

Welcome Address by Sr. Helen Ogbuji, CCVI (Co-Chair, RFC Board)

Thrive 2025: Pilgrims of Hope, Prophets of Light

Thursday, October 23, 2025

Dear Sisters and Brothers, on behalf of the RFC Board and staff, it is my great pleasure to welcome you to our 2025 Biennial Congress. Entitled Pilgrims of Hope, Prophets of Light. As we celebrate the Jubilee Year of Hope and continue to rejoice with the election of Pope Leo XIV, we commit to being witnesses of God's radical love and hope. As St. Paul says in Romans 5:5, "Hope does not disappoint, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us."

Hope is a theological virtue that encourages us to rely on and trust in God. As described in Ephesians 2:12, hope is to live with God in the world. It is not the absence of chaos or pain, but the presence of God in our messy world. Hope instills an optimistic spirit that reassures us of God's promise: "Don't be afraid! I am with you!" It gives us a glimpse of light amid chaos and pain. In our world, where tragedy seems to dominate and breaking news is filled with sadness, violence, wars, and hunger, we plant a seed of hope and give voice and dignity to our broken world. It is in this spirit that this Congress is asking us to be "Pilgrims of Hope and Prophets of Light."

During this jubilee year of hope, we are invited to journey through life with trust in God's plan, share hope with others, especially in times of suffering and conflict. It means recognizing that life is a continuous journey of faith and we must rely on God's guidance. It involves actively spreading love, joy, and peace to everyone we encounter, while maintaining a hopeful spirit and seeing a ray of light at the end of the tunnel.

Recently, I met a sister from Mexico who is sharing hope by going door-to-door, inviting families and children to return to church. She explained that while some families shut the door in their faces, others are happy to welcome them into their homes. And many have returned to church through this gesture. This is striving to be a prophet of hope even in the face of rejection!

Religious men and women have continued to empower and give hope in the face of overwhelming fear among our immigrant families. As a therapist, I volunteer among migrant and uninsured families and have seen firsthand how

our brothers and sisters are demonized because they have a different international passport. A client shared with me his experience of going grocery shopping for his family when someone shouted at him to go back to his country. Disturbed by this remark, he left the grocery store without making a purchase. Many migrant families are living in fear: fear of taking their children to school or going to places of work because they are uncertain if they will return home without being deported. We have seen how immigrants are detained, and some are deported to other countries other than their own.

Recently, on October 1st, Pope Leo criticized American immigration policies and called them "inhuman." He expressed: "Someone who says that 'I'm against abortion, but I'm in agreement with the inhuman treatment of immigrants in the United States,' I don't know if that's pro-life."

Apart from supporting migrant families, religious men and women have become beacons of hope and light to our world that is ravaged by civil unrest, violence, and wars. Thank God there is a ceasefire in Gaza. However, the war continues in Ukraine, which is very frightening. Many lives are lost and properties destroyed. Religious men and women are continuing to serve in these areas.

We were in a meeting recently, and a sister shared at our table conversation how their sisters are ministering in Russia, Ukraine, Gaza, and Haiti. She explained that their congregational leader asked the sisters in Gaza whether they wanted to return to their Mother House. However, the three sisters replied, "No, sister, we have given up our lives. God will take care of us. We have Jesus in the tabernacle to turn to when the situation becomes more difficult. We cannot abandon the people we are serving." One day, the sisters had no food except for a little flour, and they found a worm in it, to their dismay. The sisters carefully cleaned the flour and used it to prepare a delicious meal, which they enjoyed with the children they were caring for.

As missionaries of hope and light, we must be prepared to explain to anyone who asks the reason for the hope we have (1 Peter 3:15). We do this when many congregations issue public statements on the need to care for our Mother Earth, following the guidelines outlined in *Laudato Si*. This response is particularly crucial when some people have called climate change a hoax and

dismissed the overwhelming scientific concern that climate change is real and poses a serious threat.

While being mindful of these realities in our world, we are consoled by the words of Scripture: "Hope does not disappoint." We recall that RFC celebrated its 75th anniversary last year. We are grateful to God for these milestones and for all the achievements RFC has made over these years. The staff's dedication and hard work have made this milestone possible, and we thank them for their unwavering commitment. We recognize the hard work and constant support of the board of directors, member congregations, partners, collaborators, and pioneer leaders of RFC on whose shoulders we stand. It is a testament to our collective commitment to the ongoing and initial formation of religious women and men, as well as our charism carriers.

As we begin our 2025 biennial Congress, we have already enjoyed the pre-congress workshops on resilience and synodality, as well as a pre-congress retreat today. In the coming days, we will have an informative keynote by Fr. Peter Hill, CS. This will be followed by plenary sessions and, later, 5 seminar sessions to choose from. We hope that you will find these opportunities both productive and enlightening.

Thank you once again for joining us. We look forward to a successful and memorable congress. In the spirit of hope, which never disappoints, we walk as synodal people, bringing hope, light, and healing to our world. As Pope Francis encourages us: "We must fan the flame of hope that has been given us, and help everyone to gain new strength and certainty by looking to the future with an open spirit, a trusting heart, and a far-sighted vision." We are honored by your presence and delighted to have you all here today. We are here to connect, pray and celebrate, and catch up with old friends. Be sure to introduce yourself to someone new! And may we leave this congress as pilgrims of hope, carrying immense light within us and sharing it with those we meet on the journey of faith! Let us thrive together!