

Don't be prisoners of crises, men religious told

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ST. LOUIS -- Challenges faced by men's religious orders -- including the impact of the clergy sex abuse scandals and decline in vocations -- should inspire a renewed commitment to proclaim the Gospel message, said speakers at an annual conference.

Archbishop Pietro Sambi, apostolic nuncio to the United States, told more than 130 superiors of men religious Aug. 6 that the church should not be "a prisoner of the sex scandals" nor should it be "a prisoner of the crisis of religious life."

He urged participants at the annual assembly of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men in St. Louis Aug. 5-8, to return to their roots, noting that early religious communities in the United States had "a leading role in the growth of the church in this country" through their work in education and caring for those in need.

Archbishop Sambi noted that the theme chosen for this year's gathering, "Called to Proclaim the Gospel," and the meeting's timing, coming at the close of the Pauline year and at the opening of the Year for Priests, "is needed by the church in the United States just as rain is needed in the desert."

He said he is "deeply convinced that the values and witness of religious life are extremely important for the renewal of the church."

Pointing out the challenges faced by today's priests, the archbishop called the clergy abuse scandal "a horrible experience which has deprived all of us of credibility before our faithful and before society."

He also noted that some of today's religious communities have "abandoned their founding charisms, and they are going straight to their extinction," while others say they "have invented a new way of being religious but that 'new way' does not have its roots in the Gospel."

"To go out from the prison of sex scandals and out of the crisis of religious life, we must go back to the word of God," he said.

"We have been made religious, priests and bishops, not for sex scandals but to proclaim the Gospel of the Lord and to witness it," he continued. "And where it is needed to take care of the sex scandals and the crisis of religious life, there, with greater determination, it is needed to announce the Gospel."

Redemptorist Fr. Thomas Picton, outgoing conference president, also spoke of the challenges today's religious are facing and stressed that the difficulties should ultimately lead to spiritual growth.

In an Aug. 7 keynote address, he said: "Religious life is facing some dark struggles: anxiety about dwindling numbers, shrinking financial resources, scapegoating and rejection by society and even by members of the church itself, instability, graying of our members, smaller numbers of vocations, lawsuits, allegations of sexual abuse."

He stressed that "in a time of uncertainty and diminishment, religious leaders must make sure that their institutes continue to look outward while searching inward to understand their founding vision. They must not become preoccupied only with survival but continue to be bold and daring in their commitment to serving those most in need."

In the opening prayer service, Benedictine Abbot Jerome Kodell of Subiaco Abbey in Arkansas, urged the religious superiors to recognize they have a special role in proclaiming the Gospel message.

In other presentations during the conference, John Allen, a senior correspondent for the National Catholic Reporter weekly newspaper, spoke about changing roles in ministry; Fr. Ronald Witherup, superior general of the Sulpicians, presented a biblical reflection on the renewal of religious life; and Rocco Palmo, writer of the Catholic blog "Whispers in the Loggia," discussed modern ways to spread the Gospel message.

More than 80 religious superiors attended a workshop held prior to the assembly that focused on the growing Hispanic presence in the U.S. Catholic church.

At the assembly's concluding liturgy, Sacred Heart Fr. Thomas Cassidy, major superior of the U.S. province of the Priests of the Sacred Heart in Hales Corners, Wis., was installed as the new conference president.

Participants also elected four new at-large members of the national board of directors: Fr. Arturo Aguilar, regional superior of the Missionary Society of St. Columban in the United States; Fr. Justin A. Biase, minister provincial of the Conventual Franciscan Immaculate Conception Province; Br. Hugh O'Neill, provincial leader for the Edmund Rice Christian Brothers in North America; and Benedictine Abbot Lawrence R. Staszysen of St. Gregory Abbey in Shawnee, Okla.

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