CMSM Assembly Hears Challenges from Young Religious, Endorses Revised Standards for Child Protection, and Elects a New President

HOUSTON, TEXAS (August 6, 2012). At opening of their annual assembly, held August 1-4, 2012 in Houston, Texas, the Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM), whose leaders represent more than 17,000 Catholic religious brothers and priests in the United States, heard from Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò, Apostolic Nuncio to the United States, who remarked that he “did not have to be in the United States very long to appreciate the great, foundational importance of religious life in this country in establishing the Church here.” Noting that the assembly was gathered in Houston, the Archbishop said that “the heroic and evangelizing works of religious are all around us.”

A keynote address was delivered by a young Benedictine monk from Austria, Father Bernhard Eckerstorfer, OSB, entitled “Youth Culture as a Challenge, Remarks from Europe on the Future of Religious Life.” Father Bernhard is a member of Kremsmünster Abbey, where he serves as director of vocations, novice master, formation director and spokesman of his abbey. In his presentation, Father Eckerstorfer challenged the assembled participants to avoid the trap of the hermeneutics of diminishment, with its vocation crisis mentality, and to adopt the hermeneutics of young people who get ready in the present time to be equipped for the future. Echoing the forthcoming fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, he said that a tool for critically engaging youth culture today is a return to the sources found in Vatican II documents and a return to the Council’s call for reading the signs of the times.

Another young Benedictine, Abbot Austin Murphy, OSB, of St. Procopius Abbey in Lisle, Illinois, provided spiritual reflections on the theme of the assembly, “The Dream I Have for You.” Elected abbot in 2010 at the age of thirty-six, Abbot Austin acknowledged his anxiety during the opening of the assembly about speaking to a group of experienced major superiors, but he recognized that his audience could reflect on his words in light of that experience. Using the topic of dreams throughout scripture, and taking his start from a passage from the Prophet Joel (Jl 3:1), Abbot Austin noted that “the passage speaks of dreams that are from God. They are not of one’s own making, not one’s own projection. Instead, they are a result of the Spirit having been poured out on all flesh.” He would go on to talk about positive dreams as the yardstick for discerning them as a way in which God speaks to each of us.

Jesuit Father James Martin was the second major speaker at the assembly. His talk was entitled “Between Heaven and Mirth: Why Joy, Humor and Laughter are at the Heart of the Spiritual Life,” and he presented highlights from his recent book of the same title. Father Martin reminded his listeners that, since humor and laughter reveal something about who we really are as religious, they can be powerful tools in the engagement of young people and in the attraction of others to come and share in the community of religious life.

Kim Smolik, the Executive Director of the Franciscan Mission Service of North America, was the third major speaker at the 2012 Assembly. Her talk was entitled, “Daring to Dream Anew: Communion, Compassion and Courage for the Church to Come,” and in it she provided an in-depth comparison between the two generations known as “Generation X” and the “Millennials” toward a future in which young peoples’ faces and voices will be a part of the Church. “I look towards this future with
excitement,” she said, “not only because I am inspired by many of the things I see when I look at today’s young adults – and this includes committed Catholics, Catholics on the margins, and even former Catholics – but also because I’ve learned that much of what they are seeking, and in many cases deeply longing for, is exactly what you as religious are able to offer.”

In his Presidential Address, the Very Rev. Thomas Smolich, SJ, President of CMSM, said that the “assembly theme of ‘The Dream I Have for You’ is intended to give us, as leaders, some deeper insights into the experiences and perspectives of the dreamers among us…our current and future younger members.” And Father Smolich noted that religious have something to offer in the post-modern era because “historically, religious communities reach out to those most in need, those most alienated -- the dropped out and dropping in are those we are called to be with. Given the level of crisis, so well-known and analyzed in the digital age, there may not have been another era where the charisms of religious are so needed and offer so much.”

At a Pre-Assembly Workshop, CMSM members and others who are involved in programs of child protection in religious communities, received information about revised standards for accreditation recently endorsed by the CMSM National Board and their practical application from Praesidium Religious Services. In the course of the assembly membership meeting, CMSM Members heard a talk by Sr. Pat Farrell, OSF, President of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), on the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s Doctrinal Assessment of the LCWR. At the conclusion of the assembly, letters were issued by the Membership to both the LCWR and to Archbishop J. Peter Sartain, Apostolic Delegate for the implementation of the Doctrinal Assessment.

During the elections which were held at the membership meeting of the assembly, CMSM members chose the Very Rev. John S. Edmunds, ST, Superior General of the Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity in Silver Spring, Maryland, as President of the Conference for a two-year term. The Very Rev. Brother Ben L. Consigli, FMS, Provincial of the USA Province of the Marist Brothers of the Schools, was elected as the CMSM Vice President. Abbot Lawrence R. Statyszen, OSB, of St. Gregory Abbey, Shawnee, Oklahoma, was re-elected to another term as an At-large Board Member. In addition, four new At-large Members of the National Board of Directors were elected: the Rev. James A. Casciotti, SJ, Socius of the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus; the Very Rev. Michael A. Duggan, MM, U.S. Regional Superior of the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers; the Rev. Neil Pezzulo, First Vice President of the Glenmary Home Missioners; and the Very Rev. John Puodziunas, OFM, Provincial Minister of the Order of Friars Minor of the Assumption of the BVM Province.

At the concluding liturgy of the assembly, the Very Rev. John S. Edmunds was installed as President of the Conference. Father Edmunds has been the General Custodian (Superior General) of the Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity and the Chair of CMSM Region 3 since 2007. After his ordination in 1976, he served in several assignments for the Missionary Servants: as Associate Pastor of La Purisima Catholic Church in El Modena, California; as Associate Vocation Director; as Campus Minister at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; as Associate Pastor of Holy Family/St. Ann’s Church in Lawtell, Louisiana; as Pastor of St. Joseph Church in Holy Trinity, Alabama; and as Director of Post-Novitiate Formation for the Holy Trinity Mission Seminary in Silver Spring, Maryland. Prior to his present leadership role, he was Pastor for seventeen years of Christ the King Church in Jersey City, New Jersey.

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The Conference of Major Superiors of Men (CMSM) supports and offers resources for U.S. leaders of Catholic men’s religious institutes. CMSM promotes dialogue and collaboration on issues of religious life as well as peace and justice issues with major groups in church and society. There are more than 17,000 religious priests and brothers in the United States.