

**Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR)  
National Assembly, New Orleans, LA, August 14, 2009  
Response to Leadership Award  
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In September 1952, a few days after I had entered the Sisters of Charity, BVM in Dubuque, Iowa, my father rang the doorbell of the BVM Convent in Hempstead, New York. He presented a bushel of fresh peaches to the sister who answered the door. The sister smiled at my father and questioned: "All this and Helen too?"

As I review my life as a BVM with its communal riches and diminishment, its joys and sorrows, its achievements and failures, I ponder, "All this and LCWR too?" Thank you, LCWR, for our common riches and diminishment, for our joys and sorrows, for our achievements and failures, for our life together. As I think about our life together at this moment in the history of the Conference, I am reminded of an address by President John Fitzgerald Kennedy. On June 26, 1963, President Kennedy delivered a memorable speech in Berlin, Germany. At the height of the Cold War, he contrasted life in the American governed sector of Berlin with life in a Communist country. President Kennedy declared:  
"There are some who say that Communism is the wave of the future.  
Let them come to Berlin."

Tonight as we gather in historic New Orleans, there are some who say that apostolic religious life renewed in the spirit Vatican II is dead.

To those who doubt the vitality of religious life in the United States, let them come to the GED programs; let them come to the leadership of healthcare systems, let them come to Network, let them come to the 110 colleges founded and now sponsored by women religious; let them come to the hills of Kentucky where two Franciscan sisters built and stocked the only library in Carter County. Let them come to Newark, Minneapolis and Seattle. Let them come to the mission.

To those who critique us and our response to Vatican II, let them attend one of our chapters. Let them witness our relentless self-evaluation, our exhausting analysis and our challenging assessment. Let them leave, like us, weary, chastened and renewed. Let them come to Mobile, Columbus, and Wilmington. Let them come to the mission.

To those who lament the few new members in religious congregations, let them understand our profound desire for the future of religious life. Let them walk with our faithful formation teams. Let them imagine the hearts of some young women who ponder religious life and expect the fullness of the life of the church. Let them come to San Francisco, Philadelphia and San Antonio. Let them come to the mission.

To those who question our corporate witness, our invisibility, our public face, let them know that we search these concerns with humility and integrity; let them realize our grief and our joy as we ponder the challenge posed by Mary Whited: "Can you, too, sense the Mysterious

Presence who invites us to take another step? Do you, too sense that we are being led?" Let them come to Butte, Santa Fe and Hartford. Let them come to the mission.

To those who would discount us because of our seeming diminishment, let them read history and know that though the ages, God has raised up the lowly. Let them come to New Orleans, Chicago and Milwaukee. Let them come to the mission

To those who have supported us over the years through their participation in pantry showers, through the collection for religious, through their presence on our boards, through their partnership in ministry and through their response to our pleas about leaky faucets, stuck windows and stalled cars, let them understand our deep gratitude. Let them come to Bismarck, St. Louis and Phoenix. Let them come to the mission.

To those who think that sisters in the United States are divided from sisters throughout the world, let them listen to the ringing endorsement from the members of the International Union of Superiors General. "We affirm unequivocally our support for our sisters in the United States...The way religious sisters in the United States responded to the mandates of the Second Vatican Council has been a great gift not only to the pluralistic society in which they live, but also to the universal church," (May 27, 2007) Let them listen to the sisters throughout the world. Let them come to Rome, Dublin and Tokyo. Let them come to the mission.

To those who wonder about our appreciation of tradition, let them travel to the exhibit: *Women & Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America*. Let them come to Cincinnati, Dallas, Ellis Island, Washington, D.C. and Dubuque. Let them come to the mission

To all who praise God, let them know our deep desire for God. Let them realize that, in the words of Joan Keleher Doyle, BVM, "We weep, not because we have lost something, but because we have been given so much." Let them come to Miami, Boston and Indianapolis. Let them come to the United States of America. Let them come to the mission.

To those who honor me tonight I say. You honor my mother and father who brought the bushel of peaches and so much more; you honor the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary who continue to form me; you honor yourselves who nourish me. Thank you, Leadership Conference of Women Religious. For these many years, you let me come to Catholic Sisters in America, you let me come to the mission and I am deeply grateful.