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Global women religious gathering kindles solidarity, hope

by Thomas C. Fox



Rome

Some saw it as a spark in a dark night, kindled to flame, and eventually into a torch bright enough to guide spirits forward.

Those are among the metaphors some women religious used to explain the process and results of a five-day conference which drew together some 800 congregation heads from around the world.

The women spent five days together, May 7-11, examining the themes of mysticism and prophecy. They gathered under the aegis of the International Union of General Superiors (UISG), the canonically sponsored organization bonding the world's 600,000 women religious. The organization holds its plenary assembly every three years here.

Scottish born UISG President Sister of Notre Dame de Sion Maureen Cusick expressed her delight with the results of the gathering, saying it was an amazing experience, "a gift of the Spirit."

?Everyone who has spoken to me said it was fantastic. I feel we have given them more courage. Many of them came despondent, despondent because of the mess the church is in, holding in the balance the denial of the official church, the abuse of their power, the abuse of leadership.?

She went on: ?They?ve gone away with their heads high. They all said it feels different. We [women religious] need to be proud of who we are. I feel we have given them more courage."



Sister of St. Joseph of the Third Order of St. Francis Jane Blabolil said, "To me it was a Pentecost. I felt the Spirit was filling the room."

Sister Kathleen Kluthe, president of the School Sisters of St. Francis, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, called it ?truly energizing.? ?We were so united in expressing our strong desire to deepen our contemplative life ? to deepen our inner call to be mystics and prophets.?

She said that as a result of the gathering the world?s women religious have bonded more closely together. ?We connected with one another in significant ways. We want to stand together in facing common challenges.?

President of the Sisters of St. Francis, Dubuque, Iowa, Nancy Schreck, also spoke of the experience of solidarity. ?There was a tangible shared desire to deepen the mystical aspect of our lives in order to renew the prophetic dimension core to the identity of religious life.?

Women religious from around the globe appeared to leave the meeting with renewed hope growing out of a deeper sense of common challenges and common mission.

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Months back, looking for a theme for its 2010 conference, the UISG staff decided surveyed its membership and ?overwhelmingly? heard back, they said, a desire to explore the themes of ?mysticism and prophecy.? Conference organizers chose those themes and repeatedly they were described as ?two sides of the same coin.?

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For the first two days the women listened to talks on those subjects by men and women religious and by an American Rabbi. Intermittently they engaged in meditation, common prayer, liturgy and table conversation, sharing their reactions through words and symbols they brought to the meeting.

Tables of eight were intentionally arranged so that the women would share with other women from different parts of the world, mixing cultures and races.

The process of sharing was also aimed at drawing up of a final conference declaration. The last two days allowed time for the writing and reworking of the outlines of the declaration. The paper will be released May 14.

Organizers used the writings of St. John of the Cross to introduce the themes of mysticism and prophecy:

?I know the fountain well which flows and runs ? though it is night,? the conference brochure read.

The sisters recognized they were meeting in the wake of two months of new clergy abuse revelations in Europe and the resignations of several European bishops. The 55 U.S. women religious congregation heads carried to the conference the hurt of a Vatican investigation, officially called an Apostolic Visitation, of their congregations. The women also face a Vatican doctrinal investigation of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the umbrella organization representing 95 percent of U.S. women religious.

What the women might not fully have expected was the candid stories told by their African sisters who spoke commonplace murder, plunder and rape on their lands. The African women religious, younger on average than their Western counterparts, also brought fresh vitality and spirit to the meeting.

Sister Liliane Sweko on the second day of a gathering, stunned her audience, as she tallied the murders of African nuns - 235 in the year 2003, ?with many more since.? Sweko who comes from the Democratic Republic of Congo is a member of the Congregational Leadership Team of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur.

Yet her talk did not dwell on darkness.

She said: ?Even though our world may still be disfigured by violence, all kinds of terrorism, wars and conflicts often enflamed by those in power and by multinationals seeking to profit from these situations in order to exploit the riches of poor countries and keep people dominated and oppressed, our Christian faith assures us that God is always present in this world.



?According to a wisdom saying of our African ancestors, however long the night, day does finally come. In this high-stakes play of darkness and light, Christian faith and hope empower us consecrated women to be bearers of a light, a torch, which the world needs in order to see and warm itself. At times, this light and fire will be invisible to the eyes of the world, but the world will still sense its presence and strength.?

Using imagery from the Acts of the Apostles and a story of Lydia, a women who broke boundaries after she became a follower of Jesus, Religious Sister of the Cenacle Judette Gallares called upon the women to open up their hearts to conversion.

She laid out what she called the five steps of conversion, taking one through confusion and darkness to quiet contemplation, to awakening, and finally to prophetic action.

Evoking the ?good memories? of Pope John XXIII and the Second Vatican Council, an American Jewish Rabbi added his voice to those exploring mysticism in the modern world. He talked about the problem of how to be identified with a particular group or religious tradition and at the same time hold universal empathy.

Rabbi Arthur Green described himself as a neo-Hasidic Jew, placing himself within a tradition that holds ?that God can be found in each place and in every moment,? adding that the purpose of prayer, and ritual, ?is to help us open our hearts to that presence.?

Green said that in monotheism one realizes that ?all being, including every creature ? and that means the rock and the blade of grass in your garden as well as your pet lizard and your human neighbor next door ?

are all one in origin.?

It was clear during the assembly that reverence for creation and all life forms had taken a solid hold on the lives the women. Creation spirituality, unknown as a theology to many some two decades back, is now an active ingredient in their understanding of their connection to the planet.

Throughout the gathering the women were asked to look inside, to dwell on who the Spirit is calling them to become. It became clear to many that the deeper they went, the better they understood the demands of the time. It also became apparent the women, despite difference in languages and cultures and experiences, have settled into a new sense of solidarity that would have been unimaginable before the age of the Internet.

Most of the women carried small cameras, taking photos of their new found soul mates. All of the women had email addresses to share. They left with promises to stay in contact.

The women were told upon their arrival that Cardinal Franc Rodé, prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, to whom UISG is canonically connected, was 'out of town' and could not join the gathering. Instead he sent a member of his congregation, Fr. Eusebio Hernandez Sola, an Augustinian priest who stayed for the five days.

They were also told that an audience that had been scheduled with Pope Benedict on the conference's last day had been canceled because of the pope's visit to Portugal.

Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Vatican Secretary of State, sent a short telegram to the leaders of the conference telling them that "the Supreme Pontiff [was] present in spirit."

If there was disappointment it seemed to have vanished by the end of the gathering. In high spirit and with expressions of new purpose, the women seemed confident in fresh self-determination.

During the first conference Eucharist, the Augustinian priest celebrated mass, standing alone behind a twenty-five foot long dais. By the last day, he was flanked by four women on each side.



The final liturgy featured a Congolese Women Religious choir with African song and chant in four African languages. In the course of the Eucharistic celebration the energetic women, in beat with the sound of African drums, seemed to flush out the reticent until the entire assembly was swaying together in music and dance.

With Solo concelebrating with Society of the Divine Word Father Antonio Pernia as chief celebrant, the final liturgy stood in contrast to that of the first day.

Responding to a request by Cusick, Pernia stepped aside just before the final blessing. At that point one woman announced that the women would bless each other. Instead of a traditional blessing, each woman placed her right hand on the shoulder of the person next to her.

If Sola was perplexed by the breach in canon code he did not show it. Instead, he went to the microphone following the mass. At that moment large room grew quiet.

'This had been a huge grace for me,' he said. 'Thank you for sharing your hopes, dreams and difficulties with me. I am very moved. If there is a word for what I feel it is 'hope.' Jesus is with us and loves us.'

Sola's unscripted words appeared sincere and took some women by surprise.

Several women, referring to that moment, used the word "conversion" to describe it. One woman remarked: "This man is different tonight. How could he not have been changed?"

"Our horizons are much larger than our own countries now," said Sister of Charity of Leavenworth, Kansas Sue Miller, summing up the experience.

[Fox is NCR editor and can be reached at tfox@ncronline.org.]

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