News
Religious Life



The Confederation of Latin American Religious celebrated its 64th anniversary March 2 via Zoom and in person in Bogotá, Colombia. Its president, Sr. Liliana Franco, right, said the organization could only celebrate the milestone if it remained committed to building a world of equality and dignity. (GSR screenshot)



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The president of the largest organization of women and men religious in Latin America said that while the region remains a place of pain and bloodshed, it is one where the church can help the "perpetually excluded."

In a March 2 Zoom celebration marking the 64th year of the Confederation of Latin American Religious (CLAR), president Sr. Liliana Franco said the organization could only celebrate the milestone if it remained committed to building a world of equality and dignity for which men and women religious in Latin America have long fought.


Alma de mi alma
CLAR

Sr. Liliana Franco in 2019, shortly after she was elected president of CLAR (GSR file photo)

"This continent continues to cry out for a life of dignity, for an equitable distribution of goods and opportunities, for peace, and for scenarios in which the dialogue and social friendship that Pope Francis speaks of are possible," said Franco, a sister of the Company of Mary, in her keynote address. "We are the heirs of a history of proclamation, mission, prophecy and martyrdom."

Part of that prophetic role means calling out abuse, Franco said.

"That is where the voice of God resounds, inviting us not to be silent in the face of the corruption ... not to remain silent in the face of the abuses that eat away at the identity of those who are called to be brothers and sisters," she said.

In late 2022, CLAR released a groundbreaking report about different kinds of abuses — including physical, psychological and spiritual — that sisters have experienced in Latin America. Men and women religious must opt for a community "where there are no more victims of abuse among us," Franco said.

CLAR, founded in 1959, represents women and men religious in 22 countries in Central and South America, as well as the Caribbean.

Since CLAR was founded a few years before the Second Vatican Council — and before the 1968 conference of Latin American bishops in Medellín, Colombia — its members found the shift in focus on the disenfranchised and poor to be disconcerting, Franco said.

"The most impoverished corners of the continent were inhabited by men and women who were discomforted by the rhythm of the Second Vatican Council and the Latin American Episcopal Conference in Medellín," Franco said. But they "left that status of comfort" and opted for serving the poor and excluded in society, and in those years, "God has been the protagonist."

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Her address comes at a time of social and political upheaval in Latin America. In Peru, protests by those who have felt disenfranchised have lingered since late December, leaving at least 60 dead. Venezuela is facing an exodus of more than 7 million of its citizens leaving the country's spiraling economy amid political problems, with similar challenges in Cuba as well as Nicaragua, where the Catholic Church finds itself under attack by the government.

The Nicaraguan government expelled the Missionaries of Charity in June 2022, and on Feb. 11, a bishop received a 26-year prison sentence on trumped-up charges of terrorism and inciting violence.

Franco also spoke of martyrdom, saying it was the place "where everything is made fruitful by the force of coherence and evangelical radicalism ... and the witnesses are conceived by the people, because they recognize the authenticity of the proclamation."

She said those in CLAR follow a line of witnesses, men and women religious, who continue to inspire because of the path they took, including martyrdom.

Latin America, Franco said, continues to be a place "where there is still much pain, much bloodshed, many systems that enslave and co-opt liberty," but where the lives of men and women religious can continue to be a blessing through prophecy, mission and mysticism.

"Let's continue to celebrate with joy," Franco said of the anniversary, "because our God assures us that he continues to forge a path through us, and what is our duty is to give of our lives."

Read this next: Q & A with Sr. Liliana Franco, leader of women religious in Latin America, the Caribbean