

**LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS
2021 VIRTUAL ASSEMBLY**

**PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS
Creating Space for the Future:
Cutting Deeper Grooves of Transforming Love into Evolution
by Elise D. García, OP**

Thank you everyone for your presence, both here – in our Adrian Dominican auditorium – and wherever you and all 1,100 of you are gathered for this LCWR 2021 Virtual Assembly.

Our Conference this year has reached its age of maturity – the ripe-old Medicare age of 65. Or, put another way, the age of one of our “younger members”!

It was 65 years ago that Mother Gerald Barry held the first organizing meeting for the Conference right here in Adrian, Michigan. It was an in-person meeting of a few wonderful leaders of congregations of women religious.¹

They considered whether to form a national organization of religious, as Rome was requesting – including whether it should be a conference of women and men, or just women. After several hours of discussion, the women leaned toward deciding yes – to form a conference, and of women. What clinched it was a comment one of their members made, that in forming the joint male-female conference of religious in Canada, “the men did most of the talking.”

At a second meeting five months later, the Sisters agreed to establish a conference of major superiors of women, with a regional structure to support the national entity – and to put the matter to a vote before U.S. major superiors.

They then engaged in a flurry of organizing, sponsoring a national meeting in Chicago on November 24, 1956, attended by 343 Sister leaders. Before the meeting adjourned, they sent a cable to Pope Pius XII with “affectionate greetings” from the members of the newly formed conference of major superiors, which they had voted unanimously to form.²

¹ The meeting included Mother Catherine Sullivan of the Daughters of Charity; Sister Madeleva Wolff and Mother Kathryn Marie Gibbons of the Holy Cross Sisters; Mother Edward Marie Mahaney and Sister Grace Aurelia Flanagan representing Mother Eucharista Galvin of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet; Sister Rose Angela Horan representing Mother Gertrude Clare Owens of the Sisters of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods; and Mother Marietta Marinan of the Eastern Province Ursulines.

² Details drawn from *Events Leading to the Establishment of the Conference of Major Superiors of Women*, by Nadine Foley, OP, and Elise D. García, OP (May 15, 2012), Adrian Dominican Archive.

Here we are 65 years later – in many ways, *65 light* years later. We can all mentally traverse these six-plus decades and picture the extraordinary changes that have taken place in church and society, in our world and Earth home, bringing us to this day.

We now gather as a Conference, spread out in time and space, joined by the miracle of technology. It is the second time in our 65-year history that we gather virtually – something unimaginable to our foremothers, even a few years ago.

A global pandemic has gripped our planet for the last year and a half, a microorganism causing macro suffering. Some 190 million of us across the planet have been infected and more than 4 million people have died – including our own Sisters, family and friends. All of us have been forced into economic lock downs, quarantines, social distancing, and lives lived behind masks and in endless Zoom calls.

Last year, two months into living in Covid-19 confinement, we witnessed – in the deliberate killing of George Floyd by a police officer – an emblematic image of the horror, virulence and impunity of white supremacy that for so long has been tearing at the moral fabric of our nation and destroying Black lives.

It is the white supremacy that was very much alive in the Jim Crow 1950s when our Conference was formed: The white dominant world reflected in the complexion of our foremothers gathered 65 years ago and the women in their convents back home. The white dominance we still see reflected in our Conference and in our communities – the inevitable result of unspoken assumptions about race that exploded open during our Covid confinement.

We witnessed it in the Black Lives Matter marches last year and in the January 6 assault on the U.S. Capitol. The assault revealed, as our brother Bryan Massingale wrote, “the clear declaration that many white people would rather live in a white dictatorship than in a multiracial democracy.”³

The Irish used the word “cocooning” to refer to their pandemic-mandated sheltering in place. As we know, in nature, a profound metamorphosis takes place in a cocoon – a meltdown that transforms the caterpillar into a butterfly.

Our human species is called to no less profound a transformation at this singular moment in the arc of human history. At its base is a spiritual call to awaken to the sacredness, interdependence, and interconnectedness of *all* life:

- To the numinous gift of Earth, our common home.
- To the inherent dignity of all her people – our sisters and brothers, each made in the image of God.

³ Bryan N. Massingale, “The Chauvin verdict: relief, vindication but not celebration,” *National Catholic Reporter* (April 22, 2021) at <https://www.ncronline.org/news/opinion/chauvin-verdict-relief-vindication-not-celebration>.

- To the intrinsic right of all peoples, all species, all ecosystems to exist, thrive and evolve.
- To the reality of our single destiny as one Earth community in an incomprehensibly large God-drenched⁴ universe that continues to expand and evolve.

As we emerge from our cocooning, from this epic crucible of suffering across the planet, I believe that those of us who center our lives in an incarnational story that speaks of One body held in Divine Love are called as never before to *live* these understandings.

Last summer, LCWR named this urgent summons a *Spirit Call* within the call of our religious life. We recognized that addressing the sinful breach and heresy of racism and white supremacy is at the heart of our identity as women of the Gospel. It speaks to our authenticity as disciples of the One who called us “to love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:12) – of the One who witnessed radical love, even unto death as he was hung from a tree.

This is a sacred task of cosmic dimensions. Our Carmelite Sister Constance FitzGerald, OCD, has shown us its contours.

When she accepted the LCWR Outstanding Leadership Award in 2017, Connie spoke of the extraordinary witness of the “great human beings we today call mystics.” She said that by “deepening and widening the channels of human consciousness, they have carved into evolution a pathway available to us” today.⁵

These mystics – our ancestors in religious life – carved this evolutionary path through the dark night of their contemplative prayer, through the painful work of their own awakening, through their “yes” to allowing their souls to be stretched and transformed into a “Christ consciousness characterized by communion and interdependence.”⁶

Connie observes that today, their ancient mystical understanding of the “vibrant life of Trinitarian communion” that “underpins and empowers all creation” is converging with developments in science that reveal the “deep patterns of interconnectedness and relationality in the universe.”⁷

We know something about this. We women religious have been studying the new science, the new cosmology and emerging theologies.⁸ Our prayer and contemplative practices have been

⁴ I’m grateful to Linda Gibler, OP, for this phrase. See *From the Beginning to Baptism: Scientific and Sacred Stories of Water, Oil, and Fire* (Collegetown, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2010).

⁵ See Constance FitzGerald, OCD, 2017 LCWR Outstanding Leadership Award Acceptance Remarks, Orlando, Florida (August 11, 2017).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Our perspectives and spirituality have been stretched by the thought of people like Thomas Berry, CP, Elizabeth Johnson, CSJ, Ivone Gebara, OSA, Brian Swimme, Ilia Delio, OSF, Miriam MacGillis, OP, and many others.

centered in these new understandings, as has our response to ecological degradation and climate change.

Connie closed her remarks with this prayer:

May we be given the contemplative grace *to cut deeper grooves of conscious relationality and communion* in the evolutionary path we are treading so that others may follow.

May we *make our own evolutionary contribution* toward laying down permanent capabilities for creative communion and cutting deep cosmic tendencies for transforming love and relationality into the universe.⁹

“Prophets of communion!” Connie beckoned. “This is my dream for us, my sisters. It is your dream as well.”

I believe it *is* our dream. And not only our dream – but our *call* – the Spirit Call to which we, as women religious, have been summoned at this epochal moment in history: To lay down *permanent capabilities for creative communion* among all peoples and between peoples and planet. And *to cut deep cosmic tendencies* for transforming love into the universe.

I further believe that responding to this call means *knowing Christ crucified*, in ways illuminated by theologian M. Shawn Copeland in her powerful book by that title.¹⁰

Carving Deeper Grooves of Conscious Relationality in Evolution

How do we do this? How do we carve deeper grooves of conscious relationality in evolution – for our own liberation and the liberation of others?

I offer four ways we might do this:

- Learning and telling the truth of our history
- Dismantling artificial constructs of race and caste
- Knowing Christ crucified through the dark wisdom of the enslaved
- Walking the talk of our radical relationality as women religious

⁹ Ibid., italics added.

¹⁰ See M. Shawn Copeland, *Knowing Christ Crucified: The Witness of African American Religious Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009).

Learning and telling the truth of our history

When I was growing up in Mexico, my school was half day in English and half day in Spanish. One afternoon, in my third-grade history class in Spanish, I learned the story of the Boy Heroes, *los Niños Héroes* – the story of Mexican boys killed defending their capital during the U.S.-Mexico war. Our teacher told us how one of the boys wrapped the Mexican flag around his body and threw himself over the fort’s ramparts rather than let the flag be captured by the invading U.S. soldiers. I remember as I sat in that class, hearing this dramatic and painful story, that an anger rose in me: *Why hadn’t I heard this story in the morning – in my English-language history class?*

I felt, deep in my 8-year-old bones, that I should have been taught this story in the morning – and that I was being cheated. Cheated of the full truth.

We, as Americans, have cheated ourselves of the full truth of our history, ignoring or eliding the painful stories that inextricably interweave and form the full fabric of our lives as African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Euro Americans, Latinx Americans.

Our history lessons have typically condensed to a few paragraphs the brutality of slavery and Jim Crow, the decades of public lynching and segregationist exclusion of Black people in education and employment. We have totally buried the stories of white racist attacks on more than 100 Black communities that killed hundreds of innocents and stole generational wealth.¹¹

We learned nothing of the most significant migration in American history: six million African Americans fleeing the Jim Crow South.¹² Or the decades of state action barring Black people from New Deal and other government programs benefiting the white middle class. Or of how Black veterans were excluded from the GI bill after honorably serving their country.

There is a direct through-line of oppression and white supremacy in our history from the first enslaved Africans disembarking the *White Lion*, an English privateer ship, in Hampton, Virginia, in late August of 1619 to the murder of George Floyd on a street corner in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in late May of 2020.

We need to know this.

¹¹ The assault that destroyed Greenwood, known as the Black Wall Street, in the Tulsa race massacre of 1921, killing more than 300 people and injuring hundreds more, is emblematic of more than 100 such attacks on Black communities in the early 20th century. See <https://www.tulsaohistory.org/exhibit/1921-tulsa-race-massacre/#flexible-content>.

¹² Isabel Wilkerson chronicles this epic migration, from 1910 to 1970, personalizing it through the stories of three individuals and their families. See Isabel Wilkerson, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America’s Great Migration* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010).

We need to re-learn our history and revisit all the premises and assumptions that rest upon our distorted views.¹³ More than anything, we need to dispel the “innocence” of our ignorance. As Isabel Wilkerson wrote in her brilliant book, *Caste*:

The Nazis were impressed by the American custom of lynching its subordinate caste of African-Americans.... Hitler especially marveled at the American “knack for maintaining an air of robust innocence in the wake of mass death.”¹⁴

To cut a deeper groove in evolution for ourselves and those who follow, we need to face the full truth of both our morning *and* afternoon history classes, and begin the hard work of sorting out their implications. What does the full truth call us to in terms of re-examining our view of ourselves? What are its imperatives for repentance, reparation, and communion?

Dismantling artificial constructs of race and caste

Pulitzer-prize winning author Isabel Wilkerson has given us powerful intellectual tools to carve a deeper groove into evolution with new understandings of race with her masterful work, *Caste: The Origin of our Discontents*. Ms. Wilkerson comprehensively makes the case that the United States has an “unspoken, race-based” caste system. It is an artificial construct that “sets the presumed supremacy of one group against the presumed inferiority of other groups” on the basis of arbitrary traits.¹⁵ The system is “often justified as divine will, originating from sacred text or the presumed laws of nature.” She makes clear that the “hierarchy of caste is not about feelings or morality. It is about power – which groups have it and which do not.”¹⁶

Ms. Wilkerson notes that in the course of human history, “three caste systems have stood out”: The brief and now “vanquished” caste system of Nazi Germany, the “millennia-long” caste system of India, and the “shape-shifting, unspoken, race-based caste pyramid in the United States.”¹⁷

We haven’t thought of racism in the United States in terms of caste. When most of us think about caste, we think of a system that is arbitrary, unfair, unjust – and foreign to our experience.

¹³ The genocide of Native Americans and criminalization of their spiritual practices, persecution of Asian Americans through the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and Japanese internment of World War II, and the decades of “Juan Crow” laws segregating Mexican Americans are but a few of many parallel under-told stories of violence and oppression suffered by fellow Americans under white supremacy – to the present day – that we need to study and learn.

¹⁴ See Isabel Wilkerson, *Caste: The Origins of our Discontents* (New York: Random House, 2020), p. 81, quoting Eugene DeFries Bétit, *Collective Amnesia: American Apartheid: African Americans’ 400 Years in North America, 1619-2019* (Xlibris, 2019), 282.

¹⁵ Wilkerson, *Caste*, 17.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was shocked when he was introduced in 1959 to an audience in India as “a fellow untouchable.”¹⁸ He did not see the connection to India’s caste system and was “peeved” that he would be referred to as such. He later realized that, yes, “the Land of the Free had imposed a caste system not unlike the caste system of India and that he had lived under that system all of his life. It was what lay beneath the forces he was fighting in America.”¹⁹

Our U.S. caste system uses skin color to assign privilege, and that contributes to its “shape-shifting” quality. What it means to be “white” has changed over the centuries, with different immigrant groups assimilating into “whiteness.” The constant throughout history is that a dominant white caste has remained, with “whoever fits the definition of white” at that particular point reaping its privileges.²⁰ The other constant is that Black people have remained at the bottom of the caste system. Regardless of their education, career achievements, material wealth or other markers of status, our Black sisters and brothers to this day live under the oppression of a menacing caste system that daily abases.

In chilling detail, Ms. Wilkerson documents Hitler’s admiration of the United States for its racial purifying. Hitler praised our “near genocide of Native Americans and the exiling to reservations of those who had survived.”²¹ He saw our laws barring immigrants from Asia “as a ‘model for his program of racial purification.’”²² And the Nazis studied our Jim Crow, anti-miscegenation, and segregation laws as a template for their own murderous supremacy project.

What perplexed the Nazis was how the United States, despite its morally abhorrent behavior, managed to “retain such a sterling reputation on the world stage.”²³ How the American people, in the land of the free, seemed to accept their racial hierarchy “as natural.”

During the past Covid year, Black Lives Matter activists and other anti-racists have exposed the unspoken reality that white supremacy in the United States is not just a right-wing fringe phenomenon, but a powerful and insidious construct that is in the air we breathe and water we drink – and has been, under different guises, for centuries.

Consciously doing the work to identify racism, white supremacy and caste as artificial, arbitrary and immoral features of our society – and consciously acting to dismantle them in our personal lives, institutes, Conference, and ministries is a powerful way we women religious can and must

¹⁸ Ibid., 22.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid, 19.

²¹ Ibid., 81.

²² Ibid., quoting historian Jonathan Spiro, 81.

²³ Ibid., quoting historian Claudia Koonz, 83.

exert our moral authority. It is a significant way we can make an evolutionary contribution toward laying down permanent capabilities for communion among all God's people.

Knowing Christ crucified through the dark wisdom of the enslaved

In recent decades we have come to new understandings about our place in an incomprehensibly large universe that continues to expand and evolve as an interconnected community. We perceive a universe with a single point of origin out of which all peoples, all creatures, all things emerged. A universe out of which – in a moment in time some 2,000 years ago – we were given the *way* of Jesus. It centered on a radical love preached and lived by a Nazarene who with his fellow Jews struggled against the yoke of a terrible oppression, with its daily indignities and constant threat of violence, that led ultimately to his execution on a cross.

In her luminous book, *Knowing Christ Crucified: The Witness of African American Religious Experience*, Dr. Shawn Copeland reminds us that the “foremost lesson of Christian discipleship is that Jesus is the way, and the way Jesus is *is* the way of the cross.”²⁴

The way of the cross is a giving over of oneself to the radical love and solidarity that Jesus lived, extending ourselves as kin to all who are marginalized, excluded, disinherited. It is standing at the foot of the cross where unbearable suffering is lifted by grace.

What great depths of transformative love could we carve into evolution if we had some understanding of what the enslaved people knew about God and the way of Jesus? How would our lives be changed if we could glimpse the “dark wisdom that sprang from their oppression and suffering, their love of and identification with the crucified Jesus”?²⁵

Dr. Copeland has gleaned insights into what she calls the “dark and hidden wisdom” of the enslaved by drawing on their narratives, their life stories, and their spirituals.

The enslaved people, she posits, “knew themselves as ‘new creature[s] in Jesus.’”²⁶ In the dark of night, “they slipped away to the quiet of thick brush arbors, hollows, or river banks to pray, to sing, to experience God in their misery and obscurity.” And in the dark night of their souls, they too, like other great mystics of prior centuries, experienced the Spirit descend, inflaming them with “an inflow of divine love that gushed up, uniting their hearts in prayer and song and shout that ‘made heaven ring.’”²⁷

²⁴ Ibid., 118.

²⁵ Ibid., 33.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 34, citing Rawick, *From Sundown to Sunup*, 34.

The enslaved people “knew the cross as the complete rejection of violence.” Death was not the last word; nor was slavery: the “God who vindicated Jesus would vindicate them.”²⁸

In their dark wisdom, they knew that the “power of God in the cross was the power to live and to love – even when violence does its worst.” It was the paradox where “the unexpected, unimagined resurrection” inbreaks “the bleakest circumstances.”²⁹

Let us study and take into our contemplative prayer the dark and hidden wisdom of the enslaved, as we have studied and taken into prayer the wisdom of other mystics. Through their dark night and epiphanous experiences of divine love, these Spirit-filled women and men have carved into evolution a pathway to Christ consciousness available to us today that we are called to deepen and widen through our own penetrating soul work.

Walking the talk of our radical relationality as women religious

In adopting the Spirit Call within a Call last year, the National Board of LCWR recognized that we were embarking on a journey that is spiritual in nature, raising existential questions about our identity as Catholic Sisters, as women of the Gospel.

In responding to this Spirit Call, we acknowledge our own complicity as members of a Church deeply implicated in the origin and perpetuation of our nation’s perduring sin of racism. It begins with the 15th century Papal Bulls that sanctioned the African slave trade, which led to the chattel slavery of more than 12 million children, women, and men, and the appropriation of land that resulted in the genocide of up to 20 million indigenous in the Americas.

The complicity continued with participation in slavery by Catholic bishops, priests, religious women and men, and Catholic institutions. It persisted through our tacit or explicit engagement in Jim Crow, state-sanctioned segregation, and other injurious government-supported practices. We see its pattern to this day as we take part in our national race reckoning.

As we look to the emerging future of our religious life, what could be more vital to its future than to give vibrant public witness to the power of God’s transformative love by doing the profound truth-telling, repentance and, yes, the reconciling reparations work needed for Spirit-*ruah* to breathe through us?³⁰ There is a growing movement for reparations that we women religious could add our appreciable weight to in support.³¹

²⁸ Ibid., 34-35.

²⁹ Ibid., 35.

³⁰ I draw on the phrase “Spirit-*ruah* breathing through us” from a reflection on Pentecost by M. Shawn Copeland, PhD. See Copeland, “The Spirit Moves Us Toward Racial Justice” in *Commonweal Magazine* (July 8, 2020) at <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/breath-fire>.

³¹ William A. Darity Jr. and A. Kirsten Mullen make a comprehensive case for reparations, concluding that “piecemeal reparations may assuage individual guilt but cannot meet the collective national obligation. The invoice for reparations must go to the nation’s government” because it “bears responsibility for sanctioning, maintaining,

Although we have focused today on the image of God reflected in and through our Black sisters and brothers, surely we are called to no less a reckoning and loving *encuentro* with our Native, Asian, and Latinx kin; with other sisters and brothers harmed by cultural or religious bias and exclusion; and with our Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, Transgender, Queer and non-binary brothers and sisters. Each of these, our kin, reflects the glorious and inexhaustible image of God. Each is blessed by God, intended to have life and have it more abundantly (John 10:10).

Pauli Murray, the extraordinary 20th century lawyer, poet, scholar, feminist, and Episcopalian priest who combatted both Jim Crow and “Jane Crow” during her lifetime, wrote in the dedication of her book, *Dark Testament and Other Poems*:

I speak for my race and my people –
the human race and just people.³²

Our human ancestors – those great mystical beings both in religious life and in the dark hollows and river banks of our nation’s yesteryear – carved into evolution a pathway of Christ consciousness available to us today. Let us now make our own evolutionary contribution by intentionally carving deeper and wider grooves of conscious relationality among us all, learning and speaking the full truth of our history, dismantling artificial constructs of caste and racism, knowing Christ crucified through the dark wisdom of the enslaved, and walking the talk of our own radical relationality as women religious faithful to the call to love as we are loved.

Prophets of communion! Let us leave as a legacy for the future of religious life – and for the common good of our whole blessed Earth community – permanent capabilities for creative communion and deep cosmic tendencies for transforming love.

*I am deeply grateful to M. Shawn Copeland and Constance FitzGerald, OCD,
for their profound and inspiring words and thought, and great generosity as readers.*

and enabling slavery, legal segregation, and continued racial inequality.” See Darity and Mullen, *From Here to Equality: Reparations for Black Americans in the Twenty-first Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 256.

³² See Pauli Murray, *Dark Testament and Other Poems* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2018). In her Introduction to the reprint of the 1970 publication, poet and playwright Elizabeth Alexander wrote, “One life, two lives, three lives, more: Pauli Murray made an indelible mark on American history in multiple modes rarely found in one career. Legal crusader and theorist; activist; educator; first ordained black female Episcopal priest; cofounder of a national women’s rights organization.... She coined the phrase ‘Jane Crow,’ which wrote gender into the racial thinking and analysis that drove the civil rights movement.... Murray’s experience of gender was not fixed by social norms, and her admission and embrace of her gender fluidity was highly unusual in her times.... It seemed she understood poetry as a space for exploration and self knowing the example of her complex, self-aware life that is always seeking to love and connect is a prescient beacon, and why she endures today and seems so modern is that that richness is in fact in all of us, whether or not we achieve renown for our deeds.”