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Catholic leaders say missionary activity must change, expand

by Barbara Fraser by Catholic News Service

LIMA, Peru -- Catholic leaders at an international mission conference for the Americas said the church must become a missionary community with a new mentality.

The message for conference participants was that "we have to get involved if we're going to be true to the Gospel of Christ and make a difference in the world in which we're living," Bishop Patrick J. Zurek of Amarillo, Texas, told Catholic News Service.

The Third American Missionary Congress drew more than 2,000 laypeople, bishops, priests and religious to Quito, Ecuador, Aug. 12-17 to discuss challenges for mission, from family life and fundamentalism to ecology and science. Several participants talked to CNS by telephone during and after the conference.

The closing Mass marked the official launch of the "great continental mission" that bishops from Latin America and the Caribbean announced in May 2007 during their fifth general conference in Aparecida, Brazil.

That mission must build on "a spirit that was begun in Aparecida, the spirit of mission, of discipleship," Auxiliary Bishop Octavio Cisneros of Brooklyn, N.Y., told CNS.

Sister Mary McGlone, president of the U.S. Catholic Mission Association and a Sister of St. Joseph of Carondelet, said, "The challenge for mission for Latin America is to move beyond the boundaries of Latin America, to go out" to the world.

According to statistics on the congress Web site, South America sends 5,785 missionaries to other countries and receives 12,011.

Bishop Cisneros said that being a missionary church means not just sending missionaries to remote areas, but "realizing that we are all missionaries. Even in our own parishes, we have to become those who ... listen, learn" and proclaim the Gospel.

Speaking on the first day of the conference, Honduran Cardinal Oscar Rodriguez Mariadaga of Tegucigalpa said Catholics "must proclaim the good news of the kingdom in faithfulness and strength, especially because there are many who oppose it out of ambition for power, love of wealth or desire for pleasure."

The cardinal said disciples must "be willing to renounce all they have had until now, to carry out the mission of propagating the faith both within and beyond the borders of the country."

Cardinal Rodriguez said the Catholic Church in Latin America must reach out to people who "do not know the full manifestation of the love of God" incarnated in Jesus and must go beyond national borders "to the growing multitude of those who do not know Christ."

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At the same time, he said, "as evangelizers, we are concerned about so many men and women who for various reasons ... have become strangers to the faith or to religious meaning."

At last year's meeting in Aparecida, the bishops expressed concern about both the headway made by evangelical groups in the region and the number of Catholics who have become unchurched. One goal of the continental mission is to invite Catholics back into the church.

Sister Mary said it is important to note that the bishops spoke of a "continental mission," not just a Latin American effort. That poses the "challenge of seeing how this experience of interchange can help us become one church in America," she said.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Latin American bishops' council, known as CELAM, work closely together in many areas. For the past decade, Bishop Zurek said, the prelates on both sides of the U.S.-Mexican border have met several times a year to discuss common concerns, especially ministry to migrants.

However, the U.S. bishops have not yet established an office to coordinate the continental mission with Canada, Latin America and the Caribbean, and it is not clear what form the effort will take.

Bishop Zurek said the continental mission should provide an opportunity to emphasize issues of common concern, such as migration, globalization and economic justice.

One challenge is to get Catholics in the United States "involved with the issues of South America," he said. "Can we make a difference with our government, in the sense of the way we do politics, or with our economic community, in the way we do business in Latin America, so that people will not have to leave to come and find work in our country?"

By including the U.S. and Canadian church leaders in the continental mission, he said, "we are saying we are one America, we are one family, we are one church."

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