News



Adrian Dominican Sr. Donna Markham speaks to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious Friday, Aug. 11, after receiving the group's Outstanding Leadership Award. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)



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Serving those desperately in need can be dangerous, exhausting and costly, Sr. Donna Markham said, but it is at those moments, "standing with holy suffering," that fear diminishes, caution drops away, and a deep connection to the sacred becomes tangible.

Markham, an Adrian Dominican sister, described those moments to nearly 900 Catholic sisters at the Leadership Conference of Women Religious assembly Friday (Aug. 11) as she received the group's Outstanding Leadership Award. She retired as president and CEO of Catholic Charities USA at the end of June after a career that spanned decades of breaking barriers and new ground.

Markham took the helm of Catholic Charities in 2015, becoming the first woman to head the agency in its 100-year history. She was chair of the nonprofit's board of trustees from 2008 to 2011. She served in the LCWR presidency from 1990 to 1993.



Adrian Dominican Sr. Donna Markham, right, then prioress, presides over the formal entrance ceremony for Sr. Elise Garcia in April 2005. Garcia is currently the prioress. (Photo courtesy of Adrian Dominican Sisters)

A psychologist, Markham was president and CEO for 10 years of the Southdown institute in Ontario, a mental healthcare facility for church professionals, was

director of behavioral health services at Mercy Hospital and Medical Center in Chicago and was president of the Behavioral Health Institute of Mercy Health in Cincinnati.

In addition to her doctorate in clinical psychology from the University of Detroit, she has 10 honorary doctorates, was honorary president of the Canadian Psychological Association and was named to the NonProfit Times "Top 50 Power and Influence Leaders" every year from 2016 to 2022. She was even once the answer to a "Jeopardy" question.

Markham told the assembly's attendees that she truly believed any of them could be on the stage being honored for outstanding leadership, noting how so many serve and sacrifice for those in need.

"No matter what the cost, we respond to these suffering people," she said. "You and I have our own reservoir or profound encounters that have changed us, transported us, converted us. Standing on the side of holy suffering, we know we will never be the same again."



Leadership Conference of Women Religious president Sr. Maureen Geary, past president Sr. Rebecca Ann Gemma and president-elect Sr. Sue Ernster are blessed Aug. 11, after taking office at annual assembly in Dallas. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

LCWR President Sr. Maureen Geary presented Markham with the award, saying it was "for your trailblazing and accomplishments." Earlier that day, Geary, a Grand Rapids Dominican, moved to president of the leadership organization that represents about two-thirds of the nearly 40,000 sisters in the United States. Sr. Jane Herb, of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary of Monroe, ended her term on the triumvirate presidency, and Sr. Rebecca Ann Gemma, a Springfield Dominican, became past president. Sr. Sue Ernster, of the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration, became president-elect after being elected earlier this summer.

Markham encouraged the sisters to continue to carry out their mission, whatever the consequences.

"We will continue to live together in love, in boldness and sustained assurance that we are not alone," she said. "God is truly in our midst as we stand at that veil between what is and what is to come."

Sr. Elise Garcia, prioress of the Adrian Dominicans, said in an earlier interview that Markham is truly an exceptional leader.

"She's the quintessential Dominican. She has a deep devotion to the value of study," Garcia said. "She's a devoted student, always seeking truth, and has a deep devotion to prayer and contemplation. I think that combination … has contributed to the journey she has taken."



Adrian Dominican Sr. Donna Markham, then prioress, relaxes during an October 2005 visit to the Dominican Sisters of Our Lady of Remedies in Pampanga, Philippines. The Adrian Dominican Sisters helped with the formation of the Remedies Congregation’s first sisters in the 1960s, and the two congregations merged in 2011. (Photo courtesy of Adrian Dominican Sisters)

Garcia said Markham's background in psychology made her uniquely qualified to run Catholic Charities USA.

"I think all of the qualifications and experiences she has accumulated over the years, her exposure to individual suffering and the suffering in the world, and the way systemic issues harm folks made her a transformational leader," she said.

Principal of Nygren Consulting, David Nygren said Markham's leadership at Catholic Charities was truly transformational.

"She is to the Catholic Charities of today what Mother Seton was to education many years ago," said Nygren, who has known Markham since the late 1980s. "She's done every major job a Catholic leader could do, but not only that, she's done it with superior performance."

For example, Catholic Charities USA is a member organization, made up of the individual Catholic Charities agencies in dioceses across the country. But because it wasn't a direct service agency itself, it had no resources when a member agency was impacted. Markham changed that, even though it meant great change at the organization and fundraising to make it happen.

But thanks to those efforts, he said, if, say, a Catholic Charities agency is flooded by the same storm affecting the people it serves, Catholic Charities USA can now provide resources to allow that agency to continue serving. It has since provided more than $150 million in disaster relief to member agencies.

"She created a universal structure to support the needs of the church in a way no one else could do," Nygren said. "She took on unsolvable problems with courage and conviction and raised the money to support it. Catholic Charities has never been so successful with fundraising as it has under her."



Sisters dance Aug. 11 at the Leadership Conference of Women Religious assembly in Dallas. (GSR photo/Dan Stockman)

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Cardinal Joseph Tobin, Archbishop of Newark, said he has known Markham for at least 25 years but was aware of her contributions before that.

"She's a super, super woman," Tobin told Global Sisters Report. "She's very respected and loved."

Tobin said Markham, through both her work at Southdown and as a leader of religious, "has meant a great deal of new life" for consecrated men and women.

"She has worked with men and women religious in this country and around the world," he said, noting that, at his invitation, she was the first woman to address his order's general chapter in Rome, where she talked about hope in religious life. Tobin is a member of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, known as the Redemptorists.

One of her great skills, he said, is to be able to build relationships while also speaking truth to power.

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"She keeps her own integrity and faithfulness to the Gospel, and does it in a way that's not acerbic, even when she finds herself a majority of one," Tobin said. "She had to deal with several, shall we say, complex relationships, like the federal government and the conference of Catholic bishops."

Garcia said Markham used the member agencies of Catholic Charities as a network of eyes and ears to what was happening across the nation and what the needs were. In 2021, when Catholic Charities in dioceses along the U.S. southern border said that they were being overwhelmed by asylum seekers from Central America, and their young, un-vaccinated workers were being sickened by or even dying from COVID-19, Markham called LCWR. Because those over 75 were the first to receive the COVID-19

vaccine, LCWR was able to rally its sister members to help, and more than 300 sisters from across the country answered the call — Markham had marshaled an army of volunteers.

"I think she had a direct line to (LCWR executive director) Sr. Carol Zinn," Garcia said. "It was Donna who would alert us to what the needs were, then we responded in kind."



Adrian Dominican Sr. Donna Markham with Pope John Paul II, circa 2003 (Photo courtesy of Adrian Dominican Sisters)

Nygren said Markham did it only because it needed to be done.

"It's a good illustration of how she unified resources and brought people to the cause," he said. "She leveraged every person and resource she could find, and she didn't care if she ever got credit for it."

Garcia said that at a farewell event she attended for Markham in Washington, D.C., people such as Capitol Hill lobbyists and recent immigrants gave testimonies to how Markham had affected them or their work or changed their lives.

"It was a beautiful combination of engagement at the systemic level, but also one-on-one," Garcia said, noting that Markham has a unique combination of being able to

engage both with individual, personal needs and also address change at the systemic level.

Nygren said Markham's work comes from her deep faith.

"It just runs in her veins to serve the poor and preach the Gospel," he said. "She's a servant leader, and nothing is too trivial for her to take on if it's a human need and nothing is too grand not to master."

But she also thinks carefully and strategically and always returns to the essence of the mission.

"When you put her in her job, she says, 'We're going to take six months and pray about this, and then write a theology of the Catholic Church and its relationship to Catholic Charities,' " Nygren said. "She can speak to the bishops, the government — and no one could challenge her. They couldn't deny she is correct."

This story appears in the **LCWR 2023** feature series. View the full series.