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Sisters listen and act on confronting institutional domination

by Monica Clark



(CNS file photo/Nancy Wiechec)

GARDEN GROVE, Calif. -- In an unusual introduction of a keynote speaker to a national convention, six women religious carrying lighted candles led Benedictine Sr. Maricarmen Bracamontes to the podium during the general assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious here, Aug. 11.

Accompanied by the sound of bells, they encircled her as she stood in the center of the stage. Then all 600 sisters in attendance extended their right hands as they chanted a blessing: "Receive strength and light; receive power, receive love."

This reframing of the "tried and true" verbal introduction was a fitting prelude to the message Bracamontes delivered -- that traditional ways of exercising authority and power are breaking down and new structures of equality and shared responsibility are emerging.

This, she said, is true both in the global community and in ecclesiastical and religious life.

Speaking in her native Spanish, with simultaneous translation, Bracamontes cited several recent political and economic crises, including the Arab Spring and the Italian protest against the sexual misconduct of Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, as signs that a transformation is occurring throughout the world. People are no longer willing to endure oppressive systems; they seek freedom and justice, she said.

Likewise, movements, such as the first American Catholic Council Conference in Detroit in June, are confronting the submission and domination often espoused by religion, she said.

Bracamontes, coordinator of the theology team advising the Confederation of Latin American and Caribbean Religious, said these phenomena represent a shift in power that can be truly transformational when it is based on Jesus who rejected power that was abusive, and who emulated, instead, compassionate love.

"To practice a Gospel alternative," she said, "we need to de-construct the domination-submission model that most of us have internalized and which is an underlying condition of our cultures."

To illustrate her point, she told of two Mexican seminarians who were delighted to have their hands kissed by parishioners during a Holy Week mission. When she questioned them about their attitude, they said they'd been taught not to resist this sign of respect. Calling this attitude part of a "clerical culture" that needs to be reformed, she said, "I suggested that at least they could offer to kiss the person's hand in return as a sign of mutual respect."

Bracamontes said a transformative moment is also available to religious communities of women as they explore how to be renewed partners in compassion, supporting "the primary human right to God's maternal love."

If women religious ignore this radical call or refuse to assume the tasks it requires, then they "give up identity" and "opt for irrelevance," she said.

Bracamontes, who joined the Benedictines in 1980 and formed a new monastic community in Mexico in 1992, repeated an observation from last year's International Symposium of Benedictine Women that religious life almost disappeared during periods of persecution and that in the current time of historic upheaval, it might disappear "because we are no longer relevant or significant to our society."

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However, she also offered words of hope.

"Once we realize that cultural models are human creations and, therefore, can be changed and adapted, we become more creative and dynamic in our search for transforming alternatives: other worlds become possible, other ways of being church become possible, other forms of religious life become possible."

She called on women religious to probe "Christian Memory," to make the conscious choice to be attentive to the groans of the divine "Ruah," the breath of God, that "is hovering over the darkness of our decaying civilization, yearning to bring forth the light."

During the four-day LCWR assembly, the sisters confronted institutional domination through two concrete actions to end sex trafficking in hotels and to pass immigration reform.

LCWR representatives met Aug. 10 with the sales and marketing director of the Hyatt Regency Hotel, where the assembly is taking place, to seek the hotel's commitment to the Code of Conduct for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation in Travel and Tourism. To date, more than 1,000 companies throughout the world have signed the code.

Kimberly Ritter-Videmschek of Nix Conference and Meeting Management, coordinator of the LCWR assembly, accompanied the group. Her company has joined with religious communities throughout the U.S. in their efforts to end sex trafficking in the hotel industry.

"Most often hotel managers believe that such behavior is not happening in their hotel," she said. "We want to raise awareness that both labor and sex trafficking occur, even in five-star establishments. And we want to provide them with the tools to train their staffs to recognize trafficking and to report it to the police and social service agencies."

Ritter-Videmschek said the local Hyatt manager was receptive to their message and agreed to study the training program. Sisters in southern California will follow-up and seek the full commitment, said Franciscan Sister Marie Lucey, who attended the session.

Ritter-Videmschek said Nix is using the Code of Conduct as a negotiating point when signing contracts for hotel conventions. "Our goal is to only use hotels that sign the code." Carlson Properties, Hilton Worldwide, and the Millennium St. Louis have already signed, she said.

The second action came at the end of a panel discussion on immigration reform in which three immigrant women described the economic struggles that precipitated their emigration and how their parents labored in the U.S. to keep their families together. Eventually two of the women gained legal status.

However, the third speaker, a senior at Loyola Marymount University who is working as a laborer this summer, described the impact her illegal status has on her ability to fulfill her goal of becoming a teacher. She urged passage of the Dream Act (S.B. 952) to allow financial aid for undocumented college students.

Angelica Salas, executive director of the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles, then made an impassioned plea that all LCWR members phone their Senators asking them to pass S.B. 1258 (Comprehensive Immigration Reform Act of 2011) which provides a pathway to citizenship for the estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants.

The sisters responded with a strong show of hands, and within 30 minutes several had already signed the tally sheet of recorded calls.

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[**Read more stories from the assembly:** Sisters 'are living in a time of new birth']

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