

**Leadership Conference of Women Religious  
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**SURPRISED BY JOY:  
SPRINGS FROM THE GREAT DEEP ILLUMINATING RELIGIOUS LIFE**

**Janet Mock, CSJ  
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The Scripture quotation that was chosen for this assembly holds an image that is quite dear to my heart. Spring water is particularly refreshing in its purity and clarity. In Johnstown, the small south-western Pennsylvania town where I grew up, being able to stop along the highway and fill bottles with water that poured down from the surrounding hills always announced the arrival of spring, a welcome guest after a typically cold and snowy winter. Once the ice began to melt, the deeper waters sprung forth and yielded the clearest, tastiest water one could ever hope for, liquid that was untainted by chemicals – just pure, refreshing water. In my memory, there is nothing that equals the taste of that water after a rigorous winter. And so to be asked to reflect on religious life in the light of this Genesis passage is both a challenge and a lovely invitation. Is the ice thawing? Is it spring water that is bursting forth from the deep? Is it surface run-off bringing with it sediment that may or may not be helpful for new growth? Is it some of both? By the end of winter, especially in the northern parts of the United States, most of us are more than ready for spring. It is tempting to settle for the early sediment-driven run-off water, but it is well worth the time to wait for water that arises from the deeper springs. When we taste that water, we name unequivocally the arrival of spring. And so it is with us.

Being able to name is biblical and primal. Names are sacred and when our names are mispronounced or misspelled, there is something deep inside that is affronted. I AM in the Scriptures signifies the most profound name. I AM is how God actively names the Godhead. Notice that God does not say I WAS nor I WILL BE. God is I AM. What a profound consolation that is for us today, in these times. I AM here, I AM with you. I AM light. I AM within Mercy, Charity, Providence. I AM Divine Compassion. I AM in the many faces of Mary, Joseph and Jesus; of Benedict, Scholastica, Catherine, Dominic, Clare, Francis.

I AM with you until the end of time. Allow yourselves to sink into that truth: I AM with you.

As we see in Scriptures in the care Yahweh takes in announcing I AM, naming is a profoundly divine act, and so, as I attempt to reflect upon where we might be as women religious in the United States at this moment, I do so from a very specific perspective.

The eminent theologian, David Tracy offers three approaches that one might use to position where we are in his book, *Naming the Present Moment*. Tracy proposes naming as diagnostic, as prophetic, as a form of prayer. I would like to take a few minutes to break open these three approaches in regard to religious life in the world in which we live, and especially here in the United States, and then offer some insights for your further probing about the role of religious today.

## **NAMING THE MOMENT AS AN ACT OF DIAGNOSIS**

Over the past decades, much has been written about the state of religious life. Today I am talking to the experts in the field – those who know better than anyone else the state of religious life in the United States and beyond – you, its leaders. All the predictions of the past forty years are upon you as you face declining numbers, the sale or reconfiguration of property, provincial and congregational mergers, covenant relationships, limited resources both temporal and human, a paucity of leadership. Much of your time is consumed in negotiations, and you probably have learned more about civil and canon law than you ever wanted to know.

Your challenge as leaders is extraordinary, for the times are uncommon – yet not beyond your reach. An imperative for you as leaders is to name with your sisters what God is asking of you today. You receive hints about that as you ponder your viability as a community, what you can now offer to the world and what you simply cannot give any more. You have hard decisions to make but they must be realistic, for God always dwells in the present reality. I AM. Your call as a leaders is to take a long, loving look at your reality. If you have current and future leadership, if you have financial viability, if you have a cohort of members with health and vigor for the mission, you must discern together where to place that energy for the good of the world. Your task is discerning where and how to be in communion with the activity of God in our world now, at this present moment.

If your congregation has done all it can do, you must place the collective wisdom that is yours at the service of the world through prayer and suffering, entering into the passivity of Christ crucified for the good of the world. You are called to celebrate the incarnation of your charism through the years and embrace this transitional moment as an invitation to grace, knowing that life always issues out of death. Activity called forward by God and passivity called forth by God require honesty and courage; both are indispensable in the building up of the reign of God. But it is important that you understand the power possible in our cooperation in both the activity of God and in the passion of the Christ incarnated today.

In the life of Jesus, we see in the Gospels enormous activity. Jesus' public life written from the perspective of his apostles and disciples gives us a panorama of activity: Jesus teaches, Jesus heals, Jesus lifts up, casts down – he moves with alacrity and purpose, he

is on the go - until he stands before Pilate. At that point he becomes silent and passive. Until that moment in the Scriptures, all the verbs are active: he said, he reached out, he taught, he touched, he healed, he cast out . . . Suddenly before a man who recognizes him as innocent, yet lacks the courage to defend him and free him because of fear of the crowds, Jesus is silent. From that point on, the verbs in Scripture become passive: he is handed over, he is mocked, is scourged, is crucified, and says from the cross: it is finished. And then, wondrously, he is raised.

Knowing when God is calling you to activity and when God is calling you to passivity is a critical discernment for our times. Passivity is not a word we women religious in general like, much less care to emulate. Yet as I think back over these three years in the life of LCWR, as its officers participated in conversations about the mandate we received from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, there were moments of decided activity – communication with you as members, board meetings, conversations with the bishop delegates, consultations with scholars and other professionals, statements to the press, visits with the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, and the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. At the same time, there were moments when we were rendered silent. There simply were no authentic words to speak, and we feared for our life as an organization. More, we feared for the life of the Church. In retrospect, it was in those moments that God’s activity became most evident.

All through the three-year process, there were people around the table who could hear one another, name the areas of disagreement and ask for clarification. That humility and openness and willingness to learn were movements within the activity of God and indispensable to the whole process. And yet, at times, we were all rendered silent and unable to go forward.

A similar dynamic was going on in the Church at large. We have lived through fifty years of attempting to implement the documents of Vatican II and we all know the experience of being stopped in the process.

At such a time, a brilliant theologian and prolific writer who had become Pope realized that at age 85 he was unable to do all the papacy demanded at this time and embraced the passivity inherent in aging by resigning his role as pope. Pope Benedict XVI shocked the world. The resignation of a Pope had not happened in the Church for centuries, but it was happening before our eyes. The College of Cardinals gathered from around the world and a global conclave emerged, naming aloud the graces and the abuses within the Church. White smoke appeared and the first Latin American pope, a male religious, a Jesuit, came forward asking for the blessing and the prayers of the people. Who among us will ever forget that moment!

If I have taken away anything from the past three years, it is a greater desire to enter wholeheartedly into both the activity of God when I am called to companion that movement and to wait poised for the action of God when it is beyond my capacity to act. In other words, to know when to act and to know when to stay out of the way so that the action of God at larger levels can occur.

I offer that insight to you as you discern what you must be pro-active about and what you must let be done to you as you lead your congregations to their next steps. We must let go of the desire to do everything we want to do by ourselves. That day is long over. It is not a time for super stars, even among congregations. Ministries are for the most part across congregations and in concert with our lay collaborators. The times call for partnerships and companions in mission. What you must offer, however, is your charism and the wisdom that has come from the years your sisters have practiced the congregational virtues that shape your charism. The way you will move into the future must be influenced by those rich gifts which you still have to offer – and must for the good of the world.

### **NAMING THE MOMENT AS AN PROPHETIC ACT**

Naming anything as prophetic is dangerous and fraught with the potential for hubris. The Spirit of God and time determine whether our acts are prophetic or corporate ego run awry. There are trends in our age, however, that demand our attention. How we women religious address them can create an environment for the activity of God to flourish. I offer three possibilities where women religious today have the potential of joining the activity of God for the good of the world. Tomorrow, Father Steve Bevans will speak from the perspective of the thirsts of the world which call us forward. I speak from what is happening within religious life itself where the activity of God is urging us on, where I see the springs of new life bursting forth.

Today, there are approximately 1200 women in the United States who are in initial formation in religious congregations – approximately half in congregations belonging to CMSWR and half in LCWR congregations. 1200 women in the United States who are discerning a call to religious life! If even half that number are called to permanent commitment, it is at least twice the number of sisters who came to this country in the early 1800s and laid the foundation of viable education, health, and social service systems in this country.

What do these women need?

- They need a future to believe in and they need mentors who are excited about engaging and discerning our future as women religious. Are our household conversations about the past or are we discussing the present and future? Do we engage newer members in conversation about the essence of our lives?

- These women must have been touched by the call of God. They must first and foremost have a thirst for God and the things of God to be genuinely called to religious life. They must have the capacity for self-reflection and self-transcendence, for their lives must be entirely for others.
- They must be secure in their vocation so they can encourage and appreciate the vocations of others within the Church and beyond.
- They need a broad solid education in liberal arts and theology, as well as the fields in which they will minister in order to have a credible voice at the tables where they will sit, for their lay counterparts are educated to be ecclesial leaders in the Church and in the world and women religious must be academically and spiritually prepared to join them as peers.
- They need to be prepared intellectually, spiritually, psychologically to live in a greater and greater complex world and cosmos. They must learn to engage complexity critically with honesty, humility and awe.
- They must be at home with diversity – cultural, ecclesial, economic. Our communities must be places of welcome for the kind of diversity upon us as citizens of the United States and of the world.

What if we addressed these needs across congregations together, because, after all, these women are ours. They are part of a larger sisterhood and there is no greater investment in the future than to place our resources together to assure that we have spiritually formed, intellectually prepared, psychologically mature women religious to face the challenges that lie before us in the world. We must find a way to do together what many communities cannot do alone in order to secure religious life in the future. Unless you as leaders find a way together to provide this kind of preparation across communities for the women who are entering today, they will be unprepared for the leadership role of women religious in the future. Women religious' voices cannot afford to be missing from corporate boards, civic and ecclesial committees, and places that influence systemic change. Be assured, they will be missing if they are not properly educated and sufficiently prepared.

Sixty years ago, Margaret Brennan, IHM as congregational leader, prepared a group of Monroe Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary to go to Latin America, in response to the call of Pope Pius XII. She also sent another 10 of her sisters to study nationally and internationally for degrees in theology as well as sending many other sisters to become scholars in other academic fields. One of those women is LCWR's current president, Sharon Holland, who we were privileged to hear this morning. Those women and women religious like them have stood on this stage at LCWR assemblies throughout the years, teaching us, challenging us, helping us to think in new ways, keeping us rooted deeply in our faith while presenting ways to interpret that rich tradition in the light of the signs of the times. Who will be prepared to teach us in ten years? In twenty years? Few communities today have the resources to educate their

members to this degree, but together we can use our collective imagination and creativity and create a vehicle like a national endowment for sisters' education – or another similar venture to assure a well formed, educated body of women religious for the future.

Secondly, these years of profound pruning and purification begin to place us with the poor of the world in new and significant ways. It is a good place to be and may we remain there until we learn in the marrow of our bones what it means to be poor: needing others and having nothing to control or even offer except ourselves in relationship to others. And may that privileged place keep us deliberately with the poor, with those most in need in our society. Again, can we continue to work across congregations to assure our place among those most in need as we are now doing to address immigration, ecological advocacy, human trafficking, to name just a few areas. This working together has become a way of being for us. Instead of threatening our individual charisms, we find working together enhances them – because these charisms illuminate a way of approaching ministry that together makes our service so much richer. The Solidarity with South Sudan project is a great example of women and men religious from all over the world working together to train indigenous teachers, nurses, pastoral ministers and administrators to build an infrastructure torn asunder by war. Similar efforts are taking place in Pakistan, where Christians are being martyred for their faith. Religious stay because the people are depending on them for a viable infrastructure.

Finally, the quest for God remains central to the call to religious life – this life-long attraction to the strangest attractor of all – God – beyond us – with us - within us – God who keeps breaking in on our lives despite our disbelief and resistance. The world is thirsting for spirituality. Many balk at organized religion because they have not experienced it as relevant to their lives. Yet they seek meaning in a rapidly changing world. We can be a bridge. Spirituality is a vital part of our patrimony. The documents of Vatican II are coming of age. Across this country, motherhouses are already centers for apostolic life and renewal. People come to be nourished spiritually. We can work together with local retreat centers and universities to be resources to parishes. We can host interfaith dialogues and open our doors to those who are marginalized or feel they are marginalized. We might hold poetry forums and discussion groups or simply offer safe space for local groups to meet and talk together.

In the Book of Zachariah, one of the minor prophets who announced the restoration of Israel, we hear the words:

*Yahweh Sabaoth says this: Inhabitants of one city will go to the next and say, "Come, let us go and entreat the favor of Yahweh, and seek Yahweh Sabaoth. I am going myself." And many people and great nations will come to seek Yahweh Sabaoth in Jerusalem to entreat the favor of Yahweh.*

*Yahweh Sabaoth says this: In those days people of every nation and every language will take a Jew by the sleeve and say, "We want to go with you, since we have learned that God is with you."*

Isn't that precisely what we experienced after the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued the mandate to LCWR? Was not the outpouring of support for women religious these past several years from women and men in the United States and around the world an experience of being taken by the sleeve? Were not people saying to us, "We want to go with you since we have learned that God is with you."

Nearly one hundred thousand people sent letters, emails, and petitions to LCWR after the mandate's issuance voicing their concern for the Conference. In one of them, the author wrote:

*You were present at my birth at Good Shepherd Hospital in Portland Oregon. You held my hand on the first day of school at St. Ignatius in Sacramento. You taught me to play the guitar. You helped me learn the centrality of the Eucharist and what it means to "go to confession." You showed me how to be a woman and a Catholic. You challenged me to think smarter, act bolder, and love harder. You were there when I was arrested the first time, putting my body on the line for Jesus and justice. You were always there, seven steps ahead of me and two steps behind Jesus – wiping the face of patients with AIDS, instructing the illiterate coal miner, challenging the values of the World Bank. Always preaching and teaching and living the Incarnate Word of God. In all ways Catholic. In all ways Jesus.*

## **NAMING THE MOMENT AS PRAYER**

Returning to David Tracy's approaches to name the present moment, how would we name this moment in religious life in prayer? What images come to mind? We just heard one from the prophet Zachariah. Another I offer to you is the women at the tomb very early Easter morning. They came to freshen the linens and put the final touches on a body that had been pronounced dead, and found instead, an empty tomb. The body has risen. It looks different but is recognized by the way it lives and moves and has its being. It is in the encounter that the women recognize Jesus. And it is in the encounter that people recognize religious.

The risen form of religious life has been among us for over forty years, since the implementation of our renewal Chapters. The letters we received these years and the women and men who stand in solidarity with us give witness to that truth. We must tend what must die but the activity of God is with the risen body – being a presence, living with moral authority, and always, always with and for the poor.

We are smaller and increasingly so, yet wiser and perhaps more mature as a result of the profound transformation we are experiencing. Something significant has happened to us over the past years and we need time to absorb the power of it. The images of the mean nun with the ruler or the picture of the naïve sister are shattered and must never

be reassembled. We are ecclesial women and stand as adult participants in the Church and in the world. And we must never rest until every trace of discrimination is erased from the institutions in which we engage because such bias is a sin against the full revelation of God.

So how shall we be in these years? How will our small voice be heard? Let us take heart from a story told by Sidney Lanier, who played flute in the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra for many years.

Once, during a rehearsal, the orchestra was moving through a fiery musical passage which was building up to a grand and blaring crescendo. As the cymbals were clashing and the kettle drums rolling and the horns blaring, an impish thought crept into Lanier's mind: "What difference does my flute make with its tiny sound in the midst of this thunderous roar of the orchestra? What if I should stop playing? What if not a note goes forth from my flute? No one will even notice." Whereupon, still holding the flute to his lips, he ceased blowing into the instrument.

Instantaneously, the conductor banged his baton on the podium – and the full orchestra came to a screeching halt. In the deafening silence, the conductor peered from the podium directly at Lanier and roared, "Where is the flute?"

We, like the flute, are a small instrument in the orchestra of the cosmos – very small and very significant. Let us never stop playing our part. May we religious be what Caryl Houselander called Mary so long ago – the steady, faithful Reed of God.

### End Notes

While the essence of this presentation arose from reflection on the many presentations and meetings I encountered while I served as executive director of LCWR 2011-2014, I drew heavily on presentations and writings by Ron Rolheiser, OMI, particularly his insights into the passivity of Christ, presented to the Ministry to Ministers sabbatical program in the spring of 2015 and David Tracy's book, *On Naming the Present Moment*.

I offer the following bibliography which influenced my thinking as well.

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