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Catholic theologians gather in Miami for annual conference

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CTSA 2013

Miami — At a time when less than a quarter of Roman Catholics in the U.S. attend weekly Mass, the Catholic Theological Society of America has chosen to focus its annual meeting on the theme of "Conversion." Hundreds of Catholic scholars from around the world gathered in Miami this weekend to discuss the theme from theological, ethical, ecclesiastical and global perspectives. This is the 68th convention of the 1,400-member society.

The meeting's opening program was decidedly less intense than last year's session, which took place just days after the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith handed down a notification to Yale professor Margaret Farley, RSM, for her book *Just Love*. Farley, who served as president of CTSA in 2000, made her only public statements about the controversy at that conference, attracting an atypical level of media attention on last year's meeting in St. Louis.

This year's convention had its informal kickoff Thursday evening with a pre-conference session led by the Women's Consultation in Constructive Theology. The Women's Consultation traditionally concludes with the awarding of the Ann O'Gara Graff Memorial Award, given to "a CTSA woman member whose accomplishments include womanist, feminist, or other woman-identified scholarship and liberating action on behalf of women in the church and/or the broader community."

This year's recipient was Professor Mary C. Boys, a member of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and the Mary and the Skinner and McAlpin Professor of Practical Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City.

After the award ceremony, the CTSA community also honored the life of groundbreaking *Mujerista* theologian Ada María Isasi-Díaz, who died in May 2012 at the age of 69.

The conference formally opened Thursday evening with a welcome from Miami's Archbishop Thomas Gerard Wenski. His remarks were followed by the first plenary address, "Conversion and Witnessing: Intercultural Renewal in a World Church," which was offered by Peter Casarella, professor of Catholic studies and director of the Center for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology at DePaul University in Chicago.

This was the first CTSA meeting under Pope Francis, and Casarella took the opportunity to quote from several of the new pontiff's recent homilies. In his lecture, Casarella discussed the importance of connecting witnessing and conversion in the process of church renewal, and he asserted that ecclesial renewal must act in service to the "rapid and irreversible Southernization" of the Roman Catholic church.

Quoting Francis, Casarella invited his colleagues to consider challenges of "walking in the light of the Lord, building the church, and professing faith in Jesus Christ" in the movement toward church renewal. Echoing the new pope, he cautioned that the path of walking, building and professing is not always straightforward because there can be "jolts" that "pull us back" on the journey.

"The challenge that we theologians face in the new world church is to walk in the light of the Lord, renew the church constructively, and witness reflectively, *all at the same time*. The pope is showing us a way but also warning us that the path will be bumpy," Casarella concluded.

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