

Words of Welcome | Executive Director | Congress Opening

Thank you for those words of welcome, Sister Catherine, Father Michael, and Sister Helen. It is an honor to share this stage with you tonight.

In the book **St Francis and the Foolishness of God**, the authors describe a setting in which Francis and Clare gather around a campfire one evening and talk about their love of God and all of creation. There they sit, huddled together, the embers and the light of the fire flickering, engaging in passionate conversation about God's love.

In fact, the story goes, the people of Assisi looked beyond the walls of the town, across the plain, and toward the forest where the Franciscan community of Francis and Clare lived. They saw a red and orange glow as if a great fire were raging. They rushed out of the city to put out the fire – only to discover Francis and Clare sitting and talking to one another.

The authors of **St. Francis and the Foolishness of God** ask us to imagine ourselves gathered around that campfire with Francis and Clare, the coolness of the evening offset by Fire, the Sun setting to the west and the Moon rising over the nearby mountains.

**Tonight, and over the course of the next few days,
Francis and Clare invite us to dialogue with Fire.**

They ask us to consider the source of passion in our lives:

- What are we passionate about?
- Where do we find energy?
- What is our deepest joy?
- Are we moving toward it?

The authors say, and I quote:

The Fire within us can cause havoc, or it can lead us toward transformation. What about your passion for justice, our longing for peace? Perhaps that fiery passion is only a faintly glowing ember right now. Can we gently fan it until it reignites?

Francis and Clare invite us to be in dialogue with the Fire within each of us.

How do we befriend Fire, who comes to us in suffering, in mystery, in love?

[end of quote]

Throughout the ages, Fire has been a symbol of **Eros** – of love seeking union with the beloved.

Fire has been the metaphor of transformation.

As pilgrims of hope and prophets of light –
we come to this sacred space and huddle around a similar fire –
asking both the same and different questions about God and the beloved community.

How will we, as consecrated religious in a fractured world, fan the flames of Christ's Good news of justice, love, and peace?

How will we, as missionaries of hope in a field hospital of hope, encourage others, like Francis and Clare, to huddle together and gather around the "fires of life" and the "questions of meaning" that both sustain and challenge them?

How will we, as participants at the 2025 Congress, come to this space and these questions and lean in together toward the emerging, but largely unknown, future?

**This is the work – and this is the transformation – Fire invites us to.
This is God's mission-at-work in all of us.**

Like the communion of saints before us –
Like the very people who processed in earlier to accompany us this weekend –
we tend the radiant fire and fan the holy flames.

May we FLICKER with curiosity and embrace the creative questions,
May we GLOW with courageous faith and unbridled hope,
May our EMBERS fuel our passions and spark the best in each of us.

And so, friends, welcome! It's good to have you join us around this weekend's CONGRESS CAMPFIRE. We're honored by your presence.

Allow me to express gratitude, too, for the privilege we have to serve – alongside so many of you – the initial and ongoing formation needs of women and men religious.

Congress Introductions

I'd like to take a few minutes to introduce Board, staff, and invited guests.

The RFC is blessed to have a committed and supportive Board of Directors. As I introduce them, I ask each of them to stand and remain standing until all the Board is introduced.

Serving on the Executive Committee:

- **Sr. Helen Adaku Ogbuji, CCVI (Co-Chair)**
Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word (Houston)
- **Sr. Erin Zubal, OSU (Co-Chair)**
Ursuline Sisters of Cleveland
- **Br. Jack Henn, GHM (Treasurer)**
Glenmary Home Missioners
- **Sr. Michelle Leshner, SSJ (Corporate Secretary)**
Sisters of St. Joseph of Philadelphia

Board Members-At-Large:

- **Sr. Kathleen Anderson, SSJ**
Sisters of St. Joseph of Philadelphia
- **Sr. Marissa Butler, RSM**
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas
- **Br. Steve Fogt, CFA**
Alexian Brothers

- **Sr. Kathy Kandefer, BVM**
Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary
- **Sr. Barbara Staley, MSC**
Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart
- **Sr. Michelle Marie Stachowiak, CSSF**
Felician Sisters of North America
- **Fr. Richard Toboso, GHM**
Glenmary Home Missioners

Thank you, friends, for your service to and leadership of the Religious Formation Conference! *[Please be seated.]*

I would also like to introduce our dedicated staff. Many of you already know **Susan Oxley**, Communications and Membership Manager. And joining the team last month is **Nadiya Levchenko**, Director of Programs and Initiatives. Our part-time Administrative Assistant, **Steven Torres**, is unable to be with us tonight. These are the people who minister daily in service to the Conference and to religious formation. It is a joy to work with them!

Contracted staff working with us on Congress this year include **Terry Wessels** and **Nick Steffy**, and our Congress liturgist, **Michael Ward**. We could not host all of you without their exceptional work.

Finally, we have some special guests from other organizations that serve religious life with us tonight, please stand and be recognized when your name is called:

- You've already met **Fr. Michael Keucher**, Vicar Forane and Director of Vocations, Archdiocese of Indianapolis
- **Michelle Stachowiak** | Leadership Conference of Women Religious
- **Bill Boslet** | Religious Brothers Conference
- **Debbie Borneman** | National Religious Vocation Conference

- **Chioma Ahanihu** | Catholic Theological Union, Center for the Study of Consecrated Life
- **Elizabeth Ann Vasquez** | AHLMA, *Asociación de Hermanas Latinas Misioneras en América*

And thank YOU, friends, for being here. We give thanks for your partnership!