

**LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS  
2023 ASSEMBLY – Dallas Texas**

*Hope: A Wide Lens for the Journey  
LCWR Presidential Address  
Rebecca Ann Gemma, OP*

“All I really need to know I learned in kindergarten!” declared Robert Fulghum in his famous poem.<sup>1</sup> I, Rebecca Ann Gemma, personally declare, “All I really need to know I learned sitting wedged, hip to hip, thigh to thigh, between my parents in the front seat of a 1961 American Rambler Country Station Wagon.” You see, I am number seven in the sibling line-up. The first born, second born, and third born were in the bench seat behind my parents and me. Numbers four, five, and six sat snuggly in what we called the “way-back.” Seat assignments were not to be messed with!

For many years, my view as we traveled those long California highways was only of the chrome dashboard in front of me. Fidgeting, listening, imagining, and dreaming helped me through many journeys. In time, I sat tall enough to look out the windows and a world as vast as the universe opened before me. What a revelation to discover all that I had been missing. The questions I pondered, nestled securely between my parents, are not dissimilar from those I still ask today:

What shall I do? How should I be? How do I live? Aren’t those some of the same questions we grapple with today as leaders of religious institutes in this time of challenge and opportunity? As we look out the windows of today’s Ramblers, the pace alone can be overwhelming. Negotiating the curves and road construction detours along the way requires the skill of a professional race-car driver. Sometimes we have companions with us, other times we are driving alone. Sometimes the road is smooth while other times loaded with potholes. In the past we seemed to know our way. Lately, our GPS devices can’t keep up with the rapid re-routing and dead ends. So, what traveler’s prayer do you pray as you set out into the world each day? I suggest borrowing four words from a popular country song as our mantra: “Jesus, take the wheel!”<sup>2</sup>

**Drawn by Sacred Mystery: A Journey into Hope**

We have just listened to Brian Swimme speak about the enormity of the universe; the connection we have with every element that makes up this dynamic reality; and the hope that lies within and before us as we try to wrap our minds and hearts into a future of extraordinary possibility. We are being called not only to marvel at the universe’s grandeur, but to integrate science and technological innovations into our Christian faith, into our lives as vowed religious. “*What existed from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we observed and touched with our own hands—this is the Word of life!*” (1 John 1:1)<sup>3</sup> Sacred Mystery gathers all creation together in love and moves it outward to love. Close your eyes for a moment; picture yourself in your mind’s eye in the midst of this universe. Each of us is a speck in the expanse of limitlessness. Imagine, imagine possibilities on this journey into hope, trusting

<sup>1</sup>Fulghum, Robert. © 1986, 1988, 2003, New York: Ballantine Books; 25th Anniversary edition

<sup>2</sup>"Jesus, Take the Wheel" is a song written by Brett James, Hillary Lindsey and Gordie Sampson, and recorded by American country music artist Carrie Underwood

<sup>3</sup>New American Bible Revised Edition. © 1987 Catholic World Press/World Bible Publishers

the Spirit of Jesus is truly at the wheel.

Today I invite you to explore hope as both a natural and theological virtue. More specifically, I invite you to use hope as a reflective lens through which we engage religious life now and into the emerging future. Sit with me thigh to thigh, heart to heart, held by the Spirit of Jesus as we look beyond the dashboard of our past through the windshield, this wide lens of hope, to the panoramic view before us. Let's remember though, that like our windshields, the view from the lens of hope can shift according to our circumstances. Sometimes the view is clear and allows full visibility; sometimes the view gets clouded by obstacles; and sometimes the view is so cluttered that we have to find new ways of seeing ahead.

### **A Lens from Which to See Clearly: Hope as a Natural Virtue**

Charles Richard Snyder, an American psychologist, specialized in positive psychology. **Natural hope** according to Snyder is the ability to walk chosen paths leading to a desired destination. Focused thoughts, goals, strategies, motivation, and self-confidence allow individuals or groups to achieve their desired success. Snyder's concept of "Pathways Thinking" encourages persons to generate multiple pathways to lead from where we are now to our desired future. Differing pathways give us options for perusal, choice, and more flexible decision-making.<sup>4</sup>

Undergirding this thinking about pathways is Snyder's notion of natural hope which encourages an overlay of "Agency Thinking" which addresses the levels of intention, confidence and the human ability to follow those pathways to the future desired. Positive motivation is fundamental to ongoing success. Goals that express the inherent value of who we say we are, even if difficult to achieve, play an essential role in keeping us moving. Barriers are considered challenges, not roadblocks.<sup>5</sup>

"Pathways Thinking" asks questions such as "What is going on?" and 'Where do we want to go?' and 'What is stopping us?' "Agency Thinking" explores the questions: "Which strengths can we use to achieve our goals?', 'Which aspects of our current situation work to our advantage?', or 'When were we successful in similar situations in the past and why?'"<sup>6</sup>

According to Snyder, for a group to move ahead with hope, it needs two capacities. The first: a will to shape the future. Or said in another way, "Where there's a will, there's a way." Second: an ability to see ways to shape its future. "Where there's a way, there's a will."<sup>7</sup>

Many of us have utilized models to assist us in planning congregational conversations. We have contracted with professional organizations to help us strategize how to down-size or right-size our properties. We have joined others in varying age cohorts and intergenerational groupings so as to imagine where we will be in 2035. How much more life-giving and fruitful might our imagining be if done with a reflective lens sharpened by a conscious and intentional awareness of natural hope?

<sup>4</sup> Snyder, Charles Richard. Psychology of Hope: You Can Get There from Here. © 2003 Free Press

<sup>5</sup> Lopez, Shane J., Pedrotti, Jennifer Teramoto and Snyder, Charles Richard. Positive Psychology: The Scientific and Practical Explorations of Human Strengths. © 2014, SAGE Publications, Inc; 3rd Edition

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

Such hope, more than mere optimism, says Snyder, is a trait of excellence that may be moral as well as intellectual. The cultivation and refinement of it, developed over a lifetime, builds the moral fiber of a society. By continually practicing such hope, even when difficult, it becomes a habitual disposition and is transmittable to others. Human virtue, akin to Snyder's focus on hope, provides a lens less encumbered with unexpected obstacles, encourages creativity and collaboration, remains self-motivated and most often is confident in gaining the intended outcome. The lens of hope as a natural virtue is one to keep polished and ready. Yet alone, it is not enough.<sup>8</sup>

### **A Lens to See through the Haze and Opaque Views: Hope as a Theological Virtue**

Back to the front seat of the Rambler . . . Join me in imaging looking through the windshield as rain pelts the glass and we confidently turn on the wipers. We catch a glimpse of what lies ahead between each swish. We cautiously proceed hoping that a heavier storm doesn't totally block our view. And then the downpour comes. Our view becomes obscured; we lose clarity; and soon nothing familiar remains before us. When heavy storms come into our lives, we need a hope that is stronger than rationality, strategy, and upright morals. We need Christian hope, a theological virtue coming from God and leading us back to God. We receive this gift in Baptism as we trust that, through the Spirit, Jesus will always remain with us, truly present to us on this pilgrim journey. Such trust is not mere exercise of optimism. The theological virtue of hope partners with faith in responding to the human desire for goodness, peace, love and joy which God has placed in our hearts. We hear in Romans 5:5, "*hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us*"<sup>9</sup> We do not rely on our own strength, but on the very presence of Christ's Spirit at work in us. Lifted up by this hope we resist selfishness by focusing our energy outward.

Paul J. Wadell, Professor Emeritus of Theology and Religious Studies at St. Norbert College, speaks of theological hope as being the forgotten virtue of our time. He states, "Although we live in an era of considerable technological and scientific achievements, it may also be an age of diminished hope or, perhaps more accurately, misdirected hope, because it is tempting to replace the theological virtue of hope with flimsy substitutes that cannot possibly give us what our souls ultimately need. The problem is not that we hope for too much, but that we have learned to settle for so little. We have caused the horizons of hope to shrink. We have lost sight of hope's transcendent dimension because we have forgotten the incomparable promise to which hope always beckons."<sup>10</sup> Might we ask ourselves: Have our horizons of hope shrunk? Have we learned to settle for so little?

### **Living Christian Hope as Consecrated Religious**

Religious life affords us numerous opportunities to be conscious of and live in Christian hope. Though a gift from God, and not a product of our own making, hope must be cultivated, fostered and practiced, or it will fade or possibly be destroyed. How can we strengthen this hope

<sup>8</sup> Snyder, Charles Richard. Psychology of Hope

<sup>9</sup> New American Bible Revised Edition

<sup>10</sup> Wadell, Paul J. "Hope the Forgotten Virtue of Our Time". America Magazine. November 21, 2016. See <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2016/11/07/hope-forgotten-virtue-our-time>

that God has entrusted to us? How can we witness to and share this grace in a world that has become resistant to hope's existence, yet constantly hungers for it? Let us look at three familiar elements found in religious life that help us sharpen the focus of our reflective lens on hope as we navigate this journey.

### **Hope Through Community**

In his *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas Aquinas observed that there are far more reasons to be hopeful "when we have friends to rely on"(II-II, 17, 8). Wadell commented on this, saying, "If the object of our hopes can extend no further than what we might be able to secure for ourselves, then our hopes will necessarily be rather cautious and limited. But if there are people who not only love us and want what is best for us, but will also help us achieve it, then our hopes can be much more daring and expansive. We do not hope alone, we hope together. Hope requires companions, people who want our good, identify with our desires, and who help us along our way."<sup>11</sup>

Think of how LCWR has brought its members together over the years to share stories, grieve losses, celebrate diversity, engage fears, recognize our own contribution to the sin of racism, work to change injustices in society and the church, and to dream together how future generations will follow Christ's call in this form of consecrated life. Recall the times when the fidelity and witness of our own sisters allowed us to move forward in hope when we had very little left to give.

Communal relationships reach beyond our congregational walls and charisms. Encounters with all creation continue to broaden our hope and expand our vision. We realize a greater understanding of Sacred Mystery, the universe, human relationships, our vocations, our church, and ourselves than what we know and experience in this time and place. Community moves us beyond individual silos of awareness, interest, and discovery to seek God's reign in our midst.

### **Hope Through Prayer**

In a recent online article from Crux Media, Father Jeffrey Kirby writes, "Drawing from the spiritual tradition, prayer is understood as the dynamic interaction of God thirsting for us and we, in turn, thirsting for [God]. It is about living in a vital relationship with the living God, both in covenant and a communion."<sup>12</sup> Jesus, the Christ, who called us friends, remains faithful to this covenant, even when at times we are not. Prayer provides a means for us to contemplate this relationship and our human response to it. Prayer is both an avenue to and a reflective lens to hope.

How do we understand and live a life of prayer today? Do we recognize it as a lifeline that connects us to God and all that is visible and invisible? How often do we stop and marvel that at all times and in all places throughout the world, someone is speaking in the name of all creation: "O God, come to our assistance! O Lord, make haste to help us!" (Ps 69/70 v. 2).<sup>13</sup> Do

<sup>11</sup> Wadell, Paul J. "Hope the Forgotten Virtue of Our Time"

<sup>12</sup> Kirby, Jeffrey F. "The majestic heights of Christian prayer begin in humility". Crux Catholic Media. May 14, 2023

<sup>13</sup> New American Bible Revised Edition

we truly believe that selfless prayers of gratitude, lament, supplication and praise not only unify us as a global community, but can actually make a tangible, concrete, real-life difference?

As leaders in congregations can we, do we, invite all our sisters to reflect and engage in the conviction that being a minister of prayer is more than a title given to those no longer in active ministry. All religious women are commissioned to this urgently needed service, for being a minister of prayer has untold depth and is *de facto* a form of service, a commitment to Jesus' mission. Prayer can stop wars and overcome evil. Prayer is an act of hope that *Love* is alive and at work in the universe. Prayer is transformative as it calls us to recognize **hope** active through the Spirit. I was given witness to this many years ago.

Sr. Nancy, who has now taken her place in the communion of saints, had a large map of the world in her infirmary bedroom. Each day, she would ask the Spirit to send her prayer to those persons and places who were most in need of love, peace, care and safety. When I would visit Sister, she would often point to her map while adapting the words from Ephesians, 3:20. She would say something similar to, "God can do infinitely more than we can do or imagine. It is God's mighty power that gets us all out of bed each morning. Imagine what God does in this place." Hope was real because Sr. Nancy knew that the Spirit of Christ was alive and at work in every nook and cranny in the universe. Is that not the conviction in which we live our lives and wish to share with those who come after us?

### **Hope through On-Going Learning and Transformation**

As a Dominican, I embrace study as one of the four pillars that shapes our charism. It is at the heart of initial and ongoing formation programs in all our congregations. Study, dialogue and reflection are fundamental practices in living our consecration with integrity and authenticity. Siloed learning which fails to integrate and attend to relationships can leave us irrelevant to those whom God calls us to serve. Being uninformed or misinformed about humanity, the environment, politics, cultures, racism, justice issues, or church may leave us unable to meet the needs of the world on this common journey of hope and indisposed to the personal transformation to which we are called.

In 2017 Pope Francis gave a TED Talk, entitled, "Why the Only Future Worth Building Includes Everyone." Pope Francis sees an interconnectedness between all forms of intellectual pursuits and the enterprise of living the Gospel of compassion and care for all creation. "Many of us, nowadays, seem to believe that a happy and hope-filled future is something impossible to achieve. While such concerns must be taken very seriously, they are not invincible. They can be overcome when we don't lock our door to the outside world. Even science... points to an understanding of reality as a place where every element connects and interacts with everything else... How wonderful would it be if the growth of scientific and technological innovation would come along with more equality and social inclusion. How wonderful would it be, while we discover faraway planets, to rediscover the needs of the brothers and sisters orbiting around us."<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Pope Francis, "Why the only future worth building includes everyone" | TEDTalks 2017. See [https://www.ted.com/talks/his\\_holiness\\_pope\\_francois\\_why\\_the\\_only\\_future\\_worth\\_building\\_includes\\_everyone/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/his_holiness_pope_francois_why_the_only_future_worth_building_includes_everyone/transcript?language=en)

Clearly, educating ourselves in and for our ministries is a high priority in all our congregations. Seeking to respond to the signs of our times through our vowed life is a life-long pursuit and a sacred responsibility of any vowed religious. Central to the Synod on Synodality is understanding the current realities and needs of God's people and Earth. On-going learning is essential for transformation and transformation is fuel for hope.

No doubt many of us have hosted or engaged in Synod listening sessions, read the various documents coming from worldwide gatherings of parishes and other church-related groups, as well as from conferences of bishops in both the local and continental phases of the Synod. What insights are we gaining? How is the diversity of context, culture, race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexual orientation, spirituality and religious practice opening our minds and hearts to our present global reality? Do the words participation, mission, and communion have deeper meaning in our lives and instill in us a desire to be synodal in all our circles of encounter? Do they call us forth to engage and share our Christian lens of hope? Some say nothing will change within the institutional church. As women of the church, as institutes within the church, and as a Conference in dialogue with other leadership in the church, we must choose to be on this pathway of grace, emboldened by hope.

Insights gained in the Synodal process are the fodder for our engagement in contemplative dialogue with a wide array of people. Articulating what we know, experience, feel and dream; listening to others' insights, most especially those forced to the periphery; and pausing to find the common good, as prodded by the Spirit, move us from self-interest and competition to interdependency and creation-focused living. It provides us a platform to discern the movement of the Spirit and strengthen our focus on mission promoting action. More importantly, it stirs within us the hope to be transformed more fully into the body of Christ.

In his address to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops this past June, Archbishop Christophe Pierre spoke profoundly of integrating the transformational process of becoming a synodal church, a listening church, with living the Eucharist as mission. He states, "...because it is the real presence of Christ, it is a dynamic Sacrament, imbuing everything we do with the character of Christ's outgoing love for his people. It is a Sacrament for mission. A Eucharistic revival, therefore, is a call to let the entirety of our lives be an expression of the Lord's presence among us: a living-out of the union that exists between our humanity, which Christ has taken to himself, and the divinity into which he leads us."<sup>15</sup> How might we embrace these opportunities of grace mindful of the words from Isaiah 43:19, "*Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?*"<sup>16</sup>

We have looked at prayer, community, on-going learning and transformation as elements found in religious life that help us navigate our journey into hope. Now we turn to obstacles we may encounter on this journey.

<sup>15</sup> Address of His Excellency Archbishop Christophe Pierre, Apostolic Nuncio to the United States of America, to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Plenary Assembly. Orlando, FL. June 15, 2023

<sup>16</sup> New American Bible Revised Edition

## Obstacles to Hope

Sacred Mystery draws us forward into a journey of hope but does not coerce our participation. In each moment of our lives, we are given the freedom to accept or reject God's generosity. What are some of the more common obstacles that distance us from God's mission and vision for religious life today as we meet the changing and complex needs of the Earth and her creatures? What obstacles diminish hope? Let's look at three.

### Fatigue

After a tumultuous three years of the COVID-19 pandemic, many have abandoned the primarily online interactions. We have rediscovered the value of meeting over a cup of coffee and enjoying the small talk that accompanies the encounter. We have opened our convents, our homes, our engagements, and our institutions. Have we really opened our hearts to understanding how this phenomenon has affected us individually, as congregations, as social beings? Social fatigue, and for some, physical fatigue, did not pass by the doorposts of our convents, our places of ministry, or our inner lives. Isolation, death and the subsequent grief marked our hearts in untold ways. Depletion of liveliness, numbing behaviors, negative or cynical outlooks on life, and the lack of creative energy remain byproducts of this unprecedented global crisis. It is incumbent on us, as leaders in communities of faith, to address the remnants that keep us from living our vocations grounded in hope and connection to ourselves and others. Rituals of meaning, playful engagements, one-on-one interactions, and the blessing of touch, may well be needed more today than when masks covered our smiles and isolation was a hallmark of the common good.

### Forgetfulness

There is a story of a young couple who watched their four-year-old son wander into the nursery where their newborn lay sleeping. Seeing him move close to the infant's ear, the eavesdropping parent heard him say, "Hey, can you tell me what God is like, I am starting to forget." This event may or may not be true, but let us recognize its parallels. Consider the periods during the day when God seems absent from our hearts and minds. Consider those moments, when we throw up our hands at what seems to be a disturbing, unsettling, disunifying, chaotic, and unjust world. Consider those times when pain, uncertainty, stress, and anxiety grip us into feeling alone or abandoned. It is at such moments we are invited to re-member ourselves to our Creator and recall Jesus' eternal promise: "*I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate to be with you always, the Spirit of truth, which the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor knows it. But you know it, because it remains with you, and will be in you. I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you.*" John 14: 15-17<sup>17</sup>

Paul Wadell reminds us, "Hope is imperiled not so much by the misfortunes, struggles and sometimes inconsolable losses that come our way because, as a virtue, the very nature of hope is to steady and strengthen us during those moments lest they defeat us. Rather, hope erodes when we no longer aspire to something sufficiently good enough—something sufficiently blessed and promising—to sustain us in the life that God wants for us."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> New American Bible Revised Edition

<sup>18</sup> Wadell, Paul J. "Hope the Forgotten Virtue of Our Time"

When we forget who we are and whose we are, the deeper questions on how to live our lives as consecrated women religious in these times of complexity and challenge become overwhelming. Hope diminishes. We settle. We compromise. We maintain. Yet the charism of religious life is a gift from the Spirit that impels us forward “*to bring good news to the afflicted; to bind up the brokenhearted; to proclaim liberty to captives; and freedom to prisoners*” (Isaiah 61:1)<sup>19</sup> here, now, and into the future. This gift will not be taken from us, for it was given by our God who is faithful. Let us remember.

## **Fear**

We live within a growing culture of fear. Dictators raging wars; increased tribal nationalism; raced-based viciousness; gun violence; limited access to healthcare; censorship of differing voices; accelerating poverty; fake news proclaimed as truth; and polarization in governments, churches and families all contribute to this culture of fear. Such a culture takes on a life of its own and can be demoralizing. Caroline Ong notes, “Such a culture is often based on misinformation, lack of knowledge, and a false sense of individualism that has no concern for others. We are individuals with our human rights, we are also social beings constantly in relationship with all that is around us. Our existence is interdependent on others. The African concept of ubuntu—commonly translated as ‘I am because we are’ highlights this interdependency. In this philosophy, healthy individualism involves concern for others, encourages creative solutions and inclusivity. The culture of fear engenders the opposite philosophy. Individualism, in a culture of fear, is concerned primarily with self-preservation and is likely to encourage the exclusion of others unless it clearly benefits the individual in the immediate.”<sup>20</sup>

Fear is a human response to threat. As we see the stark changes in religious life and the challenges that confront us each day, we must recognize our own culture of fear. Do we have any residual fears of failure or of being perceived as unfaithful because our numbers are shrinking? Do we long for what was, resisting the ideas and vitality of younger generations? Can we live in community with members of other congregations whose races, cultures, and prayer expressions are different than ours? Can we trust we belong to a church born of the Spirit and that our gifts are not to be denied?

Fear can break us or bring us to our knees. Together, let us trust the words from the prophet Jeremiah, “I know well the plans I have in mind for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for woe so as to give you a future of hope” (Jeremiah 29:11).<sup>21</sup> Let us cast out our fears and embrace the reflective lens of Christian hope which is already within us.

## **Hope Today**

Thus, wrapped in the promises and fidelity of our God, living our vowed life with commitment to community, prayer, and on-going learning and transformation, aware of, but undeterred by obstacles, are we ready to re-board that Rambler together? The journey, this time a

<sup>19</sup> New American Bible Revised Edition

<sup>20</sup> Ong, Caroline G. “A Growing Culture of Hope or Fear?” Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church. Catholicethics.com. November 1, 2019

<sup>21</sup> New American Bible Revised Edition



global one, is before us – with the vastness of God’s universe now also in view. How will we discern the way? By living in hope!” Pope Francis reminds us, “To Christians, the future does have a name, and its name is Hope. Feeling hopeful does not mean to be optimistically naïve and ignore the tragedy humanity is facing. Hope is the virtue of a heart that doesn't lock itself into darkness, that doesn't dwell on the past, does not simply get by in the present, but is able to see a tomorrow. Hope is the door that opens onto the future. Hope is a humble, hidden seed of life that, with time, will develop into a large tree. It is like some invisible yeast that allows the whole dough to grow, that brings flavor to all aspects of life. And it can do so much, because a tiny flicker of light that feeds on hope is enough to shatter the shield of darkness. A single individual is enough for hope to exist, and that individual can be you. And then there will be another "you," and another "you," and it turns into an "us." And so, does hope begin when we have an "us?" No. Hope began with one "you." When there is an "us," there begins a revolution.”<sup>22</sup>

So, my friends, our windshield is polished and the road beckons. Let us sit tall and look out the windows at the vast promise before us. We are hip to hip, heart to heart. Let us not fear to hope – Jesus, the Christ, has the wheel.

***Do Not Fear to Hope***  
***Music and Lyrics by Rory Cooney***

Do not fear to hope though the wicked rage and rise.

Our God sees not as we see,  
 success is not the prize.

Do not fear to hope, for though the night be long,  
 the race shall not be to the swift.

The fight not to the strong.

Look to God when victory  
 seems out of justice’s sight.

Look to God whose mighty hand  
 brought forth the day  
 from the chaos of the night.

Look to God when reason fails  
 and terror reigns in the night.

Look upon the crucified,  
 and see beyond  
 into Easter’s dawning light.

Hope is for a pilgrim people.

Searching for a promised land.

Hope is like a rose in winter or an open hand.

It celebrates the light of morning,  
 while working in the dark and cold.

It gathers us together to share what we’ve been told.

Text: Rory Cooney, b.1952 Tune: Rory Cooney, b.1952

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<sup>22</sup> Pope Francis, “Why the only future worth building includes everyone” | TEDTalks 2017.