

Pax Christi honors US women religious

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Sr. Marlene Weisenbeck accepts the Eileen Egan Peacemaker Award on behalf of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. (Courtesy of Pax Christi USA)

Pax Christi USA, the national peace organization, recognized the contributions of women religious as peacemakers by honoring the Leadership Conference of Women Religious with the Eileen Egan Peacemaker Award at Pax Christi's annual gathering in Chicago July 16-18.

The Eileen Egan Peacemaker Award is bestowed periodically by Pax Christi to honor a group or individual who has made an extraordinary prophetic witness for peace in a time or situation of devastating violence or injustice. The award is named for the late Eileen Egan, one of the cofounders of Pax Christi USA and a longtime executive with Catholic Relief Services.

"Everyone in Pax Christi USA knows and recognizes that women religious are the backbone of the Catholic peace and justice movement," explained Dave Robinson, Pax Christi executive director. "These strong, prophetic and compassionate women are always on the frontlines where the weak and most vulnerable suffer at the hands of violent and unjust power. For everything these women do, from their visionary leadership to their personal integrity, we felt this moment to be the opportune time to honor them."

The award comes as U.S. women religious and the Leadership Conference, a network representing 95 percent of the women religious of America, each are in the midst of a Vatican investigation dealing with quality of life and orthodoxy issues.

Bishop Gabino Zavala, bishop-president of Pax Christi USA, in a prepared remark stated: "Women religious have been our teachers, our guides, our mentors and our conscience. They have called us to be a people committed to living lives fashioned by the heart of the Gospel which Jesus proclaimed. For the dedication to peace and justice which they have shown in our church and to the world, Pax Christi USA recognizes and honors them with this award."

Franciscan Sister of Perpetual Adoration Marlene Weisenbeck, president of the Leadership Conference, accepted the award, saying of women religious: "Our passion is to persevere as did Jesus in the face of opposition to bring our world into closer conformity with the beatitudes of the Gospel."

Recognizing the work of women religious, she said that the Leadership Conference's mission is:

- To assist members to carry out their service of leadership in to further the mission of Christ in today's world;
- To foster dialogue and collaboration among religious congregations within the church and society;
- To develop models for strengthening relationships with groups, such as Pax Christi, that are concerned with the needs of society.

Weisenbeck said the Leadership Conference works "at the service of the Gospel," adding that the organization since 1981 has passed more than 100 resolutions supporting peace-related actions. The group, she said, "has participated in vigils and demonstrations, advocated with government leaders, taught students and coworkers about conflict resolution, written articles, witnessed to nonviolence as a way of life, and collaborated with others in peacemaking activities."

Echoing a conference theme of highlighting the role of women in the world, Bishop Thomas Gumbleton, founding bishop-president of Pax Christi USA, delivered a homily July 18, preaching on the Sunday Gospel text, which was the story of Mary and Martha.

Elaborating on the Gospel, Gumbleton said, "In our culture and in much of modern culture throughout the world, women are beginning to have leadership roles in societies where they never did before. "Is not the Spirit speaking through that culture as the Spirit spoke through those in the early church who wanted to be Christians without being Jews, or how the Spirit has spoken to the church to give up any connection with slavery, how the Spirit has spoken to the church saying you may not kill even a terrible criminal?"

"I believe the Spirit is speaking to the church and the Spirit is telling us that the role of Mary in today's Gospel must be honored. The role of those first women in the early communities who were leaders of the church must be honored, and we must try to hear the Spirit speaking to us, and, at least in our church, allow discussion, allow us to listen to one another and to hear what God is saying.

"And if Jesus is living in every one of us, every one of us has a right to be a full disciple of Jesus, carrying out whatever role of the ministry service God calls us."

This year's conference theme was "Know Justice, Know Peace: Ending War at Home and Abroad." Elaborating on the theme, Fr. Bryan Massingale, professor of theology at Marquette University in Milwaukee, said the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. realized that opposition to the Vietnam War was required by his commitment to end racial injustice and the alleviation of crushing poverty. "For him, the "triplets of evil" -- imperialistic militarism, materialism, and racism -- were so interconnected and intertwined that any effective struggle against one demanded engaging the others as well. For reasons both strategic and religious, he refused to segment his moral concerns."

Elena Segura, director of the Office for Immigrant Affairs and Immigrant Education in the Chicago archdiocese, reminded the gathering that two-thirds of the human family live in poverty. "The poor are migrating for survival," she said. "In the last 30 years the number of immigrants has doubled to almost 200 million people.

"To you folks of Pax Christi, peacemakers, I don't have to talk about why immigrants come to this country. Or the popular phrase that anti-immigrant groups use: "What part of illegal don't you understand?"

"When this phrase is being shouted in my ears by some Catholics who call my office to complain about the stand of the church towards immigration reform, I always take this time as an opportunity to listen to the fear,

the rage, to pray on the spot for this person and his/her family and the group he/she represents.?

By the way, Segura added, ?an anti-immigrant Catholic is a contradiction of terms.?

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