

**Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR)**  
**National Assembly, New Orleans, LA, August 14, 2009**  
**Response to Leadership Award**  
**Sharon Holland, IHM**

What can I say on this festive occasion in troubled times? First of all, certainly, thank you! It is good to be here, together with Sr. Helen Maher Garvey. At the end of July I had the opportunity to go to Cincinnati to see the exhibit, *Women & Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America.* It is indeed magnificent! Perhaps the full impact of the lives of those women, and their descendents, is even deeper and richer than can be captured in image and word.

I have said to many of you over the years that I believe I get credit for much more than I've done. But, if nothing else, I spoke English. Now perhaps I should say, if nothing else, I speak Italian -- imperfect as it is. Tonight I thought I might offer you a few useful words in Italian.

At schools and workplaces a popular phrase can be *fare un ponte* -- build a bridge. This is used when a holiday comes on Friday, but one is expected to work or go to school on Saturday. The idea is to build a bridge from closing time on Thursday to opening time on Monday, passing right over that Saturday and creating a three-day weekend.

In more serious moments, I have often reflected on building bridges during my time in Rome, desiring to bridge languages, cultures, and expectations. A few months before leaving, I decided to return to the writings of Catherine of Sienna -- that remarkable woman of the Church who lived in troubled times. I recalled, among other things, that she had spoken of bridges.

In Catherine, of course, the bridge is Christ. She speaks of Christ who reconnected earth and heaven, humanity and divinity. She presents the urgent necessity of climbing that bridge. Then Catherine uses vivid images to point out the danger of giving up on climbing the bridge, and sliding back into the dank and rushing river beneath the bridge.

Bridge building, as you well know, is serious and arduous business. In his recent encyclical *Caritas in veritate* (June 29, 2009), Benedict XVI notes that the God of the Bible is both Agape and Logos, charity and truth: "Truth, in fact," he writes, "is logos which creates dia-logos, and hence communication and communion." (n.4) Today, we might speak of bridge building as fostering dialogue, as strengthening communion.

In the light of all this, another useful word is the frequently heard *pazienza*. this is not a lazy or indifferent patience; here we are talking about something more like Paul's patient endurance by which one perseveres and eventually arrives at the goal.

Together with that, we surely need the familiar exhortation: *corraggio!* Courage, literally, is acting with the heart, a heart which is strong and convinced. With patient courage, the labor of building bridges inches forward.

*Avanti!* That's the movement forward. Sometimes this word is simply the answer to a knock at the door. *Avanti!* Come in. At other times it signals that you still have to go further, the goal is ahead; *avanti!* You still need to go forward. We too still need to go forward.

Whatever the words, we need to go forward, with both patience and courage, in our building of bridges. We go confidently in the company of, and by way of, Catherine's bridge, Christ, whom she frequently named "Truth." Thank you.