



# Special Report

THE 4TH GLOBAL INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH NETWORK SYMPOSIUM: 10th -12th June 2025

THEME: “Consecrated Women in Africa Creating Global Impact Through Sustainable Development”

## **CARA: Illuminating the Church Through Research, Collaboration, and Faithful Foresight**

At the recent concluded 4<sup>th</sup> Global Research Network Symposium, Fr. Thomas Gaunt, SJ, Ph.D., Executive Director of the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA), reaffirmed CARA’s key role in strengthening the Catholic Church through data, dialogue, and discernment. Rooted at Georgetown University, CARA stands as an independent, non-profit research center that bridges academic excellence with pastoral service, providing evidence-based insights that inform Church leadership and inspire faith-filled action.

With over 60 active research projects annually, CARA has become a cornerstone in ecclesial research—not only in the United States but across the global Catholic community. Fr. Gaunt’s presentation painted a vivid picture of an institution where faith meets research, where numbers tell stories of vocation, and global collaboration fuels pastoral innovation.

Fr. Gaunt clarified ‘independence and integrity’ sets CARA apart. Although housed within Georgetown University, CARA operates under a separate board of directors, composed of bishops, religious, and lay professionals. This governance model protects its academic autonomy while ensuring its mission remains rooted in service to the Church. “CARA has a small team,” Fr. Gaunt remarked, “but we cover a lot.” That small but skilled team includes sociologists, political scientists, educators, and communication experts—many of whom work alongside visiting scholars from around the world.

CARA’s most influential work centers on its longitudinal studies of religious vocations. Every year, the center surveys those entering novitiates, professing vows, or preparing for ordination. These surveys rich in data on faith journeys, ministry experiences, and demographic

patterns help congregations and dioceses understand what draws people to religious life today. With two decades of trend data, CARA offers one of the most comprehensive views of evolving religious vocations available anywhere in the world.

Reflecting on the financial foresight that sustains some congregations today, he shared that in one study, CARA discovered that those with stable financial foundations shared a common history: “Thirty or forty years ago, there was always one sister, stubborn and unpopular, who insisted on saving for the future,” Fr. Gaunt recalled. “Today, they call her a saint.”

He emphasised the need for long-term planning and elder care issues at the heart of congregational survival and mission continuity. CARA’s work in this area combines data analysis with compassion, helping communities plan for the well-being of their elderly members without losing sight of their charisms and apostolic vitality.

Fr. Gaunt also highlighted a quiet crisis facing many religious institutes: the loss of historical archives. “When historians want to study education in America, not just Catholic education, they go to the sisters’ archives,” he said. “But many of these are at risk of being lost.”

These archives often containing letters, journals, and founding documents are not just historical artifacts but living testimonies of faith and service. Preserving them ensures that the contributions of religious women and men to education, healthcare, and social transformation remain visible for generations to come.

CARA’s portfolio is as diverse as the Church itself. From child protection audits in U.S. dioceses to studies on rural Hispanic parishes and Catholic

hospital chaplaincy, the center's research responds to emerging pastoral realities. Each project, large or small, strengthens the Church's capacity for accountability, inclusion, and informed ministry.

Fr. Gaunt's presentation ultimately revealed CARA as more than a research center, it is a bridge between scholarship and spirituality, between data and discernment.