

National President Fran Lucas

Dear sisters in the League,

What a difference one year makes! It feels like a near-180° turnaround! And here we are at our first-ever in-person national annual meeting of members!

The types of activities and events that occurred in councils across Canada that I'm reporting for the past year as compared with those I reported on the previous year are certainly different, with these being much more encouraging, well received by members and with a much-needed personal and in-person touch.

Attending 11 conventions at the provincial and diocesan level, plus numerous council events, has demonstrated to me that councils and members are on the move again, and there's no stopping them now. There has always been a thankfulness exhibited when members come together, but at events this year, it was more pronounced and, in many cases, emotional. The numbers at the various conventions were not necessarily the same as in pre-pandemic conventions, but the quality and attention to detail were enjoyed by all. My personal opportunity to meet hundreds of women and their spiritual advisors and their bishops was an opportunity to build relationships that I benefited from immediately and continue to do so. From meeting a member who proudly spoke of being a third-generation council president to hearing speakers who motivated and encouraged members to hearing reports of amazing accomplishments that are often never heard outside of that particular audience was gratifying. "Sharing" was one word I repeatedly heard as something we need to be better at. For instance, anything online offered to an individual council could be opened up to all councils to participate in. Or, when a standing committee chairperson creates a workshop for her diocese, why couldn't it be shared with all provinces?

The national theme, *Catholic and Living It!*, took on a life of its own in councils in very creative ways. Lively presentations and events were augmented with small, large and very large signage emphasizing the meaning of that particular council's initiative.

Individual councils at different levels contributed financially and by volunteering in many ways to support the *Walking Together* visits for Truth and Reconciliation. I was fortunate to be on a committee of Archbishop Richard Smith's (Edmonton), helping with Pope Francis's visit and then attending the mass. From attending mass in tiny churches in remote areas to large cathedrals to the cathedral of all cathedrals, Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome, I was honoured to represent The Catholic Women's League of Canada. Being part of an audience with Pope Francis—being within feet of Pope Francis twice in less than a year—was indeed unbelievable.

Online meetings were effective but not a replacement for the benefits of meeting in person, as I heard echoed at every visit. To continue meeting and building relationships when at conventions, I challenged members to hold a small Tea Party where at least one attendee who was not well known by the others was invited. The one I held was as affirmation that this was a meaningful and fun way to get to know others with favourable results. Many such events resulted in new members of the League. Photographs of these parties were posted on the League's various social media platforms.

In February, National President-Elect and Chairperson of Organization Shari Guinta, National Chairperson of Resolutions Rolande Chernichan and I went to Ottawa and National Chairperson of Legislation Glenda Carson joined us virtually. Our meetings with various offices of ministers at the federal level were rewarding and continue to bear fruit through the relationships built during and after our visits. Lunch with Archbishop Ivan Jurkovič (Apostolic Nuncio to Canada) at his residence and our meeting at the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops office rounded out our trip.

We found the League is recognized and respected in so many places throughout Canada. It was not a surprise but an affirmation of the impact of our work when an organization such as Novalis approached us (the League) when they were honouring Catholic women who made a significant contribution to the Canadian Catholic world and asked us for information on one such member.

I was delighted and honoured to be able to represent the League at the World Union of Catholic Women's Organisations in Assisi, Italy, in May, along with six other Canadian members and three Ukrainian Catholic Women's League members.

On several occasions, I was made aware that information in the parish mailings sent to councils is not always getting to the individual members of the executive. These memos are a direct link from the national executive to the parish with vital information that needs to be shared. Even if a particular executive position is not filled, I encourage you to find a creative way to ensure all parish mailing information is made available to the entire executive and a summarized version is shared with your members.

To see our membership numbers at an all-time low has the potential of being very discouraging. Yet, hearing the many successes of recruiting new members is so joyful and encouraging that there is true hope that we will see a steady increase in the months and years ahead. Many councils have had 12, 15 and 20 new members join! How has your council grown? The work of the implementation committee and the many resources available to make members and, therefore, councils stronger is truly helping in that regard. The Unity Outreach initiative can only add to our success based on the comments I have heard during my visits across Canada. Members and executive councils are thankful for the opportunity to express their needs and to know a plan is in place to help wherever possible. That plan that is excitedly being worked on is to strike three task forces to help the board to better serve the provincial executives and, by extension, councils at other levels. Each provincial executive would be required to plan for its dioceses and each diocese for its parishes based on the reports they received. All of us need to be part of the *outreach* and do things that ensure *unity* at and of all levels.

Identifying time for education was always valuable. Here is some very basic League information I shared while reporting during my travels:

- We have 63,572 members, 333 life members, and 15 current honorary life members, and in a couple of days, I will be number 16!
- We have 33 dioceses with 1,097 parishes in the 11 provinces.

- We had 10 board committees and five *ad hoc* committees these past two years. The five *ad hoc* committees include life member, briefs and petitions, deepening relationships with Indigenous League members, convention/AMM guideline updates and website redesign.

Feeling the need to keep members aware of the places and events I was representing them at, I set a two-year goal of submitting monthly “President Outings” messages to be posted on the national website and all social media. From anniversaries to Christmas receptions, the National Council of Catholic Women conference, Ukrainian ribbon-making, to a group of us praying the rosary in a beautiful green space: all these events were shared with members.

Having taped a video message for Christmas Day 2022, I attempted to do a better job with my Easter message in 2023. In these ways and by all the visits in person and sometimes online, I continually strived to be visible to and engage with our members. When a unique request came in from an Ontario diocesan president for the national officers to tape a message of appreciation by naming each council and president in their message, which would be used at their diocesan convention, the officers embraced that request.

Over my term, I’ve been given many beautiful books that councils created in celebration of various milestones, including that of the League’s national 100th anniversary: these are wonderful testimonies to the love of the League and a desire to maintain that history for those who follow—I’ve enjoyed reading them all. There were also banquets, dinners, luncheons and breakfasts to celebrate many of those milestones bringing together not only members but friends and members of the parish community—again, a real privilege for me to attend and participate in.

My two years, 24 months, 104 weeks, 730 days as your national president have been a gift! Would I give up any part of that? Well, maybe a couple of those days. To experience what I have experienced would likely have similarities for all the previous national presidents. There would also be a smattering of differences because of the growth in the League, changes to the world and opportunities that arose. For every one of them, I am grateful. I am confident that with the friends I have made, I will never be concerned if I ever find myself in need in any part of Canada. I know there is a member I could reach out to, and without hesitation, they would be there for me.

We are all familiar with the disciples’ hearts burning within when Jesus revealed himself as the risen Christ. Having said yes to the opportunities we have been afforded through our membership in the League, we continue to have hearts burning within as we do the work of the Catholic Women’s League in service “For God and Canada.”

My life has been enriched by being a member, and especially by my time as your national president.

Thank you. †