

LCWR Keynote Address
Kansas City, MO
August 2, 2007

St. Joseph's Retreat
Center
Bailey's Harbor, WI

A Marginal Life: Pursuing Holiness in the 21st Century

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I. Introduction

Perhaps the title of this year's LCWR assembly, "The Next Frontier: Religious Life at the Edge of Tomorrow," is a bit imperialistic.¹ It conjures up images of conquered Indians and stalwart white pioneers. The underlying philosophy for "frontier" is "manifest destiny." It is our destiny to extend our grasp, to reach beyond what is currently "ours" and to take from the other. The theological justification in the 1800s was the salvation of heathen souls—a theology that we no longer hold.

Rather, what would it sound like if instead of "frontier," we used "margin," which Webster defines as "the outside limit and adjoining surface of something." "The Next Margin: Religious Life at the Edge of Tomorrow." I agree. It doesn't have the same zip as "frontier," particularly since we are at the beginning of what once was the American frontier. But the substitution does bespeak of a philosophy and theology that is at the heart of Religious Life.

The philosophy underlying the ascetic and cenobitic life was that one could not obtain holiness in the midst of the world. Rather, one needed the solitude of the desert or the rub of community, in order to create the internal silence and disposition in which to hear God speak. The margin is where Religious Life emerged. With Vatican II, Religious

¹ Webster defines "imperialism" as "the policy, practice, and advocacy of extending power and dominion of a nation, esp. by direct territorial acquisitions."

Life was again directed toward the margins—not away from the world but to the very edges of society, which were in desperate need of our compassionate attention. So it is to the margins that Religious Life must again move, in order to be true to its original and renewed impetus toward holiness.

From the perspective of one member of Generation X, “A Marginal Life: Pursuing Holiness in the 21st Century” proposes that the challenges facing congregations, the Church, and, in many respects, the World have both a personal and a corporate dimension. If Religious Life is to regain relevance and authenticity both dimensions must be simultaneously addressed. We have lost our prophetic place on the margins, having gravitated toward the middle of society and fallen off the edge of the Church. The stories in Scripture can provide a compass by which we reorient ourselves so that we may more enthusiastically seek holiness, enliven our charisms, and pursue the Mission of Jesus.

II. What Lens?

According to Philip Sheldrake, “Postmodernism critiques the ‘modernist’ confidence in the powers of human reason to pin down essential truths or to establish definitive meanings. Postmodernism recognizes all interpretations of ‘truth’ are culturally conditioned, contingent and morally flawed as well as intellectually partial.”²

One of the benefits of Post-Modernism—the wholesale critique of modernity and its reliance on objectivity and western assumptions that there is one obtainable “Truth”—is that we are more readily able to recognize the place of subjectivity. If you and I look at the same cluster of clouds, we will doubtlessly see something different. It might look like a giant hand to me, but a spreading tree to you. Post-modernism allows that both you and

²“The Crisis of Postmodernity,” *Christian Spirituality Bulletin* 6 (1996): 7.

I am correct. We are simply viewing the same thing through a different lens. Therefore, I begin with this disclaimer: the opinions offered in this presentation do not necessarily reflect the opinions of LCWR, the Roman Catholic Church, the Dominicans of Sinsinawa or the Dominicans of the U.S. for that matter. Nor do they necessarily reflect the opinions of other women religious who are relatively new to community. What I present may find resonance with you and your experience, but please know I do not hold the answer to the question of the future of Religious Life. From my particular lens, I offer you my critical reflection on my experience of Religious Life and its possible future, in conversation with our tradition.

A bit about my lens. First the obvious. I am a white, middle-class, well-educated woman in her forties. Born in the United States, I have also lived in—not just visited—Morocco, Jamaica and Israel.

I have no memories of the Church before Vatican II. I was the product of the abysmal catechetical preparation of the 1970s—stuck between the Baltimore Catechism and the New Catechism. If I said to you: why did God make you? Those of you educated with the Baltimore Catechism would respond: “God made me to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him for ever in heaven.” I would be forced to make a banner in order to answer! I am a Catholic who grew up without a Catholic subculture, with no sense of tradition, whose sole understanding of what it meant to be Catholic centered on the Eucharist.

I am a Dominican Sister of Sinsinawa, a graduate of the first class of the collaborative Dominican novitiate—which is to say I only know Dominican life and

religious life within the context of collaboration and as broader than my own congregation. I made final profession in 1998.

I am a Biblical Scholar, ministering at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago, where I have the privilege of teaching future ministers of the global church. All of this and more form the lens through which I view the world.

For our purposes one of the most critical factors of that lens is my age, or rather, my generation. It impacts how I view Religious Life today and what I anticipate it will be like into the future. That being said, I'd like to offer you an opportunity to think about and converse about the lenses you possess. And I've focused that reflection—odd as it may seem—on airplanes. I've chosen several images of planes that have historical significance. They have the potential of representing formative moments in your life, or, they are simply history.

Wright Brothers at Kitty Hawk (1903). A case in point. I'm pretty sure that this is history to all of us here. None of us are old enough to remember Wilbur and Orville's first flight. However, Sr. Claude Feldner who celebrated her 90 years of profession as a Sister of St. Agnes just this past month may well have a memory of this event.

Japanese Bomb Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941. The mother of a sister with whom I live remembers WWII vividly. Not the war per se, she was a teenager, but the anxiety of it all. She was a plane-spotter. Her job to help the war effort was to know the enemies' planes and to be able to identify them, should they ever fly over Western New York. My mother remembers walking home from grammar school, looking over her shoulder, afraid that the Japanese were on their way to her home as well. I daresay that both Delphine and Joan still feel a catch in their throats when an old airplane flies overhead.

Enola Gay, the B-29 bomber that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima, Japan, August 6, 1945. The Feast of the Transfiguration. It ended the war in the Pacific, but opened up a new age of horror in warfare. And here, it is not only if you were old enough to be living in 1945, but where you lived. I imagine our Asian sisters have a very different memory that goes with this airplane.

The Space Race between the Soviet Union and the US began in 1957 with the Soviet launch of Sputnik, reached a high point in 1969 when Neil Armstrong walked on the moon—and those of us with television sets watched it in our own homes.

The dropping of Agent Orange as part of the U.S. Military's herbicidal warfare in Vietnam, 1961-1971. Veterans and local folks continue to suffer its effects forty years later. Do you remember the Vietnam War? The Civil Rights Movement? The Women's Liberation Movement.

The Space Shuttle, Challenger explodes 73 seconds after its launch, January 28, 1986. The wholesale optimism of the Reagan Years were dashed as millions watched on television, including school children.

The World Trade Towers are attacked by terrorists and collapse, September 11, 2001. The Pentagon, the seat of American military might, is also struck by another plane. We all can remember this moment. Where we were when we heard, and how we—or our world—will never be the same.

I could have easily used other images, perhaps more positive ones, but these are evocative. These remind us of our experiences of fear, anxiety, sadness. But they also remind us of our stamina, our hope, our willingness to continue even in the face of tragedy. I invite you at your tables to use these images as a starting point for a conversation about your own generational lens. Which of these images are the ones you remember from your childhood, young adult life, mature years? How did the events that they portray impact you? Do you think that the impact is different depending on how old you were when the event occurred?

These images are taken from the geo-political landscape. What images might you have for your religious-spiritual landscape? Is Latin Mass a fond but ancient memory or something you read about in a theology book? (Or more recently in the Pope's latest apostolic letter?!) Is Vatican II a felt experience of renewal or a just a catch phrase you use? Remember John XXIII? I don't? Remember Pope Paul VI? Not me? Remember

John Paul I? There was a John Paul I? Spend some time conversing with each other about the variety of lens through which we view our life as women religious.

Small Group Conversation on Our Generational Lens (15 minutes)

- Which of these images are the ones you remember from your childhood, young adult life, mature years?
- How did the events that they portray impact you?
- Do you think that the impact is different depending on how old you were when the event occurred?
- What images might you have for your religious-spiritual landscape?
- Is Latin Mass a fond but ancient memory or something you read about in a theology book?
- Is Vatican II a felt experience of renewal or a just a catch phrase you use?
- Remember John XXIII, Pope Paul VI? Pope John Paul I?
- Spend some time conversing with each other about the variety of lens through which we view our life as women religious.

III. Possible Paradigms for the Future

The LCWR Planning committee posed and prioritized several questions for my deliberation as I prepared for this presentation.

- What are the challenges for us today—within congregations, in the church and in our world? What biblical insights can we get into these challenges?
- What is your vision of Religious Life for the future and what biblical stories support your vision?
- What are the reasons for religious to be hopeful?
- What voices would you like us to listen to as we contemplate the future of Religious Life?
- In what ways could Generation X see the future as needing to be different from the past?

A second category of less significant questions included: do you see an elephant in the living room? I like that one and thought I'd bring it to the head of the class. The others I hope will be addressed implicitly in the remarks that follow.

Now about the animals in the living room. I'm confident in suggesting that there is an unsightly and unacknowledged animal standing in the midst of most living rooms. My family probably had an entire ark. I doubt that I'm alone in that. The truth is that we all have issues that should be addressed, need to be addressed and will never be addressed. Be that as it may, I would name the animal du jour in the living room of Religious Life as "Indecision." Perhaps this creature looks a bit like Dr. Doolittle's Pushme-Pullyou—a two headed llama with a head at each end of its body, and unable to move in any direction. With regards to Religious Life in the 21st century, I have been told repeatedly that we are at a new moment in history. Old categories no longer work. Old concepts of how to live the Life are no longer valid. It's a new moment. Historically, this, indeed, may be the case. But history is in the looking back. What about the looking forward? Enough of "this is a new moment." I want to know what does this moment mean? Where do we go from here? And the two-headed (or as I will suggest four-headed) Pushme-Pullyou stands incapable of egress in any direction.

Perhaps a different metaphor will be more helpful. This manifestation of Indecision is as if the ship of Religious Life has hit the doldrums—that stagnant area of seas where neither wind nor current cause movement. We may be frantically running about the ship—some of us rowing, others hoisting sails, but we are not doing this in concert with each other, and, hence, we go no where.

I think some of the challenges for us today are

- recognizing the various directions we as individuals and we as community are moving toward,
- evaluating which of these will foster our life and charism as women religious, and, finally,
- abandoning the other possibilities, sailing headlong into the direction we choose.

In light of my own experience, conversations with myriad other religious and critical reflection on the signs of the times, I can recognize four different general “directions” in which religious congregations seem to be moving. Not one of the four is better or worse than the others. The difficulty lies not in the directions themselves but in getting the congregation as a whole to discern together the best approach and to commit together to that end. As I see it the directions include

1. Death with Dignity and Grace
2. Acquiescence to Others’ Expectations
3. Sojourning in a New Land not yet Known
4. Reconciliation for the Sake of the Mission

Each of these options is dynamic in relation to the center, which for us as Christians is the Mission of Jesus. For us as Catholics that center is further surrounded by the Church—the Church as Tradition, the Church as Sacrament, the Church as Hierarchy and the Church as People of God. As we look at these four options, I’m suggesting that each one makes a move in relationship to the Church and more deeply in relationship with the Mission of Jesus. Option 1: Death with Dignity and Grace is clearly “at” the center, having completed movement. Option 2: Acquiescence is in the ring of the Church.

Option 3: Sojourning, as its name indicates, moves away from the center. Option 4: Reconciliation heads straight toward the center, through the Church. With each of these “movements” there is a biblical foundation and a suggestion of how to approach vocations.

A. Death with Dignity and Grace

I begin with Death, not because it is seemingly the most dramatic, but because for most religious congregations this is the default mode in which we are living, or rather dying. Let me begin with a biblical foundation and then draw conclusions for today.

i. Biblical Foundation: Death and Burial of Sarah (Gen 23)

Your bible editors like to subtitle Genesis 23 “Purchase of a Burial Place,” but the story is much more touching and more intimate than that. When we last hear of Sarah, she had demanded that Abraham remove Hagar from the community (Gen 21). Now in this chapter, we are present at Sarah’s death. The text tells us that she lived to be 127 years old. She died not yet seeing the promise made to her husband that their offspring would be as numerous as the stars and that this land in which they sojourned would become their own (Gen 15). She died in Kiriatharba, what is now Hebron in the West Bank, amid an alien people. As the text reads, Abraham, well up in age himself, performs the customary mourning rites for her. In the Ancient Near East, as was true elsewhere, great ritual surrounded the death of a family member, especially the Matriarch. The space that Sarah once occupied within the household had to be acknowledged and commemorated. She was irreplaceable. Her role within the tribe would be passed on to the wife of Isaac, so that we see in the next chapter Abraham commissions his servant to

find a wife for his son. After mourning her place in the family, Abraham must now bury his wife. This poses a dilemma for though he has been promised the land in which he dwells, he does not have the deed as yet. Abraham must go the people of the land—in this case not Canaanites, but Hittites—and purchase a place for burial. His negotiations are successful and until today, Hebron is considered the burial place of the patriarchs (and matriarchs).

This Scripture story presents us with the elements that accompany a good death:

- Recognition of life’s achievements—here summarized in her age at death.
- Appropriate mourning rituals to mark her passing from this state of living to a new state of death.
- Burial—which includes both making preparation and the actual putting to rest.
- Continuation of life—Abraham seeks a wife for his son.

ii. Application

There are approximately 67,000 women religious in the United States. The average age is 69. Candidates and novices entering cannot possible offset the number of sisters who are dying. Around the country, the aging population of religious and the few numbers of entrants are having an impact on the cottage industries that grew up around the post-Vatican II Religious Life. Retreat houses are having to close due to the lack of retreatants or are busy trying to refashion and market themselves for a different generation. Summer institutes for religious are floundering. Mother houses are facing serious financial straights, requiring the down-sizing and even selling of property. The work force for the immigrant Church has been replaced by a stable Church with a growing presence of lay ecclesial ministers.

Faced with this scenario some communities have made valiant choices to die with dignity and grace, to put their house in order, to pass on their charism and to ritualize that who they have been will not continue into the future. They do not invite or accept new candidates. They recognize that they have served the Church well, and now leave room for a new movement of the Spirit. They accept that their congregations were called into being for a specific purpose, and they endeavored enthusiastically to accomplish that purpose. Shoring up the crumbling walls of the institution would never be the desire of their founders. They acknowledge their accomplishments, engage in appropriate mourning and rejoicing, prepare for burial and recognize that others will come along after them. These Sarahs among us are an inspiration.

Unfortunately, these Sarahs are few in number. Other communities suffer from the same scenario—a lessening of new members and the vitality they bring, a charism that is no longer viable in the same old ways we've always done it, an exorbitant focus on retirement and its financial needs, and a wholesale depression that manifests in apathy and individualism. These are the walking dead among us. And they don't even know it. What are the signs of a zombie congregation?

- What's the age of your youngest vowed member? Do young women enter, but leave before profession? Are older women retiring from their lay jobs and then entering your congregation?
- What's the discrepancy between how much you spend on retirement and how much you budget for continuing formation and initial membership? Are your internal communications filled with exciting mission opportunities or retirement options? Do your congregational newsletters read like an AARP magazine?

- How are your sisters living? As couples or singletons, but as they age, are they looking for larger communities in which to “retire”? If you had a newer member would you have several viable living options for her that would allow her to live in community with those at least close to her age?
- What are the topics of conversation when your sisters gather? The exciting new book on spirituality you read? A vital new mission you’ve opened? Or the excitement you felt after Vatican II? The missions you engaged in years ago? What you did during the Civil Rights Movement? How 70 is the new 30? Your fill-in the blank (knee/hip/shoulder) replacement?

As I stated earlier, Death is the default mode for many congregations who are in denial. Since they fail to recognize the signs, they are not able to make proactive choices. Their self-image is stuck in the 1970s, when perhaps they were most avant-garde, most energized, and much more young. At a gathering of my sisters a few years ago, we were discussing how others viewed us. One sister who has spent much of her ministerial life at one of the congregation’s colleges beamed, “Everyone knows the Sinsinawa Dominicans!” A younger sister with whom I live then retold a recent encounter we had had with a prospective landlord, who not only did not know who the Sinsinawa Dominicans were, but wasn’t quite sure what a Catholic sister was either. Needless to say, he did a criminal background check on us! What is even more disheartening is introducing your self as a sister and hearing in reply, “They still have sisters?”

The death of Sarah signaled a change in the status of the family. It allowed for a new matriarch to emerge, who would lead the family facing a new time and new trials. Ritualizing the death of a religious congregation and making appropriate “burial”

recognizes that the sisters have served long and well. Their departure does not signal an end of their charism, but allows it to be made manifest in a new way, in a new time, by another whom we may not yet know.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What feelings arise in you when you think of this option?
2. Is this viable for your congregation? Why or why not?
3. Are there sisters in your congregation who are already living this option?

B. Acquiescence to Others' Expectations

i. Biblical Foundation: Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42)

Another viable option is acquiescence. A biblical illustration is found in Luke's conflictual story about Martha and Mary. I say conflictual because though Luke is often credited with introducing the most women in his narratives, he seldom gives them roles of prominence.³ In fact the only time a woman speaks directly in the Gospel of Luke, which happens to be Martha in our pericope, she is silenced by Jesus.

The story opens with Jesus being welcomed by a woman whose name is Martha. It's odd that no men are present in the household. Lazarus is found in John's Gospel. Probably Martha and Mary are meant to demonstrate two different ways of early Christian women's public behavior. Martha is taking on a masculine role by inviting Jesus to her home and offering him hospitality. Mary sits passively at the feet of Jesus, listening. This pericope reads like a narrative of 1 Cor 14:34-35:

“Women should keep silent in the churches, for they are not allowed to speak, but should be subordinate, as even the law says. But if they want to learn anything,

³ My colleague Barbara Reid, O.P. has an excellent book that investigates more fully the role of Lucan women. See Barbara Reid, *Choosing the Better Part. Women in the Gospel of Luke* (Michael Glazier Books, 1996).

they should ask their husbands at home. For it is improper for a woman to speak in the church.”

In reality, this little passage from Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians is an interpolation, an addition added later and not by Paul. While Martha is busy about the details of service (the Greek word is *diaconia*, from which we get “deacon”), Mary sits quietly listening to the teachings of Jesus. Luke has Jesus commend Mary, for she “has chosen the better part.” Scholars will see a variety of dichotomies in this narrative. Active versus contemplative; masculine versus feminine; assertive woman versus passive woman. For our purposes, however, Mary symbolizes those religious communities who have chosen to acquiesce to the more recent urgings of the Church hierarchy to become more visible and “faithful.”

ii. Application

Not every congregation is giving up the ghost sort to speak. Some have attended to their reality and are making choices that a generation ago would have been anathema to their members. These groups are recognizing the changing atmosphere in the institutional Church, the renegeing on the promises of Vatican II, and the seemingly conservative young adults interested in pursuing a life of holiness through the profession of the evangelical counsels. They are taking seriously Pope John Paul II’s call to pursue holiness first above all else. They are putting on the habit, or continuing to wear the habit with zest. They are renewing pious practices such as adoration and the Rosary. They are returning to the classroom.

Some would critique that they are the nostalgic portrait of a time now passed. But they are flourishing. Young adults are finding in these communities a living image of their romantic view of Religious Life. They are entering. And they are staying.⁴

Mary's choice is commended by Luke's Jesus, and the congregations that choose to acquiesce may find equal encouragement from Church leadership. But they are not simply returning to a life before Vatican II, though outwardly it may appear to be so. They are retrieving structures, symbols and rituals that may have been discarded during renewal, because they feel that these will enable them to live their charism more faithfully in the 21st century.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What feelings arise in you when you think of this option?
2. Is this viable for your congregation? Why or why not?
3. Are there sisters in your congregation who are already living this option?

C. Sojourners in a New Land not yet Known

i. Biblical Foundation: Hagar, the Mother of Another Great Nation (Gen 21:9-21)

The story of Hagar, at first read, is a sad tale. An Egyptian handmaid to a powerful wife of a powerful resident alien is offered to the husband, in order to produce an heir. Misinterpreting these actions as the possibility of release and elevation in position, Hagar flaunts her new status before Sarah. Bad move. Abraham chooses wife over sexual slave, allowing Sarah to do with her property as she wishes. Sarah sorely mistreats Hagar, who eventually runs away. As the story is told from the perspective of

⁴ The National Religious Vocation Conference is initiating an extensive research project to track the number of entrants to religious congregations and their longevity. For preliminary statistics and trends, see its February 28, 2007 press release (<http://vocation-network.org/articles/read/113>).

Israel, God intervenes and commands that Hagar return to her abuser. A shred of hope is given her. God will bless her son, who will become a founder of another great nation. She returns dutifully at the word of a foreign God not her own.

Later when Sarah spies Ishmael, the son of Hagar, playing with her son, Isaac, she again intercedes to Abraham. "Drive out that slave and her son! No son of that slave is going to share the inheritance with my son Isaac!" (Gen 21:9). Abraham is distressed—not because of Hagar—but because of his son. Again God promises this child, too, since he is an heir of Abraham, will be a great nation. Abraham sends the two off into the wilderness of Beersheva with only a skin of water and a bit of bread. When the water is gone, she places her son under a shrub and walks a distance away, for she cannot bear to watch him die. As luck would have it, God hears the child's cry (not the mother's?) and provides water in the desert. The text continues, "God was with the boy as he grew up" (Gen 21:17). But the story never says that God was with Hagar.

The narrative of Hagar is also a tale of paradox. Hagar may be a member of the household, but she is a slave, an Egyptian slave at that. She is property for the woman in power, Sarah, to abuse and to dispose of. She is sexually exploited by the man of power, Abraham. The God of Israel is not her God, and sees little need to protect or care for her. But Hagar is, nonetheless, paralleled with Abraham. God promises Abraham that he will be the father of a great nation (Gen 12), a similar promise God also makes to Hagar (Gen 21:18). Abraham sends for a wife from among his kin for his son Isaac (Gen 24:4). Hagar will find a wife among her own Egyptians for her son, Ishmael (Gen 21:21). Sarah needed her man to fulfill her wishes, pleading with Abraham twice to take care of that upstart. But Hagar has no such man, and no such limitation. When last seen, Hagar is

leading her son through the desert, bereft of God's guidance for her, with neither man nor family for support or protection. A seemingly vulnerable woman sojourning in an inhospitable land.

ii. Application

The dynamic option for Religious Life, which I am calling, Sojourning, is much more difficult to discuss, since it involves moving beyond the Church, even beyond Jesus. A sojourning congregation is no longer ecclesiastical. It has grown beyond the bounds of institutional religion. Its search for the Holy may have begun rooted in Jesus as the Christ, but deep reflection, study and prayer have opened it up to the spirit of the Holy in all of creation. Religious titles, institutional limitations, ecclesiastical authorities no longer fit this congregation, which in most respects is Post-Christian.

When religious communities embraced the spirit of renewal in the 1970s, they took seriously that the world was no longer the enemy, that a sense of ecumenism required encountering the holy "other," and that the God of Jesus might well be the God of Moses and the God of Mohammed. The works of Thomas Merton encouraged an exploration of the nexus between Eastern and Western religious practices. The emergence of the women's movement with its concomitant critique of religion invited women everywhere to use a hermeneutical lens of suspicion when reading the androcentric Scriptures and the texts of the Tradition. With a new lens, women also began to see the divine within nature, the value and importance of the cosmos, and that the emerging new cosmology encouraged their spirituality and fed their souls.

As one sister described it, "I was rooted in the story of Jesus, and it remains at my core, but I've also moved beyond Jesus." The Jesus narrative is not the only or the most

important narrative for these women. They still hold up and reverence the values of the Gospel, but they also recognize that these same values are not solely the property of Christianity. Buddhism, Native American spirituality, Judaism, Islam and others hold similar tenets for right behavior within the community, right relationship with the earth and right relationship with the Divine. With these insights come a shattering or freeing realization—depending on where you stand. Jesus is not the only son of God. Salvation is not limited to Christians. Wisdom is found in the traditions of the Church as well as beyond it.

Sojourners have left the religious home of their fathers and mothers and are traveling in a foreign land, mapping their way as they go. They are courageous women among us. And very well may provide a glimpse into the new thing that God is bringing about in our midst. Who's to say that the movement beyond Christ is not, in reality, a movement into the very heart of God? A movement the ecclesiastical system would not recognize. A wholly new way of being holy that is integrative, non-dominating, and inclusive. But a whole new way that is also not Catholic Religious Life. The Benedictine Women of Madison are the most current example I can name. Their commitment to ecumenism lead them beyond the exclusivity of the Catholic Church into a new inclusivity, where all manner of seeking God is welcomed. They are certainly religious women, but they are no longer women religious as it is defined by the Roman Catholic Church. They choose as a congregation to step outside the Church in order to step into a greater sense of holiness. Theirs was a choice of integrity, insight and courage.

Like Hagar wandering the wilderness with neither guide nor Israel's God, the congregations that choose the way of the sojourner may leave the land of religious

familiarity, but they will also become a great nation, for women and men are hungering for their leadership, insights and inspiration.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What feelings arise in you when you think of this option?
2. Is this viable for your congregation? Why or why not?
3. Are there sisters in your congregation who are already living this option?

D. Reconciliation for the Sake of the Mission

In a single issue of *NCR*, I found these stories:

- Phoenix diocesan officials denied Edwina Gateley the right to lead a retreat at the Franciscan Renewal Center because she would not allow officials to tape her presentations. The diocese was concerned since “she had a reputation for giving statements that are antithetical to Catholic teaching.” According to them, rather than prejudge her, they would hear for themselves. Understandably Edwina found the whole affair intrusive and did not present at the retreat.⁵
 - Wow! What power one woman can wield that dioceses send out snoops. Reminds me of a gospel passage.
 - So the scribes and chief priests “watched him and sent spies who pretended to be honest, in order to trap him by what he said, so as to hand him over to the jurisdiction and authority of the governor” (Luke 20:20). Jesus wasn’t fooled. Never was Edwina.
- That was page 6, now on page 8, we learn that “German theologians demand doctrinal office restructuring.” Seems a hundred German theologians supported a call to “intelligent restructuring” of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith

⁵ Dennis Coday, “Catholics Protest ‘silencing’ of Gateley,” *NCR* 43 (June 22, 2007), 6.

proposed by Professor Emeritus Peter Hünerman.⁶ I can imagine what the former head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith thought about that.

- And finally, the centerfold, “Finding ‘Herstory.’ Pilgrims in Rome examine women’s leadership roles in the early Christian Church,” by Margot Patterson.⁷ Towards the end of this piece, Margot interviews one of the participants. Katherine Paul had been a pastoral associate, a hospice chaplain and most recently a pastoral administrator in a Michigan diocese until a change in the administration stopped her—and any other lay pastoral administrators—from preaching. Paul says, “I happen to be part of a church that still looks at me primarily in terms of my physical attributes rather than my gifts.”⁸
- Lay women giving retreats to religious women, European theologians outraged at the condemnation of another theologian’s work, ecclesial lay ministers having their job description suddenly circumscribed. All we needed in this one edition of *NCR* was an article on the clergy sex abuse scandal.

It is painfully clear to most Catholics, even the ones who vote Republican and listen to Mother Angelica, that all is not right between the faithful and the leadership in our Church. Seems the more theologically educated the American laity become, the more edgy the hierarchy. And there’s a growing concern about the next generation of young Catholics. In a report on Young Adult Catholics, Dean Hoge et al outlined broadly the differences among Pre-Vatican II Catholic Spirituality, Post-Conciliar and today’s young

⁶ John Allen, “German Theologians Demand Doctrinal Office Restructuring,” *NCR* 43 (June 22, 2007), 8.

⁷ Margot Patterson, “Finding ‘Herstory.’ Pilgrims in Rome examine women’s leadership roles in the early Christian church,” *NCR* 43 (June 22, 2007), 10-13.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 13.

adult spirituality.⁹ The highly-sentimental, ritualized, and devotional spirituality of the 1940s-50s gave way to an emerging sense of ecumenism, inculturation, a more positive affirmation of the world at large, and the Charismatic Movement. Now young adult Catholics see themselves as spiritual and not necessarily tied to traditional religion. They continue to hold the Virgin Mary as a cultural icon of Catholic identity. This is true of both Latino/a and non-Latino/a young adults. However, despite what we may be perceiving in our newer members, “overall the disassociation of many young adult Catholics from traditional forms of Catholic devotionism and from the saints is having important effects,” notes Hoge.¹⁰

The norms and patterns of this older spirituality promoted a distinct Catholic ethos and mythos. They fostered a distinct Catholic identity and set Catholics a part from non-Catholics in unequivocal ways. They also facilitated lay linkage to the institutional Church and built community.¹¹

Lay ecclesial ministers are feeling disenfranchised. Catholic theologians are denied academic freedom. Religious and lay women feel scrutinized simply because of their biology. Gays and lesbians desire to participate as fully human, fully sexual Catholics within their parishes. And young adults are drifting away from the very elements that once strengthened religious ties, set moral high ground, and created community. The hierarchy of our Church is right to feel alarmed. What is at stake is the very heart of the Church itself. But the cardinals and bishops may be so busy putting out brush fires that they fail to see the coming conflagration, at least as concerns the American church.

⁹ Dean R. Hoge, William D. Dinges, Mary Johnson, Juan L. Gonzales, Jr., *Young Adult Catholics. Religion in the Culture of Choice* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001), particularly pages 149-217.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

i. Biblical Foundation: The old things have passed away. Behold! New things have come (2 Cor 5:17-20)

In Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, he uses a common political term of his day, that of "reconciliation," and reinterprets it for his Christian community.

So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come. And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (2 Cor 5:17-20).

The first century Christian community of Corinth was not so different from our Church today. Rival factions fought over who was most faithful, most "catholic" with a small "c." Cultural influences infiltrated the nascent communities and caused disputes, disagreements and disorder. The term Paul uses, *καταλλάσσω*, which we translate "to reconcile" is defined as bringing together opposed parties in the political realm, often used of the peacemaking that occurs after a battle. It also has the connotation of bringing someone into friendship with God. If we cannot be reconciled with each other, how can we hope to be in friendship with God?

ii. Application

But this reconciliation of which Paul speaks and which we so desperately need is not easily obtained, measurable immediately, or likely the desire of all parties involved.

According to Robert Schreiter,¹² a colleague of mine, the Christian perspective on reconciliation includes the following:

1. It is God who initiates and brings about reconciliation.
2. Reconciliation is more a spirituality than a strategy.
3. Reconciliation makes of both victim and oppressor a new creation.
4. The story that overcomes the experience of conflict and violence is the story of the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus.
5. Reconciliation embraces all dimensions of reality.

The process of reconciliation begins not with the oppressor but with the victim who has recognized in God's healing grace that God is on the side of the lowly, the broken, the abused. Backed by God's assurance, they gain the strength to initiate reconciliation with their oppressor. After meeting with his torturer and offering his forgiveness, Joe Seramane, now director of the Justice and Reconciliation Department of the South Africa Council of Churches, noted, "it is through reconciliation that we regain our humanity. To work for reconciliation is to live to show others what their humanity is."¹³

Are we not victims of patriarchy within our society and church? Have we not—individually and corporately—felt the heavy hand of church politics? Has not the rigidity of the hierarchy set a poor example for its priests, who, formed in a spirit of domination and dogma, become not servants of Christ but stalwart soldiers of the Vatican? And therefore, as vocal victims, aren't we the best ones to extend an invitation to be reconciled?

¹² Robert J. Schreiter, "Reconciliation as a Missionary Task," *Missiology* 20.1 (Jan. 1992): 3-10.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 9.

Additionally, Schreiter notes that those who initiate reconciliation must stand on the margins, pointing to the possibility of another world, one reconciled with God, marking “not the end of the world, but the entry into a new and better one.”¹⁴ Neither the Vatican nor we are able to envision how the Church will look if the women religious who have given their lives for the Mission of Jesus as embodied in his church on earth, earnestly seek reconciliation with the very men who control the power in but not the Spirit of the Church.

One option for religious congregations standing on the edge of the 21st century is to become ambassadors for Christ, initiating reconciliation. Reconciliation first with our hierarchical church from which we have experienced abuse, oppression, neglect and domination. If there is to be a future for women religious that upholds our dignity as reflections of the divine equal to that of our brothers, respects our baptismal promises, and honors our commitment to the Mission of Jesus, we must first be reconciled with the institutional Church. Such an effort will cost us dearly. As Mary Katherine Hilbert noted:

When the climate in church or society does not welcome voices that differ, women and men with an authentic passion for the proclamation of truth need the courage and integrity required to speak the truth they see and to take the consequences for their speech...Even more painful than the criticism, resistance, and threat that arise from speaking challenging words to those outside the church is the suffering that can result from speaking one's perception of the truth within the church.¹⁵

¹⁴ Ibid., 10.

¹⁵ Mary Catherine Hilbert, *Speaking with Authority. Catherine of Siena and the Voices of Women Today* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001), 95-96.

This congregational commitment recognizes what has gone unsaid for too long. We have lost sight that we are ecclesial women. We have tired of the condescension, and we have opted instead for ministry outside the Church. We may have some members who continue as persistent widows before an unjust judge, but those sisters are few, and largely unsupported by the congregation as a whole. We may not avail ourselves of the Sacraments, because we are angry—not about the Eucharist itself—but about the ecclesial deafness that refuses to hear the call of the Spirit summoning not only celibate males, but married men and women to serve at the Table of the Lord. We are on the verge of extinction, not because of some cataclysmic event, but because for the last thirty years or so, we have slowly removed ourselves from Church circles, and have failed to recognize when we were no longer needed as a work force, that perhaps the Spirit had a new call for us.

Perhaps we should look to Catherine of Siena, Doctor of the Church, for inspiration. As Mary Katherine Hilker in her 2001 Madeleva Lecture on “Speaking with Authority” noted:

The authority of women’s speech does not come, finally, from political roles or ecclesial position, but from the truth of words spoken, the authenticity of the speaker, and the relationship of trust and genuine concern that allows one to speak not only words of encouragement, but also words of challenge.¹⁶

Those words must first begin with the address, “My brother bishops...” Until we as congregations of women religious initiate a process of reconciliation with our ecclesiastical brothers, we cannot hope to have much of an impact elsewhere. As our mothers used to say, “charity begins at home.” Or as we hear in the First Epistle of John

¹⁶ Hilker, *Speaking with Authority*, 65.

“for whoever does not love a brother whom (s)he has seen, cannot love God whom (s)he has not seen” (1 Jn 4:20).

Because in many respects we stand in the awkward position between the laity and the clergy, and because we are, in fact, professional women of and for the Church, we are the best ones to extend a hand of unity and forgiveness. I’m not naïve. I expect that hand will be bitten on more than one occasion, or at least ignored. But that doesn’t deny that the Spirit of God has strategically placed us at this crossroads. We are fond of calling ourselves prophets, and naming our own actions as prophetic. Well, the true prophet never wants the title, and real prophetic actions cost. Shall we line up with Miriam, Deborah, Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Catherine of Siena? Or shall we excuse ourselves because we are too old, too financially-strapped, too disenchanting, too disaffected?

But if our congregations do take this less traveled path, it will require a congregation-wide commitment, an appropriate attitude of openness, a deep and continual prayer life, and formal training in theology, scripture, and ecclesiology as well as methods of peace-making and reconciliation.

If you choose this model, you will no longer desire vocations so as to improve your numbers or lengthen your congregation’s life. You will fervently desire vocations, You’ll work hard to get your house in order, so that you are worthy to receive them, because you will recognize that you will not finish this important and vital task on which you have set out. The mission of Jesus will not be completed by your hand. The hierarchy’s abuses of power, shameful behavior and deafness to your cries for equality will not be eradicated because of your efforts. This move toward reconciliation and healing is only the beginning.

Pray that new sisters will join their youth and vitality with your wisdom and insight. Prepare them well. Educate them so that they stand with confidence head to head with their brothers, the clergy. Then let the sword you swung at ecclesiastical injustice be turned into a plowshare, and let those who come after you turn the new soil, plant the next seeds of hope, of justice, of love,—and dare I say— of equality for our Church. Trust that the harvest of reconciliation comes on God’s time, not our own.

Reconciliation is not the only choice, but it is my choice, because it is also my Church. And with St. Paul, I want to be about that new creation, for “the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come.” My sisters, the Mission of Jesus compels us and the Church in crisis begs us to becoming an active reconciling presence.

Questions for Discussion:

1. What feelings arise in you when you think of this option?
2. Is this viable for your congregation? Why or why not?
3. Are there sisters in your congregation who are already living this option?

IV. Conclusion

As I began acknowledging my particular lens, I must now also admit that my four options are first, from my reading of the current status of communities and congregations; second, numbered at four only because of the limitations of my imagination and our time here, and finally, as the name applies, are only options. What you choose with your congregations is up to you, the Spirit and your charism.

In your conversations around the table, I imagine that for each option you could name sisters in your community who have already chosen that direction. In fact, part of the difficulty for religious congregations today, as I see it, is precisely that we are not

united. We like to say in my community, “When you’ve met one Sinsinawa Dominican, you’ve met one Sinsinawa Dominican.” Is that a good thing? For the most part, we no longer have distinctive dress, distinctive housing, distinctive ministries. And if our corporate identity is vague with some members opting out, some members acquiescing, some members leaving Christianity all together, and some members desirous for peace and reconciliation, what are we together anyway? No wonder young, intelligent, God-seeking women do not find us attractive. We don’t find ourselves attractive. Nor necessarily vital or relevant.

Back to that animal in the living room. If we continue to feed Indecision, it will cause our imminent decline. If we do not make a decision about who we are and who we want to be, the decision will be made for us. You are the leaders of your congregations. You have the grace of the office and the Spirit of God rests clearly and firmly on your shoulders. Religious life was never meant to be a democracy. Not every sister will agree with you. But it is your holy task to provide vision and direction for your congregation. Make the hard choices. Begin first with the animal in your living room.

My hope as a relatively new member of Religious Life is that whatever direction our various congregations choose—Death with Dignity and Grace, Acquiescence, Sojourning or Reconciliation—that we go there with authenticity and integrity. And that we go there together. Such a task may move us toward the margins, but most assuredly it will deepen our holiness.