



**MONTHLY MEMO**  
**August 2023**

I am devoting much of this *Monthly Memo* to the highlights of the report written by Linda Ferrington rsc, Mission Integration Manager of Emerging Futures, about her attendance at the Assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) in the United States this month. Linda's whole report and the papers from the Assembly can be found on the EFCL website's Resources page [www.emergingfuturescollaborative.org.au](http://www.emergingfuturescollaborative.org.au)

**LCWR ASSEMBLY REPORT: Drawn By Sacred Mystery- A Journey into Hope**

The Assembly of Leaders across women's religious institutes in the US met to discern and explore the challenges and opportunities for transformation that reflect the global reality of Religious Life. The language may differ slightly, but the challenges are similar in Australia. Exploration of new ways and approaches to engage in Canonical Governance, what are the current and future opportunities for communities to find collaborative initiatives and partnerships. LCWR calls on its members to engage all the creative dimensions of the human person to imagine and design new expressions of mission and continue to envision religious life in the future. While structures are essential, the underlying priority is caring for their members in life-giving ways. This is the mission of EFCL.

This assembly was planned and delivered to enable us to look at the current realities of religious life through a vast cosmic lens. Our imaginations were stretched and wrapped in awe and wonder at the unfolding mysteries of the universe. We were called to sit in silence and reverence this vast sacred mystery. How does our story, individually and institutively, intersect with what is evolving and emerging in the larger universe, and how might we draw hope from all that we are seeing, learning, and conversing about?

The keynote address by Brian Thomas Swimme encapsulated the Assembly invitation to be open, attentive, and responsive to the sacred mystery and how this engagement leads to a continuing hope in the unknown personally, communally, and globally for us and our institutes.

The combination of speakers, processes for individual reflection and table conversations, and my attendance at the breakout session Sacred Encounter provided excellent opportunities to exchange insights and affirm many of the dimensions included in the EFCL Journey. The final morning immersed us in the cosmic writings of Hildegard of Bingen, and her solid female leadership was emphasised in this presentation.

The context of the Assembly was to focus our whole selves on the presence of sacred mystery, which was celebrated through prayer and ritual woven throughout the assembly. The following speakers attuned our hearts and minds to the cosmos:

1. Brian Thomas Swimme
2. Barbara E. Reid, OP and Jung Eun Sophia Park, SNJM
3. LCWR presidential address by Rebecca Ann Gemma, OP

These papers and the recordings can be found on the LCWR website at [www.lcwr.org/calendar/lcwr-assembly-2023](http://www.lcwr.org/calendar/lcwr-assembly-2023)

## NETWORKING MEETINGS

Around the formal sessions of the Assembly, I organised to meet with the following:

### **Carol Zinn ssj: Executive Director Leaders Conference of Women Religious (LCWR)**

Carol is central to our relationship with LCWR, and her insights into the opportunities and challenges facing religious congregations throughout the US and from a global perspective are a source of great wisdom for EFCL. Carol has been invited to Australia in 2024 with dates yet to be confirmed.

### **Michelle Stachowiak cssf, Associate Director for Mission Collaboration for LCWR.**

Michelle is part of

the LCWR office staff and works with Religious Institutes partnering around collaborative initiatives.

### **Anne Munley ihm, Associate Director for Discerning Emergent Future**

Anne is part of the LCWR office staff and works with Religious Institutes to discern their future.

### **Mary Pellegrino csj, Vice President of Plante Moran**

Mary's role is centred around mission, charism, and formation. The Paschal Mystery is the centre of our journey as we discover how to be prophetic today, pointing to and witnessing the Reign of God. Mary is coming to Australia in 2024 at the invitation of the Dominican Sisters of Eastern Australia and will be available to be in conversation with EFCL.

### **Sharon Euart rsm, Executive Director Resource Center for Religious Institutes (RCRI)**

Sharon is a Mercy Sister who holds a doctorate in canon law and is the Executive Director Resource Center for Religious Institutes (RCRI). Brad Hannagan and I will be attending their Conference in late September in St Louis, and I have arranged a meeting with Sharon and her team with Brad and myself.

### **Alain Ambeault csv: Executive Director for the Canadian Religious Conference**

### **Brendalee Boisvert csm, CSM President, Canadian Religious Conference**

The Canadian Religious Conference is a network that brings together the leaders of 240 Catholic congregations of women and men religious in Canada. The CRC's mission is to encourage its members to live fully their vocation in following Christ and to support them in their prophetic witness to justice and peace in a Canadian context.

### **Pat Murray ibvm: The Executive Secretary for The International Union of Superiors General (UISG) and**

### **Mary John Kudiyirippil ssps, Assistant Executive Secretary, UISG**

Pat spoke of the silo mentality in Rome and encouraged EFCL to build relationships with the Dicastery and the English-speaking canon lawyers. There is an urgent need for the Conferences to arrive at an emerging governance framework that can be adapted to various circumstances.

### **Pat Cormack scsc: Wisconsin Religious Collaborative**

The Wisconsin Religious Collaborative of ten religious institutes exists to provide a sustainable membership organisation that promotes good stewardship by sharing resources and professional expertise in finance, management, pastoral care, governance, and other areas to sustain the mission.

As you can see, Linda had a really productive time representing Emerging Futures at the LCWR Assembly. The networking meetings are perhaps even more critical than the content of the Assembly, as in networking we keep in touch with our global partners on this journey into the future of religious life: we learn from each other and provide learnings for each other.

I encourage you to go to our website [www.emergingfuturescollaborative.org.au](http://www.emergingfuturescollaborative.org.au) and read Linda's whole report that is an attachment to this *Monthly Memo* stored in **News and Resources August 2023**. The papers and the DVDs of the LCWR Assembly may be accessed by anyone at [www.lcwr.org/calendar/lcwr-assembly-2023](http://www.lcwr.org/calendar/lcwr-assembly-2023)

## **National Zoom Event**

You know that we have a Zoom event coming up on **November 7, 11.30am-1.00pm, for anyone who is interested in participating**. I invite you to begin registering now for this event. You can register easily at Humanitix using the following link <https://events.humanitix.com/efcl-national-zoom-event> or you can send an email to [nitasha.prasad@efcl.org.au](mailto:nitasha.prasad@efcl.org.au) with *November* in the subject line and Nitasha will register you. We look forward to seeing many of you in November: we have an interesting Zoom planned!

Sharon Price rsm, Transition Manager

31 August 2023

## Report on LCWR Assembly 2023

### **Drawn By Sacred Mystery: A Journey into Hope**

The Assembly of Leaders across women's religious institutes in the US met to discern and explore the challenges and opportunities for transformation that reflect the global reality of Religious Life. The language may differ slightly, but the challenges are similar in Australia. Exploration of new ways and approaches to engage in Canonical Governance, what are the current and future opportunities for communities to find collaborative initiatives and partnerships. LCWR calls on its members to engage all the creative dimensions of the human person to imagine and design new expressions of mission and continue to envision religious life in the future. While structures are essential, the underlying priority is caring for their members in life-giving ways. This is the mission of EFCL.

This assembly was planned and delivered to enable us to look at the current realities of religious life through a vast cosmic lens. Our imaginations were stretched and wrapped in awe and wonder at the unfolding mysteries of the universe. We were called to sit and silence and reverence this vast sacred mystery. How does our story, individually and institutively, intersect with what is evolving and emerging in the larger universe, and how might we draw hope from all that we are seeing, learning, and conversing about?

The keynote address by Brian Thomas Swimme encapsulated the Assembly invitation to be open, attentive, and responsive to the sacred mystery and how this engagement leads to a continuing hope in the unknown personally, communally, and globally for us and our institutes.

The combination of speakers, processes for individual reflection and table conversations, and my attendance at the breakout session *Sacred Encounter* provided excellent opportunities to exchange insights and affirm many of the dimensions included in the EFCL Journey. The final morning immersed us in the cosmic writings of Hildegard of Bingen, and her solid female leadership was emphasised in this presentation.

The context of the Assembly was to focus our whole selves on the presence of sacred mystery, which was celebrated through prayer and ritual woven throughout the assembly. The following speakers attuned our hearts and minds to the cosmos:

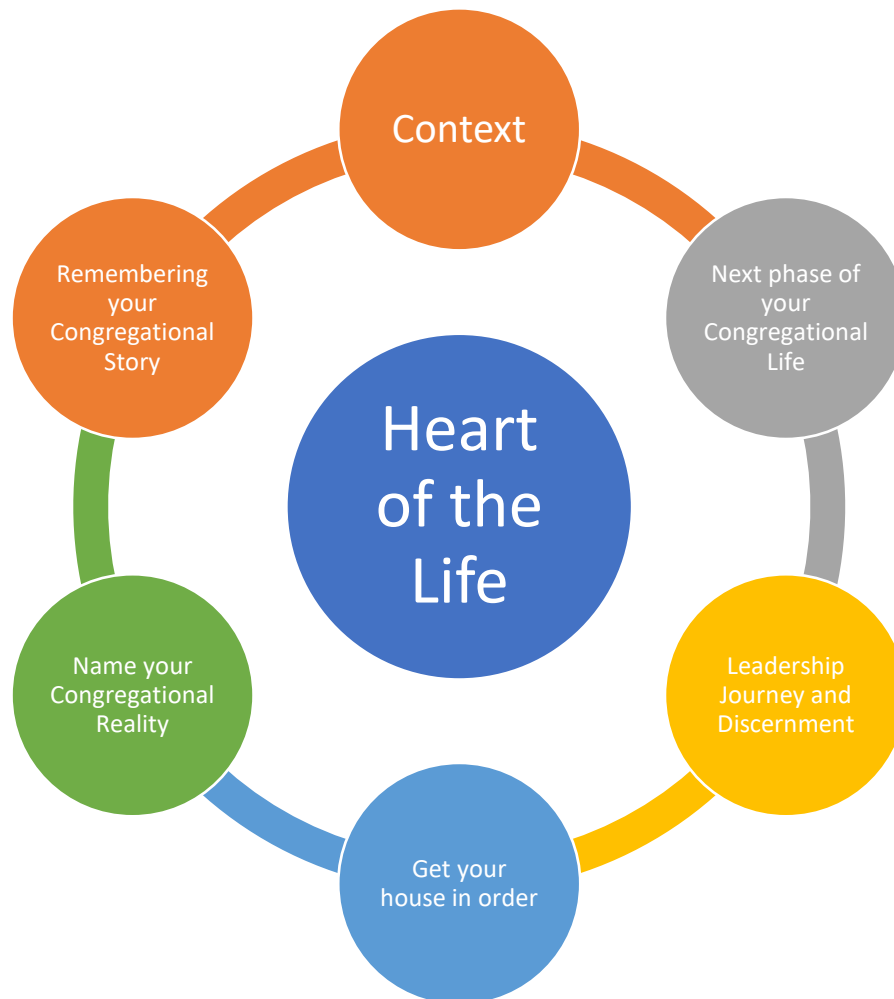
1. Brian Thomas Swimme
2. Barbara E. Reid, OP and Jung Eun Sophia Park, SNJM
3. LCWR presidential address by Rebecca Ann Gemma, OP

These papers are attached, and the recordings can be found on the LCWR website at [www.lcwr.org/calendar/lcwr-assembly-2023](http://www.lcwr.org/calendar/lcwr-assembly-2023)

### Breakout Session

This session reflected on three stages of the leadership journey in Religious Institutes as they address membership, property, and the future. There were clear parallels to the movements in Australia in establishing MPJPs, reflection on the care of aging members, property as a source of financial security, and how to express the essence of religious life, not identity through ministry. Mary Jo Nelson olvm spoke of the process undertaken by her community of moving to a Commissary. This involved the following steps, which needed to be completed more straightforwardly and were revisited as the experience deepened.

### The Transition Journey in Religious Life



The contributions fit into three stages:

1. Pre-MPJP, where the discernment is focused on what to do with our large ministries and how these are to be governed into the future. Real Estate issues regarding the huge Mother House, which combines aged care support, retired sisters, and active members.
2. Groups on the discernment journey regarding their ministries and properties have engaged various consultants to assist them in their planning.

3. This stage is where communities have discerned their coming to completion and are in the process of gaining a Commissary or having one.

The role of the Commissary described by the participants was a hands-on high level of engagement with the community and the retired sisters, unlike the EFCL model, where the role is hands-off oversight model. The attention to the Canonical requirement should have been mentioned.

Several religious people spoke of their need to redefine the role of the Commissary and create a role for another person. This would be the Community Coordinator role in the EFCL model.

## **NETWORKING MEETINGS**

Around the formal sessions of the Assembly, I organised to meet with the following:

### **Carol Zinn ssj: Executive Director Leaders Conference of Women Religious (LCWR)**

Carol is central to our relationship with LCWR, and her insights into the opportunities and challenges facing religious congregations throughout the US and from a global perspective are a source of great wisdom for EFCL. CRA has invited Carol to Australia; dates are yet to be confirmed for 2024.

Key points:

- The significance of the changing attitude of the Dicastery in Rome as reflected in the meeting undertaken in December 2022 and March 2023.
- Carol emphasised the importance of EFCL being in a good relationship with CRA. As it is at the Conference level of Religious Institutes that the Dicastery sees as its primary level of global engagement.
- Carol was optimistic that Dicastery is open to dialogue in the early stages of how Conferences respond to the reality that “existing juridical instruments are often inadequate. It is, therefore, necessary to identify new ones and paths that require all-around ecclesial accompaniment.”
- Carol believes that taking the Dicastery along the journey in outlining the discerned steps of Religious Institutes and EFCL is critical to developing a fruitful relationship.
- Carol encouraged EFCL to establish a relationship with CRA that would reflect unity to the Dicastery, enabling EFCL to be present at future meetings in Rome.

**Michelle Stachowiak cssf, Associate Director for Mission Collaboration for LCWR.** Michelle is part of the LCWR office staff and works with Religious Institutes partnering around collaborative initiatives.

Key points:

- Collaboration is spoken of in all contexts with Religious Institutes, yet the reality of how these occur is very different.
- Younger members of Religious Institutes see themselves as partners with various social and local partners of faith or no faith traditions as long as the services are provided. This is a dilemma within some groups.

- The younger members are not interested or attentive to the significant issues facing religious institutes regarding the governance of their large ministries or how they will be supported.
- Collaborative conversations are focused for the younger members on the essence of Religious Life, excluding conversations about institutional ministries.

**Anne Munley ihm, Associate Director for Discerning Emergent Future**

Anne is part of the LCWR office staff and works with Religious Institutes to discern their future.

Key points:

- Anne spoke about a significant project that LCWR has undertaken to interview all leadership teams who are their members. This is eventually become a publication and will be a vital piece of research regarding the future direction of Religious Life in the US.
- Anne was very interested in how the EFCL model has a hands-off role for the Canonical Delegate and how the community makes decisions without a leadership team.

**Mary Pellegrino csj, Vice President of Plante Moran**

Mary's role is centred around mission, charism, and formation. The Paschal Mystery is the centre of our journey as we discover how to be prophetic today, pointing to and witnessing the Reign of God.

Key points:

- Mary is coming to Australia in 2024 at the invitation of the Dominican Sisters of Eastern Australia and would be delighted to be in conversation with EFCL.
- The consultative role that Plante Moran plays with Religious Institutes varies from dealing with property and financial issues on the one hand and the direct facilitation with Religious Institute members that Mary provides as required. This can be in giving retreats, presentations or facilitating their discernment processes.
- Mary introduced me to her team, and I have arranged for us to meet at the RCRI Conference and link them with Brad Hannagan.

**Sharon Euart rsm, Executive Director Resource Center for Religious Institutes (RCRI)**

Sharon is a Mercy Sister who holds a doctorate in canon law and is the Executive Director Resource Center for Religious Institutes (RCRI). Brad Hannagan and I will be attending their Conference in late September in St Louis, and I have arranged a meeting with Sharon and her team with Brad and myself.

Key points:

- Sharon is keen to know if there are resources that RCRI could develop to assist EFCL and the broader global response to Religious Institutes coming to completion. She would be happy to discuss this further with Brad and I in September.
- Sharon spoke of the different roles of Commissaries, how Religious Institutes discern their way forward and the varying advice provided by Canon Lawyers. So far in the

United States, the relationships between most Commissaries and their Institute have a greater level of engagement than in the EFCL model.

- Governance must emphasise the evolving movement of religious life rather than the charism of one group.
- Sharon was interested in the Australian perspective regarding the meetings in Rome in December and March.

**Alain Ambeault csv: Executive Director for the Canadian Religious Conference**

**Brendalee Boisvert csm, CSM President, Canadian Religious Conference**

The Canadian Religious Conference is a network that brings together the leaders of 240 Catholic congregations of women and men religious in Canada. The CRC's mission is to encourage its members to live fully their vocation in following Christ and to support them in their prophetic witness to justice and peace in a Canadian context.

Alain and Brendalee are passionate about the mission of consecrated life in the world and the Church. They are committed to assisting Canadian congregational leaders deal with the current reality and significantly move forward to completion with a focus on living the essence of Religious Life without the governance of ministries.

Key points:

- Alain outlined the similar positions of Religious Institutes in Canada and believes there is much for Canada and EFCL to learn from each other.
- Alain spoke of the Canadian experience in Rome and the conference's relationship.
- Sr. Bonnie MacLellan, csj, who was present at both meetings in Rome, felt that the energy and openness of the December meeting were not as evident in March. Bonnie told me that she thought some of the men present from Conferences and the Dicastery had reflected on the March meeting and attempted to "put the genie back in the bottle".

**Pat Murray ibvm: The Executive Secretary for The International Union of Superiors General (UISG) and Mary John Kudiyirippil ssps, Assistant Executive Secretary, UISG**

Pat was keen to understand the absence of EFCL from the Rome gatherings and the initial conversation related to this discussion.

Mary John joined the conversation and was interested in what was evolving through EFCL. Mary John had spent time in Australia and was interested in the outcome of the transfer of the ministries of the Holy Spirit Sisters to SVHA.

Key points:

- Pat spoke of the silo mentality in Rome and encouraged EFCL to build relationships with the Dicastery and the English-speaking canon lawyers.
- There is an urgent need for the Conferences to arrive at an emerging governance framework that can be adapted to various circumstances.

- There are global challenges facing provinces with a diminishing leadership pool or people tired from long terms and re-elections. There is also a movement within women's religious institutes not to send their younger members to look after older provinces, contributing to the wind of change. This is reflected in the discernment of our international congregations, EFCL Service Partners.

### **Wisconsin Religious Collaborative**

The Wisconsin Religious Collaborative of ten religious institutes exists to provide a sustainable membership organisation that promotes good stewardship by sharing resources and professional expertise in finance, management, pastoral care, governance, and other areas to sustain the mission.

This was my second meeting with the group, and their most significant challenge was finding suitable staff within their available budgets.

### **Thresholds and Transformation**

Donna Fyffe, Hilary Musgrave and Monica Brown have combined to form Thresholds of Transformation. Hilary and Monica are well known through their ministry at Emmaus Publications. I met with these three women to understand their processes as they work with one of our Service Partners and will be part of a group of four facilitating their next chapter.

The image and exploration of crossing this threshold as a transforming time that leads to a communion of discernment and hope is used consistently in EFCL Transition Team meetings. This team could be a resource for some of our Service Partners in addressing their internal issues before embracing the EFCL process. Their process is based on trust, a sacred call to unite dreams and experiences and contribute meaningfully to the new world order prophetically articulated by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si*.

### **Conclusion**

As I conclude this report, I express my gratitude to the Board Members and Sharon for the opportunity to participate in the LCWR Assembly as I renewed relationships and created new networks.

In her Presidential Address: *Hope a Wide Lens for the Journey*, Rebecca Anne Gemma OP said:

*Recall the times when the fidelity and witness of our own sisters allowed us to move forward in hope when we had very little left to give. Communal relationships reach beyond our congregational walls and charisms. Encounters with all creation continue to broaden our hope and expand our vision.*

This is the hope that leads to the creation of EFCL and is the living ministry of EFCL in the service of religious institutes and its members.

Gratefully,

Linda Ferrington rsc  
Mission Integration Manager  
August 22, 2023



**LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS  
2023 ASSEMBLY – Dallas Texas**

Drawn by Sacred Mystery: A Journey into Hope  
Barbara E. Reid, O.P.

[Slide 1] Thank you for the invitation to reflect on being drawn by sacred mystery in our journey into hope. As a biblical scholar, I am drawn immediately to the narratives at the end of the Gospels that recount the passion, death, resurrection, ascension, glorification, giving of the Spirit, and sending of the disciples on mission as those narratives capture the very heart of sacred mystery.

I have often suggested that we read the Gospels backwards, since the whole narrative is told from the perspective of those who experienced the mystifying death of Jesus and its aftermath and told the story of his life in light of that paschal mystery.

Perhaps the most mysterious Gospel ending is that of Mark. But in order to grasp it, you must know all that came before. [Slide 2] A central question in the first half of Mark is “Who is this?” (e.g., Mark 2:7; 4:41; 6:2), his identity is shrouded in mystery. The question cannot be rightly answered if you’ve only seen Jesus as teacher, preacher, and healer, without the last part of the story. At the midpoint of the Gospel, Peter rightly identifies Jesus as Messiah (8:29), but he is far from grasping what that means. Like him, we continue to struggle with the mystery of suffering, dying, and rising.

At the heart of this mystery is self-surrender to love, the refusal to put ourselves and our concerns at the center of the universe, the recognition of our rightful place in the vast web of interrelationship with all created beings, and the willingness to let go even of life itself in loving and advocating for the most vulnerable among us.

The choice to surrender self to Love even to the point of death is not easy nor is the way always clear, although, like Jesus, at key moments in our life we are given grace-filled experiences that show us the next steps. [Slide 3] The Gospels recount that at his Baptism, Jesus knew with utter assurance that he was God’s beloved in whom God was so delighted. Jesus sees “the heavens torn apart,” just the way God manifested God’s self in Ezekiel 1:1 and he saw the Spirit descending on him like a dove, just as the Spirit hovered over the watery chaos at Creation in Genesis 1:1 (Mark 1:9-11). This experience of God’s presence and power served as a touchstone throughout his earthly sojourn.

At another key turning point, when Jesus was discerning whether to leave the Galilee and set his face to go to Jerusalem, he had another revelatory experience. [Slide 4] He had gone up a mountain to pray (Luke 9:28) and there God revealed the next steps of his journey. The appearance of his face changed as he entered deeply into the mystery of God’s all-consuming love. Like Moses, whose face glowed after his encounter with God on Mount Sinai, Jesus’s face irradiated his encounter with Holy Mystery, who affirmed that he was to accomplish a new

*exodos* in Jerusalem (Luke 9:31).<sup>1</sup> The word *exodos* in Greek is a compound of *hodos*, “the way,” and *ex-*, “out.” It has a double meaning. *Exodos* of course recalls “the way out” of slavery of the Israelites from Egypt. But it also means “the way out” of this life, i.e., death (see 2 Pet 1:15). Jesus understands that he is to go to Jerusalem [Slide 5] and he will undergo death there, and his death will be the new liberation for all God’s beloved from anything that enslaves them. [Slide 6] In this profound experience of Holy Mystery, Jesus is assured once again with signs of divine presence: an overshadowing cloud, two heavenly companions, Moses and Elijah, and the divine voice that reiterates God’s all-consuming love.

But when Jesus approaches the end of his journey, those visible, tangible signs of divine presence are absent. [Slide 7] In Gethsemane, even the support from Jesus’s followers vanishes as first they sleep and then they flee (Mark 14:32-42). As Jesus discerns whether the path he is on toward death is really God’s will, there is no cloud, no voice, no heavenly companions, seemingly no response from God. He clings to what he has experienced before: he knows he is beloved and that his death will not take place outside of God’s will for life to the full for all. But how will God bring forth liberated life through an excruciating death? That is yet shrouded in mystery.

[Slide 8] In Mark’s account, Jesus dies without getting an answer. Moreover, he feels utterly abandoned; the disciples have fled, save the faithful women who are keeping watch. His last words are, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (15:34). Jesus turns to Psalm 22, as he abandons himself fully to Holy Mystery without seeing the end that is unfolding. He dies before he can voice the verses of the Psalm that say: “Yet it was you who took me from the womb; you kept me safe on my mother’s breast. On you I was cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me you have been my God” (Ps 22:9-10).

[Slide 9] Mark notes that the Galilean women—Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome—who had been following Jesus and providing for him when he was in Galilee, had been watching while he was crucified and saw where he was buried (15:40-47). [Slide 10] Early in the morning on the first day of the week—one of those thin spaces, where Holy Mystery tends to be most manifest, the women go back to the tomb. [Slide 11] When they enter it, they see a young man dressed in white and they are greatly alarmed (*exethambēthēsan*, 16:5). He tells them not to be, that the crucified One has been raised, and he directs them, “Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” [Slide 12] The Gospel concludes: “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement (*tromos kai ekstasis*) had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (16:8).  
The end.

What kind of ending is that—with terror and failure—to a story that claims to be good news (Mark 1:1)? [Slide 13] Early scribes fixed it. They cobbled together pieces from other traditions and added some resurrection appearance stories.

[Slide 13a] The so-called “Shorter Ending” says that the women did tell Peter and others all that had been commanded them.

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<sup>1</sup> English translations such as NRSVCE that render the Greek *exodos* as “departure” mask the important nuances of the word. Better are translations such as NABRE and NRSVue that render it “exodus.”

[Slide 13b] Another scribe adds an appearance to Mary Magdalene (now labeled 16:9-11).

[Slide 13c] Another adds an appearance to two disciples that has echoes of Luke's Emmaus story (16:12-13).

Another one adds a commission to the disciples (16:13-18).

Yet another has Jesus ascend and wraps it up with the disciples going out and proclaiming the good news everywhere" (16:19-20).

There. That's better. Now we can close the book and we have a happily-ever-after ending.

But that's not the way Mark ended it. Let's look again, first at what the women saw then let's look again at their reaction.

[Slide 14] Six times Mark calls attention to what the women saw—in the crucifixion scene, the women are watching (*theōrouσαι*, 15:40), keeping faithful vigil at the cross all day from the time of Jesus's crucifixion at nine o'clock in the morning (15:25), through the darkness of noon (15:33), his death around three in the afternoon (15:33, 37), to the evening and his removal from the cross and entombment (15:42-47).<sup>2</sup> [Slide 15] When they come to the tomb after the sabbath, they look again and see (*anablepsasai theōrousin*, 16:4) the stone already rolled back; they see (*eidon*, 16:5) a young man who tells them to look (*ide*, 16:6) at where he had lain and then go to Galilee: "there you will see [*opsesthe*] him" (16:7).

When the women flee from the tomb and say nothing to anyone, on one level, they, like many persons who suffer post-traumatic stress, may not have been able to give voice right away to the horror they had witnessed. On a theological level, their silence is the proper response when coming face to face with Holy Mystery. [Slide 16] Their silence matches the silence at the beginning of creation before God speaks creation into being. Mark's Gospel opened with, "The beginning of the good news" (Mark 1:1); it now moves to the beginning of a new creation that that is emerging. No words can adequately express what is happening.

The other two words [Slide 17] that describe the women's reaction are *tromos* and *ekstasis*. *Tromos*, "trembling," is caused both by witnessing horrific death and by awe at the power of God, as when all the people trembled when God manifested Godself at Mount Sinai in Exod 20:18. The overwhelming beauty and majesty of God's power manifest in creation also causes trembling, as in the book of Job, when Elihu says "At this also my heart trembles and leaps out of its place" (Job 37:1). And if I understood correctly—here is where we'll need Brian Swimme to elaborate—an article in the New York Times last June says the whole cosmos is trembling, reverberating, with a hum of gravitational waves.<sup>3</sup>

The women's trembling is accompanied by *ekstasis*, ecstasy, that takes them outside themselves. Ecstasy is a hallmark of mystical experience. In cosmic terms, ecstasy allows us to experience a dissolution of the boundaries between oneself and Holy Mystery and all of God's beloved ones in the cosmos.

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<sup>2</sup> In 15:47, the verb *etheōroun*, "saw," is in the imperfect, emphasizing their continuing action as witnesses.

<sup>3</sup> Katrina Miller, "The Cosmos is Thrumming with Gravitational Waves, Astronomers Find," *New York Times*, June 28, 2023: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/28/science/astronomy-gravitational-waves-nanograv.html>.

This ending of Mark's Gospel points the way ahead for us: a way marked by contemplative silence and trembling in the face of Holy Mystery, by letting go, and by ecstatic movement into interconnectedness and transformation.

[Slide 18] The letting go and self-emptying that is asked of us is depicted well in the empty tomb story in the Gospel of John. In that version, Mary Magdalene, representing the whole of the community of beloved disciples, comes alone to the tomb. When she recognizes the Risen One, he tells her, "Do not continue to hold on to me" (20:17), that is, do not cling to the way they had known him as an earthly human being. He points her to the believing community: [Slide 19] "Go to my brothers and sisters"—it is there that he will be experienced as palpable.<sup>4</sup>

[Slide 20] In John's Gospel, Mary does go and does announce to the other disciples that she has seen the Lord and all that he told her. But the disciples do not yet know how to move beyond their fear. That evening, as John 20:19-23 tells it, Jesus came and stood in their midst. [Slide 21] He says, "Peace be with you," and shows them his wounds, and again says, "Peace be with you," verbally surrounding with peace all the woundedness they carry. And then he says, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." How can they be sent on mission in such a broken and fearful state?

Three key movements: [Slide 22] first, they need to open themselves to receive the Spirit that is empowering them. Jesus breathes on them, just as the Creator breathed the breath of life into the first living being (Gen 2:7). [Slide 23] Then, he urges them to forgive everyone and everything they can: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them." Finally, they have to hold on to everyone; don't allow any to be lost. Many translations of John 20:23 say: "if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." But that's not what the Greek says. There is no word "sins" in the text. The sense is "whomever you hold are held fast." It is much the same as when Jesus tells his disciples in John 6:39: "And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day." Or when Jesus is being arrested and he says, "I did not lose a single one of those whom you gave me" (18:9).<sup>5</sup>

What I think of when I hear this verse, is the address that [Slide 24] Sr. Thea Bowman gave to the US Bishops in 1989 not long before she died.<sup>6</sup> She finished her address by asking the bishops to sing with her and she intoned, "We shall overcome..." The bishops stood and began to sing with her, but she stopped them, and said, "No, brothers, not like that. You have to take the hand of the brother next to you as you sing." And so they did. As they began again, she stopped them once more and said, "No, not like that, brothers, you have to [Slide 25] cross your arms like we did in the Civil Rights marches." And she smiled and said, "that's right, brothers, you have to move closer together to do that. That's how we did it then so that when the dogs came, and the water canons came, and the police with their batons came, we wouldn't lose any one of the brothers or sisters in the struggle."

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<sup>4</sup> See further Sandra M. Schneiders, *Written That You May Believe. Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*. rev. ed. (New York: Crossroad, 2023), 219-220.

<sup>5</sup> See Sandra M. Schneiders, "The Resurrection (of the Body) in the Fourth Gospel. A Key to Johannine Spirituality," in *Life in Abundance. Studies of John's Gospel in Tribute to Raymond E. Brown*. Ed. John R. Donahue (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005), 168-198; esp. 186-187.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uOV0nQkjuoA>.

[Slide 26] As we let ourselves be drawn ever more deeply into Holy Mystery, the Gospels point the way for us to journey in resurrection hope. Resurrection is not a happy ending to a tragic death. Nor is it the fulfillment of all our expectations. It is a mysterious, baffling gift that draws into self-emptying, interconnectedness, and transformation. For two millenia, we spoke of how all humans would participate in resurrected life. [Slide 27] Today we speak of deep resurrection.<sup>7</sup> Recognizing our interconnectedness with Earth and all living things, we now envision the whole evolving world of life will be transfigured by the resurrecting action of the Creator Spirit. Our response to such a gift is awe, self-emptying, and holding on to each beloved one as we create ever wider circles of love in mission.

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<sup>7</sup> See e.g., Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 208-209; Gerhard Lohfink, *Is This All There Is? On Resurrection and Eternal Life*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018). Ilija Delio offers a quantum understanding of resurrection in *Making All Things New: Catholicity, Cosmology, Consciousness*, Catholicity in the Twenty-First Century (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 83-85.

**LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS  
2023 ASSEMBLY – Dallas Texas**

Cosmological Spirituality of Catholic Sisters  
Brian Thomas Swimme

The phrase "cosmological spirituality" reaches back into the earliest time of our tradition, when theologians spoke of the mystical body of Christ. This concept is rooted in the New Testament, in St. Paul's epistles, both to the Corinthians and the Romans, which use the image of the cosmic Christ -- a body formed by humans guided by the mind of Christ. In later centuries, Church Fathers, including St. Augustine, reaffirmed and amplified St. Paul's assertion that the community of believers is a spiritual extension of Christ's body.

The language and the ideas used by these theologians are more than a thousand years old but their insights have been extended into our contemporary world by the Jesuit paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Teilhard's word for the cosmic Christ is the "noosphere," a word he invented exactly one century ago, in 1923 Paris. He conceived the word in terms of Earth's development which began as molten rock, a geosphere, then constructed life which spread over the planet, a biosphere, and then brought forth human thinking which also spread over the planet, the noosphere.

Teilhard placed his thinking about the noosphere in our current evolutionary understanding of the universe.

The universe began with a burst of matter and energy fourteen billion years ago. This discovery of an expanding universe was made by Edwin Hubble in his observatory atop Mount Wilson. This was a strange and unexpected discovery. Even more intriguing, the galaxies the farthest away were rushing the fastest. The galaxies nearby were rushing away more slowly. When scientists articulated the conceptual history of the universe, they found that all of the galaxies came from the same place. All of the matter and energy in the universe burst forth at the same time, fourteen billion years ago.

It is worth noting that the major scientists of the twentieth century did not like this discovery. Even Albert Einstein, who was so key to the whole development of cosmology. In fact, for years he denied the validity of a cosmic birth. You see, physicists did not like the idea that the universe was changing. That it began in a simple state and complexified. Physicists preferred the notion that the universe was eternal and that any complex objects emerged by accident. The new theory, as articulated by George Lemaitre, argued for a *cosmogogenesis*, a universe that develops and complexifies through time. Einstein was arguing against the cosmic birth because he was hoping to maintain his faith in an unchanging cosmos. But then Einstein took a trip with Lemaitre to Mount Wilson. Einstein looked through the telescope at the galaxies and realized he was wrong. He accepted his defeat most graciously saying, "Lemaitre smashed my idea of an unchanging universe with a hammer blow."

Our discovery that the universe had a beginning is our discovery that the universe develops like an organism, which is what we mean with the word "cosmogogenesis." This development of the universe takes place through the power of relationship. Through our study of the history of

cosmogenesis, we have come to see that relationship is the most fundamental power in the universe.

For example. In the fireball at the beginning of time, protons enter relationship with electrons. Together they gave birth to the first hydrogen atoms. A hydrogen atom is a new entity in the universe, an entity millions of times larger than the particles that actualize it. With the emergence of these primal atoms, the universe could begin building the galaxies. This dynamic holds at every new level of development: throughout fourteen billion years, relationships determine the directions of the universe's unfolding.

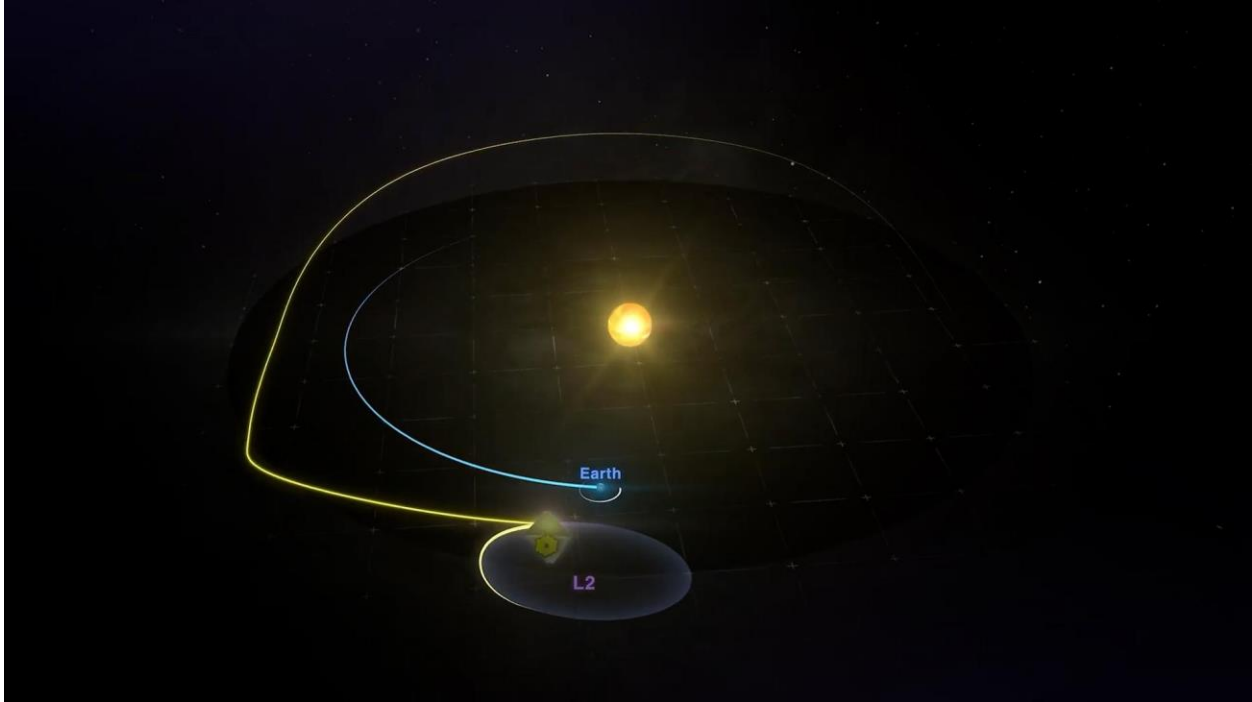
If we go to the life world, we see this power of relationship at a later stage of the universe's development. For three billion years, life on Earth consisted solely of unicellular organisms. But then, some 700 million years ago, these unicellular organisms entered into relationships with each other. And here is the great mystery: over time, these relationships led to oak trees and elephants.

By carefully reflecting on this fact, we take another step into cosmological spirituality. These unicellular organisms were smaller than the sharp end of a pin. They certainly could not have had any idea that they were entering a process that would eventuate in zebras. In their own way, these unicellular organisms were drawn by sacred mystery, the sacred mystery of cosmogenesis. Because they were bold enough to follow that path, they constructed millions upon millions of animal and plant species.

Now we come to relationships in the human world. One of the most surprising discoveries in 20th century biology is the near identity of chimpanzees and humans at the level of DNA. We are 98.6% the same genetically. Yet, such differences in our functioning! Over the last ten million years, Chimpanzees have not changed, have not moved from their habitat in equatorial Africa. While humans, over the past hundred thousand years, have invented symbolic language, learned the biology of their bodies, built ten thousand cities, flown to the moon, constructed libraries all around the planet, and created a network of communication that puts an individual human in potential contact with every other human around the planet.

Our DNA remains the same as the DNA of chimpanzees. Which means that these human accomplishments did not come from any change at a biological level. These actions came from the ability of humans to enter a new kind of relationship that brought forth the collective. It is this collective that St Paul called the cosmic Christ and Teilhard de Chardin the noosphere.

I want to give you a visual sense of this. Here in eight images is a story of the cosmic Christ in action, in the field of astronomy. Similar stories could be told in the fields of education, governance, social justice, and all initiatives involving the collective "we" of humanity. I focus on astronomy only because it's a field I know.



### 1. The L2 Stationary Point.

Let's begin with mathematics. When humans first emerged seven million years ago, they had no mathematics. All of it had to be created. As each generation of humans built upon the mathematics of the previous generations, we eventually arrived at the equations for gravity first articulated by Isaac Newton in the seventeenth century. Mathematicians began analyzing these equations. With each advance in understanding, another step in knowledge became part of the heredity of humanity. This points to the crucial difference of humanity when compared to other mammals. Humanity can enter into relationships with other humans who have died but who have bequeathed to us their gifts of understanding. One of these individuals is Joseph-Louis Lagrange who in the eighteenth century found a spot where gravitational forces in our solar system cancelled out. One of these spots was a million miles beyond Earth. Any object placed on that spot would not move with respect to the Sun and Earth. That spot, called L2, is where the James Webb Space Telescope was placed.





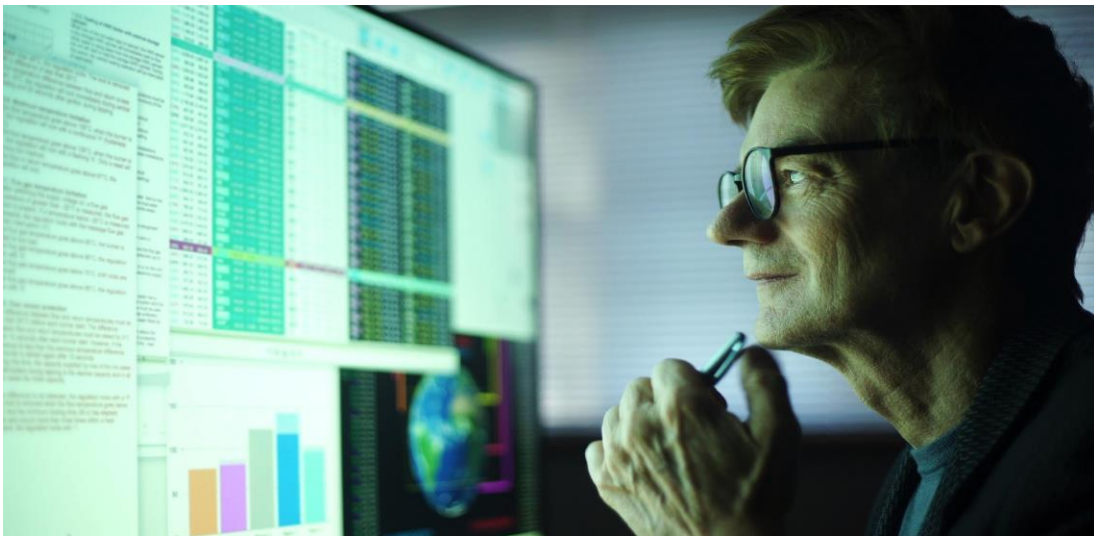
## 2. The construction of the James Webb Space Telescope.

Who built the James Webb Space Telescope? Well, certainly the hundreds of engineers who came from 14 different countries. Of course we need to also include the scientists who discovered the crucial mathematical equations. And then we have the teachers who taught the engineers and the scientists. We need to include the farmers who fed the engineers and scientist, just as we need to include the political leaders who maintained stability in the cities so that this development could take place. You see my point, I'm sure. It was this entire collective of billions of humans that created the JWST. That is the noosphere in action. All these humans worked together, united by a single aim, to know the nature of reality.



### 3. The human eye.

To get a feeling for the unified nature of the noosphere, we can compare it to a human body. The electrical signals originating in the brain position our eyes to focus on what we want to see.



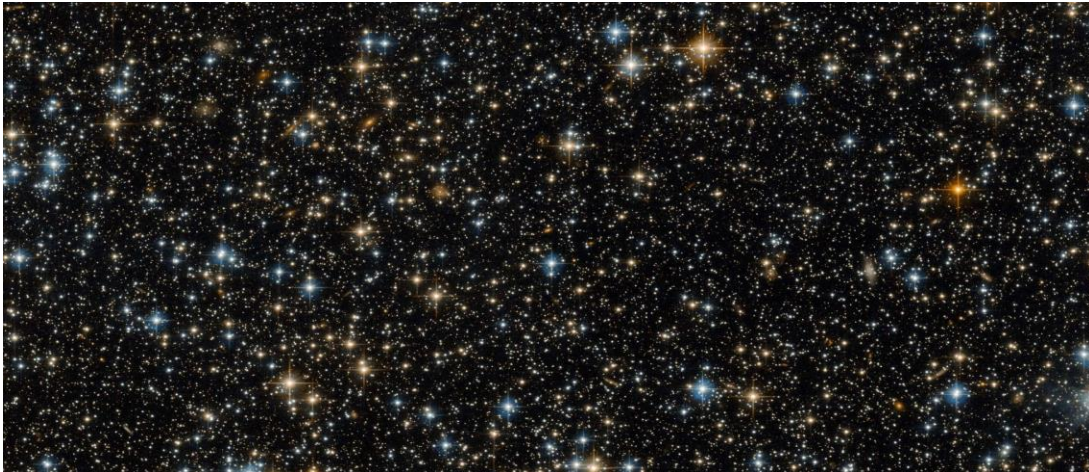
### 4. Technician.

In the same way, technicians at Nasa send out electronic messages to...



5. The Noosphere's eye.

...the Webb's electronic eyes, telling them where to focus. This entire system involving Earth, Sun, telescope, and Nasa technicians is the noosphere. Billions of people, the majority of them no longer among the living, can look at the Webb telescope and say, with accuracy, "We created you."



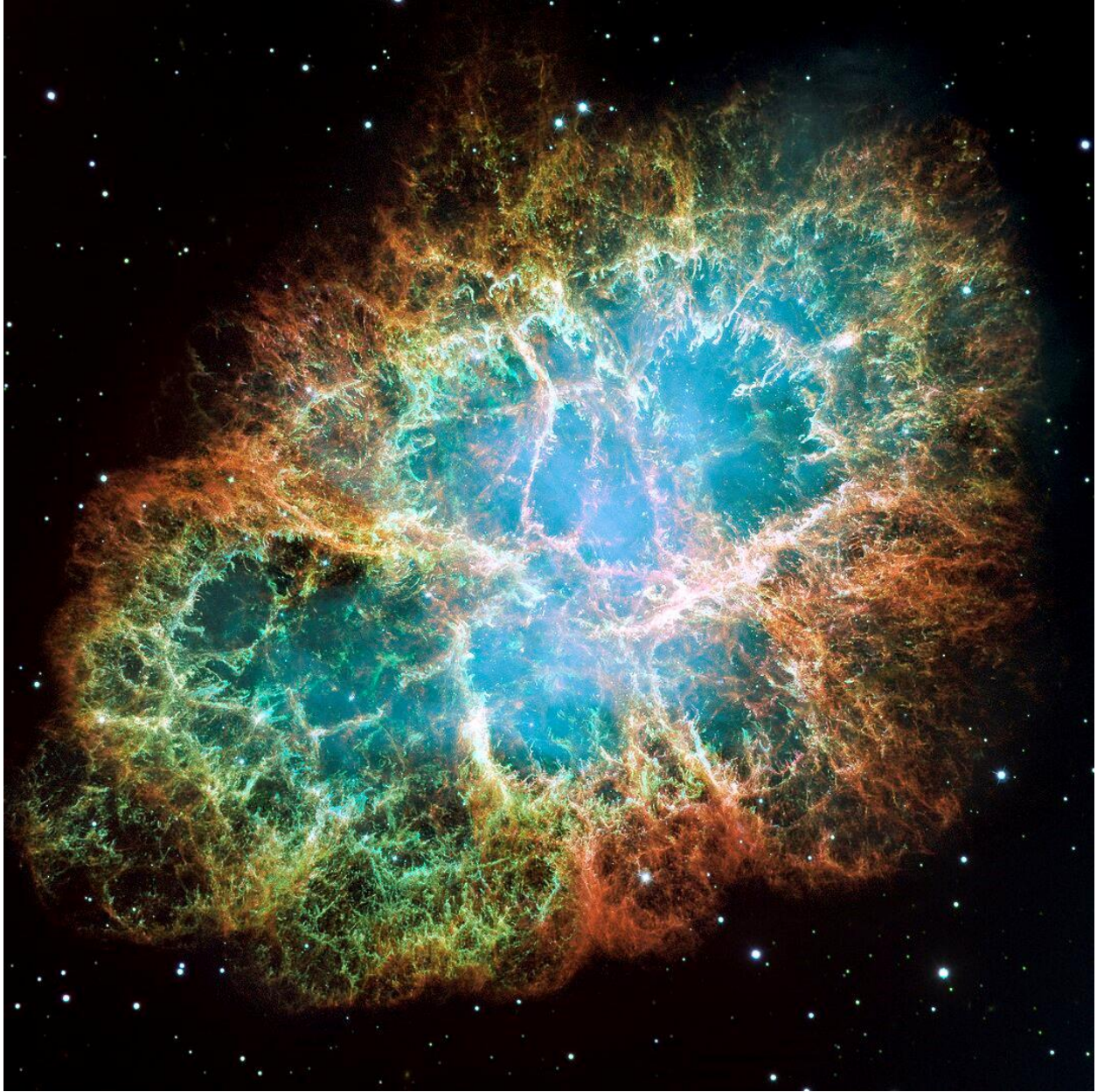
6. A million galaxies.

Let's reflect on what the cosmic Christ has discovered. In this image, each tiny dot of light is a galaxy. Each galaxy has 50 billion stars. Behold the glory of our creator. The mathematical cosmologist Stephen Hawking discovered that had the expansion of the universe been altered at the start by even a tiny amount, these galaxies would never form; life would never form; human mentality would never form. Even if the expansion rate were changed by one part in a trillion trillion trillion, the resulting universe would be barren. It would scatter into dust or collapse into a black hole. As we take this in, as we dwell in the elegant dynamics of the expanding galaxies, we are witnessing the divine care that suffuses the universe.



### 7. Pillars of Creation.

Compared to our galaxy, these Pillars of Creation are small, but compared to the human body, their size is almost unimaginable. The top pillar is seven lightyears in length. Which means our entire solar system would fit inside that pillar. In fact, a hundred thousand of our solar systems could be lined up in that pillar without touching one another. This is the magnificent universe in which we live in. New stars are being created in those pillars and throughout the universe. Older stars are exploding and dying. Though we are democrats and republicans, Americans and Chinese, buddhists and Christians, all such designations are secondary. The primary truth is that we are *all* cosmological beings, all brought forth by divine creativity. To recognize our commonality with all beings is to take another step into cosmological spirituality.



#### 8. Supernova Explosion.

After a certain span of time in which all the elements are created in the core of a large star, it explodes. Because of that explosion, we exist. Every element of our body was fashioned inside a star. The explosion of a star is a primary revelation of love at a cosmological level. A love that is a divine give away. A love that holds nothing back. A love exemplified by the history of Catholic sisters. A love that reveals the heart of divinity. The star dies in its final act of generosity, and out of that generosity, the future of the universe is born. Take this image to heart. It is the cosmological form of your love.

As this could be the last time I will address the LCWR, allow me to end with a personal note. For the last ten years I have been writing *Cosmogogenesis: An Unveiling of the Expanding Universe*, the story of my own entrance into cosmological spirituality, especially through my encounter

with the passionist monk, Thomas Berry. This process of reflecting on my journey showed with great clarity how my intellectual and spiritual life came from my work with the Catholic sisters.

Sister Isabelle Mary introduced me to the mathematical study of stars

Sisters Jane Blewett, Alexandra Kovats, and Toni Nash, showed me that the sensibilities of women had to become central for anyone who desired to become a cosmic storyteller

Sister Marya Grathwohl showed the power of the new cosmology for liberating prisoners.

Sister Linda Gibler connected the sacraments to cosmological creativity.

Sisters Gervaise Valpey and Miriam Therese McGillis taught the deep relationship of food and cosmology

Sisters Mary Southard and Blanche Gallagher created cosmological art in the tradition of St Hildegarde

Sister Jeanne Clark connected social justice with cosmology

Sister Anne Marie Dalton placed the new cosmology in Catholic theological tradition

Sister Anne Lonergan created a womb for deepening our understanding of the new cosmology.

Sister Ilia Delio made clear that spirituality and technology could be combined

Sister Dolores Rashford opened her college to the study of cosmological spirituality

Drawn by Sacred Mystery, we Catholics are entering a new world, a new cosmology, a new spirituality. And after all that you have given, we ask you for yet one more thing. That you tell the story of your spiritual journeys. You poured yourselves out, you gave away your lives. Because of the death of a star, Earth's life came forth. The Pachal mystery is woven into the very fabric of the universe. Because of you, my life and the lives of millions of others, came forth. It is the time to celebrate your journeys into the spirituality of a supernova's generosity, the spirituality of the cosmic Christ.

**LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS  
2023 ASSEMBLY – Dallas Texas**

Three Journeys to the Mystery  
Jung Eun Sophia Park, SNJM

Good morning sisters,

This morning, I want to start by playing the song *The Rose*, because this song tells the story of an encounter with the divine mystery. (The Rose the song) 3 min.

We are all on a journey within the divine mystery. I love it because every journey is an adventure in which we change and expand our narrow and skewed vision a little bit more every day. As we travel, and because we travel, we come face-to-face with the divine mystery through our own journey. Some are external, concrete and exterior, involving movement through life across landscapes and through space– and other journeys we take are interior, as we move across internal, or spiritual, landscapes, along which we experience engagements with the soul.

We use the term mystery often, and so it is important to ask, what does mystery mean? The fascinating term ‘mystery’ carries countless different meanings for different people, but at its core, the term mystery connotes something that is hidden, an incomprehensible truth that is at its essence, beyond human understanding.

More specifically to us, Mystery in the Christian context is used as an adjective to describe a condition or disposition of God. We can trace the modern use of the word Mystery to the Greek word, *mysterion*, which is used 27 times in the New Testament, and emphasizes the disposition of divine Truth that is available only through revelation. The divine revelation operates all around us, and is inherent in Nature, in our history, and in Jesus Christ. Our journeys are propelled by these engagements with the divine mystery, where we are always living in engagement with a part of the Truth, and yet it is big, the mystery is the entire journey itself that must be lived moment to moment in ourselves.

The divine mystery can be experienced in the dialectical tension between revealing and hidden. As journeywomen in search of Truth, we puzzle and continue on, fueled at times by a deep sense of curiosity, confusion, sometimes mistrust, and even failure. In these times, we might take heart to know it is here that we are most engaged with the divine mystery; a mystery that is always moving and eternally present.

As we are drawn along our journeys by the Sacred Mystery, we need to examine what it means. First, we are invited by the redemptive history which, as the phrase suggests, is unfolding and expanding every moment. Actually, this enterprise is unending, so there is no luxury to cling to the past glories. As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, “No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he is not the same man.” We live in an eternal present. We continually need to be equipped to sense and read the signs of the time, and be open to the new meanings this will bring.

I offer that there are three different types, yet interlaced journeys, we take with the Sacred Mystery: the Contemplative Journey, the Alterity Journey, and the Border-Crossing Journey.

## Contemplative Journey

The draw of the Sacred Mystery invites us to be contemplative, and to enter a mode that is beautifully described by Sr. Barbara as a form of study, as well as an essential component of Dominican spirituality. The Chinese character *kwan sang* stands for contemplation, and offers a similar insight into the consciousness of contemplation; it literally means, 'to be still and watch how a sprout buds'. There is consensus, then, that contemplation requires us to pay attention to both the internal and the external, or the interior and exterior world— and to simultaneously examine what is going on inside of our hearts and outside around us. We watch and study, as we move through time along our paths, and yet not every journey is the same.

One of the most beautiful definitions of contemplation, in my perspective, is to describe it as follows: a long loving gaze at the real by Walter Burghardt.<sup>1</sup>

First, let's think about the long gaze. It is really challenging for those of us who live in the quick paced, short attention spanned, digital world, where one's attention and focus shift, on average, every twenty seconds. We also live in a capitalist society, which forces us to be ever effective and always productive. The long gaze can lead us to meaningfully connect with others, and to increase our integrity and offer the world true gifts for the sign of the times. It then can be a prophetic action which stands against productivity and effectiveness, and for affection and relationality. Thus, the long gaze is naturally connected to a loving gaze.

What, then, is a loving gaze? A loving gaze channels the divine; and is most like the gaze we receive from God. As Sr Rebecca Ann Gemma stated, hope is a lens by which we see the world; it is a natural and a theological virtue. In this view we find that God's gaze favors the poor and the invisible, and this specifically stands out as a foundation for the kingdom of heaven. Like the leavening of bread, a loving gaze nurtures and feeds the world. It allows it to grow and expand without any noise and within a deep and beautiful silence.

Dr. Brian Swimme explained that the created universe expands and is deeply interconnected. I agree with him on this most important point, because the universe is created, sustained, and expanded by the enormous energy of Love. When we meet the gaze of God, which is love itself, we can only expect hope for new life and new humanity.

Next, we need to pay attention to and explore the word gaze. Is it just looking and observing something? And if not, what else does gaze imply? What are we women religious seeing today?

Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan lends a hand to understand what gaze might mean. He contends that we not so much seeing, as we are seen by the Other, with a capital O.<sup>2</sup> In this definition, the Other means all those aspects of the environment, particularly the language that describes us, are used to operate, control, and at times, manipulate people's minds. I personally understand the Other now as involving the environment of capitalistic enterprise and the glowing screens of high technology. So, while we see, we are actually caught in the frame or structure given by the Other. For example, in this high tech society, the poor and the less productive and effective often are overlooked, and become invisible. They easily fall

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<sup>1</sup> See Walter Burghardt, "Contemplation: A Long Loving Look at the Real," *Church* (Winter, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book X: Anxiety*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (Polity Press: Malden, MA, 2014), 152.



into isolation and the abyss of alienation. The gaze that involves capitalism and technological media bears the imprint of those who create and control it, and as such, is skewed by a Western, white consciousness that bears the dynamics of racism, sexism, and marginalization.

Now I'd like for us to contemplate together, what do we do in God's gaze as women in religious life? In this reflection, I will begin by emphasizing the importance of bearing witness to death in this journey drawn to the divine mystery.

Just a few months ago in May, the university where I taught, Holy Names University, closed. It was such a painful process. There was sadness, disappointment, and mistrust in me and others. The dying process in Western culture is not embraced; it is stale, uncreative, and filled with uneasy vacancies. In a similar way, the narrative of the current dominant culture negates weakness, aging, and death. Rather than turn toward these normal parts of life, like aging, people keep them secret and deny or hide them through make up, plastic surgery, and shame. Weakness is denied and fear of it transforms individuals on a quest to be posthuman; people dream of living forever.

In this environment, to be a willing witness to death can be a prophetic action against the dominant culture. Then, how can we as women religious witness the declining numbers in many of the U.S. religious communities, and fully participate in their transitions as we engage with aging and dying members, and the difficult processes of closing missions? It is possible that we may add strength to our process if we can learn to contemplate these endings through a long, loving gaze.

If we look at the reality of 21<sup>st</sup> century religious life, the dispersion and the decline in numbers, what would it look like? Michael Foucault said, "no discourse, no reality." If we do not articulate the process of dying honestly and explain what it involves in a contemplative way, we cannot bear witness to the resurrection because that it would not exist.

Today there is no doubt we are experiencing a massive shift in religious life; we also must realize that we are possibly witnessing to death of religious life as we know it. Perhaps, early Christian communities, too, needed to talk more about the passion narrative, as we need to talk about our own realities. For our communities to dream to live in the land of resurrection, we, too, need to openly develop a more creative and sincere passion narrative.

When we take stock of our current situation, we are encouraged to engage in the act of contemplating it to find out, Where I am standing now? And then, am I or the community standing in a place with the freedom to continue the journey toward the Mystery?

The Real is the whole entity of a person or an institute, including the imaginary and the symbolic realm. The imaginary involves the realm of dream and fantasy. When we dream, we gain the ability to sustain the sometimes harsh realities of life itself in the midst of moments of being lost. When we come to a certain stage in religious life, we cannot grasp only the imaginary realm, such as the idea that our institution will stand firm forever. This can also be a difficult moment, as when we lose the belief in the permanence of our domain, we may feel the ground breaking underneath our feet. Nevertheless, if a religious community stands too much in the imaginary domain, for example, the community will be very fragile.

The second domain of a person or an institution is the symbolic, which emphasizes the Logos. The Constitution, canon law, and any minute orders of housekeeping, including *faire de menages*, are all examples. This domain gives people a sense of security. But, if this domain supersedes other domains, the one could be overly legalistic, judgmental, and perhaps oppressive towards its members and organizations.

However, the symbolic is also limited: God is more than what we can speak; this is a way in which the mystery overlaps with the concept of the Real. As we contemplate the empty tomb, or the hole, we enter the domain of the Real. Here we meet the unknown God, and the world itself.

I offered a course of women and mysticism at the Holy Names University. In the class, I always asked students to make their own definition of mysticism. Every hands-on answer would be welcomed in this class, but they could copy others. One student offered a fascinating definition; it held that mysticism is a way of seeing myself and the world beyond my own frame, which is the perspective of God. I now like to use her definition of mysticism. The Real is the space where mysticism begins.

This leads us to the question: what is the essence of religious life?

We can remove elements and ask the question again, and see what remains. If there are no more new members, and no more property or institutions, rules, and laws, then what is religious life? If we have completed all of our current missions, then what remains of religious life? In this harsh question, we face the Real, and in contemplating the answers, we find the core value of religious life. A disciple met Jesus in Galilee and in front of the empty tomb, in the midst of the lack and the horror, in the middle of the Real. It is here that God says, "Return to Galilee." Today, in our contemplative journey as women religious, we can ask ourselves, "Where is the Galilee to which we must return as a part of our journey? Where can we face the Real, and experience the mystery of God in the midst of the dialectic brought about by His absence and presence?"

### **Alterity Journeys**

The second journey stands on the alterity, or a third way, in which we bear fruits in betweenness. This nature of alterity is expressed very well in one of my favorite stories, Alice's Adventure in the Wonderland. I would like to use this story as a metaphor for my journey. ( Alice the clip for 3 min).

Interestingly, Alice's journey begins with her observation or discovery that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket, or a watch to take out of it. The narrator says "*There was nothing so very remarkable in that; nor did Alice think it is so very much out of the way to hear the Rabbit say to itself.*" Alice felt curious when she saw the rabbit pop down a rabbit-hole, and so she followed it deeper and deeper, in pursuit of a glimpse and understanding. Her journey took her on an amazing, and unforeseeable journey.

Picture Alice, standing in front of the rabbit hole, through which lay an unknown mystery and an unknown future. Alice's curiosity draws her into the mysterious hole, and pulls her through it and onto a great journey. Like Alice, we religious are also invited on an adventure in this new world. For this we need holy curiosity. Of course, curiosity killed the cat!

Nevertheless, we need holy curiosity to look into the Real, embracing hope. And as the narrator of Alice in Wonderland says, "*in another moment, down went Alice after it, never considering how she would get out again.*" I believe this phrase symbolizes the beauty of apocalyptic hope, and how we might experience our own travels.

The world where Alice journeys is a place where she has the freedom to transform greatly, and in ways previously not possible. For example, in this new world she can be both big and small. I love this part of the story, and that the new world is so flexible and accommodating and full of possibilities. She is changeable in size!

On our own paths, we, too, might feel the need to take on different forms. At times we may feel very small, or quiet, and unassuming, while at other times we might feel big and powerful. Either way, we can open more doors through this flexibility.

Sometimes we are too tall to understand the cry of the poor; yet other times we are too small to understand the evolving Mystery. When Alice was a child, she cried and she experienced a transformation that led her on a great journey. We may need to cry to experience more of life, lest we become stuck in closed spaces, or mindsets. When we are more open and flexible, like Alice— we can engage with many different others, and situations once beyond our scope of understanding. Let us imagine what kinds of adventures are awaiting us!

The adventure of this expanding cosmos lies in the fact that there is neither a center nor a periphery. The truth of this reality is that it never stops evolving, revolving, moving and changing; nothing in our world is ever static. Therefore, it is an illusion that there is the center! We are all connected, and perceive this world from our own perspectives, but these are by nature skewed and fragmented, just a tiny angle and perspective on a vast entity. We should not be discouraged that our perceptions are limited by our perspectives. But we should be graceful about this so we can be truly free. A decentered world has no ability to control. We are invited and given the freedom to walk into a new territory of love and friendship.

We need to collaborate in this new space we are in, in this shared journey we are on, to create a whole. We need to learn about one another so that we may extend our previously limited understanding to include this new moment. We must listen and befriend, embrace the new, see the many new but previously hidden forms of similarity and difference, and know that we are all one when together.

A good metaphor for understanding this new way of operating religious communities might be to envision a web. In the community, the way to communicate is often a very unilateral and hierarchical model. If we imagine the religious institute as a circle or web, the way to communicate would be quite different. Many voices and perspectives can be taken into account. Many forms of communication, and the voices both small and large can be heard.

Imagine how religious life was in the beginning. It was in the desert, and the people were often destitute with an extreme lack of resources. Yet, in these apparent states of lack, it was a space of hospitality. Women and men labored there in silence and welcomed peasants who suffered from high taxes of the Roman empire. There was an alterity based on subversive power. In the desert, those touched by death, poverty, and lack of resources, were considered honorable guests.

Where is the desert in this global world? If we return to Galilee, do we need to be little or big? Alice's journey began with puzzlement that led her to travel down the hole, beyond

any place she had known, far beyond where she could see or even understand, in search of answers. This bears striking similarities to religious life. With curiosity, we run into the rabbit hole without worrying about backtracking as a way to get out of. Instead, we know we can only go forward on our journey, never back. We move confidently forward, into the darkness and we must find the bravery to face many questions: what is religious life today? What would alternative ways of living on this journey look like? Are we still committed to run into the hole, in pursuit of engaging the real?

We must also ask, do we have the freedom to quit the journey, if we so choose? Do we have the fortitude or voice to even ask this question? It would depend on the disposition of each community, and the ability to exist in a space in which all answers can temporarily be considered as possible. We must continually renew our resolve for the journey, our commitment to mission, our relationship to the real. Black holes, voids, possible transformations that become forbidden, these are the sign of a delimited journey, of stifled stagnation. God calls us to the desert in the spirit of freedom and into the spirit of freedom we travel, together and individually— one way and head first, like Alice. Her groundedness and curiosity, and ability to embrace new world and keep moving forward, can be an example, however playful, for how we might navigate and conceptualize this journey.

### **Border-Crossing Journey**

The border crossing journey has dual qualifications: it is both physical and spiritual. There are many borders to cross when entering a new land, and these involve risks yet the crossing always brings with it the power of transformation. In this journey, it is essential to meet the other, the stranger. Receiving and greeting this stranger is often a source of anxiety and discomfort. This person could be an exile, an undocumented immigrant, a new community member with a thick accents. No matter how much you feel uncomfortable, it is a necessary process to cross over or transcend your own frame or perspective. In dancing with the stranger, we are given great gifts. We can engage with our hidden self and experience expansion of our view. We greet the stranger in ourselves as well.

The space of border crossing is called a borderland where all foreign elements clash and out of the conflicts and tension, new life emerges. In conversing with others, we need to train our ears carefully. Before asking others to tame their tongues for my ears, I should ask myself to tame our ears. Confucius suggests a virtue of sixty years old as having tamed ears. Having tamed ears indicates you have an open and generous heart so that any word, speech do not bother you because you already learned to listen to others' hearts.

For the person or the community that inhabits a borderland, a new life emerges. The loving dynamic which embraces cultures, offers an open way to be together, and to experience life in this new moment, together, while fully learning from one another. Then, in this journey, they can find a companion to go through. In this companionship, we find ubuntu spirit.

### **Ubuntu spirit**

Ubuntu is a Nguni Bantu term meaning "humanity". It is sometimes translated as "I am because we are" (also "I am because you are"), or "humanity towards others." Ubuntu has its roots in humanist African philosophy, where the idea of community is one of the building blocks of society. Ubuntu is that nebulous concept of common humanity, oneness: humanity, you and me both.

Ubuntu is an old philosophy and way of life that has for many centuries sustained the African communities in Sub-Saharan Africa, in particular, and in Africa as a whole. The concept of Ubuntu is found in diverse forms in many societies throughout Africa. More specifically, in the Bantu languages of East, Central and Southern Africa, Ubuntu is a cultural world view that tries to capture the essence of what it means to be human.

Today, the spirituality of Ubuntu has been adapted in education, philosophy, business management, and it has more common elements: inter alia: the human experience of treating people with respect; humanness, which means that being human comprises values such as universal brotherhood and sharing, and treating and respecting others as human beings; a way of life contributing positively to sustaining the wellbeing of people, the community or society; and a non-racial philosophy applicable to all people as human beings.<sup>3</sup> In the shared humanity, one group or one person does not have to take all responsibility and the other group of person does not have to rely on other's decision making.

I learned this spirituality when I had a conversation with a young Congolese theologian when I visited Congo in March. The theologian emphasizes this spirituality as a new way of humanity, expunges the deep wounds of western exploitive colonization, which easily creates a deep sense of inferiority or frustrations, and recovers the interior heart.

This is a way to move forward to the new future, and can bring many new possibilities of collaboration and new sisterhood projects. Now thankfully, thanks to the development of technology and globalization, we feel more directly connected and we can realize that we can influence one another and collaborate in ways we have yet to imagine. Of course, we need to develop further infrastructure which connects more people around the globe.

### Companions/Guides

Finally I would like to reflect on a kind of leadership in this journey to cross the cultural boundary and create a Ubutu space. Almost every ancient religion imagined a journey from this world to the other world. The journey is tumultuous so that the soul needs guides.

In Korean folklore, there are four companions who guide the soul into the other world. They are called Kkok tu (꺾뚜), which means the frontier or the beginning. We find them in the ancient tomb, where they painted these figures around coffins. The first kkoktu is a navigator who is a path finder. Through the journey into the unknown, the kkoktu is to find a new route to go through. The second companion who accompanies the soul is the kkotu protector. The protector fights against the enemy or violent spirit which might hurt the soul. The second kkok tu is a warrior to defeat any danger and possible harm. The third kkok tu is a caregiver who takes care of the soul in terms of physical and mental health. When a soul experiences enormous anxiety or fear from uncertainty, the kkok tu consoles the soul and gives necessary care. Then the last, but not the least kkot tu is an entertainer. During the journey to the unknown, perhaps, one of the most important components is a sense of humor, which gives us a sense of fun and joy. We tend to be eager to find a companion who is serious, smart, wise, and brave. However, it is important not to forget a companion who can bring humor and laughter which helps us to feel light in this heavy duty journey.

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<sup>3</sup> T.I. Nzimawe, "Practising Ubuntu and Leadership for Good Governance: The South African and Continual Dialogue," **African Journal of Public Affairs** (2014: 30-41).

## Final remarks

We as women religious have been on the journey to deepen our understanding of the great mystery and to further expand our existence in the unfolding universe. We deal with being puzzled in this new landscape. We naturally are touched by the fear of the unknown and the anxiety of the uncontrollable, yet we can remain steadfast holding one another, and tending the Mystery with hope.

Our journey begins as we encounter the real, the hole, the empty tomb, and it creates the dialectic that draws us forward, reminding us of the changeable and exciting nature of our path. No one reaches a final destination. We do not travel backwards. The essential nature of our path, like Alice, involves not seeing the end, and the intentional embracing of new worlds, new friends, and new ways of being. We have discussed the many interior and exterior journeys that characterize our lives. The final destination is itself unknown, and yet our journey never ceases to expand, challenge, and engage us. It is why we are so fully alive; we live by crossing borders, embracing mystery, and creating community. This is how we survive.

The late Chicana feminist thinker Gloria Anzaldua emphasized the importance of being in the borderland. It implies two sacred spaces. First, our origin place, where we first departed on our journey, or the spot Alice first encountered a rabbit hole, or the moment a disciple discovered an empty tomb. And then it anchors us where we are now, somewhere on a path, walking along with a mission, in search of a destination where we find comfort and happiness. There, here in the borderland, is the space where we can most enjoy the journey of religious life itself. We can experience our path, our communities, and fellow travelers, without worrying about the final destination, and like Alice in Wonderland, who never worries about the way to get out of it. We can make the most of the journey and encounter the Mystery that unites us.

**LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS  
2023 ASSEMBLY – Dallas Texas**

*Hope: A Wide Lens for the Journey  
LCWR Presidential Address  
Rebecca Ann Gemma, OP*

“All I really need to know I learned in kindergarten!” declared Robert Fulghum in his famous poem.<sup>1</sup> I, Rebecca Ann Gemma, personally declare, “All I really need to know I learned sitting wedged, hip to hip, thigh to thigh, between my parents in the front seat of a 1961 American Rambler Country Station Wagon.” You see, I am number seven in the sibling line-up. The first born, second born, and third born were in the bench seat behind my parents and me. Numbers four, five, and six sat snuggly in what we called the “way-back.” Seat assignments were not to be messed with!

For many years, my view as we traveled those long California highways was only of the chrome dashboard in front of me. Fidgeting, listening, imagining, and dreaming helped me through many journeys. In time, I sat tall enough to look out the windows and a world as vast as the universe opened before me. What a revelation to discover all that I had been missing. The questions I pondered, nestled securely between my parents, are not dissimilar from those I still ask today:

What shall I do? How should I be? How do I live? Aren’t those some of the same questions we grapple with today as leaders of religious institutes in this time of challenge and opportunity? As we look out the windows of today’s Ramblers, the pace alone can be overwhelming. Negotiating the curves and road construction detours along the way requires the skill of a professional race-car driver. Sometimes we have companions with us, other times we are driving alone. Sometimes the road is smooth while other times loaded with potholes. In the past we seemed to know our way. Lately, our GPS devices can’t keep up with the rapid re-routing and dead ends. So, what traveler’s prayer do you pray as you set out into the world each day? I suggest borrowing four words from a popular country song as our mantra: “Jesus, take the wheel!”<sup>2</sup>

**Drawn by Sacred Mystery: A Journey into Hope**

We have just listened to Brian Swimme speak about the enormity of the universe; the connection we have with every element that makes up this dynamic reality; and the hope that lies within and before us as we try to wrap our minds and hearts into a future of extraordinary possibility. We are being called not only to marvel at the universe’s grandeur, but to integrate science and technological innovations into our Christian faith, into our lives as vowed religious. “*What existed from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we observed and touched with our own hands—this is the Word of life!*” (1 John 1:1)<sup>3</sup> Sacred Mystery gathers all creation together in love and moves it outward to love. Close your eyes for a moment; picture yourself in your mind’s eye in the midst of this universe. Each of us is a speck in the expanse of limitlessness. Imagine, imagine possibilities on this journey into hope, trusting

<sup>1</sup>Fulghum, Robert. © 1986, 1988, 2003, New York: Ballantine Books; 25th Anniversary edition

<sup>2</sup>"Jesus, Take the Wheel" is a song written by Brett James, Hillary Lindsey and Gordie Sampson, and recorded by American country music artist Carrie Underwood

<sup>3</sup> New American Bible Revised Edition. © 1987 Catholic World Press/World Bible Publishers

the Spirit of Jesus is truly at the wheel.

Today I invite you to explore hope as both a natural and theological virtue. More specifically, I invite you to use hope as a reflective lens through which we engage religious life now and into the emerging future. Sit with me thigh to thigh, heart to heart, held by the Spirit of Jesus as we look beyond the dashboard of our past through the windshield, this wide lens of hope, to the panoramic view before us. Let's remember though, that like our windshields, the view from the lens of hope can shift according to our circumstances. Sometimes the view is clear and allows full visibility; sometimes the view gets clouded by obstacles; and sometimes the view is so cluttered that we have to find new ways of seeing ahead.

### **A Lens from Which to See Clearly: Hope as a Natural Virtue**

Charles Richard Snyder, an American psychologist, specialized in positive psychology. **Natural hope** according to Snyder is the ability to walk chosen paths leading to a desired destination. Focused thoughts, goals, strategies, motivation, and self-confidence allow individuals or groups to achieve their desired success. Snyder's concept of "Pathways Thinking" encourages persons to generate multiple pathways to lead from where we are now to our desired future. Differing pathways give us options for perusal, choice, and more flexible decision-making.<sup>4</sup>

Undergirding this thinking about pathways is Snyder's notion of natural hope which encourages an overlay of "Agency Thinking" which addresses the levels of intention, confidence and the human ability to follow those pathways to the future desired. Positive motivation is fundamental to ongoing success. Goals that express the inherent value of who we say we are, even if difficult to achieve, play an essential role in keeping us moving. Barriers are considered challenges, not roadblocks.<sup>5</sup>

"Pathways Thinking" asks questions such as "What is going on?" and 'Where do we want to go?' and 'What is stopping us?' "Agency Thinking" explores the questions: "Which strengths can we use to achieve our goals?', 'Which aspects of our current situation work to our advantage?', or 'When were we successful in similar situations in the past and why?'"<sup>6</sup>

According to Snyder, for a group to move ahead with hope, it needs two capacities. The first: a will to shape the future. Or said in another way, "Where there's a will, there's a way." Second: an ability to see ways to shape its future. "Where there's a way, there's a will."<sup>7</sup>

Many of us have utilized models to assist us in planning congregational conversations. We have contracted with professional organizations to help us strategize how to down-size or right-size our properties. We have joined others in varying age cohorts and intergenerational groupings so as to imagine where we will be in 2035. How much more life-giving and fruitful might our imagining be if done with a reflective lens sharpened by a conscious and intentional awareness of natural hope?

<sup>4</sup> Snyder, Charles Richard. Psychology of Hope: You Can Get There from Here. © 2003 Free Press

<sup>5</sup> Lopez, Shane J., Pedrotti, Jennifer Teramoto and Snyder, Charles Richard. Positive Psychology: The Scientific and Practical Explorations of Human Strengths. © 2014, SAGE Publications, Inc; 3rd Edition

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid



Such hope, more than mere optimism, says Snyder, is a trait of excellence that may be moral as well as intellectual. The cultivation and refinement of it, developed over a lifetime, builds the moral fiber of a society. By continually practicing such hope, even when difficult, it becomes a habitual disposition and is transmittable to others. Human virtue, akin to Snyder's focus on hope, provides a lens less encumbered with unexpected obstacles, encourages creativity and collaboration, remains self-motivated and most often is confident in gaining the intended outcome. The lens of hope as a natural virtue is one to keep polished and ready. Yet alone, it is not enough.<sup>8</sup>

### **A Lens to See through the Haze and Opaque Views: Hope as a Theological Virtue**

Back to the front seat of the Rambler . . . Join me in imaging looking through the windshield as rain pelts the glass and we confidently turn on the wipers. We catch a glimpse of what lies ahead between each swish. We cautiously proceed hoping that a heavier storm doesn't totally block our view. And then the downpour comes. Our view becomes obscured; we lose clarity; and soon nothing familiar remains before us. When heavy storms come into our lives, we need a hope that is stronger than rationality, strategy, and upright morals. We need Christian hope, a theological virtue coming from God and leading us back to God. We receive this gift in Baptism as we trust that, through the Spirit, Jesus will always remain with us, truly present to us on this pilgrim journey. Such trust is not mere exercise of optimism. The theological virtue of hope partners with faith in responding to the human desire for goodness, peace, love and joy which God has placed in our hearts. We hear in Romans 5:5, "*hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us*"<sup>9</sup> We do not rely on our own strength, but on the very presence of Christ's Spirit at work in us. Lifted up by this hope we resist selfishness by focusing our energy outward.

Paul J. Wadell, Professor Emeritus of Theology and Religious Studies at St. Norbert College, speaks of theological hope as being the forgotten virtue of our time. He states, "Although we live in an era of considerable technological and scientific achievements, it may also be an age of diminished hope or, perhaps more accurately, misdirected hope, because it is tempting to replace the theological virtue of hope with flimsy substitutes that cannot possibly give us what our souls ultimately need. The problem is not that we hope for too much, but that we have learned to settle for so little. We have caused the horizons of hope to shrink. We have lost sight of hope's transcendent dimension because we have forgotten the incomparable promise to which hope always beckons."<sup>10</sup> Might we ask ourselves: Have our horizons of hope shrunk? Have we learned to settle for so little?

### **Living Christian Hope as Consecrated Religious**

Religious life affords us numerous opportunities to be conscious of and live in Christian hope. Though a gift from God, and not a product of our own making, hope must be cultivated, fostered and practiced, or it will fade or possibly be destroyed. How can we strengthen this hope

<sup>8</sup> Snyder, Charles Richard. Psychology of Hope

<sup>9</sup> New American Bible Revised Edition

<sup>10</sup> Wadell, Paul J. "Hope the Forgotten Virtue of Our Time". America Magazine. November 21, 2016. See <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2016/11/07/hope-forgotten-virtue-our-time>

that God has entrusted to us? How can we witness to and share this grace in a world that has become resistant to hope's existence, yet constantly hungers for it? Let us look at three familiar elements found in religious life that help us sharpen the focus of our reflective lens on hope as we navigate this journey.

### **Hope Through Community**

In his *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas Aquinas observed that there are far more reasons to be hopeful "when we have friends to rely on"(II-II, 17, 8). Wadell commented on this, saying, "If the object of our hopes can extend no further than what we might be able to secure for ourselves, then our hopes will necessarily be rather cautious and limited. But if there are people who not only love us and want what is best for us, but will also help us achieve it, then our hopes can be much more daring and expansive. We do not hope alone, we hope together. Hope requires companions, people who want our good, identify with our desires, and who help us along our way."<sup>11</sup>

Think of how LCWR has brought its members together over the years to share stories, grieve losses, celebrate diversity, engage fears, recognize our own contribution to the sin of racism, work to change injustices in society and the church, and to dream together how future generations will follow Christ's call in this form of consecrated life. Recall the times when the fidelity and witness of our own sisters allowed us to move forward in hope when we had very little left to give.

Communal relationships reach beyond our congregational walls and charisms. Encounters with all creation continue to broaden our hope and expand our vision. We realize a greater understanding of Sacred Mystery, the universe, human relationships, our vocations, our church, and ourselves than what we know and experience in this time and place. Community moves us beyond individual silos of awareness, interest, and discovery to seek God's reign in our midst.

### **Hope Through Prayer**

In a recent online article from Crux Media, Father Jeffrey Kirby writes, "Drawing from the spiritual tradition, prayer is understood as the dynamic interaction of God thirsting for us and we, in turn, thirsting for [God]. It is about living in a vital relationship with the living God, both in covenant and a communion."<sup>12</sup> Jesus, the Christ, who called us friends, remains faithful to this covenant, even when at times we are not. Prayer provides a means for us to contemplate this relationship and our human response to it. Prayer is both an avenue to and a reflective lens to hope.

How do we understand and live a life of prayer today? Do we recognize it as a lifeline that connects us to God and all that is visible and invisible? How often do we stop and marvel that at all times and in all places throughout the world, someone is speaking in the name of all creation: "O God, come to our assistance! O Lord, make haste to help us!" (Ps 69/70 v. 2).<sup>13</sup> Do

<sup>11</sup> Wadell, Paul J. "Hope the Forgotten Virtue of Our Time"

<sup>12</sup> Kirby, Jeffrey F. "The majestic heights of Christian prayer begin in humility". Crux Catholic Media. May 14, 2023

<sup>13</sup> New American Bible Revised Edition

we truly believe that selfless prayers of gratitude, lament, supplication and praise not only unify us as a global community, but can actually make a tangible, concrete, real-life difference?

As leaders in congregations can we, do we, invite all our sisters to reflect and engage in the conviction that being a minister of prayer is more than a title given to those no longer in active ministry. All religious women are commissioned to this urgently needed service, for being a minister of prayer has untold depth and is *de facto* a form of service, a commitment to Jesus' mission. Prayer can stop wars and overcome evil. Prayer is an act of hope that *Love* is alive and at work in the universe. Prayer is transformative as it calls us to recognize **hope** active through the Spirit. I was given witness to this many years ago.

Sr. Nancy, who has now taken her place in the communion of saints, had a large map of the world in her infirmary bedroom. Each day, she would ask the Spirit to send her prayer to those persons and places who were most in need of love, peace, care and safety. When I would visit Sister, she would often point to her map while adapting the words from Ephesians, 3:20. She would say something similar to, "God can do infinitely more than we can do or imagine. It is God's mighty power that gets us all out of bed each morning. Imagine what God does in this place." Hope was real because Sr. Nancy knew that the Spirit of Christ was alive and at work in every nook and cranny in the universe. Is that not the conviction in which we live our lives and wish to share with those who come after us?

### **Hope through On-Going Learning and Transformation**

As a Dominican, I embrace study as one of the four pillars that shapes our charism. It is at the heart of initial and ongoing formation programs in all our congregations. Study, dialogue and reflection are fundamental practices in living our consecration with integrity and authenticity. Siloed learning which fails to integrate and attend to relationships can leave us irrelevant to those whom God calls us to serve. Being uninformed or misinformed about humanity, the environment, politics, cultures, racism, justice issues, or church may leave us unable to meet the needs of the world on this common journey of hope and indisposed to the personal transformation to which we are called.

In 2017 Pope Francis gave a TED Talk, entitled, "Why the Only Future Worth Building Includes Everyone." Pope Francis sees an interconnectedness between all forms of intellectual pursuits and the enterprise of living the Gospel of compassion and care for all creation. "Many of us, nowadays, seem to believe that a happy and hope-filled future is something impossible to achieve. While such concerns must be taken very seriously, they are not invincible. They can be overcome when we don't lock our door to the outside world. Even science... points to an understanding of reality as a place where every element connects and interacts with everything else... How wonderful would it be if the growth of scientific and technological innovation would come along with more equality and social inclusion. How wonderful would it be, while we discover faraway planets, to rediscover the needs of the brothers and sisters orbiting around us."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis, "Why the only future worth building includes everyone" | TEDTalks 2017. See [https://www.ted.com/talks/his\\_holiness\\_pope\\_francois\\_why\\_the\\_only\\_future\\_worth\\_building\\_includes\\_everyone/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/his_holiness_pope_francois_why_the_only_future_worth_building_includes_everyone/transcript?language=en)

Clearly, educating ourselves in and for our ministries is a high priority in all our congregations. Seeking to respond to the signs of our times through our vowed life is a life-long pursuit and a sacred responsibility of any vowed religious. Central to the Synod on Synodality is understanding the current realities and needs of God's people and Earth. On-going learning is essential for transformation and transformation is fuel for hope.

No doubt many of us have hosted or engaged in Synod listening sessions, read the various documents coming from worldwide gatherings of parishes and other church-related groups, as well as from conferences of bishops in both the local and continental phases of the Synod. What insights are we gaining? How is the diversity of context, culture, race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, spirituality and religious practice opening our minds and hearts to our present global reality? Do the words participation, mission, and communion have deeper meaning in our lives and instill in us a desire to be synodal in all our circles of encounter? Do they call us forth to engage and share our Christian lens of hope? Some say nothing will change within the institutional church. As women of the church, as institutes within the church, and as a Conference in dialogue with other leadership in the church, we must choose to be on this pathway of grace, emboldened by hope.

Insights gained in the Synodal process are the fodder for our engagement in contemplative dialogue with a wide array of people. Articulating what we know, experience, feel and dream; listening to others' insights, most especially those forced to the periphery; and pausing to find the common good, as prodded by the Spirit, move us from self-interest and competition to interdependency and creation-focused living. It provides us a platform to discern the movement of the Spirit and strengthen our focus on mission promoting action. More importantly, it stirs within us the hope to be transformed more fully into the body of Christ.

In his address to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops this past June, Archbishop Christophe Pierre spoke profoundly of integrating the transformational process of becoming a synodal church, a listening church, with living the Eucharist as mission. He states, "...because it is the real presence of Christ, it is a dynamic Sacrament, imbuing everything we do with the character of Christ's outgoing love for his people. It is a Sacrament for mission. A Eucharistic revival, therefore, is a call to let the entirety of our lives be an expression of the Lord's presence among us: a living-out of the union that exists between our humanity, which Christ has taken to himself, and the divinity into which he leads us."<sup>15</sup> How might we embrace these opportunities of grace mindful of the words from Isaiah 43:19, "*Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*"<sup>16</sup>

We have looked at prayer, community, on-going learning and transformation as elements found in religious life that help us navigate our journey into hope. Now we turn to obstacles we may encounter on this journey.

<sup>15</sup> Address of His Excellency Archbishop Christophe Pierre, Apostolic Nuncio to the United States of America, to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Plenary Assembly. Orlando, FL. June 15, 2023

<sup>16</sup> New American Bible Revised Edition

## Obstacles to Hope

Sacred Mystery draws us forward into a journey of hope but does not coerce our participation. In each moment of our lives, we are given the freedom to accept or reject God's generosity. What are some of the more common obstacles that distance us from God's mission and vision for religious life today as we meet the changing and complex needs of the Earth and her creatures? What obstacles diminish hope? Let's look at three.

### Fatigue

After a tumultuous three years of the COVID-19 pandemic, many have abandoned the primarily online interactions. We have rediscovered the value of meeting over a cup of coffee and enjoying the small talk that accompanies the encounter. We have opened our convents, our homes, our engagements, and our institutions. Have we really opened our hearts to understanding how this phenomenon has affected us individually, as congregations, as social beings? Social fatigue, and for some, physical fatigue, did not pass by the doorposts of our convents, our places of ministry, or our inner lives. Isolation, death and the subsequent grief marked our hearts in untold ways. Depletion of liveliness, numbing behaviors, negative or cynical outlooks on life, and the lack of creative energy remain byproducts of this unprecedented global crisis. It is incumbent on us, as leaders in communities of faith, to address the remnants that keep us from living our vocations grounded in hope and connection to ourselves and others. Rituals of meaning, playful engagements, one-on-one interactions, and the blessing of touch, may well be needed more today than when masks covered our smiles and isolation was a hallmark of the common good.

### Forgetfulness

There is a story of a young couple who watched their four-year-old son wander into the nursery where their newborn lay sleeping. Seeing him move close to the infant's ear, the eavesdropping parent heard him say, "Hey, can you tell me what God is like, I am starting to forget." This event may or may not be true, but let us recognize its parallels. Consider the periods during the day when God seems absent from our hearts and minds. Consider those moments, when we throw up our hands at what seems to be a disturbing, unsettling, disunifying, chaotic, and unjust world. Consider those times when pain, uncertainty, stress, and anxiety grip us into feeling alone or abandoned. It is at such moments we are invited to re-member ourselves to our Creator and recall Jesus' eternal promise: "*I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor knows it. But you know it, because it remains with you, and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you.*" John 14: 15-17<sup>17</sup>

Paul Wadell reminds us, "Hope is imperiled not so much by the misfortunes, struggles and sometimes inconsolable losses that come our way because, as a virtue, the very nature of hope is to steady and strengthen us during those moments lest they defeat us. Rather, hope erodes when we no longer aspire to something sufficiently good enough—something sufficiently blessed and promising—to sustain us in the life that God wants for us."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> New American Bible Revised Edition

<sup>18</sup> Wadell, Paul J. "Hope the Forgotten Virtue of Our Time"

When we forget who we are and whose we are, the deeper questions on how to live our lives as consecrated women religious in these times of complexity and challenge become overwhelming. Hope diminishes. We settle. We compromise. We maintain. Yet the charism of religious life is a gift from the Spirit that impels us forward “*to bring good news to the afflicted; to bind up the brokenhearted; to proclaim liberty to captives; and freedom to prisoners*” (Isaiah 61:1)<sup>19</sup> here, now, and into the future. This gift will not be taken from us, for it was given by our God who is faithful. Let us remember.

## **Fear**

We live within a growing culture of fear. Dictators raging wars; increased tribal nationalism; raced-based viciousness; gun violence; limited access to healthcare; censorship of differing voices; accelerating poverty; fake news proclaimed as truth; and polarization in governments, churches and families all contribute to this culture of fear. Such a culture takes on a life of its own and can be demoralizing. Caroline Ong notes, “Such a culture is often based on misinformation, lack of knowledge, and a false sense of individualism that has no concern for others. We are individuals with our human rights, we are also social beings constantly in relationship with all that is around us. Our existence is interdependent on others. The African concept of ubuntu—commonly translated as ‘I am because we are’ highlights this interdependency. In this philosophy, healthy individualism involves concern for others, encourages creative solutions and inclusivity. The culture of fear engenders the opposite philosophy. Individualism, in a culture of fear, is concerned primarily with self-preservation and is likely to encourage the exclusion of others unless it clearly benefits the individual in the immediate.”<sup>20</sup>

Fear is a human response to threat. As we see the stark changes in religious life and the challenges that confront us each day, we must recognize our own culture of fear. Do we have any residual fears of failure or of being perceived as unfaithful because our numbers are shrinking? Do we long for what was, resisting the ideas and vitality of younger generations? Can we live in community with members of other congregations whose races, cultures, and prayer expressions are different than ours? Can we trust we belong to a church born of the Spirit and that our gifts are not to be denied?

Fear can break us or bring us to our knees. Together, let us trust the words from the prophet Jeremiah, “I know well the plans I have in mind for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for woe so as to give you a future of hope” (Jeremiah 29:11).<sup>21</sup> Let us cast out our fears and embrace the reflective lens of Christian hope which is already within us.

## **Hope Today**

Thus, wrapped in the promises and fidelity of our God, living our vowed life with commitment to community, prayer, and on-going learning and transformation, aware of, but undeterred by obstacles, are we ready to re-board that Rambler together? The journey, this time a

<sup>19</sup> New American Bible Revised Edition

<sup>20</sup> Ong, Caroline G. “A Growing Culture of Hope or Fear?” Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church. Catholicethics.com. November 1, 2019

<sup>21</sup> New American Bible Revised Edition

global one, is before us – with the vastness of God’s universe now also in view. How will we discern the way? By living in hope!” Pope Francis reminds us, “To Christians, the future does have a name, and its name is Hope. Feeling hopeful does not mean to be optimistically naïve and ignore the tragedy humanity is facing. Hope is the virtue of a heart that doesn't lock itself into darkness, that doesn't dwell on the past, does not simply get by in the present, but is able to see a tomorrow. Hope is the door that opens onto the future. Hope is a humble, hidden seed of life that, with time, will develop into a large tree. It is like some invisible yeast that allows the whole dough to grow, that brings flavor to all aspects of life. And it can do so much, because a tiny flicker of light that feeds on hope is enough to shatter the shield of darkness. A single individual is enough for hope to exist, and that individual can be you. And then there will be another "you," and another "you," and it turns into an "us." And so, does hope begin when we have an "us?" No. Hope began with one "you." When there is an "us," there begins a revolution.”<sup>22</sup>

So, my friends, our windshield is polished and the road beckons. Let us sit tall and look out the windows at the vast promise before us. We are hip to hip, heart to heart. Let us not fear to hope – Jesus, the Christ, has the wheel.

***Do Not Fear to Hope***  
***Music and Lyrics by Rory Cooney***

Do not fear to hope though the wicked rage and rise.

Our God sees not as we see,  
 success is not the prize.

Do not fear to hope, for though the night be long,  
 the race shall not be to the swift.

The fight not to the strong.

Look to God when victory  
 seems out of justice’s sight.

Look to God whose mighty hand  
 brought forth the day  
 from the chaos of the night.

Look to God when reason fails  
 and terror reigns in the night.

Look upon the crucified,  
 and see beyond  
 into Easter’s dawning light.

Hope is for a pilgrim people.

Searching for a promised land.

Hope is like a rose in winter or an open hand.

It celebrates the light of morning,  
 while working in the dark and cold.

It gathers us together to share what we’ve been told.

Text: Rory Cooney, b.1952 Tune: Rory Cooney, b.1952

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<sup>22</sup> Pope Francis, “Why the only future worth building includes everyone” | TEDTalks 2017.

**LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS**  
**2023 Assembly – Dallas Texas**

**LCWR Outstanding Leadership Award Response**  
**Donna Markham, OP**

Let me begin my remarks this evening with a story.

In January 2020, the influx of migrants along the southern border had become overwhelming. Catholic Charities agencies' case workers had been working since the inception of the pandemic, often on the front lines with people homeless in our cities and homeless because of migration. People with nowhere to go came to our agencies in droves. These dedicated young case workers lacked proper PPE and many became ill from covid. Several died. From our National Office of Catholic Charities, we struggled to get masks and gowns to our agency frontline workers. Many of you helped. Sisters sewed masks, congregations contributed financially. We all can recall how terrifying those days and months were.

By January 2021, millions were dying. Homelessness had reached gargantuan proportions. We were witnessing a full, global humanitarian crisis that had no hint of ending soon. The border crisis had become untenable and Catholic Charities workers struggled to respond as best they could. They were exhausted; the diocesan Charities Directors were frantic over how to care for so many people as well as support and protect their indomitable, young staffs. Then, somewhat miraculously, the first vaccines became available in January of '21. You all remember that those over 75 were among the first eligible to be inoculated.

Deeply worried about the young case workers and about their leaders, and admittedly in somewhat of a state of desperation, I gave Carol Zinn a call. "Do you think any sisters over 75 and vaccinated might volunteer to help us along the border?" I asked. Carol said, "Let's give it a try. I'm *sure* our members will help!" Thus, through Carol's leadership and my query, began an extraordinary collaboration between LCWR and CCUSA. Well over 300 sisters volunteered to go to the border. I found myself moved to tears. They went fully aware of the risks. They went knowing of the hardships of life as a volunteer in a humanitarian crisis. They went! At the



national office, my teammates (many of whom are young and had not met any sister but me) were flabbergasted. “Who *are* these sisters? Why would they ever take such a risk at their age?”

Sisters, there is no way for me to convey the profound witness to hope that women religious, in understated, quiet humility and with incredible competence, provided to tens of thousands of case workers—young and old—and to migrants and homeless people. Our sisters knew exactly how to assist, how to organize, how to take appropriate charge! This experience is but one of many examples of the extraordinary goodness that permeate religious life, even as our physical fragility and vulnerability is evident. I cannot stand here in front of you and not thank you from the very depths of my being for your solidarity, your generosity, your leadership. I am so honored to be a part of you.

Serving in faith-driven leadership, especially in times of multiple and escalating crises, changes us. We will never be the same again. Fear diminishes. We become emboldened to take norm-shattering risks in radical service to the mission. The human anguish and call to respond are so compelling that any concern for our own safety simply dissipates. We no longer are uncomfortable with the tears that accompany our encounters with such mystery. Like the ancient Celts, I believe we are standing in the “thin place” with our very beings poised at the edge of a translucent veil between what *is* and what is yet to come. More than a physical place, for me it is a soul-shaking state of awareness where fear disappears, caution abates, and the flooding of the Holy envelops. There seem to be no words to articulate such experiences where some deep connection to the Sacred becomes tangible. These are places where the awe of life, in its mystery and in its anguish, pierces to the core.

There is no longer any room for postponing radical response as the awareness of urgency floods into us. It is the place of the soul where leaders are stripped of anything that prevents us from acting with clarity and conviction. Time is short and the cries of earth and her suffering poor are shrill. We are compelled to do something.

I know you, like me, have had such experiences of wordless reverence that lead to a certain emboldening of the soul. Keeping vigil by the bedside of a

dying sister friend; receiving a Ukrainian female soldier having survived unimaginable torture in a Russian prison; holding a broken grandma of a child murdered in Uvalde; standing at the edge of a village now totally erased by the consequences of climate change; receiving a migrant who survived trekking from Afghanistan through 15 countries and the Darien Gap to escape death from the Taliban. No matter the cost, we respond.

Such experiences strip the noise away from touching into the very heart of the gospel.

You and I have our own inner reservoirs of profound encounters that have changed us, transformed us, converted us. Standing along the holy edges of profound suffering, we know we will never be the same again. And we become even more emboldened to live religious life in all its full radicality.

For me, I am no longer afraid of what may become of me in speaking truth or doing what I know to be right. I know you understand this and live it with me. We will allow absolutely nothing to prevent us from reaching out in compassion. This is the gift and the hope I believe we women religious leaders offer to our broken, angry world today. As my young staff wondered, "Who are these sisters? Why would they ever do this?" we know the answer. Because we cannot do otherwise.

I am honored to walk among you as your sister and friend. I know I stand in a sacred, thin place of the heart and soul alongside you and we will continue to live together in love, in boldness, and in the sustained assurance that we are not alone. We are with strong companions. God is truly in our midst as we stand at the edge of that veil between what is and what is yet to come.