

**Response of Margaret Brennan, IHM
Recipient of the 2010 LCWR Outstanding Leadership Award**

LCWR Assembly
Dallas, Texas
August 13, 2010

GIFT...
In gratitude ... and awe
A Response

Thank you – thank you very much for honoring me with the LCWR Leadership Award. I am enormously grateful – a bit startled – and somewhat overwhelmed that I should be given this honor and recognition in the “Anna years” of my life.

But perhaps, like the Anna of the Scriptures, and in the spirit of that wise old prophetess, I can offer an anthem of praise to God as she did, as we too wait expectantly “*for the freeing of Jerusalem ...*” in *our* own time ... and at *this* time.

When Jane Burke called me with this surprising and astounding news, I was in my car returning from Toronto. I had just crossed the bridge between Sarnia and Port Huron on my way to Detroit, driving in the midst of a heavy thunder storm. The sky, opening in such a dramatic way, was a wonderful accompaniment to my incredulous thoughts and feelings ... the rumblings overhead like a drum-roll for for an *ancient mariner* perhaps?!

Days and weeks have passed since that afternoon ... and for many hours, over many days, I have pondered the *why* of it ... *why me? why now?... in my 86th year?!*

In retrospect I thought that perhaps how I could best respond as one of the “elders” of the LCWR, and in this time of Vatican Investigation, is to testify once again to the wonder of the beginning years when the Conference was first invited into existence by Pius XII in 1952. As we know, and maybe need to remember, it was not a grass-roots organization.

Though hardly remembered as a liberal Pope, Pius XII authored several of our most important encyclicals – *Mediator Dei* and *Mystici Corporis* – as well as *Divino Afflante Spiritu* which opened a new freedom in interpretation of the scriptures. In recent years, the reputation of Pius XII has been somewhat tarnished by problematic relationships with the Holocaust which came to light in later years. Yet, he, never-the-less, in the post-war years of the second world war, realized that the initiatives, education and power of the American Sisters would be a powerful instrument for the transformation of society.

It startles us a bit today when we reflect that our major superiors of a past time, were somewhat reluctant to take up the mandate of Pius XII ... content as we were with the individuality and charisms of their (and *our*)own congregations, the cut and color of our

habits and head-pieces, the burgeoning ministries in schools hospitals and social agencies, the full novitiates, the construction of juniorates. We had the NCEA (The National Catholic Education Association), the NHA (the National Health Association) the Sister Formation Movement. What more did we need?

And so it was that a period of time elapsed before on November 24, 1956 (nearly five years after the Pope had expressed his hopes) that almost 250 heads of American Communities gathered in Chicago to discuss once more the mandate of Pius XII. A simple intervention of one of the participants ended the doubt and the debate. Mother Marie of the Ursulines took the floor and with the simple statement *“Rome wishes it, and, as obedient children of the church, there should be no hesitancy”*.

The Conference was born.

As a relatively young, inexperienced, and newly elected General Superior I attended my first meeting of the CMSW (the Conference of Major Superiors of Women Religious) in 1966. It was in its tenth year.

Sister Mary Luke Tobin, the President, had returned from Rome. As an auditor and the only American Woman Religious at the Council, she had been assigned to the Commission in charge of drafting the *The Church in the Modern World*. Cardinal John Dearden of Detroit, the convener, allowed the auditors to speak and Luke joined fully in the struggle to word its prophetic message.

As Mary Daniel and Lora Ann point out in their book, *The Transformation of American Catholic Sisters*, Luke, on her return from these last sessions of the Council, became literally, *“a roving cheerleader for its themes ... She crisscrossed the country bringing its themes to congregation after congregation”*.

Mary Luke died on August 24th 2006. She was ninety-eight years old. The description of the death of Moses, that prophet of prophets, in a way describes her as well – with a *slight* difference of age. The book of Deuteronomy records his death –

*Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died,
his eye undimmed, his vigour unabated ...Dt. 34:7*

At the national meeting of LCWR in August of 2006, Luke was in the Infirmary – close to death. When asked by the President of the Loretto Sisters if she had a message to send to the Conference, Luke raised her arm, put it straight out ahead of her and said with characteristic enthusiasm and yes, even with authority. *“Carry on...”*

In the immediate post-Vatican years, I met the women in LCWR Leadership who, formed by the challenges of Vatican II, would forever influence and energize my own thinking and did, in Mary Luke’s words, *...“carry on” ... Angelita Myerscough, Betty Carroll, Francis Borgia, and*

Francine Zeller, Barbara Thomas, Joan Doyle, Helen Flaherty, Bette Moslander, and so many others ... and perhaps most of all, the steady, wise, discerning presence of Mary Daniel Turner.

In the post-Conciliar years the Conference has met many challenges from other times and other events - changing its title, rewriting statutes which became by-laws, taking ownership for its future, entering into the issues of the day, and indeed, struggling today, it would seem, for its very life and existence - the object of search and scrutiny.

The post-modern world put us in touch with the need for new expressions of our Christian Faith. Some years earlier Teilhard de Chardin, objecting to the phraseology of "*post-Christian*" preferred the expression "*trans-Christian*". For him the Christian Faith needed to reexamine its relationship between Christ and a universe which had grown fantastically immense ... and he owned that the Incarnate Word had a *cosmic* relation to the universe as well as a purely historical one.

"The situation is simultaneously tragic and magnificently clear", he wrote, " ... If only Rome would start to doubt herself at least, a little!"

How often we too, in a different time, and in a difference place may have felt somewhat the same for reasons, far other than Teilhard's, but coming as well from a lived experience of the Church in a changed world.

In this moment of LCWR history, when its very meaning and history has been called into question, I feel extraordinarily honored and humbled to be able to express a word of wonder and of gratitude for *Who* and *What* we are.

I do believe that the LCWR is *GIFT* ... gift not of our own making ... but given to us... and entrusted to us. And I do believe, as well, that this time of Apostolic Visitation may be one of its finest hours.

This evening I share a poem with you entitled *Gift* by W.S. Merwin - the 2009 U.S. Poet Laureate. Surely the author of this poem was not thinking of LCWR when he crafted his thought. Very likely, he may not have even have heard of us.

But then, good poetry, more often than not, escapes its author in the end, becoming instead the property of *whoever* and to *whomever* it speaks ... resonating with deep feelings, opening minds and hearts with its message and meaning as it touches and speaks to others.

The Gift of LCWR for me is just *that* ... a *Gift* ...and the "*I*" can easily become a "*we*." And so ... quoting the words of the poet W.S. Merwin, and using poetic license, I speak his words to us ...

*We must trust what was given to us ... if we are to trust anything
What did it not begin what will it not end ...
We have to hold it up in our hands as our ribs hold up our hearts*

*We must be led by what was given to us ...
We have to let it open its wings and fly among the gifts of the unknown ...
And in the mountain ... on this mountain
We must turn again to the morning ...
and to be led by what was given to us ...
as streams are led by it
and braiding flights of birds
the grouping of veins the learning of plants
the thankful days
breath by breath.*

I confess to a ambivalence and ambiguity in the poem ...
to what I cannot name ...
and to what escapes my grasp ...
And yet ...
like all good poetry it holds a mystery ...
and often one that goes beyond the author's meaning
as well as the reader.

I have placed copies of this poem on each table.
It says much more profoundly what I would like to have said in gratitude this evening.
I hope that you will find meaning in it a message, a challenge, a consolation, a call from and to
God, the Nameless One, Untouchable, and Free ...

Once again,
I am so grateful to receive this award.
And I receive it in the name of all of those women with whom I ministered in the early years
and the recent years ... and to be able to be present this evening in mind and memory with all
those whom you have honored before me ... named and unnamed.

And most especially, I receive it in gratitude for the life, support, and continuing inspiration that
I receive from my own congregation ...
The Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters from Monroe, Michigan.

Thank you.

*Margaret Brennan, IHM
Monroe, Michigan*