

**Leadership Conference of Women Religious
2024 Annual Assembly – Orlando, Florida
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Our Time is Holy: Who Then Shall We Be?

Good morning! It is a delight and privilege to be with you! So much is before us: A full assembly schedule. A deeply troubled world – humanity, Earth, all creation – which needs accompaniment, healing, and peace. A future of consecrated religious life that emerges even while we live it, ponder it, help shape it, and entrust it to our Provident God who has owned the past and still owns the present, the future and the vision. And – opportunity and blessing are before us. So much opportunity and so many blessings! Gathered today, we consider the call to women religious each from our own perspective: elected leadership, sisters at home, colleagues in ministry in a congregation, or friendship with LCWR and its members. All are welcome.

Is it bold to assert OUR TIME IS HOLY? Or is it unremarkable, because all time is holy, that which preceded us, that which we live today, and that which will flow on into the vastness of eternity? It seems the question is not all that difficult. God created time! As leaders we claim that! “we embrace our time as holy.” Our word *holy* comes from the German for “blessed.” We recognize that our time is good, is gift, is blessed, even with our many challenges. So, let us agree that yes, OUR TIME IS HOLY. Amen? AMEN.

The question *Who Then Shall We Be?* cannot be so easily resolved. It is a discovery more than a naming, choosing, or claiming, of an identity. Perhaps it is only a “pointing to,” a question that doesn’t demand an answer, but asks only for **deepening**: deepening from emergence of the next insight, the next step, the next crisis, the next opportunity, the next widening of our tents, the next reparation, the next growth, the next loss, the next healing, the next breath, the next sorrow, the next light, the next new acquaintance of person or idea that helps us grow into who we shall be.

I have discovered many pathways into exploring the question *Who Then Shall We Be*. We will experience our encounter this morning as a series of expeditions, “a journey or excursion undertaken for a specific purpose.”² Perhaps YOU will glean an insight that carries YOU *toward* an answer, in this holy moment in time. Perhaps WE will glean insights that carry US *toward* answers in this holy moment in time, as people living our baptismal call. With this beginning, and with all that this assembly will offer, we will embrace this time as holy and beckon the Holy Spirit to guide us.

We’re about to do some exploring. Have you brought your spelunker helmet?

FIRST EXPEDITION: Into questions we are NOT exploring today....

No worries! To paraphrase Rilke, it is not the answers that show us the way but the questions.

Path One... a good start, but not enough

Our question is NOT **Where then shall we go?** But – oh how I wanted to “go there” in this address. It would be so much more concrete. My family is fond of saying “Join the Dominicans, See the World,” as my vocation has taken me places I could never have imagined: Dominican foundational places such as Caleruega and Prouilhe; ten weeks of study and pilgrimage in several lands of our biblical heritage; and Chimbote, Peru; to name just a few. To which I can add, join LCWR, see the World! And meet the Pope! Alas, **where then shall we go** is NOT our question today.

Yet, where we shall go has something to do with who we shall be. As does where we have been and what we have seen/lived/witnessed there.

A familiar proverb asserts: We see from where we stand. Our standing may be physical and/or philosophical/theological/historical. Where we have been shapes us. Where we are today shapes us. What horizon we see as we peer into the distance shapes us.

The popular Dr. Suess book *Oh the Places You'll Go!*³ is often given to graduates who are entering into a new phase of life. I received the book from a dear friend and mentor, Sister Jackie Bennett, when I graduated from Catholic Theological Union twenty-five years ago. The book offers advice and excitement – and even warning – such as:

“You’ll look up and down streets. Look ‘em over with care. About some you will say, ‘I don’t choose to go there.’ ... And you may not find *any* you’ll want to go down. In that case, of course, you’ll head straight out of town.

“It’s opener there in the wide open air.

“Out there things can happen and frequently do to people as brainy and footsy as you. And when things start to happen, don’t worry. Don’t stew. Just go right along. *You’ll* start happening too.

“So... be your name Buxbaum or Bixby or Bray or Mordecai Ali Van Allen O’Shea, you’re off to Great Places! Today is your day! Your mountain is waiting. So... get on your way!”

We might find parallels to the adventures we are experiencing today as consecrated women. In my congregation, annually each of us receives a mission card and is blessed in a mission sending. For some, this involves a change of address and/or ministry. For all, this involves a renewed, conscious YES to prayer for the life of the world and recommitment to our vows.

Mission is where WE go – so try this paraphrase on for size:

You’ll look up and down NEEDS. Look ‘em over with care. About some you will say, **‘PLEASE send me there.’** You may not find *any* you’ll want to omit. In that case, of course, you’ll head straight to commit.

You’ll commit with scads of companions who dare, with folks who’ll seek justice all wrapped in deep prayer.

It’s nourishing there with companions who care, who find grace in creation and God’s loving fare - the provision of love and inclusion and blessing – the beauty and joy of the vows we’re professing.

Out there things can happen - and frequently do - to people as loving, brave and prayerful as you. **AS US! ALL OF US!**

And when things start to happen, don't worry. Don't fuss. Just go with real glee. *We'll* start happening too, as we uncover together *just who we shall be*.

So... be your name Carmelite, BVM or Franciscan, or Good Shepherd, Poor Handmaid or Blessed Dormition, you're off to Great Mission! Today is your day! Your call is awaiting. So... get on your way!

Where, indeed, shall we GO?!? Where the needs are great, of course!

We claim, *it is about the journey, not the destination*. As we look to the future and so many unknowns, we accept that our steps will not always lead to solutions. It is the steps that matter (and not only if you are wearing a FitBit). We are not alone in this great expedition. The **Synod on Synodality** is helping us - the Church - find our way, find *who we shall be*. The Synod is a path, a journey, revealing a church "alive and on the move." Jesuit Sam Sawyer noted that just the experience of finding the way to the meeting room in the Vatican brought great awareness and understanding for the members of the Synod: "not entirely knowing where to go and being surprised by what happens when you get there seems to be part of what happened in the synod itself."⁴ It is the process that makes the Synod for Synodality a force for shaping who we shall be, as church committed to mission, communion and participation. By extension of our mission, we also shape society – thus, where we go shapes us into who we shall be.

Path Two... still finding our way

Our question is also NOT **What then shall we DO?**

Though I was sorely tempted to "go there" too. Doesn't everyone think *doing* is easier than *being*???

LCWR's years' long journey with the process *Discerning our Emerging Future* is not about adopting a strategic plan to choose a new something to DO. Rather, it is about discerning what our beckoning horizon is revealing to us and how we shall journey into it together.

My congregation, and likely yours, has been engaged in a process of understanding our "assets" – vowed members, property, ministries, charism, financial resources, traditions, mission – as we peer toward a horizon that promises grace, yet is wrapped in a mantle of mystery. Desiring to be generous in sharing our resources as an ongoing expression of mission, our investment advisors have illustrated our journey forward as in a car with headlights. Blessing, planning, strategy and good stewardship create the beams of the headlights, necessary especially at night. Yet, headlights go only about 350 feet, and after traveling that distance, only the next 350 feet are illuminated. This is just a little more than the length of a football field – which, as a former marching band member, I can tell you is only 160 steps. We cannot answer what we shall do far into the future, but we can take the next best step, march the next best 160 steps, drive the next best 350 feet. What we shall do now is mission; what we shall later do is... mission, *as the road before us is revealed*. The mission of Jesus Christ, whoever *we* shall be!

LCWR will soon begin a new focus called *Living into Our Emerging Future*. Daily living requires some doing, to be sure. Yet for many years now we have asserted that our consecrated life is about *being*, not *doing*. Remember the adage – life is a mystery to be lived (being), not a problem to be solved (doing). We do not *do life* as consecrated women. We *live life* as consecrated women. We are fully immersed in the contemplative dimension of our life.

We ask: *Given our reality, what is our call now?* The question is not – what are we to DO now, but rather, *who are we to be?* This question doesn't deny the dramatic demographic changes we are experiencing – both the many, daily losses of revered members called home by God, and the small but beautiful budding forth of women responding to the call today. Our LCWR Call⁵ acknowledges "... the state of US religious life is shifting and ... significant decisions are before each of us that will impact the development of this vocational call." While we don't deny our losses, we ask simply, in light of the world's great needs, *This is today. What is our call now?* It is a question posed to sisters, congregations, and the conference, and it is a question our dialogue on *Living into Our Emerging Future* will help us explore together.

I believe LCWR's work now is accompanying leaders in both the letting go and the letting come... in the constancy of change. The evolutionary curve WILL take us to something new that needs our best efforts. What we shall do then, and in any age, will flow from who we shall be.

Path Three... a brief pause to catch our breath and the breath of the Holy Spirit

Our question is also NOT **To whom shall we go?** But with that question we are getting warm!

A pause here will center and refresh us on our expedition to discover who, then, we shall be. "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of everlasting life" (John 6:68).

This Life runs deep within us even as we live with uncertainty. Rumi says "And don't think the garden loses its ecstasy in winter. It's quiet, but the roots are down there riotous."

We know our Creator God is the One from whom we came and to whom we shall go.

Affirming our belief in this truth will keep us on the Way and help reveal who then we shall be.

Path Four... not quite there

Our question this morning is also NOT God's question **Whom shall I send?**

"And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' Then I said, 'Here I am; send me'" (IS 6:8).

In the *being sent*, we come to discover who we are, and we journey toward who we shall be. Even more, in our eager response, newly vowed or 80-year Jubilarian, in exclaiming "send me." we open ourselves to becoming.

Pause a moment and marvel with me at *how many times* you have already responded "send me." In your response, with faith, hope and generosity, what has emerged in your life? In responding "send me," how have you added brush strokes and color to the sketch of who you shall be? Jot phrases or draw for a moment.

This is a communal reality as well. Marvel with me at *how many times your congregation* has responded “send us.” In your response, with faith, hope and generosity, what has emerged in the life of your congregation? In responding “send us,” how have you added brush strokes and color to the sketch of who you shall be? Jot phrases or draw for a moment.

Remember our Dr. Suess paraphrase? You’ll **commit** with scads of **companions** who dare, with folks who’ll seek justice all wrapped in deep prayer – it’s nourishing there with **companions** who care.

Our eagerness to respond reveals the vibrancy of our becoming. Each time we respond **SEND ME, SEND US**, new depth emerges in the portrait of who we shall be.

Path Five... we are almost there

A last question, **WHOSE then shall we be?**... gets us very warm, VERY close to answering our question *who then shall we be*. All we really need to know is WHOSE we are. When we know WHOSE we are, a corner of the veil that blurs who we shall be is lifted. Region Four discerned together “we are called to be relational, flexible, creative, listeners, instillers of transformative hope, and risk-takers.” That kind of insight comes from knowing WHOSE we are.

Jesuit James Martin asks, “Can you surrender to the future God has in store for you?” When we know Whose we are, the future aligns. Surely God is in the L2 place about which we learned last year from Brian Swimme – the heartbeat place/the still place; God, the Source of all Being.

With clarity and trust in *Whose* we have been, *Whose* we are, and *Whose* we shall always be, we can come to know who we shall be.

SECOND EXPEDITION: Our Time is Holy

I may have left too quickly the conclusion that OUR TIME IS HOLY. Let’s backtrack for a short spell. How is the light on your helmet holding out?

In my preparation, I was pondering the connection between time and horizon. I googled “difference between time and horizon” and was astonished to be in the midst of references to “the time horizon of investing” – “the time period where one expects to hold <a financial> investment for a specific goal.” Maybe it fits – with **our** investment being **our vows!**

In an interview with Annmarie Sanders, David Whyte addressed the topic *Living and Leading from a Place of Immense Horizon*⁶. “Immense horizon” seems to fit with “Our Time is Holy” as we live our call with an immense horizon beckoning.

David relates: “I grew up with a sense of there being different times and timings and understandings of time and that they all actually live and work together well ... I have the side that wants to know what time it is now, but also the part of me that wants the parallels of all the different times that are occurring, the understanding that each human being is a conversation between the past, the present, and the future and that we never, ultimately, get to choose amongst those three.”

David offered his poem *The Bell and the Blackbird*⁷, which “takes an old Irish narrative of a monk at the edge of the monastic precinct, hearing the bell calling him to *prayer*, **and simultaneously**,

the call of the blackbird, calling him to *wild nature*." Which, David says, may parallel "our fruitlessly trying to choose between going deeply into the present and preparing for the future...."

https://www.youtube.com/shorts/YnEY_itdFpk

The Bell and the Blackbird

The sound of a bell
still reverberating,
or a blackbird calling
from a corner of the field,
asking you to wake
into this life,
or inviting you deeper
into the one that waits.
Either way
takes courage,
either way wants you
to be nothing
but that self that
is no self at all,
wants you to walk
to the place
where you find
you already know
how to give
every last thing
away.

The approach
that is also
the meeting
itself,
without any
meeting
at all.

That radiance
you have always
carried with you
as you walk
both alone
and completely
accompanied
in friendship
by every corner
of the world
crying
Allelujah.

David adds: “We never do get to absent ourselves from this world because we feel we need to rehearse for a larger world. We have to live on a ground that is always a ground shared between the two....”

How well we know the ground shared in our time, all the realities crying for our presence and accompaniment: the climate crisis and our suffering Earth and all creation; virulent racism; forced migration; the violence of war; profound hunger and debilitating homelessness; disregard for human life along a continuum from conception to natural death; despair and desolation. And here in the United States at this time of elections, the extreme polarization, chaos and fear that distract from the best instincts of our nation’s founding.

With former LCWR President Sister Sharlet Wagner, CSC we ponder:

“Do we believe that our congregations are exactly where God wants them to be at this time? That religious life is exactly where it is meant to be at this time? We make a mistake when we attempt to do the impossible of trying to live forever and fail to fully embrace the now. It is not ours to see the future of religious life, nor is it ours to direct the future of religious life. We can thank God that our task as elected leaders is not to create a *plan* for the new to emerge; **it is to create a space for the new to emerge.**”⁸

This time needs us now even as we acknowledge the immediate and immense horizon that is God, and the immediate and immense space that urgently awaits new creation. Our time horizon requires the investment of our very selves, and our goal is the life of the world. Let us not be distracted from the clarity of our call in this holy time.

THIRD EXPEDITION: Who Then Shall We Be?

Refreshed in our awareness that there are places to GO and things to DO, with a renewed sense of being called and sent and belonging to the Holy One ... and that we live in a holy time that begs our awareness, encounter and presence, we can approach our ultimate question: **Who Then Shall We Be?**

Path One Revisited: **Where then shall we go?**

Where we shall go shapes who we shall be. A story called *The Monk Whose Face Was Red*⁹ speaks of **going deep** and points to who we shall be.

“Standing beside a cave was a monk whose face was red He smiled at me and said, “I guess you’re wondering why my face is so red.... When I was fifty I died. When I went to judgment, they asked me, ‘What have you accomplished?’ That’s when my face turned red. I pleaded with them to give me more time <and they gave me seven more years>.

“So I came back to my cave. I went in and kept going. I went in deeper than I’d ever gone before, in and down, in and down.

“Finally I began to hear a rumbling sound, like mighty waters. You know what it was? It was the tears of the whole world! I heard the bitter tears of EVERYONE’S fear, hurt, despair, disappointment, rage. Everyone’s. And I heard the sweet tears too – you know,

when you're loved, when you're safe at last, a loved one restored, those tears of joy. Yes, I heard the death of Christ and his resurrection. I must have been at the heart of the earth, because, while I couldn't hear any words, I heard ALL the tears and therefore I experienced total communion. I was separated from my separateness.

"... I finally decided how I would spend those seven years. I would go back and forth to the mouth of the cave and conduct people back and forth to the depths."

Whose tears are we hearing? Whose tears have yet to pierce our conscience or our consciousness? Mythologist Martin Shaw asks, "What if we reframed 'living with uncertainty' to 'navigating mystery'?" As we navigate mystery, we shall go deep and be separated from our separateness; we shall be in communion with the tears of the world. Like Harriet Tubman, "who brought emancipation to anyone who crossed her path"¹⁰ we shall be conductors of people, people painfully separated but going deep and coming back whole, coming back healed, now healers themselves in touch with the tears of the world, who conduct others on the same journey to emancipation.

Path Two Revisited: What then shall we DO?

Clear words from two LCWR documents speak of *doing* that points to who we shall be.

From the LCWR Emerging Orientations: *We are called to be a healing presence in the world* and to bring our voices and moral authority to the critical issues of the day. We DO this through our orientations toward:

- Global consciousness and encounter
- Widening our tents and making LCWR's borders more porous
- Integrative partnerships
- Mission in the public square
- Becoming technologically astute for the sake of building relationships

From LCWR's Spirit Call Within a Call: As members of a church deeply implicated in the origin and perpetuation of our nation's perduring sin of racism, of congregations that have been complicit, and of a conference whose whiteness has been unexamined, we take our part in the national reckoning provoked by the horrific public murder of George Floyd and the all-too-many killings that preceded it and yet continue. Together ... we will identify the steps that beckon us on this journey – the profound truth-telling, reconciliation, repentance, and repair work needed for Spirit-*ruah* to breathe us through to transformative change.

We shall be people who use our voices and enlarge our hearts. We shall own our complicity. We shall be a healing presence. We shall demand change. We shall be agents of transformation. We shall be transformed.

Path Three Revisited: To whom shall we go?

In our prayer for discernment for leadership in LCWR, we call forth these women who point to who we shall be:

- Shiprah and Puah who took courageous action to oppose injustice

- Deborah who accepted the mantle of authority to lead people to new life
- Miriam who led people out of the desert into flourishing of life
- Mary who listened deeply and freely gave her Fiat
- Mary Magdalene who faithfully accompanied and fearlessly preached
- Priscilla who collaborated and led people in work and faith filled worship

Sister Elizabeth Johnson invites us to reimagine the communion of saints, which includes our beloved foremothers in family of faith, family of upbringing, and congregation, and encourages us: “Remembering the great crowd of female friends of God and prophets opens up possibilities for the future; their lives bespeak an unfinished agenda that is now in our hands; their memory is a challenge to action; their companionship points the way.”¹¹

These Friends of God and Prophets are already with the One to whom we shall go. On our journey to reunion, we shall be women who take courageous action, lead people out of deserts, listen deeply, accompany faithfully, fearlessly preach the Good News, and answer YES.

Path Four Revisited: **Whom shall I send?**

Well. *Just look around this room* to point to – and see - who we shall be!

- If you have a smart phone, please pull it out (share with anyone who does not have one handy). Please open your **news app** and scroll through the headlines for 30 seconds. Now, please open your **camera app**. Select the view as if you were going to take a picture and sweep first your table and then this whole room with that view. Now select the camera view *that looks back at you* and give yourself a long loving gaze.
- Who shall be sent? **Here are twelve apostles from our 1,254 LCWR members:**
 Juanita.... Catherine.... Ifeoma.... Marie Peter.... Ann.... Bibiana.... Mary
 Yesenia.... Nkechi.... Elizabeth.... Kim-Phuong Monica

Here we connect the news app with the camera app with our membership to show **we shall be** women who answer the call to serve in this world in which we live – this world that has so much pain and so many needs.

Path Five Revisited: **Whose then shall we be?**

Our sister Thea Bowman implored us to remember who we are and whose we are, and to live from that deep well, pointing to who we shall be. She acknowledged “I know that God is using me in ways beyond my comprehension.”¹² In our deepened focus on Eucharist this year in the United States, we can see that Sister Thea united her life to the life of the One who was for us Bread, broken and shared. She knew well Whose she was and who she was.

We shall be morsels of encouragement, life, and love for our broken world. In ourselves being broken and in sharing the fruits of our consecrated life, we shall be bread, naan, tortilla, challah, paratha, chapati, agege, pandesal, shaobing, pita. We shall be nourishment for the life of the world.

Fourth Expedition: **Excited luminous human beings**

Beloved, we are God’s children now. Who we *shall be* is not yet known.¹³ Who we shall be is a journey of discovery, a journey of becoming.

Pope Francis, in his Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et exsultate*¹⁴ speaks to each and all of us in this room and on livestream: “I would like to insist primarily on the *call to holiness* that the Lord addresses to each of us, the call that he also addresses, personally, to you: *Be holy, for I am holy.*”

Theologian Frederick Buechner tells us “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.”¹⁵ This place of deep gladness, which makes us people of joy, is perhaps the radiance of being of which David Whyte’s poem spoke:

That radiance
you have always
carried with you
as you walk
both alone
and completely
accompanied
in friendship
by every corner
of the world
crying
Allelujah.

Our assembly symbol, a luminescent tree, invites us to engage this holy time with intention and awareness of God as the life force Who flows through us. Luminescent is the adjective; to luminesce is the verb: to shine or glow with light. An example of luminescence is tritium, “excited luminous paints that are used on watch dials.”¹⁶ I did not know that paints could be excited!!! But perhaps this is something to which we may aspire – not being the paint on watch dials but being excited luminous human beings. We are, after all, an Easter people. May we weave together a garment of luminescent splendor that reveals our beauty and the beauty of our God in whom we live and move and have our being.

Look around again at your committed companions. The world needs transformation, as do we. It is time to get on with it, this journey of becoming.

Out there things can happen - and frequently do - to people as loving, brave and prayerful as you. **AS US! ALL OF US!**

And when things start to happen, don’t worry. Don’t fuss. Just go with real glee. ***We’ll start happening too, as we uncover together just who we shall be.***

And my friend Sister Jackie wrote this ending in her own handwriting: “Just follow the Spirit within and trust in the process – that’s all we have to do, right?? Best wishes and God Speed.”

¹ LCWR Call 2023-2028

² *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*

³ Seuss, Dr., *Oh The Places You’ll Go!*, Random House, New York, 1990

⁴ *America*, “Waiting to Find Out Where to Go,” December 2023

⁵ LCWR Call 2023-2028

⁶ LCWR *Occasional Papers: Living and Leading from a Place of Immense Horizon*, "Our Journey to the Borders and Beyond," Summer 2020

⁷ White, David, "The Bell and the Blackbird," Many Rivers Press, Langley, Washington, 2018

⁸ Wagner, Sister Sharlet CSC, "The Emerging Orientations of LCWR," 2020

⁹ Theophane the Monk, *Tales of a Magic Monastery*, Crossroad, New York, 1981

¹⁰ National Museum of African American History & Culture, The Smithsonian Institute, *Collection Story on Harriet Tubman*

¹¹ Johnson, Elizabeth A., *Friends of God and Prophets*, Continuum, New York, 1998, p.169

¹² U.S. Catholic interview, Sister Thea Bowman, FSPA, "On Dying with Dignity," March, 1990

¹³ 1 John 3:2

¹⁴ *Gaudete et exultate* (On the Call to Holiness in Today's World), Pope Francis, 2018, paragraph 10

¹⁵ Buechner, Frederick, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, HarperOne, San Francisco, 1973, p. 95

¹⁶ vocabulary.com