

**Leadership Conference of Women Religious
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LCWR Presidential Address: Attitudes of Heart and Mind

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In my computer, this presidential address is under the heading "*Nunc Dimittis*." That thought had somehow amused me months before anything had really come to conclusion. When I tried the phrase on some folks I discovered that younger generations had not prayed Compline in Latin, hearing nightly Simeon's canticle welcoming the sight of the child who fulfilled his life's longings and, in a sense, allowed him to retire.

*Now Lord you may dismiss you servant in peace,
according to your word,
for my soul has seen your salvation...*
(Lk. 2: 29-30)

It is a fitting song of gratitude and praise. But of course, we really are not at a point of conclusion, but rather a point of going forward.

We have traveled from Nashville to Houston; that was quite a journey. We have gone from the home of the Grand Ole Opry to that of the Houston Grand Opera. If we stayed here until December we could go there to enjoy a performance of "The Little Prince." We could hear again the wisdom offered by Saint Exupery: "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye." Doesn't that fit well with our desire to act out of a contemplative stance?

In considering what to say this morning about moving forward, I did look back briefly. I recalled the Assembly of 2009. I had not expected to be there, but as I retired from the Curia, (*Nunc Dimittis!*) I was being given the LCWR Outstanding Leadership Award, on the coattails of one of my most highly esteemed LCWR persons—Helen Maher Garvey.

Although both the Apostolic Visitation and the CDF Doctrinal Assessment had been announced shortly before I came home, the gravity of things was not yet as evident. I was rather enjoying being present at the Assembly without an official capacity as "visitor from Rome." I recall, in my acceptance of the award, playing with some Italian words to speak of building bridges, having courage and going forward (*Avanti!*). Little did I know!

In 2012, I was again at the Assembly, now actually as a member. I felt more tension in the atmosphere. There was the nagging question of *why* all of this was happening. I remember posing a rather rhetorical question during open mike time: "Is this about doctrine or docility?" I had no doubt that it was about "both." Some honestly believed we were off track on certain

doctrinal matters; some simply were convinced that we were disrespectful of ecclesiastical authority.

The critical question now is how do we go forward in and beyond 2015? I believe, quite apart from the concrete persons who may have been involved at the time, a significant response to “why?” is explained by a sort of cultural chasm which we have not always recognized adequately.

The Cultural Chasm

A profound issue and goal was and is ecclesial communion. That is an enormous topic. But, for our purposes here, in trying to go deeper into what exemplifies ecclesial communion, I returned to a phrase I had found years ago when writing an article on exemption. Exemption from episcopal jurisdiction was first granted in 628 by Pope Honorius I to an Irish Monastery in Italy. (I know you’ve always wanted to know that!) The goal was to balance the respective ecclesiastical authority of bishops and of monastic religious superiors. The point is, the issue is not new, nor does it involve only women religious.

The phrase that I have found so helpful comes from *Christus Dominus*, the Vatican II Decree on the Bishops’ Pastoral Office in the Church. In the section regarding religious, principles are given for harmoniously carrying out apostolic works in the diocese. Many things are said; some are repeated in *Mutuae relationes* and certainly this will be further developed in that document’s revision. Other points were incorporated into the 1983 Code of Canon Law.

The thing I want to quote is one which cannot be legislated:

*There should be the closest possible coordination of all
apostolic works and activities. This will
depend mainly on a supernatural attitude of heart and mind
grounded on charity. (CD 35.5)*

What supernatural attitudes of heart and mind have we exercised and seen exercised, bringing us to this place? We have spoken of the fruits of contemplative listening to the Holy Spirit, meditating on the Gospels where we learn the attitudes of Jesus’ heart and mind. We have encouraged each other to share our deepest longings. We seek to practice attentive listening and to reverence every person. How can we best cultivate attitudes of heart and mind in ourselves and others which will facilitate collaboration in ecclesial mission...build ecclesial communion?

I found it interesting to note that the Introduction to the Doctrinal Assessment, quotes P. John Paul II, speaking to religious during his 1987 visit in San Francisco. He said: “I rejoice because of your deep love of the Church and your generous service to God’s people. The spiritual vigor of so many Catholic people testifies to the efforts of generations of religious in this land.”

I was there in San Francisco as part of the Commission working with Archbishop Quinn. The thing I remember most, however, is the address of the women representing the laity. I don’t have the exact words, but they were to this effect: “Holy Father, please understand that when we ask questions we are not rebelling against the Church. We have been educated to ask

questions and think critically. We want to understand.” She was more eloquent than that, but her words highlighted one of the roots of cultural misunderstanding. She had realized that behavior which is very normal for a woman in American culture might well be perceived as disrespectful in another setting.

The CDF assessment considered LCWR’s sense of Church diminishing. The concern of the Assessment was, therefore, to assist us in “implementing an ecclesiology of communion.” Many religious were offended. Many of us have spent all of the 50 years since the Council working for the renewal of our institutes and our Church, according to Council teachings. Some say that if we didn’t love the Church, perhaps we would not care. However, we do love the Church, it is our Church, and we do care. It is, among other titles, the Council’s “People of God” Church where everyone’s vocation, life and mission is rooted in Baptism.

Remembering this plea of the laywomen to John Paul II, and returning to some of the conversation during the work on the implementation of the Assessment and the Mandate, I believe I realized anew more of the problem. At some point, a participant in the process stated that certain perceptions of LCWR, unfortunately, had become “institutionalized.” Certain impressions had become hardened into accepted fact, or just habitually repeated without examination. There can be unspoken or even unconscious assumptions. We have to acknowledge, at the same time, that we risk doing the same thing.

Reflecting further on what I am calling a “cultural chasm” there is a gap in understanding which comes from familiar unexamined practices or thought patterns. This brought to mind another statement which has remained with me for decades. They come from a Canadian theologian. I don’t have his exact words, but in effect he said that religious had renewed according to *Gaudium et spes* rather than according to *Perfectae caritatis*. Does that fit your experience? Certainly, many of us remember when the first document of the Council was promulgated in December of 1963—that on the liturgy: we were quickly busy about its implementation.

Almost two years later (October 1965), *Perfectae caritatis*, the document on religious life, was issued. I believe most of us practically memorized the basic message of n. 2, the guidelines for renewal: return to the sources—Scripture, the Gospel and foundational texts, the original inspiration of the institute; and, look forward to the contemporary needs of Church and world. There is more detail, but these principles launched our work.

However one views our efforts at the renewal of our religious lives, and whatever the theologian meant by religious renewing according to *Gaudium et spes*, rather than *Perfectae caritatis*, I ask you: How could we have renewed without studying the entire teaching of the Council? The 1964 document on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, had already spoken of religious life and its place in the People of God. The dogmatic constitution on the Church, and the pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world, are both about the same Church and its expanding relationships in the world. My guess is, most of us also could recite the opening words of *Gaudium et spes*.

The joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties
of the people of this age, especially those who are poor
or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and

hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ.

We needed the whole Council, we were expected to learn about it and we took to it with enthusiasm. I am reminded of my young days in religious life, perched in the bleachers of the high school gym in full habit, reading my little red book of Council documents while fulfilling the role of “designated adult” in the gym so that the girls could play basketball.

While it seems quite clear to me that we needed to know and attend to the attitudes and instructions of the Council as a whole, our perceived emphasis on *Gaudium et Spes*, on the social doctrine of the Church, began to clarify something else. LCWR struggled year after year in visits to Rome with the apparent incomprehension of our emphasis on societal issues rather than specifically religious life topics such as the vows. Why did we have successive assemblies on racism, for example? While racism obviously was also a topic of serious concern to our bishops, it somehow was not seen by some as appropriate as the work of a conference of religious. Nor did LCWR understand why the importance of that topic for religious in our country was not obvious.

I believe I saw another example of this type of “culture gap” misunderstanding when the CDF Mandate recommended removal of the Systems Thinking Handbook from our website. I had never seen it; a number of us had never used it. We looked and saw that it was no longer current and had really been replaced by newer programs on leadership development. We saw no problem in removing it; however, reflection on the question was fruitful.

The handbook worked through a case study of a religious congregation experiencing tensions over Eucharistic celebrations for jubilees. The Handbook was illustrating a process by which differing factions in the congregation could come to deeper understanding of one another; could build communion despite diversities. The criticism of this program came from a perception that it reflected indifference regarding the intrinsic value of the Eucharistic celebration. From that vantage point, the superior would have been expected to provide adequate instruction of the value of Eucharist. It was not seen as a moment for having discussions which, for those judging it, appeared to be relativism, as if doctrine could be kept or changed by discussion. The concern is real, but changing doctrine was not being proposed. The goal was to increase communion through deeper understanding of the cause of tensions.

We somehow were looking at the same realities, but we were standing in different places. We didn't realize that we were experiencing the incomprehension of two groups who did not know each other's deeper assumptions. We risked slipping into talking about each other, without really talking more deeply with each other.

Over the years, there were meetings in Rome with polite exchanges, but with rare occasions of going deeper into matters to test out doubts or possible misunderstandings. I would say that this was not ill will on anyone's part, but real dialogue simply had not begun. Perhaps all left the room thinking that this time they had been understood.

I remember once when one of our officials took the risk of respectfully telling the prefect of that time (I worked with three) that she had found his words in a press interview offensive. He asked her which; I imagine I held my breath as she explained that it was his comment that many works of American religious were “useless.” I don't recall his response in the room, but

he later found the occasion of saying to her, that he did not really think that. There was no time then to pursue the question. But, there would have been no further awareness if the question had not been posed. We were gradually seeing that there were huge cultural chasms of which all seemed unaware; nor did we know how to begin to bridge them.

In a word, as difficult as the last three years in particular have been, we have experienced the positive value of “staying at the table.” We, LCWR officials and the bishop delegates led by Archbishop Sartain, continued to pursue the issues raised by the Mandate, always trying to understand more deeply. Annually, we brought reports of the progress to you through our board meetings and assemblies, seeking your endorsement to continue forward in integrity. At the same time, Archbishop Sartain was navigating our progress through the other bishop delegates and the CDF.

I want to say too, how much we have valued and appreciated the collaboration of the total LCWR membership. Your acceptance of our request for confidentiality at various points, while frustrating to some, made possible the open, honest dialogue which took place. We, LCWR and the bishops, were assured that we were not going to be quoted far and wide, correctly or incorrectly, while things were in mid-stream. Thank you for providing us that “safe space” for dialogue. Later in these days we will be in further conversation about our journey together in these years. We also will have an opportunity to thank Archbishop Sartain at our closing banquet.

Many of you have personal experience of what I have called a “cultural chasm.” You have experienced this as missionaries and/or as international congregations. In such cases, you probably expected to be challenged by a different culture. Bridging cultural chasms is more difficult when you don’t expect the chasm, assume there isn’t one and/or believe that there shouldn’t be. We have made progress in checking our assumptions by asking questions and inviting them.

Symbols of Growth in Communion

During the next days we will be talking further about the learnings of these years. Here I just want to touch back on two “symbols” of positive shifts in relationships. One is the Joint Final Report which signaled the conclusion of the Mandate; the other, the picture of LCWR officials with Pope Francis.

It is not the usual practice to have a *joint* report in such processes. It may sound very sensible to Americans, but normally delegates sent from the Apostolic See, submit their report directly to those who sent them, making recommendations. We saw that more usual pattern in the Apostolic Visitation, although the joint press conference with sister responders was significant. In the case of the CDF Mandate, this was truly a joint report written and worked through by the same people who had engaged in the dialogue.

Both the method and the content attest to a recognized sense of ecclesial communion. The final paragraph of the Report states: “The very fact of such substantive dialogue between bishops and religious has been a blessing to be appreciated and further encouraged. The commitment of LCWR leadership to its crucial role in service to the mission and membership of the Conference will continue to guide and strengthen LCWR’s witness to the great vocation of Religious Life, to

its sure foundation in Christ, and to ecclesial communion.” What was once in doubt is now recognized as the point of departure for going forward.

The specific questions and concerns about the report which were expressed on our survey will be addressed later in the Assembly.

The other public symbol is that wonderful photo of Carol and Marcia, Janet and Joan with Pope Francis and his translator. That was spread across the country by the news media and immediately recognized as a long-awaited public symbol of the communion our sisters feel and desire with and within the Church. One of the reporters said, that picture, itself, is the story. It is a powerful symbol; not a resting place but a launching pad.

While all of these efforts were taking place, life in the Conference and in our congregations was going on. I was a bit taken aback when a sister asked me what LCWR was going to work on now that the Mandate was concluded. I believe Marcia had a similar experience. The question was well meaning, but perhaps asked with little awareness of all that the wonderful staff in the Silver Spring Office does day in and day out to serve us all.

I started rattling off programs and resources for leadership development: the contemplative process, retreats and publications; service to institutes in transition; and issues of social justice including immigration and trafficking, the environment and non-violence, poverty and economic justice. The staff lays the ground work and prepares the programs which will enable us to carry out our LCWR 2015-2022 Call. The CDF Mandate took a lot of time and energy, but it was never our sole focus.

Who are we, and where are we going?

The list of initiatives in the LCWR Call is compelling. They are not new, but are on-going challenges. Some were foreseen in *Perfectae caritatis* and *Guadium et spes*, others are even more deeply identified by *Laudato Si*.

We will be attending to these issues in many ways, in collaboration with many organizations. Increased collaboration avoids duplication of efforts and strengthens the impact of initiatives.

What I want to highlight here is what we said about ourselves in the 2015-2022 Call. Throughout the recent years this Assembly of members has insisted on maintaining our integrity, of being true to who are and aspire to be. The plan for a renewed Call was launched at the post Assembly Board meeting in 2013. It was my first and someone discreetly informed me: “You are *ex officio* a member of this committee.” After many meetings, drafts and revisions—you will remember them from regional meetings—the LCWR Call – 2015-2022 was approved at the 2014 Assembly.

Quite apart from the work on the CDF Mandate, and before its conclusion, this is some of what we chose to say about ourselves. You have heard it many times.

- **“We are ecclesial women, living in hope, rooted in the mission of Jesus.”** We claim our prophetic role and responsibility in the Church. We have committed

ourselves to ground everything in a contemplative stance and to live in right relationship with all of creation and in solidarity with the global community.

- **“We live in a world** filled with the action of God’s creating love and are partners of that divine activity in a time when major social and global change creates both enormous challenge and significant opportunity.” We read of inequity which breeds oppression; unbridled consumption and unfettered capitalism which imperil the common good and of environmental degradation which threatens all God’s creation. (These sentences sound like phrases lifted from *Laudato Si* which had not yet been published.)
- **“We abide in a church** whose members experience a renewed call to live the heart of the Gospel.” The call speaks of our desire to work with others toward a more welcoming Church community; to bring science, theology, and lived-experience into greater dialogue, “and to create safe, honest places for open exploration of the pressing questions of these times.” We own our “longing to pass on a vibrant faith and rich tradition to succeeding generations.” “We desire strengthened relationships between church leaders and the community of the faithful and pray for genuine forgiveness and healing within the Body of Christ.”
- **“We lead congregations** faithful to the call of the Gospel that attempt to bridge the tradition which grounds us and the future which calls us forward.” We are challenged to live on the margins, welcome diversity and honor shifting worldviews. The text recognizes we yearn for “a deepening of mutual respect and trust between women religious and church authorities and desire significant and sustained collaboration with laity.” We acknowledge the challenges faced by many congregations as they look toward the future, but claim to do so, rejoicing in hope.

Our Call for the next seven years really does speak of “attitudes of heart and mind” for going forward. These will shape our approach in carrying out our mission; our attitudes toward the poor and marginalized. They will also be evident in our work with those with whom we disagree; with those by whom we feel injured or unjustly judged. Our commitment to act out of a contemplative stance is a daily challenge.

Attitudes for the Journey

We also have been offered a series of “attitudes of heart and mind” by Pope Francis in very recent times.

Joy. *Evangelii gaudium* opens with a sentence which I have found both consoling and challenging. “The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus.” I am reminded of the expression attributed to St. Teresa of Avila. Her 16th century nuns were familiar with castles and knights and kings. They knew that if the flag was not raised on the King’s castle, he was off on a hunt or to wage war or broker peace; if the flag was flying, he was there. She advised her sisters not to be “sorry saints.” Joy, she insisted, is the sign that the king is at home.

Mercy. Even while we continue this year dedicated to Consecrated Life, Pope Francis has announced an extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy. The “Bull of Indiction” (don’t you love these formal titles!), in plain English, the document announcing this special Holy Year opens with the statement: “Jesus Christ is the face of the Father’s mercy” (*Misericordiae vultus*). Mercy, Francis insists, is not opposed to justice but rather is God’s way of reaching out...offering a new chance. God would not be God if limited only to justice.

Care and Praise. Care for our common home. In *Laudato Si*, “care” recognizes the communion and interrelatedness of all. Care for our common home is care for all of humanity in the interrelatedness, the web of all. We are called to praise of God’s love and to care for all creation.

Dr. C. Vanessa White, professor at Catholic Theological Union, while addressing a recent gathering of Oblate Sisters of Providence and IHM Sisters of Scranton, Philadelphia and Monroe, challenged us: “What you focus on is what you give power to.”

- What do we wish to focus on, to empower as we go forward?
- By what “attitudes of heart and mind” do we wish to be characterized?

The answers we formulate together will shape the way we live out our LCWR Call in going forward. Let us go forward.

Avanti! Laudato Si!