that's because of the enormous damage caused by priests who abused their trust; in part, he said, it's because every priest today lives with the knowledge that "we may be accused tomorrow, guilty or innocent."

Yet the message radiating out of St. Louis was largely one of hope.

Perhaps the most determined apostle of hope in the mix was Archbishop Pietro Sambi, the pope's nuncio,

or ambassador, in the United States since December 2005, who delivered the assembly's keynote address on Thursday.

Here's a window onto Sambi's personality: When I sat down next to him at the speaker's table on Thursday morning, I asked how he was doing. "Better every day," he said with a broad smile, adding, "We must be optimistic ... we are Christians, after all."

Sambi is the kind of guy who, just by being himself, puts a radiant human face on the church. Even his sartorial choices in St. Louis set a tone: Rather than his episcopal regalia, he delivered his address Thursday morning clad in a sort of relaxed, untucked BBQ shirt. While he's perfectly fluent and clear in English, he also began by apologizing for his "Oxford accent" -- which brought gales of laughter, since his Italian-inflected English is more Guido Sarducci than John Henry Newman.

In his address, Sambi called upon the church in the United States "not to remain a prisoner of the sex scandal" nor "a prisoner to the crisis in religious life."

Sambi acknowledged that the sexual abuse crisis has taken a terrible toll, saying that in some quarters it has "deprived us of all credibility." Likewise, he conceded that diminishing numbers have induced a crisis of confidence in some circles of religious life. Nonetheless, Sambi insisted that rebirth is possible through adopting the spirit of St. Paul, being "seized," "grasped," by the Gospel of Christ, and preaching that gospel relentlessly.

"There is a Christian way of dealing with problems," Sambi told the several hundred leaders of religious life. "It involves converting humiliation into strength by fidelity to our vocation and mission."

Sambi praised religious orders in America for having given witness since the nation's founding to two great values of the Gospel: charity and education. He said that some orders today seem to have "abandoned their charism," under the mistaken notion that the Holy Spirit has decided that they're headed for extinction, while others talk vaguely about finding "new ways of being religious."

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"This is not the Catholic faith," Sambi insisted. "In the creed, we pray to the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life ... never the giver of death."

Invoking a challenge laid down by Pope Benedict XVI during his April 2008 trip to the United States, Sambi encouraged the religious to be bold in pursuing renewal.

"Evangelization, with faith and courage, will restore trust in the church of God," Sambi said, recalling a similar message he delivered to the American bishops in November 2006.

Ordained in 1964, Sambi is a veteran of a 40-year diplomatic career that's taken him to such far-flung outposts as India, Indonesia and the Holy Land. (Jokingly, Sambi said that so far he hasn't worked a single day in the Vatican, and that now he's waiting to be called back to the Vatican "for my martyrdom.") He finished his address with an anecdote from his time in the early 1990s as nuncio to Indonesia.

A professor of Buddhist philosophy, Sambi said, once asked if he could come to Sunday Mass in the chapel at the nunciature in order to learn something about Catholicism by listening to the sermons. He came eight Sundays in a row, and at the end, pride got the better of Sambi, and he couldn't help asking,

?How were my homilies??

?They were beautiful, like a flower,? Sambhi said the Buddhist professor replied. ?But I couldn't tell from listening to them what the Christian God is like.?

Sambhi used the experience to make a point about St. Paul, who, he said, had the ?marvelous capacity? to preach the Gospel in a way that communicated God's entire plan of salvation. That's the kind of preaching, Sambhi said, that the church in the United States needs today like a desert needs rain -- preaching that presents ?not a single flower, but the entire Christian garden.?

One footnote: In talking about St. Paul, Sambhi veered into a brief reflection on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. He said that historically, Christianity has bred two broad theologies of Judaism: ?substitution,? which holds that by rejecting Christ, Israel forfeited its election and the church is the ?new Israel?; and ?fulfillment,? insisting that nothing in Judaism has been canceled by Christ, but rather brought to completion. That second view, Sambhi said, seems to be the thought of St. Paul, and Sambhi said that it seems to him the ?correct? theology.

Kodell likewise struck a note of hope in his opening meditation Wednesday evening. (By the way, nothing says ?inculturation? quite like listening to a Benedictine monk who, on the basis of his Southern drawl, sounds like he ought to be coaching the Arkansas Razorbacks.)

Kodell said that scrutinizing the writings of Paul, there are three kinds of death: physical death; the death of sin; and death to oneself, which is the kind of death that breaks through into new life. In projecting the public face of religious life, Kodell said, the tendency is too often to dramatize the death part -- the struggles, the hard work, the sacrifice -- and to ?hide the resurrection.?

Religious sometimes almost seem to hide ?the subterranean river of joy that's within us,? Kodell said.

In a sort of tectonic metaphor, Kodell noted that earthquakes are often set in motion when a small sliver of rock shifts deep beneath the earth. He called upon religious to be those ?small slivers of rock,? helping to realign the plates of the world in the direction of Gospel values.

?We are not hopeless or helpless,? he concluded.

It remains to be seen, of course, whether this determination to live in a spirit of hope will actually translate into new energies -- new vocations, new apostolates, creative new means of engaging social challenges. Nonetheless, the headline from St. Louis seemed to be, ?Hope stirs in religious life.?

Other headliners at the assembly included Sulpician Fr. Ronald Witherup, who spoke on St. Paul and the renewal of religious life, and Rocco Palmo of ?Whispers in the Loggia? fame. Redemptorist Fr. Thomas Picton, president of the CMSM, delivered the presidential address on Friday.

Tomorrow I'll be in Houston, speaking to a gathering of permanent deacons. According to a recent study of the permanent diaconate in America by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown, the Galveston-Houston archdiocese has the second largest number of deacons in the country after Chicago.

In an interview with me during the October 2008 Synod on the Bible in Rome, Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of Galveston-Houston praised the quality of preaching offered by his deacons. ?As much as I hate to admit it,? DiNardo conceded, ?some are better than the priests.? I'm looking forward to hearing a few of them strut their stuff this weekend.

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