

Welcome by Pat Farrell, OSF – LCWR President
Opening of the Women & Spirit Exhibit
Sacramento, California
January 24, 2012

It is my deep pleasure and real joy to welcome all of you tonight in the name of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. We are here because the story of Catholic sisters in the United States needed to be told, and as we open the final exhibition of Women & Spirit we celebrate this wonderful telling of it. We are proud of the professional quality of the work and grateful for the dedication and spirit of those who worked on it. I will not even begin to mention them all, leaving that to Helen Garvey. But in the name of LCWR I do need to acknowledge Helen who took our dream of a display of the history of women religious and orchestrated the masterpiece that we will see tonight. The task was enormous, far beyond what any of us would have forseen. She embraced it with her characteristic optimism and good humor, her faith and vision, her dogged persuasiveness, and quite a dose of Irish charm. Please join me in thanking Helen Garvey.

I am so pleased that Women & Spirit is being exhibited in this particular museum which raises up women. If the contribution of women in general has been underexposed, minimized, and uncelebrated, that certainly is true of women religious. The image of Catholic sisters has been stereotyped and trivialized, often portrayed in caricatures. This exhibit shines a spotlight on the initiatives, leadership and even heroism of sisters in the United States. We all know the large brush strokes of that picture---the impressive network of schools, hospitals, and social services begun by sisters. But the many concrete stories of individual congregations, specific projects and responses to certain historical needs come to life here. We see pioneer women, nurses on the battlefields of the civil war, civil rights activists, and so much more.

But there is an even more important inner story communicated in this exhibit. What energy and spirit made possible the incredible accomplishments sisters have made in the last couple of hundred years? That part of the story is implied. It's what we read between the lines. But it's there. Look for that as you wander through this exhibit. I think you'll see what happens when the hearts of ordinary women are set on fire by the Spirit of God. It is a love story. It is a picture of what it looks like to be impelled by a power beyond us and nourished by a reservoir within us. It's also the story of community, of what can happen when a group of women gathers around the same values and focused intentionality. No one woman could have ever begun to do what sisters did together. No one congregation could have made the kind of impact on our country and our church and we were able to make collectively. It was the sharing of who we are and what we have that enlarged individual efforts into such an avalanche of collective service. That communal story paints a real picture of real women, with all of our strengths and vulnerabilities, subject to grace, open to concrete historical circumstances.

Tonight we certainly stand in the paradox of beginning and ending at the same time. Sacramento opens this privileged view into the life of Catholic sisters, nationally and in this area. At the same time, this will be the last showing of the exhibit before it is dismantled. It is a metaphor for another level of beginnings and endings. As women religious begin to celebrate the history that you'll see here tonight, we do so recognizing that much of what is portrayed is fading, while nationally we discern together where we are now being called to invest our more limited numbers and energy in a very different moment in the history of our country and our

church. Much of what is shown here of the incredible networks of schools and hospitals and various social services are not what we will be able to sustain in the same way going forward. But the ending is another beginning and we are discerning the new even as we celebrate what has been. May our future be worthy of the legacy we stand before tonight.