News
Religious Life



Sr. Noelle Corscadden of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, known as the Loreto Sisters, third from right, is pictured with sisters from the Congregation of Jesus and the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in South Sudan. A Vatican decree has granted the merger of the Congregation of Jesus and the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary. (Courtesy of Noelle Corscadden)



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"Evolving Religious Life," a continuing series from Global Sisters Report, explores how Catholic sisters are adapting to the realities of congregations in transition and new forms of religious life. While we write often about these trends, this particular series will focus more closely on sisters' hopes for the future.



"Becoming One" is the theme adopted by two religious congregations who will officially merge at a Eucharistic celebration on Nov. 4 in Loyola, Spain. The Vatican's decree granting the merger of the Congregation of Jesus and the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary (Loreto) comes 416 years after Venerable Mary Ward (1585-1645) first set out her vision for a radical new way of religious life for women based on the apostolic model of St. Ignatius Loyola.

Founded in 1609, Mary Ward's Institute separated into two branches — the Congregation of Jesus and the Loreto Sisters. Many powerful voices in the church in the early 17th century refused to countenance Ward's vision for the education of girls and women by religious sisters freed from the constraints of enclosure. Her religious communities and schools throughout Europe were shut down at the behest of those who resented the "Jesuitesses." A bull of suppression, *Pastoralis Romani*

Pontificis, was imposed on the institute in 1631, while Ward was imprisoned by the Inquisition and accused of heresy. She died in her native England in 1645 with her life's work in ruins.



Sr. Mary Ward, pictured in an undated painting, is the founder of the Congregation of Jesus and the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, known as the Loreto Sisters. (CNS/Courtesy of Bar Convent)

It was not until 1909, 300 years after her first foundation, that Mary Ward's followers were granted permission by the church to acknowledge her as their foundress and the process of rehabilitation began. On Dec. 19, 2009, Pope Benedict XVI recognized Mary Ward's heroic virtue and declared her venerable.

Some religious congregations today, challenged by declining numbers, have merged as an alternative to closure. But the Congregation of Jesus and Loreto Sisters are voluntarily merging and among the members it is seen as the fulfilment of Mary Ward's foundational vision for her institute.

"Neither of us are doing it because we have to; we are doing it because we want to and because we feel called to do it," Loreto Sr. Noelle Corscadden told Global Sisters Report. Corscadden, the former superior general, was pivotal, along with Sr. Jane Livesey, the then-Congregation of Jesus superior general, in bringing about the merger.

The two leaders started having conversations in 2016 when they were both based in Rome. It probably helped that three of Livesey's grandaunts had actually been Loreto Sisters through her mother's side of the family.

"There was something about the fact that you had an Englishwoman and an Irishwoman who were talking about this," Corscadden said. "I think we were very aware of the symbolism of what we were doing and the importance of that symbolism."

Corscadden explained that the merger follows an earlier unsuccessful effort in 1900 to bring together Ward's institutes.



Sr. Jane Livesey, former superior general of the Congregation of Jesus, puts flowers on her great-aunt's grave in the Loreto cemetery in Rathfarnham, Dublin, watched by Loreto sisters from Abbey House. A Vatican decree has granted the merger of the Congregation of Jesus and the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary. (Courtesy of Sr. Noelle Corscadden)

"But it was just before World War I and there was no way England was going to join Germany," she said. "It was just before the 1916 Rising and there was no way Ireland was going to join England. Politics as well as bishops got in the way."

A consultation process held in 2019-2020 in both congregations indicated that there was a desire to realize Ward's plan for one institute. The Loreto Sisters have a total global membership of about 580 sisters, while the Congregation of Jesus has about 1,300 sisters.

Under the merger, the approximately 1,880 sisters will all take the same name: Congregation of Jesus.

"If we had opted for full canonical union that would mean that the CJs would cease to exist, the IBVMs would cease to exist, and we would form something new," Corscadden said. "That disconnects us from Mary Ward because we would be founding a new congregation. We are half the size of the CJs. In merging with the CJs, we take what is in existence and step into that."

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But in places like Ireland, where the Loreto Sisters are renowned for their network of schools, there have been some concerns that the merger will mean that the highly regarded brand of Loreto will disappear. Not so, according to Corscadden.

"The name Loreto is too strongly identified with us, even though it is a nickname and we don't use it in our Spanish-speaking countries, so it is not universal. But where we do use it, it has actually become synonymous with us — so it's not going to go. It would be a headache to try to change the names of all the schools."

The Australian province of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary has reassured its supporters, "Our name 'Loreto Sisters' will stand forever."

"There is always going to be some fears when change is coming about," Corscadden said. "The day we voted there was such a sense of joy. That's not saying that everybody voted yes, I'm sure there are sisters who didn't, but I think the majority were happy that we were part of something that was very significant historically."



Sister Pryanka of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary and Sister Helena of the Congregation of Jesus, visiting neighbors in Rumbek, South Sudan (Courtesy of Noelle Corscadden)

The "Becoming One" celebration will be held at the Sanctuary of Loyola, chosen because of Mary Ward's commitment to "take the same as the Society [of Jesus]." The date of Nov. 4 is also significant as it is Teresa Ball Day.

The Irish branch of the Loreto Sisters launched in 1821-1822 when Mother Teresa Ball, who did her training and novitiate at the Congregation of Jesus' Bar Convent in York, brought Mary Ward's charism to Ireland. The first house of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Ireland was named Loreto House after the shrine in Italy where Ward used to pray. Ball (1794-1861) opened the institute's first house in Rathfarnham (Dublin) in 1822. Ball opened many schools in Ireland.

The process of merging is not new to the Loreto Sisters as they have been reuniting with independent houses like Loreto Fermoy in Ireland and in 2003 with the North

American branch. "We called that reunion because the North American branch would have said that they got separated from the Irish branch. In fact, canonically, it was a merger," Corscadden said.

"The fears that Fermoy talked about when they were joining with Rathfarnham, and the fears that the North Americans had when they were joining the Irish branch of the Institute are exactly the same as the fears that we have as we prepare to merge with the CJs," Corscadden said. "It is the same language: 'They are bigger than us, we are going to get lost. We will lose the intimacy of knowing everybody. We'll get forgotten.' It is fear of a new culture."

Corscadden, who was superior general and provincial in Ireland over a 16-year period, believes "one of the upsides of the merger is mission and ministry because the outreach is much greater. We can work more together, already we have a CJ working with us in South Sudan."



Sisters of Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary and Congregation of Jesus meet local families at Loreto Rumbek, in South Sudan. (Courtesy of Noelle Corscadden)

The Loreto Sisters opened the first secondary school for girls in Western Lakes State in South Sudan — Loreto Rumbek — in 2008. That mission has now expanded to include a co-educational primary school and a health care center in Rumbek, South Sudan. They are now in the process of opening a second school in Aweil.

But there will be difficulties ahead and the sisters will have to find ways to iron out different accounting methods and the diversities in each province.

For now, provinces are not going to merge. The Loreto Sisters have 10 provinces and the Congregation of Jesus have 16 provinces. The sisters will "start looking at those structures from the point of view of administration and governance," Corscadden said.

For the immediate future the two congregations are focused on new joint governance initiatives which build trust and allow members to get to know each other. Two members of each congregation will join the other congregation's leadership team.

Corscadden hopes that the merger will "empower our women to be brave and strong and to respond to whatever the needs are that they come across."

"As our world fragments we offer this witness of union and unity," she said.

This story appears in the **Evolving Religious Life** feature series. View the full series.