

Comunión “En Salida”:¹

An Apostolic Call for our time in Religious Life

LCWR Presidential Address August 2018, S. Teresa Maya, CCVI

Why now? Hope in Communion

We have been called to leadership during extraordinary times! The much-anticipated “change of epoch” is upon us in full force. Just thinking of the events of the last year confirms that we need to understand the “why” of our leadership in light of the times we live. I remain stunned by how the forces of nature and world events have shaken us. We have been blown away and drenched by devastating hurricanes; scorched by fires that rage even today, and have experienced violence at inconceivable levels. We have seen our young people rise in desperation, and witnessed the next level of struggle for the rightful dignity of women. A refugee crisis has shaken the ethical grounding of this nation. Our Church is still experiencing the after-shocks of the moral earthquake of the abuse crisis. We have watched international alliances fall apart and entire societies the world over clamor for change. This has not been a year to stay at home!

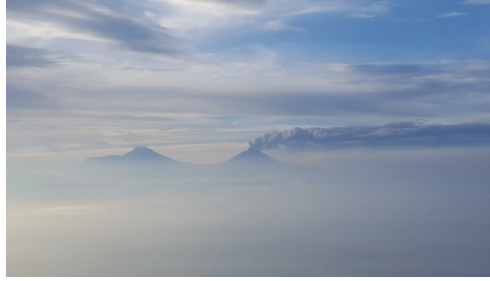
When Margaret Wheatley stated in her keynote at LCWR two years ago that things would get worse before they got better, I did not believe her. Today, I know she was right. Things have indeed become worse. We are witnessing the full breakdown of the institutions that sustained us through the Twentieth Century. We are standing on the much-foretold threshold.²

As I reflect on the past year, what stays with me are the natural disasters - perhaps because they came so close to those I know and love - in Texas after Harvey, in Puerto Rico after Irma, in California with the wild fires and, of course, in Mexico City with the earthquake.

¹“*En Salida*” is used in reference to Pope Francis’ call “*Iglesia en salida*,” a Church that goes forth.

² Margaret Wheatly referred to her conversation with Pema Chödrön: “I was talking to her about my despair for the state of the world, and she said very quietly, “You know, Meg, it’s going to get a lot worse.” I found that to be the most cheerful statement she’s ever given me, because I know it’s true,” LCWR Assembly Keynote: “Finding Ground in the Age of Groundlessness,” Dr. Margaret Wheatley, August 10, 2016. Pat Farrell at the same Assembly said “The world around us teeters on the edge of both peril and promise. Breakdown and breakthrough tussle with each other. The path forward is hidden in fog,” LCWR Assembly Keynote.

On the return flight to San Antonio after visiting our sisters, ministries and my family after the earthquake, I was met by this image outside the airplane window:



The sight reminded me that I grew up near four volcanos. This one in particular, *Popocatepetl*, remains active and was shaken into action by the earthquake, and even as recently as last week!

As hard as I have tried to walk away from the question of what it means to live next to a volcano, I cannot. I keep returning to it. The haunting images of Kilauea's lava in Hawaii and the grey mud after Volcán de Fuego in Guatemala claimed my imagination even further: What does it mean to live so close to a highly probable eruption? How can all those communities continue to stay next to a volcano?

Throughout the past year, the parallel to the present moment of religious life has not been lost on me. As religious we are also living close to a "final eruption" that will wipe out what we have come to know, struggle with and love about this life, everything. How ready are we, really?

But then, the image shifted a few months ago, during a table conversation with friends. Alide shared that she lived close to Mt. St. Helens. Intrigued, I asked if they had been there during the eruption, wondering what it was like, how they got out, what happened afterwards. She described the ensuing months after the eruption and then paused to ask, "**Do you know about the wildflowers?**" Puzzled, we all shook our heads. She then added that over the following years, they had seen the most beautiful wildflowers ever, in fact, some they had never seen before. She must have read the disbelief on my face, and immediately put *Siri* to work. The grey images of volcanic ash turned into color on Alide's iPhone screen. Gently, the conversation turned from obliteration and destruction to beauty and color. I learned from George about the Mt. St. Helens' blown glass which uses the ashes to produce amazing color, I learned about the blue, red and green glass and about the relation with Chihuly glass making.

Weeks later, I even received a beautiful gift as a result of our conversation: a Mt. St. Helens' glass egg.



Yes, as religious today we are living next to another kind of active volcano and our level of preparedness varies. As leaders of our communities we stare at our respective volcanoes almost every day, sometimes in a funeral, or the closing of a ministry, or the final sale of our motherhouse. We know more is coming. We know the big eruption is coming. Yes, we have been dealing with the minor ones, and yes, there is ash already around us. Like communities living close to volcanoes, we have been trying to be prepared. We have planned for the big one. We have been divesting, dealing with property, decluttering, arranging for the care of our members. Some days I wonder: Is this our principal call as leaders of religious institutes at this time?

After I saw the wildflowers, I realized my questions demanded trust. This egg sits by my desk as a reminder that “there is color in the ashes.” I believe in the color because we have been faithful. We have absolutely nothing to be ashamed of. We did everything we were supposed to do by taking the Vatican Council II renewal to heart. We know this in the heart of our communities. We know this together, young and old. We have been faithful women. This same faith will allow us to look beyond the ashes to the color that they make possible.

Because of our faith, we know in our hearts that getting ready for that “final eruption” is not enough. Once all the planning is done, we must ask, what is ours to do with the rest of the time? What are we to do with the energy and time we do have, with the collective wisdom among us now? We have been in emergency mode for so long, sometimes watchful, sometimes in denial, sometimes just fearful; busy about the preparing, simplifying, deinstitutionalizing, but it is not enough!

I remember a book I had to read as the *mentee* in our sponsorship committee years ago, *After We're Gone*.³ I followed the steps with missionary zeal, even translated the book into Spanish. Then, one day I realized the transfer of leadership was well under way, all our ministries, even the ones in Latin America, are led by wonderful lay men and women; yet we, the Sisters, are still

³ Mary Kathryn Grant and Sister Patricia Vandenberg, *After We're Gone: Creating Sustainable Sponsorships*, 1998.

here. Literally, “*We are not gone yet*”. And, judging by our average age and our longevity, it is going to be a while “before we are gone!”

Our mission as leaders for this time is as simple as it is ancient: community. This is what we do best; this is what we have always done through all our ministries. We lead for community. There is nothing more important, more radical, more necessary for us than to lean into our apostolic call to nurture and foster community wherever we find it, wherever we are, with whatever means we have, whether it is prayer, solidarity, presence, sponsorship, or our blessing.

Nature itself is challenging the fierce individualism of our culture, an individualism that is in the air we breathe, the creeping individualism that has been slowly taking grip of our institutes. For all the times we have fallen into the temptation of “doing it alone,” or “thinking individuals need to pull themselves up, out of ... or through something.” Every disaster this year, natural or social, has reminded us that we need each other. The images of people in solidarity with others should also not be lost in our reflection on the past year whether it was in Houston, Guatemala or Hawaii. Collectively, we have come to learn that the biggest challenges can only be faced in community.

Pope Francis reminds us in his most recent exhortation that “no one is saved alone.”⁴ [*“Nadie se salva solo”*] Eruptions and disasters require community. Preparedness for what is coming needs to be done in community. The only way for us to hope in this moment in time is as community:

Hope is the gift of communion.

Ultimately, the task of our leadership is to make the color real for our communities! Leadership must vision beyond the preparation for the final eruption. We need to point to the wildflowers already showing up among us. We need to encourage the belief that the wildflowers can grow from the ashes.

**What does hope look like for religious life today?
How do we remind each other about the wildflowers?**

⁴ *Gaudete et Exultate*, No. 6. Pope Francis earlier quotes, *Lumen Gentium*, No. 9.

Listening to the Young

To create a community of hope the first task we have as leaders is to shift the place of our listening.⁵ The time has come for us to start listening to young people-- and by young, I do not mean our 70-year-old sisters who may be the youngest in community. I mean really young people, those “millennials” we make fun of because they cannot live without a cell phone!

We need to listen to young people everywhere, not only in our institutes, but also in our country and around the world. If we do not have any daily interactions with younger people, because of our community circumstances or ministry circles, we need to actively find them, borrow them! We need to listen deeply into their hopes and fears, into their questions and concerns. I am encouraged by the places where our elders are becoming mentors to younger generations, by the wisdom and authenticity younger people find in our sisters. When they are together the words of the prophet are fulfilled: ***“I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old ... shall dream dreams, and your young ... shall see visions”*** (Joel 2:28). We need to be there, to trust the intuition that brought Pope Francis to call a Synod for the Youth, because in his words “young people must be taken seriously!”⁶

However, to have a genuine conversion, we need to recognize that young people are doing all right. I applaud the National Catholic Reporter editorial written after the Notre Dame Conference on Cultures of Formation and Young People.⁷ The editors challenged the assumptions that the crisis is with our young people, rather they suggest we need to turn to look at the Church’s “mishandling of the sex abuse crisis, its money scandals and callousness toward gay and lesbian Catholics.” They write, “Young people, especially young women, who know how their mothers and grandmothers struggled to gain equality in the wider culture, do not care to become involved in an institution where women are marginalized.”⁸ The writers go on to say that the young- like any one of us really- are simply looking for authenticity.

⁵ Margaret Wheately says: “I know with all my heart that the only way the world will change is if many more of us step forward, let go of our judgements, become curious about each other, and take the risk to begin a conversation,” *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future*, Kindle Edition, 2009, Loc 26.

⁶ Claire Giangravè, “Be brave! Pope tells participants at Vatican pre-synod on youth,” Mar 19, 2018, <https://cruxnow.com/global-church/2018/03/19/be-brave-pope-tells-participants-at-vatican-pre-synod-on-youth/>.

⁷ Notre Dame’s McGrath Institute for Church Life held the conference: “*Cultures of Formation: Young People, the Faith and Vocational Discernment*,” from March 5-7, 2018, <https://icl.nd.edu/synod>.

⁸ National Catholic Reporter, Editorial “Young people are not the problem,” p. 22 march 23, April 5 2018.

Young people need us engaged in conversations about belief itself. Talking to them, we will encounter the growing irrelevance of the traditional religious discourse to our time. We need to pay close attention to the secularizing experiences of our Canadian neighbors, and other countries like them.⁹ Our struggle with one-issue politics and our infatuation with statistics have only distracted us from the more profound transformation that has begun in full, claiming the next generation. With every study, we hope something has changed. No matter the sample, the demographic sector, we cannot ignore the new story the social sciences are drafting before us: American society will very soon follow the secularizing path.¹⁰ This is a question about relevance of faith to everyday life. What witness are we giving this generation?

As we face this new secularity,¹¹ I do mourn losing ground for the Church we love. The loss of a Church that has journeyed with the poor, the Church of Oscar Romero and Dorothy Day, where migrants and the poor found shelter and someone to listen to them. This should make us all pause. We need to mourn the loss of the relevance of the faith tradition that has inspired who we are, and has given meaning to every one of our endeavors. The Christian story of hope and mercy needs to be retold for the next generation, and we should be the best storytellers.

This is why, the conversations between the generations living this present moment are so critical. Our “nuns”, our sisters, our communities, need to go “forth” into these conversations with the “nones”. I have hope in the

⁹ The NCR-Briefs contained this snippet about the conversations the Canadian bishops were having, April 20 to May 3, p. 3.

¹⁰ The proliferation of studies on secularization and millennial disaffiliation are themselves evidence of a concern. Examples abound: NCR. Article June 15-28, special report, “What do we know about how Catholics inform their consciences?”; another the study by William V. D’Antonio, Michele Dillon, & Mary L. Gautier, *American Catholics in Transition*, Rowman and Littlefield, 2013. From the website: 21st Century Catholic Evangelization, created by the Evangelization Committee of the National Conference of Catechetical Leadership: *American Catholics in Transition* reports on five surveys carried out at six year intervals over a period of 25 years, from 1987 to 2011. The surveys are national probability samples of American Catholics, age 18 and older, now including four generations of Catholics. Over these twenty five years, the authors have found significant changes in Catholics’ attitudes and behavior as well as many enduring trends in the explanation of Catholic identity. Generational change helps explain many of the differences. Many millennial Catholics continue to remain committed to and active in the Church, but there are some interesting patterns of difference within this generation.” <http://www.21stcenturycatholicsevangalization.org/trends.html>; finally, the more recent publication *Going, Going, Gone: The Dynamics of Disaffiliation in Young Catholics*, a study by St. Mary’s Press of Minnesota in collaboration with CARA, 2017.

¹¹ Charles Taylor explains “the shift to secularity ... consists, among other things, a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace,” *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, 2007, p. 2.

conversations being convened by the “*Nuns and the Nones*” movement.¹² The time is critical. We need to become deep listeners of the young: of their search, their questions, and their quest for meaning. We need to offer them the meaning of our lives, the story of our our faith in Jesus Christ!

The young also call us to embrace diversity as one of the most precious gifts to our time. And, I mean every diversity, generational, racial, ethnic, gender, political and theological. We know this call is also meant for our institutes, especially in this country where our ranks do not in any way reflect the diversity of the People of God in the pews. The youth consulted by the synod challenged the church to a greater appreciation for diversity.¹³ Let us listen!

Young women are choosing to live with us, to embrace our charisms, to make vows in our communities. They have surprised us with coming, and they surprise us even more by staying. The recent book *In Our Own Words: Religious Life in a Changing World*¹⁴ makes us realize that the voices of our younger religious, not only echo our legacy but also bring fresh new questions and insight. Last year I participated in the writing collaborative that produced this book. What a privilege it was for me to be in that writing circle, where there was so much energy and hope present among us that I will never doubt there is a future to religious life, *our future!*

There is a new vibrancy in our ranks, not confined to our institutes. The intercongregational nature of the conversations younger people are having is one of their gifts! They result from vulnerability and smallness, from need, and thus they are very different from the self-sufficient intercongregational conversations of the past. They need each other in ways older generations never did and will therefore yield something far more organic and generative. I have heard of the

¹² From the website: “To date, Nuns & Nones has been a volunteer labor of love. In partnership with sisters from twelve different orders and millennials representing dozens of organizations and institutions, the Nuns and Nones gatherings have been organized by Rev. Wayne Muller and Adam Horowitz. Our growing volunteer team includes Katie Gordon, Alan Webb, Emily Chiappinelli, Alexa Clay and Christina Tran. Advisors include Sr. Gloria Marie Jones (OP), Sr. Judy Carle (RSM), Sr. Carol Zinn (CSJ), Sr. Mary Dacey (CSJ), Sr. Mary Trainer (RSM), Michelle Gossman, Suzanne Buckley, Konda Mason, Oren Slozberg, Jean Holsten, and Jon Abelese. We are grateful for in-kind support from the Transformations Spirituality Center, the Mercy Center, the Cranaleith Spiritual Center, The RSA, How We Gather and the Harvard Divinity School,” <https://www.nunsandnones.org/>.

¹³ “We value the diversity of ideas in our globalized world, the respect for others’ thoughts and freedom of expression. [...]We should not fear our diversity but celebrate our differences and what makes each one of us unique,” *Instrumentum laboris*, XV Ordinary General Assembly of Synod Of Bishops Young People, The Faith and Vocational Discernment, 2018, No. 10. See *Final Document from the Pre-Synodal Meeting*, Rome, 19-24 March 2018.

¹⁴ See Juliet Mousseau, Sarah Kohles, eds., *In Our Own Words: Religious Life in a Changing World*, Liturgical Press, 2018.

hope which listening to the authors on their book tour has represented. Young people who are accepting the challenge of religious life today will help us recreate our shared communion. Let us listen!

I am convinced young people are calling us to join their ranks in the struggle for social justice. I mean that intentionally, we are called to join them, not called to get them interested in our issues, or fall into the temptation of “organizing them.” The incredible witness of younger people today has made us pause. The boldness with which the Dreamers have raised their voices and shaken us to action is remarkable. How many of us cried when we saw the images from cities all over the country in which young people, children even, were demanding safety from gun violence. Just when we thought the marching had taken us nowhere, with signs and shirts worn out from the sun, this generation is calling us out again, calling us to go forth: “*comuni3n en salida*”. It was younger women who finally initiated the “#MeToo” campaign, and courageous silence breakers that won the Time magazine Person of the Year!¹⁵ It was their courage and their passion that gave voice and courage to older women. Our task is to have their backs, to ensure them of our support, to pray for them.

The young will also help us get past our discouragement about poor results! I am convinced with Simon Pedro Arnold, who will be speaking later to our Assembly, that when we embarked on the critical task of renewal, we had a conviction we would see it all happen in our lifetime.¹⁶ Some disillusionment has taken a hold of our soul for sure. Some things did change, but not enough! Pope Francis’ words warning about the new Pelagianism fit these questions perfectly:

When some of them tell the weak that all things can be accomplished with God’s grace, deep down they tend to give the idea that all things are possible by the human will, as if it were something pure, perfect, all-powerful, to which grace is then added. They fail to realize that “not everyone can do everything” and that in this life human weaknesses are not healed completely and once for all by grace.¹⁷

There have been many times when we did rely mostly on our efforts. We would be dishonest if we did not admit we did hope to see the New Jerusalem. One of my sisters who went to work in the fields of Nicaragua during the Sandinista revolution, went convinced the future had begun there. She recently shared, after

¹⁵ “The Silence Breakers”, Time Magazine Person of the Year, December 18, 2017.

¹⁶ Simon Pedro Arnold, *Talita Kum: Una nueva Vida Religiosa para un Nuevo Discipulado*, Ediciones Claretianas, 2015, p.11-12 (translation mine).

¹⁷ *Gaudete et Exhultate*, No. 48-49.

watching with sadness what is happening there today, that she had come to recognize her efforts for liberation sometimes fell into the temptation that it was all about “our effort.” She added, that she now understood the difference between *Kairos* and *Chronos*; it’s about God’s time.

Sisters, it is clear, the *Parousia* will not happen in our lifetime. However, we do have a few good years, to bless the next generation with our wisdom and our trust, to kindle in them the hope of God’s vision for humanity. We must mentor, facilitate and even fund the dream of the next generation of religious. Authentic completion can only happen after this blessing, which will inspire, encourage, and empower them to continue the dream of transformation that we have dreamt with such passion the last fifty years!

What keeps us from listening to the young?

What emotions does speaking about the young and younger members stir in you? Why?

A Renewed Apostolic Identity

During my last few visits to Rome, “doors” have intrigued me. On my first trip back in 2016, I decided to go through the *Door of Mercy*. No sooner had I crossed into St. Peter’s, when, instead of feeling the freedom of mercy I felt constrained and confined, crushed by tourists taking selfies! Then I turned around and realized that grace came only after “*la salida*” – after going forth. After that, I started taking pictures of the door from the inside of the basilica, year after year. Over the last few years, I realized, we are not called to turn our backs on the Church, no matter what has happened, no matter what moral failing it needs to address; but rather, we are called to “go forth,” to become “*comuni3n en salida*”-- facing the people of God, the needs God sees, the suffering of our entire planet. We need to leave the comfort of our on-going conversations where we challenge the patriarchy of our Church, just because we are familiar with them. After all, there is a certainty in knowing what you are up against! The place for religious is no longer this debate, reclaiming our going forth, “*la salida*”--what lies beyond-- is our rightful place.

Each one of us, as leaders, spends a good portion of our time hearing the “rumblings of the volcano,” hurrying to arrange everything so we are ready. We lead in a time of mourning, and while we stand with our heads high, there is no denying our hearts are heavy with grief. We become “*mujeres en salida*”- women who go forth- when needs call us. Turning our sight toward the people who need us outside ourselves will not only bring new insight, it will also give us a new purpose. No matter how old we are, we need to reclaim our apostolic identity. After all, God did not call only the young, look at Moses, Zachariah, or Elizabeth!

We were called to be leaders, not executors of last wills and testaments. Mission is where we find the deepest meaning of our lives because we are apostolic women religious. We need to lean more intentionally, more humbly and more hopefully into this identity. Divested of the institutionality that claimed the last century of our apostolic response, we are now charged with discerning where that core energy needs to be refocused.¹⁸ We are about “doing something,” whatever it is, that will collaborate in welcoming the Reign of God.

We understand what Pope Francis says about being an “*Iglesia en Salida*”, a Church that goes forth precisely because we have been doing it all our lives. We may have retired from some of those margins, but we left our heart there. We are still “going forth” when we engage all those needs in our collective prayer and when we are diligent advocates for those who suffer, writing letters, signing petitions, strengthening the resistance. We find our elders standing with DACA students, sitting on the sidewalks, cheering the marches against gun violence, or stuffing backpacks for refugees released from detention. The willingness of our sisters to serve, no matter how old, makes us all stronger.

We lead frail and smaller communities, but we lead communities of contemplation/action. How do we lead “before they are gone”? How do we respect the apostolic soul of our communities, so that even in our dying we are giving, doing, moving, and promoting? What is ours to do so that the final years of most of our sisters are as meaningful and engaging for mission as they can be?

¹⁸ Sandra Schneiders explored this apostolic identity question in serious depth! “Religious Life must develop new relationships if its distinctive identity is to be fruitful for a new situation... especially in its ministerial form, does not exist simply to be treasured by those called to it and used by them for their own purposes (however worthy), but also and equally importantly, this treasure exists for the sake of the reign of God in this world,” *Buying the Field: Catholic Religious Life in Mission to the World*, Paulist Press, 2013, Kindle Edition, Loc 339.

A friend of mine here in St. Louis, a former Anheuser-Busch executive, once told me sisters were very selfish because they had not really shared our spirituality. I could not understand what Al was trying to say until recently. Listening to Simon Pedro, again I confirmed my conviction that our new apostolic call is centered on meaning.¹⁹ We need to tell our story, the deep meaning of our lives, that allowed us to do everything we have done. The work being done by the Catholic Sisters Project should be replicated in all our institutes.²⁰ We still have time to share more intentionally, and even more loudly, where we got the energy for discipleship, how we found Jesus Christ suffering in the world around us, how Matthew's "whatever you did to the least... you did unto me" took us to every possible margin of human existence. Our story needs to be shared with a world desperate for meaning and purpose. Sisters, our time in leadership will not be complete until we have called all of our sisters to share the "why" of their extraordinary lives.

Engaging our aging honestly and meaningfully is also part of our new apostolic call. In a society increasingly infatuated with the source of eternal youth, that fears aging, our older sisters have much to offer. Our health and wellness coordinator gave me a book to read last year, *What Are Old People For?*²¹ When the sisters in my community saw the book they were not at ease until I read them the subtitle: "*How Elders Will Save the World*"! More and more, I believe we need to ask ourselves that very question: "What are old people for?" or more precisely "What are old sisters for?" We need to ask this question today when they are among us, wisdom figures and story tellers, blessers, and encouragers. There is nothing shameful about being old! While we need to ensure dignified living for all of them, this is not a time to shelter them, but rather to call them forth as well. Every time our older sisters travel, go out around town or even simply take a stroll, they are witnessing to the value of aging. They are testifying to lives filled with meaning. Our response will give hope to millions of older Americans, who are struggling to answer the same question.

The vulnerability and tentativeness of our responses may just be the beginning of the future of apostolic religious life. Gone are the days when we could staff, build, or coordinate entrepreneurial endeavors in ministry. We are no longer the ones that will open a new hospital, college or social services agency. We have

¹⁹ Simón Pedro Arlund, "¿Existe un futuro para la vida consagrada?" [*Is there a future for religious life?*], General Chapter, CCVI San Antonio, 2018.

²⁰ National Catholic Sisters Project, see <http://www.nationalcatholicsistersweek.org/about.php>.

²¹ William H. Thomas, *What Are Old People For?: How Elders Will Save the World*, Vanderwyk & Burnham, 2004.

empowered the next generation of lay ministry leaders to do this. However, we are not exempt from apostolic responses, that are closer to home, simpler, one on one, welcoming rather than solving, listening, and wiser! We have nothing left to lose, and in this tentativeness, this frailty we are giving shape to the future apostolic identity of our communities.

Our recent “apostolic response” to the migrant and refugee crisis should kindle our hope. We could not send dozens of sisters to the border. We sent some. We could not house thousands of refugees and migrants. We housed some. We could not march by the hundreds. We marched some. The migrants at the bus station in San Antonio advise each other to speak to the “abuelas,” the older sisters who volunteer there every Thursday to help them navigate travel within the U.S. One of our communities housed only three people overnight after they were released from a detention center, because that is “all we could take.” But then the sisters shared how they had given shelter to “Jesús, María y José.” This apostolic response is enough, because it is local. Our response may not put a dent into the situation around the world but as Sr. Norma Pimentel, M.J. explains, “*it restores human dignity one migrant at a time.*”²² Could this be the future of our apostolic communities?

We are living next to a volcano that will force us to migrate away from the structures and size that our apostolic communities could boast in the last few decades. We will become lighter and itinerant, we will be fewer. However, we will be enough; we are enough; we will be what God needs today. We will bring with us our call to community and our stubborn conviction that Christ suffering in God’s people requires our response. We will serve in small, meaningful ways, hosting the human family one person at a time.

**How do we journey beyond grieving for our institutional
accomplishments into the beauty of frail
but intentional apostolic communities?**

**How do we listen to the wisdom figures among us
that will save the world?**

²² Conversations of LCWR Region 12 with Sister Norma Pimentel, M.J., Fall 2017.

Leadership into Authentic Communion

The heart of our apostolic identity is community. We are women who nourish, encourage, and create community. Community does not happen on its own, it requires leadership. We need to make sure our communities are always ready for “*encuentro*,” ready for guests, willing to offer openness to new ways of thinking, and to those who need a place to be heard. We need to lead the process of reconciliation so that even our failings in community can be transformed into possibility in our later years.

Community requires intentional leadership that does not shy away from the difficult work of healing the community from the prejudice and division that has tainted and diminished community. Our communities still have some pending work to do. We need to reconcile our communities with their own history of prejudice before we enter fully into the Communion of Saints!

We are not only completing fifty years of a response to the renewal called forth by the Second Vatican Council. We are also remembering fifty years since the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, which resulted in the organization of the National Black Sisters Conference. We really need to wonder more about what has not happened. Why do we need to affirm that “*Black Lives Matter*”? Like many organizations, National Geographic dedicated time to this reflection. Editor Susan Goldberg, wrote in the special issue on race in America:

So let's talk about what is working when it comes to race and what isn't. Let's examine why we continue to segregate along racial lines and how we can build inclusive communities. Let's confront today's shameful use of racism as a political strategy and prove we are better than this.²³

Fifty years have also not been enough for our communities, our own sisters, to model reconciliation with the deep historic racism that has underpinned every institution in American society. We have the critical responsibility as leaders to lead through the awareness of our racism and the consequences of white privilege, our unconscious bias. A workshop, an assembly, is not enough, the time has come for us to model for the world around us that we can be communities of reconciliation.

²³Susan Goldberg, editorial, National Geographic Special Issue: *Race in America*, April 2018.

The Black Sisters Conference honored Patricia (Patte) Grey last week. She was refused entrance to the Congregation of the Sisters of St Joseph of Baden, went on to the Sisters of Mercy and eventually founded the conference. Years ago, we would not have heard that painful part of our history. Today we must applaud the courage of the Sisters of St. Joseph to own that history and actively seek reconciliation.²⁴ However, one story is not enough. This is part of the history of all our communities; we all have stories about Mexican Americans, and Asian sisters, stories about German and Japanese sisters. We have painful stories of Irish sisters sent to American accent training. Story after story explains why our institutes do not mirror the diversity of our country, our Church. Unless we lead through the critical, painful and, yes, shameful conversations of what our racism and our maternalistic charity have done, we are not leading communities of faith.

We lost an entire generation of religious because of our prejudice, but our merciful God is giving us another chance! We may need to delve deeper into our monochromatic profile as religious institutes to truly welcome the new diversity among us. We heard Dr. Shannen Dee Williams. But, have we done enough? Do we own the stories of discrimination and prejudice that resulted in such poor diversity among us? Like National Geographic, have we examined our missionary stories in the Southern Hemisphere looking not just at what we accomplished but also at what was not? Why is it that after almost fifty years of presence our communities got so few vocations or were even established there? Why is it that we still control the finances from the north, and why is it that elected leadership from the global south sometimes experience a resignation to their presence rather than hope in their potential?

I am a migrant religious. I know this story continues to unfold before us. There is nothing shameful about being a migrant, especially not as a member of an international community. So, why do I hear story after story of the discrimination in our midst? We cannot fall into the temptation of thinking this is only a history project. A sister in my community was surprised when I told her there are places in this country where I am afraid to go. Baffled she said. "O come on, that doesn't happen anymore." I stood in disbelief. Here was a woman that has marched for refugees and the environment, who thinks fifty years after

²⁴Dawn Araujo-Hawkins, "A sisters' community apologizes to one woman whose vocation was denied," Global Sisters Report, January 8, 2018, <http://www.globalsistersreport.org/news/trends-equality/sisters-community-apologizes-one-woman-whose-vocation-was-denied-51191>.

King this doesn't happen anymore, and I am not even Black! People of African descent live with this reality more brutally than any one else.

For a year, we have watched the dreams of young immigrants dashed by a headline and sound-bite-driven political agenda. The complexity of the issues surrounding migration, asylum and family separation in this country baffle, astound, and anger us. This has created a de facto refugee crisis in a country that prides itself on its immigrant past. Are we sure we are not being poisoned by the toxic environment that surrounds us? Are we sure that we are open to the wave of migrant religious that is already browning our institutes, our ministries and our Church?

The new story is unfolding; are we ready to embrace it? The book about to be published: *Pathways to Religious Life*, studies international sisters and priests as “part of the migration patterns that circle the world.” The authors challenge us to recognize there is not just one story here.²⁵ We need to believe with them that embracing our multidimensional diversity will bring healing to many parts of the Church. “*La vida religiosa no tiene fronteras.*” [Religious life has no borders]. We are called to lead into a communion we have never seen before that will renew our hope in our common humanity. A communion with leadership willing to lead into a reconciled diversity.²⁶

Why is embracing our own legacy of racism critical to our future?

How do we lead into a reconciled diversity?

²⁵ Mary Johnson and Mary L. Gautier, “International Sisters and Priests in the United States”, chapter in the book, *Pathways to Religious Life*, Oxford, 2018, p. 190.

²⁶ *Evangelii Gaudium*, “Diversity is a beautiful thing when it can constantly enter into a process of reconciliation and seal a sort of cultural covenant resulting in a “reconciled diversity,” no. 230.

Conclusion: Intentional Collaboration

The time has come to turn the “auto-pilot” off. Telling our story into the emerging future requires leaders who are bold enough to assume responsibilities that are just beyond our reach, just beyond our possibilities, just beyond ourselves. To lead a communion of faith we need to embrace the vulnerability that has brought us together. We cannot believe alone, we need to lead into the collaboration that will kindle our hope. Collaboration is the only way forward for our communion. Intentional, simple, every day collaboration needs attentive leadership. Our world is desperate for this witness. Hope is the gift of communion!

My final thought comes from the advice from my abuela when she was close to her death: “*no le tengas miedo a la muerte, allí estaremos.*” [Do not fear death, we will be there for you]. We lead communities of faith that remain communities beyond death. Chris Pramuk and Jan Richardson last year called us to this awareness. We need to experience the communion of saints that lies just beyond. We need to trust that all this dying holds a deeper communion that strengthens and encourages. Ron Rolheiser keeps calling us to give up our own death, to trust that this final sacrifice means something in Jesus’s own sacrifice.²⁷ So I bring the scene from the movie “Coco” with the bridge of “cempasuchil” [Marigold] flower. I chose an image of vivid color because after the final eruption, the ash, and the lava, there will be so much color! But we will only be able to see it with the eyes of faith. We are encouraged by the deep knowledge of the communion that sustains all communions, the realization that those who have passed live among us, journey with us. They encourage us on, to head to the “door”, to the people of God!

Comunión en salida, ¡Sí se puede!
Trust the color in the ashes.

²⁷ Rolheiser writes “How can I live so that when I die, my death is an optimal blessing to my family, my friends, the church and the world?”, *Sacred Fire: A Vision for a Deeper Human and Christian Maturity*, Image, 2014, p. 284.