

Catholic Women's League members descend on Calgary for 99th annual convention

The blue and white flag of the Catholic Women's League is flying over downtown Calgary this week as some 900 women from across Canada gather for the league's 99th annual national convention.

National President Anne-Marie Gorman, who is chairing the convention for the first time, says it will be a time of celebration, prayer, learning and debate. The national theme is Caring for Our Common Home, which Gorman chose after being inspired by the writings of Pope Francis in the 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'* and others with a biblical perspective on ecology.

Although they are meeting in the heart of the Canadian energy industry, delegates won't be arguing the merits of oilsands development or the science behind climate change. But they will hear from a number of speakers who will address the theme through the lens of faith and offer practical suggestions for action.



Anne-Marie Gorman

"The whole point behind the theme is that we only have one earth, and it behooves us to look after it the best way we can," Gorman said as she prepared to welcome members to the Aug. 18-21 gathering at the Hyatt Regency.

"We're taking it strictly from a spiritual perspective. The theme is simply to ask all our members, the 78,000 of them, to think about things they can do to look after the planet that we've been given. It's a gift from God."

However, there will likely be debate on the convention floor when members consider a list of resolutions. Gorman won't say what the topics will be, just that the resolutions are varied and come from different parts of the country. Once passed at the convention, resolutions become part of national policy and may form part of the league's advocacy work with federal politicians and officials on Parliament Hill.

Following last year's convention, Gorman was part of a CWL delegation that lobbied politicians to remove a controversial clause in the Canada Summer Jobs grant program which required applicants to attest that the mandate of their organization supported Charter rights, including a "right" to abortion. The government eventually did make changes to the attestation clause, and Gorman says "I can't help but believe that we were listened to."

The delegation also presented a resolution urging the federal government to exclude Medical Assistance in Dying from hospice and palliative care services.

"I've been privileged to go to Ottawa and meet with federal ministries, the prime minister, the people who work in different bureaucratic seats," she said. "We prepare really well, and we're always well received. We don't always get what we ask for, but we have a respectful dialogue."

"A lot of organizations don't get that privilege of meeting with the federal government, so we take it very seriously and prepare very well. It's one of the reasons that I think all Catholic women would want to be part of the organization – that we can influence what's happening at the federal level."

Raising awareness of just what the league does is one of the aims of a five-year strategic plan the CWL adopted last year. The plan aims to renew the league in every aspect, from organizational structure to marketing to affirming and supporting each individual member.

Gorman herself, a member of St. Patrick's Parish in Stanley, N.B., joined the league in 1977 following the death of her mother, who had been an active member of the local council. Today the league looks pretty much the same as it did back then, she said, but that's about to change as the strategic plan unfolds.

She hopes the renewal will help attract new members by letting Catholic women know that membership means more than preparing funeral lunches and hosting bake sale fundraisers at the parish.

"I think a lot of people in the pews in the church have misconceptions about what the Catholic Women's League is. We do all those things at the parish level, assist in so many different ways, but we're more than that," Gorman said.

"We're hoping that future members who are interested in social justice and what is happening in our country will be excited and want to join us because we have this ability to write resolutions that will possibly form policy, that will

have an influence on government.”

Over the years, membership in the league has declined with attrition and the change in culture, where most women now work outside the home.

“They don’t have time to leave the house and go to a meeting for an hour and a half even, but their voice is really, really important,” Gorman said. “So in joining the league, if they buy into what the league is – we’re a faith-based organization that is interested in service, in spiritual development, in social justice – whether or not they’re able to come to meetings is immaterial.”

Gorman hopes the league’s renewal comes with more flexibility, so that a woman who doesn’t have time to bake pies for the sale might see that she can serve in other ways, such as addressing specific issues in her community and developing resolutions, or just volunteering for a project with a limited time frame.

The Catholic Women’s League will be celebrating its 100th anniversary at next year’s convention in Montreal. The league originated in 1912 in Edmonton, where local women under the leadership of Catherine Hughes saw a need to assist the large numbers of immigrant women who were arriving with few supports in their new country. The league became a national organization in 1920 and held its first convention in Montreal in 1921.

A century later, Gorman says the strategic planning process has convinced members that the league is still very much needed by the Church, the parish, and women themselves.

“We keep saying, ‘If you just knew what we were all about, you’d want to be with us, you really would.’”

This article was corrected on August 20, 2019, to read ‘spiritual development’ in paragraph 17.