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Asia, Oceania women religious offer support to beleaguered U.S. sisters

by Thomas C. Fox



Sisters deliberate at Thailand conference (photo by Tom Fox)

SAMPHRAN, THAILAND

In a symbolic and bold move, 113 women religious leaders from 17 Asian and Oceania nations today issued a statement of solidarity with U.S. women religious who are facing two Vatican investigations.

The women began their nine-day conference Oct. 13, and as they conclude, they said they want to send a message to their sister sisters half a globe away that they are one with them in their time of difficulty.

The meeting is being held under the auspices AMOR, which is holding its 15th gathering since the loose network of women religious was organized in the early 1970s. AMOR, which stands for Asia-Oceania Meeting of Religious has been holding its meeting with the theme "Jesus Encounters the Syro-Phoenician Woman: Called to Move Beyond." The solidarity statement was viewed by many as one answer to the call.

AMOR women religious leaders gather every few years to listen to one another, share ideas, offer encouragement, set goals and plan for the future. The organization has no official church status, which,

several delegates said, gives it greater freedom, flexibility and strength than if it had official status, a sentiment shared by one of the main speakers.

At this year's meeting, held at the Baan Phuwaan archdiocesan conference center 30 miles outside of Bangkok, the women grappled with seemingly overwhelming challenges. Overwhelming, they would say, but not so with the grace of God. Time and again they declared they will find ways to "move beyond," deepening their ties with the poor and deepening their motivating spirituality.

The issues on their discussion tables ranged from global to local, from climate change to relations within their congregations.

Ample time was given for sharing stories and cultures, which were often given expression in evening sessions of song and dance. Many of the stories were heart-wrenching. The women here came from the corners of their societies and represent Catholic populations that are only slivers of the wider society.

Many are marginalized in both the wider culture and the church. But these women seemed to draw strength from each others' commitments and shared circumstances of vulnerability.

In story after story, what emerged was a portrait of women living and working on the margins of society, often with little support or acknowledgment, but inspired by the Jesus story.

In the course of the conference, the women engaged each other, listened to each other, and offered solace. They were encouraged by examples of breakthroughs of women who had emerged from the grip of oppressive structures. AMOR organizers invited an ordained Thai female monk to share her story. She related stories of widespread personal discrimination.

One woman religious talked about her life in rural Malaysia, where she is a simple witness to tribes whose lands are being taken by logging companies. Another woman talked about witnessing a Catholic village burned to the ground recently by religious fanatics. Still another woman lives in rural Thailand, high in the mountains, trying to provide education to the young.

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"I think AMOR is playing a prophetic role," said Sacred Heart Sr. María Victoria González de Castejón, executive secretary of the International Union of Superiors General, based in Rome. Castejón was a guest observer. "AMOR is not recognized in the church as an official institution. It is, then, a free forum. It's playing a role in helping us to go beyond, which, of course, is the theme of this gathering."

"I think AMOR can show that we women religious can meet and we can share things, as women religious, that are deep and meaningful in our lives. We can share things that challenge us. These women are not waiting for a green light. They are capable of organizing themselves without a green light."

Castejón termed the statement issued on behalf of sisters in the United States "very touching."

"All [these women] want to say is 'We are with you.' You have these younger ones, the younger sisters of religious life -- although some of the congregations they are part of are very old -- and as a small group they are saying to the older sisters, to a whole continent, 'We are with you.' I think this is beautiful."

The official AMOR statement, short and to the point, is addressed to "our sisters of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious" and reads: "We, 113 women religious from 17 countries, representing

the conferences of major superiors of Asia-Oceania, are participating in AMOR XV (Asia-Oceania Meeting of Religious) in Samphran, Thailand, from the 13-21 October 2009. The theme of this assembly is "Jesus Encounters the Syro-Phoenician Woman: Called to Move Beyond." Through your leadership conference, we are aware of the journey that many congregations of religious in the United States are going through. We offer you our solidarity and prayers."

It was signed by the AMOR XV executive committee and approved unanimously by a show of hands from the group.

A number of themes ran through the gathering, among them "the call to go beyond." Others included the need for prophetic witness, the connection between prayer lives and action, contemporary challenges of religious formation, and disappointment in church authorities who ignore women religious as equals and as self-generating agents of change and growth.

The mood of the gathering was also apparent in speakers' addresses.

On day one, Infant Jesus Sr. Maria Lau from Singapore challenged the women "to break out of their boundaries " and move beyond them." She encouraged delegates "to think anew and base their actions on the radical example of Jesus who broke through the boundaries of his time, and in the particular the way he dealt with women."

Lau said the Gospel stories of Jesus' encounters with women revealed a pattern of empowerment. Jesus allowed women to be themselves, she said. "He gave women security and space to come forward," she said.

In another address, Indian theologian Assumption Sr. Rekha M. Chennattu called for a radically new religious paradigm. She told the women the time had come for women religious to leave what she described as a culture of "command and control" and enter one built on "service and friendship."

Chennattu, who holds advanced degrees in scripture studies from Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome and The Catholic University of America in Washington, described religious formation as a "never-ending dynamic process."

"Religious by nature are called to bring about its dynamic permanent renewal," she said. "We live in a fast-changing world and the only thing that is constant in this world is change. The old style of leadership as "command and control" is outdated and cannot work today."

She advocated a "friendship" model, which, she said, would be "the most appropriate and adequate model" for religious in today's communities.

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