



## **Our Sisters, Our Future: Health and Spiritual Care for Aging**

**March 9, 2022, Webinar Remarks**

**Sister Jane Wakahiu, LSOSF**

### **Introductory Comments**

Good morning/evening/night – depending on wherever you are calling from to participate in this webinar. Thank you for joining; it demonstrates the issue of quality elderly care is essential to you. I am Sr Jane Wakahiu, a member of the Little Sisters of Saint Francis. I serve as the Associate VP and head of the Catholic Sisters Initiative at the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, Southern California.

Our founder, Conrad Hilton, was educated by sisters. They impacted his life because of the work all sisters do to transform society and provide spiritual, pastoral accompaniment and social services to the most vulnerable in society. In his will, Mr. Hilton instructed the Foundation to “Give aid to... the sisters, who devote their love and life’s work for the good of mankind.” The quality of life of Catholic sisters is an essential pillar at the Foundation. And we are helping to ensure the quality of life of sisters through:

- Building the capacity of sisters to improve the management of their congregations and their ministries
- Strengthening congregational services to sisters for their health and wellness, which is so essential to enable sisters to continue to do the extraordinarily difficult and emotionally challenging work that they carry out
- Strengthening the ongoing formation in congregations that is essential to the vitality of spiritual life and wellness, which is the heart of what it means to be a woman religious
- Creating networks among sisters – focused on their ministries, their voices for advocacy, the life of their communities – to break down silos, eliminate isolation, and ensure that sisters around the world can learn from and support one another, and
- Contributing to the growth and excellence of sisters’ ministries in service to those who live in deeply disadvantaged circumstances

Cutting across all these areas of concern, the wellbeing of elderly sisters is critical. As Pope Francis has said, “The elderly are a treasure for our society.” Our elderly sisters are a treasure for each of us.

Think about it; our elderly sisters have spent their lives dedicated to others – providing pastoral, educational, or curative care. Our elderly sisters of the future – that means every one of us – will have done so equally. One question that touches my heart is, how can we ensure a life of dignity for our sisters when they reach their evening years, tired and weary after years of service? How can we ensure that our congregations have the financial and physical capability to provide that life of dignity and the internal strength and support to provide elderly sisters with intergenerational and intercultural companionship, spiritual support, and ongoing formation in their twilight years? We are on this journey together. Every congregation will see the number of elderly sisters grow – some already are at this

stage, but all of us will reach the age where we need more support from our sisters. The Psalmist says, “seventy is the sum of our years, or eighty if we are strong” Psalm 90:10. Catholic sisters are strong, indeed – and many reach eighty, ninety, and even one hundred!

The International Union of Superior Generals and the Hilton Foundation’s Catholic Sisters Initiative have joined hands to host this two-part webinar series to initiate global conversations about quality elderly care to ensure the physical, spiritual, psychological, and emotional wellbeing of women religious. We want to promote cross-learning for those in the West who have planted the seed and reaping harvest of adequate planning – to those on other continents where the seed of planning for elderly sisters ought to begin to be sown. We want to start surfacing and understanding the questions, identifying congregations who have developed answers, discussing how those models might be adapted to each congregation’s own needs, and laying out the critical planning dimensions that must underpin the action. Perhaps we will find answers – and together develop some solutions.

This conversation is a dialogue, sharing experiences, needs, and perspectives. I urge you to bring your questions forward, speak to your needs and concerns, and hopefully bring forward your approaches, both those that have succeeded and those that, perhaps, have not. I remember Pope Francis’ invitation in 2014 to “look to the past with gratitude, the present with passion, and look to the future with hope.” Preparing for that future is one of our greatest blessings for our elderly sisters.

Today we start that journey of preparing the future together; we have two parts in this dialogue, first is a presentation on the trends using data to help understand “Where We Are and Where We Are Going” and second, a panel of sisters to discuss critical issues on that journey towards quality care of our elderly sisters.

We are privileged to have an expert and a leader in research and data on global women’s religious trends. Fr. Thomas Gaunt is a Jesuit priest and Executive Director of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University. He has a B.A. in Philosophy from St. Louis University, an M.Div. from Loyola University-Chicago, and an M.P.A. and Ph.D. in City Planning from the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. Prior to becoming executive director at CARA, Fr. Tom was the Executive Secretary/Socius of the Jesuit Conference-USA, the national office of the Jesuits of the USA. But even before that, Fr. Tom was a parish priest in the Diocese of Charlotte, South Carolina. So, he knows the data, but he also knows first-hand our lives of ministry in service to a community in need. Welcome, Fr. Tom.

**Sr Jane introduces Sr Pat:**

Sr Pat Murray, whom I am proud to call a good friend, is a Loreto sister who serves as the Executive Director of UISG. Sr. Pat is our moderator for this conversation today. Sr. Pat served as Peace Education Officer and as President of the Irish Episcopal Commission for Justice and Peace. She was the first Director of the Loreto Schools Network in Ireland and was Vice President of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. She worked with others to establish the presence of IBVM/Loreto Sisters in the UN in New York. More recently, Sr. Pat served as the first Executive Director of Solidarity with South Sudan - a new model of inter-congregational missionary presence. Sr. Pat has a Master’s Degrees in Education (TCD-Dublin) and Theology (CTU-Chicago) and a Doctorate in Practical Theology (CTU-Chicago).

Sr Pat will introduce to us the panel of experts in their respective professional fields, who are leaders who have worked in Christ's vineyards, ministering to those in need. And so, we have before us colleagues who stand shoulder to shoulder with us as we plan for the blessings of our elderly sisters.

### **Closing Comments**

This has been a most stimulating session. So many perspectives and important observations about the needs of our elderly, and so many ideas and experiences about how to ensure their lives are lived with dignity and spirituality.

### **I will capture the notes as the webinar runs through**

I think we genuinely have captured the scope of our challenges. We now better understand the questions we must answer and the answers we must plan for. We cannot do this alone; we need each other as a global sisterhood, we have a responsibility to care for those whose shoulders we stand – for the mission.

In April, we will begin to bring forward thoughts about solutions, about potential models for action in

- How we think about funding and affordability
- How to prepare our congregations and our sisters for new ways of living
- How to collaborate effectively so that multiple congregations can together address the needs of aging
- How to serve our sisters who are ill, particularly how to address the challenges of dementia and terminal illness

As I said when we began today, this is a conversation and dialogue, reflection and contemplation on possibilities of addressing quality elderly care for the common good of religious life. It is the beginning of sharing our needs, priorities, experiences, and approaches. It is the beginning of planning.

This planning will lead to concrete action at the continental and global levels. Of course, the partnership will be crucial, and we should learn from countries that have made significant strides in planning. But even among those countries that are well ahead in planning, some congregations are struggling; in the spirit of synodality, we walk together to find meaningful solutions to address the issues in concrete ways.

We hope this conversation will create an international committee to explore the most appropriate actions and solutions. We hope you initiate conversations at your national conferences; we at the Hilton Foundation look forward to our continued dialogue and support for Catholic sisters to act on that conversation to protect our mutual treasure.