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Keynote: LCWR 'seed bed' for 21st century

by Joshua J. McElwee

ST. LOUIS -- With the profound abilities and advances of technology and the numerous problems facing the world -- from nuclear accidents to global climate change -- the human race stands at a moment of "evolution or extinction," a keynote speaker told some 900 U.S. Catholic sisters gathered here in conference Wednesday morning.

And one of the best hopes for the continuation of humanity, said Barbara Marx Hubbard, are the women religious themselves.

"You are the best seed bed I know for evolving the church and the world in the 21st century," Hubbard, an author known for her advancement of a worldview called "conscious evolution," told the crowd at the annual assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR).

"That may be a surprise for the world, but new things always happen from unexpected places. Let's think of it ? that God has given a seed bed that is capable of helping to evolve the world and the church of the 21st century. Why not? Where else would it come from? It has to come from the women."

Hubbard's remarks came on the second day of the LCWR assembly, which is to last through Friday. The gathering has attracted national attention as the group, which represents about 80 percent of U.S. Catholic sisters, is expected by Friday to make its first formal response to a sharp rebuke by the Vatican.

That rebuke came in an April 18 document from the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, which alleged that there was "corporate dissent" in the group regarding the church's sexual teachings. The Vatican ordered that the group revise and place itself under the authority of three U.S. bishops.

While that order will be discussed in closed-door "executive sessions" throughout the week, the focus Wednesday morning was on broader notions -- on what Hubbard, citing Saint Paul several times, said was

the question of "how we shall all be changed" to use our era's scientific and industrial power "for good."

The idea of "conscious evolution," Hubbard explained, posits that humanity stands now in the unique position of being able to choose its own future by the actions it takes -- either by responding or not to situations and questions which very well could affect our future existence.

Several times, Hubbard explained the concept pointing it back to the work of Catholic theologians, particularly Franciscan Sr. Iliia Delio and French Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and the New Testament.

From a "conscious evolution" framework, Hubbard said, three "great questions" now face the world:

- How will we use our technology and power for good?
- What story do we have to tell in order to imagine an ability to use our power that way? and,
- "What kind of person do we have to be to handle all this power?"

The answer to the third question, Hubbard said, "is the person inspired by the Christ. It is the person incarnating that aspect of Christ that is creative."

If we use our capacities with Christ-like love, she continued, "We shall all be changed." If we use them "with limited self-consciousness, we shall destroy."

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Before outlining her worldview, Hubbard took the stage Wednesday morning in tears, saying she had "tears in my eyes of the joy of this moment, of this opportunity that has been given to the leadership conference ? as the entire world is opening its hearts to you."

"I feel it with the depth of my being, that we have come here together at the most critical time at the history of humanity because we're facing a moment of choice."

Before Hubbard's remarks Wednesday, the sisters assembled began the morning with a 40-minute session of prayer focused on seeking truth and invoking the Holy Spirit.

During the prayer, which involved a prolonged session of silence, there were multiple mentions of letting go of personal fears to "live from the spirit of the living water."

"May we have the grace to let go of our own thoughts, fears and personal stories," a presenter said at one point. "Let us encounter with the living truth of this moment."

After their silent reflections, the sisters were asked to share among themselves what they heard in prayer. One said that she was finding it helpful to try and let go of her own opinions. Another said she was focusing on finding a feeling of peace, as "peace is better than anything."

Standing at the end of prayer, the sisters pledged together: "I pledge to you, my sisters and brothers, to make a conscious choice to stand in and surrender to the living truth as it evolves and is revealed this day."

Hubbard is to make another presentation to the LCWR gathering Wednesday afternoon, which will be followed by a closed-door "executive session" where LCWR members are expected to discuss possible responses to the Vatican mandate.

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NCR will be reporting on the LCWR assembly all week. Previous reports:

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- **Keynote: LCWR 'seed bed' for 21st century**, Aug. 8
- **LCWR 'gathers collective wisdom' of members to discern next steps**, Aug. 8
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