

**Leadership Conference of Women Religious  
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**Hope Unbroken:  
Jesus, Lazarus, Martha, Mary and the Future of Women Religious in the United States**

First of all, thank you for letting me speak with you virtually. As you may have heard through the LCWR grapevine, I was planning on joining you in person, but my mom was recently diagnosed with dementia which has meant more time with her and less time for travel.

Now, I'm sure that that situation is probably totally unfamiliar to you. I'm sure that none of you have ever worried about anyone you know who is aging, right? And I'm sure that you yourselves haven't had to worry about aging, right? I certainly haven't. Not me! I'm not getting any older, and neither are any of the Jesuits with whom I live and work. In fact, we're only getting younger!

Of course, I'm kidding. Like my mom, and like you, I'm getting older and belong to a religious order that, while we are graced with vocations every year, is aging, at least in the US. Now, that is not true for all religious orders: some more traditional ones in the US are exploding with vocations; and overseas of course, especially in the developing world, many orders of both men and women are growing. I'm sure that Sister Brambilla could share many stories about that. But many orders are not growing.

So I am with you in spirit if not in person. And before I go any further, I want to say a few things. First, Catholic sisters are my heroes. Maybe you don't need to hear that, but it's true. Now, unlike many Catholics of my age, I did not go to Catholic schools until I entered the Jesuits. But I did have the Sisters of St. Joseph of Chestnut Hill teaching me CCD (sorry: religious education) on Sundays after Mass in suburban Philadelphia. And one of my earliest memories is Sister Margaret Mary writing a huge letter "O" on the blackboard to begin our lesson on the Act of Contrition. "O my God..." Also, I have to apologize, because I was one of the public-school kids who would root around in the Catholic school students' desks on Sunday mornings, because ... why not?

But it wasn't until I entered the Jesuits at age 27 that I came to know, understand and even reverence Catholic sisters. One of the first presentations we had in our novitiate in Boston, to help us understand different vocations in the church, was from Sister Maureen Clarke, a CSJ of Springfield, Mass., who was Catholic chaplain at a nearby prison. And I can't tell you how impressed I was. I thought: this is a Catholic Sister? It opened my mind to who women religious in the US were.

During the two years of our novitiate, we learned not only about Catholics sisters in the distant past but also ones closer to our time, like the four churchwomen who were martyred in El Salvador just a few years before I entered the Jesuits.

Then, during the subsequent ten years of my formation, women religious became my spiritual directors, my professors, my role models, my mentors and of course my friends. I also tried to stand with the LCWR when you were investigated by the Vatican and I rejoiced with you when Pope Francis ended that painful chapter. You have been selfless and poor and obedient and hardworking and chaste and loving and prophetic and magnificent. So thank you.

But I know that like so many religious men and women, many of you are facing the reality of apostolates being closed, consolidations of orders, deaths of sisters, declining vocations, and even communities discerning what the Sisters of Charity in New York have called a “path to completion.” At the same time, women religious are still in the forefront of Catholic education, pastoral work, social justice, spiritual direction, and, moreover, all sorts of ministries and new initiatives are started every year. And both Catholics and non-Catholics still look to you for moral leadership. So where is God in all of this?

In my prayer and in my conversations with the LCWR team and other women religious, I came to the conclusion that I wanted to use a biblical framework for our reflections. By the way, I am aware of the incongruity of a priest giving advice to sisters. A man giving advice to women, once again in the church. But I hope you see this as recompense for the graces that Sisters have given me in my life. Also, as someone once said to me about any sort of spiritual reflection, think of what I’m offering to be like spaghetti. One way to find out if spaghetti is cooked is by throwing it against the wall and seeing if it sticks. So see what if anything I say sticks. The rest you can let go. By the way, my mom is 100% Italian and I once mentioned this image to her and said, “No one cooks spaghetti like that! You just take it out of the pot and take a bite and see if it’s ready. Who told you that?”

Initially I thought I would offer a reflection on the Annunciation and how Mary says “yes” to an uncertain future. But I thought in all your years as religious, and with some of you coming from congregations that are Marian in their spirituality, you’ve probably heard all that before.

So I thought I’d offer you something from my own history, in a sense, which is a reflection on the story of the Raising of Lazarus as it is recounted in John’s Gospel. Some of you may know that’s the subject of my latest book, but this is not meant as a plug. Rather, as I was praying over this talk, Lazarus continued to come up as a framework to understand where God might be leading us. So I’m offering this as a fellow Christian, a fellow Catholic and a fellow religious, but also as someone in a religious order that is facing some of the same challenges and opportunities that women’s orders are.

So let’s think about this story from John’s Gospel, which doubtless you know. It’s a tale about love, illness, death, grieving, honesty, openness, uncertainty and, ultimately, new life.

What can it teach us?

First, love. This story is mainly about love, the source and ground of all our religious orders and the beginning of all our individual vocations. When Martha and Mary send word to Jesus that their brother Lazarus is ill, they don't say, "Lazarus our brother is ill," as you might expect. Or "Lazarus, your disciple, is ill." Or even what you would expect in the New Testament, "Lazarus of Bethany is ill." They say something more important: "He whom you love is ill." The Greek is *hon phileis*.

This is the foundation of all our vocations, all our communities, all our ministries and all our futures. Our founders and foundresses were all in love with Jesus. And in some way each of us has all fallen in love with Jesus. Now I don't mean that strictly in the mystical sense, as with St. Catherine of Siena entering into a mystical marriage with Jesus, or St. Teresa of Avila swooning in ecstasy, at least as Bernini would have it. No, I mean that all of us were attracted to the person of Jesus, have spent time with him in prayer (and maybe had a few mystical moments), have read about him, have studied the Gospels, have encountered him in the sacraments, have met him in those we meet and have lived out our lives in service to him. And as St. Ignatius said, "Love shows itself more in deeds than in words." But love for Jesus undergirds all we do.

Even more important is knowing that he loves *us*. Notice that Martha and Mary don't call Lazarus, "The one who loves *you*," But, rather, "He whom *you* love." All this starts with Jesus's love for *us*, which we've experienced in so many ways. So we must start with that in any discussion and rely on the sure and certain knowledge of his love for all of us.

After the sisters send word to Jesus about their brother's illness, something surprising, perhaps even confusing, happens. We're told, "Accordingly, though Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus, after having heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was." Accordingly? Well, at least we're told he loved them. But his delay and seeming indifference raises the question of "Where are you, Jesus?" Or "What are you doing?"

We often hear that question echoed in our own hearts. A few weeks ago, I just learned that a two Jesuits I know were removed from ministry because of sexual abuse. And I thought, "Oh no, not again. What a tragedy for everyone. Jesus, where are you?" More importantly: "Where were you?" In a less dramatic way, we can wonder why we are no longer getting as many vocations as we once did, why many in our circle of friends are dying and why our beloved places are closing. Just a few weeks ago I heard that one of my favorite retreat houses, the Linwood Spiritual Center, in Rhinebeck, NY, run by the Sisters of St. Ursula, is closing. It's a source of great sadness. And we can wonder: Jesus, where are you?

The sisters don't understand this. Meaning Martha and Mary. And women and men religious, and many others, don't understand this too. Now, as I said, this is not the case for every sister or every order.

What I want to highlight here, though, is the essential unknowability of God's plans. "Why is this happening?" is often a question that, for now, is unanswerable. New Testament scholars

say that Jesus's own delay in coming to help Lazarus can be attributed to many things: waiting for the requisite number of days for the soul to leave the body; or the idea that Jesus would be giving Lazarus something better than healing; but mainly Jesus's independence. Jesus will go when he goes. God does what God does. But crucially, as we'll see later, the sisters are blunt with their feelings about his not showing up.

Now, when the disciples hear the news of Lazarus's death, they are confused. Jesus says that Lazarus has fallen asleep, and he is going to awaken him. But the disciples misunderstand, as they often do in John, and think he means ordinary sleep and they say, "He will be all right." Often in John's Gospel, if someone says he knows, he doesn't and if someone says they see, they can't. So Jesus is blunt with them, as he has to be with us. He says, "Lazarus is dead."

This is an important insight for us. Some things are gone. In my own Jesuit Province, in just the last few years, we've sold several retreat houses, which provided for the spiritual care of thousands of people for decades, and were beloved not only by the retreatants but by the Jesuits. We closed the Campion Renewal Center in Weston, Mass.; and sold Manresa Retreat House in Staten Island, St. Ignatius Retreat House on Long Island and the Jesuit Spiritual Center at Wernersville, Pennsylvania, which, to make it even more painful, was the novitiate for the old Maryland Province. And to make it even triply painful, the donors, Nicholas and Genevieve Brady, were buried there. So we had to exhume their bodies from the building that they built for us and re-inter them in the Jesuit cemetery. It's all so painful.

But we have to face this. Like the Bradys who led generous lives, and like Lazarus, who was loved by his sisters, some things are dead. It's important to name that, be grateful for what went before, grieve that and accept it. Some ministries and houses and events and people, all beloved to us, all parts of our lives, all who made us what we are, and contributed to the church, are dead. "Lazarus is dead." As you know better than I, there is a need to celebrate what happened there, savor it and then give it over to God.

I once asked my friend Sister Janice Farnham, a Religious of Jesus and Mary, how she felt about the ending of some apostolates and even some women's religious orders. "Well," she said, "It's like a person's life. We come into this world, we do what God asks of us and we leave this world. In a sense it's a natural progression." So death is part of this religious life, both individually and corporately.

But that, as you know, is not the end of the story. And before we can even get to Jesus giving Lazarus new life, emotions have to be expressed. When Jesus finally reaches Bethany Martha and Mary greet him and they tell them how they feel.

Now, in John's Gospel, the characters of Martha and Mary are thrillingly alive. And interestingly, their personalities mirror the story about them in Luke's Gospel, when Jesus visits their house in Bethany and Martha complains to Jesus that her sister is not helping her. Most visual depictions of this narrative depict Martha preparing food. But Luke says that Martha

complains she is doing not all the cooking, but all the *diakonia*, the ministry or service. The New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine told me that one reason that we have traditionally consigned Martha to “peeling potatoes,” as she said, is that we have been uncomfortable with Martha’s association with *diakonia*, whence comes the word deacon.

But Martha is not afraid to be blunt with Jesus: “Tell her, then, to help me,” she says at her house. By the way, we’re at *her* house, not Lazarus’s. And then when Jesus finally comes to Lazarus’s tomb after a delay of several days—imagine how upsetting it must have been to wait for him to come, as we wait for a change that never comes—she is honest with him. “Lord,” she says, “if you had been here, our brother would not have died.”

How can Martha be so blunt, both at her house, in a time of relative calm; and at her brother’s tomb, in a time of stress? Well, she knows Jesus. We can be that honest only with people that we know. A few years ago, when I was chosen to be a Delegate to the Synod of Bishops, someone said to me, “You have to tell Pope Francis this and that!” And they shook their finger at me to demonstrate. And I said, “I don’t talk to the Pope like that!” But I’ve seen others talk to him like that. People who knew him well. Martha and Mary could be honest with Jesus about their feelings, about their emotions, about the death of their brother, because they knew him. It’s an invitation for all of us to be honest with God about pain, death and loss. And also about our hopes for the future. Because Martha also says she knows that God will give Jesus anything he asks.

When Jesus asks where her brother is laid, she says, “Come and see.” What a powerful invitation! Martha uses the same words to Jesus that he used for his disciples. Sometimes in our prayer we have to invite Jesus to see something. Come into my life and see what I’m experiencing. Let me take you there.

When Jesus comes to the tomb, he weeps, as you know. It’s one of the most famous phrases in the Gospels: Jesus wept. It’s often seen as a sign of his sadness over Lazarus, and a sign of his utter humanity. Which it is. But New Testament scholars point out the words used in Greek are less about sadness and more about anger. Jesus seems to be angry? Why? Well, perhaps over the sheer fact of death, perhaps at what he knows it coming (that is, the raising will lead to his crucifixion) but mainly, say scholars, the lack of faith of the people that he can do something extraordinary. Do you ever wonder if God gets frustrated by our lack of faith in what God can do?

Then he says something strange. “Take away the stone,” he says. How odd! Why couldn’t Lazarus just have appeared? My sense is that Jesus is asking the crowd to participate in the miracle, in the freeing, just as we are invited to help do that with our friends, our sisters, our brothers. What are the stones that keep our sisters and our orders from being free? What keeps us from seeing the light? Where are the stones in our congregations?

But Martha is focused on something else now. When Jesus asks her to roll away the stone, she says, there will be a stench. Like so many of us, Martha is focused about the practical, the rational, the facts. She still can't see that Jesus has something else in store for her. Also note that Jesus is not worried about looking inside the tomb. He's not worried about looking at the parts of our lives that seem rotten, or smelly, or even dead. He's not worried about our confusion or our doubt or our fears. He is willing to look at that with us. He's not afraid of the stench. So he asks Martha: Don't you believe in me?

Martha believes, like we all believe, even in the face of struggle. She says earlier, "I know you are the Messiah, the Son of God, and the one who is to come." But Jesus is even more than what Martha can imagine, as the Messiah. And as if in reward not only for her faith but her honesty he reveals who he is: "I am the Resurrection and the Life."

Here is the place where many of us stand in our lives as religious and in our communities. Frightened, worried, sad, fearful and afraid of the darkness inside the tomb. At the same time, still believing, still hopeful, knowing that Jesus is always with us. And wondering what is going to happen. When my dad was diagnosed with cancer, and I confessed to my friend Sister Janice Farnham that I didn't know if I was going to be able to handle it she said, "Can you surrender to the future God has in store for you?" This is our invitation.

Now at the dramatic high point of the story, Jesus utters his famous words, "Come forth!" And here I'd like to look at this story from the point of view of Lazarus and ask what it has to do with religious life.

First of all, what this story has to offer us is the invitation to leave behind in our tombs anything that keeps us stuck or bound or unfree. We are invited to ask: What is keeping us from hearing God's voice in our lives, in our congregations, in our communities? Is it a fear of change? A fear of being seen as not important? A fear that somehow we made wrong decisions? Is it the fear of leaving something else behind? Even a fear of physical death? Can we leave all those fears and worries in the tomb? Are there resentments or grudges or disappointments that you have? Can you leave that behind? What do you, what do we, need to leave behind to hear God calling us into a surprising new life?

Second, I want to share an insight that a woman shared with me during a zoom talk about my book. She said that Lazarus, who was brought back from death, as he is lying on his tomb, had to decide to do something that no one else ever had to do. And that's where we are today as religious, whether we're young or old, or our communities are expanding or shrinking, or are being founded or moving onto the path to completion. What do I mean by that?

Each of us as individuals, and each of our congregations has our own unique constellation of joys and hopes and griefs and anxieties. Everyone in the audience has their own unique set of problems: physical, emotional, mental, even spiritual issues. And we all have our own set of

gifts and graces: talents and skills and hopes and plans. So it's easy to feel: no one understands me. No one has this precise set of problems and opportunities. And so it's easy for us to say, "I can't do this." But that was precisely Lazarus's situation: no one else ever had to do what he did. So he had to say, "I can do this." And here's the point: What enabled him to respond to that invitation? It was precisely this: he knew who was calling him.

Lazarus is not getting out of his tomb simply because he thinks it's a good idea, or some committee told him that he needed to, or he read a book on self-improvement. Lazarus leaves the tomb and moves toward the future because he knows who is calling him. Lazarus is able to say yes to that voice because he *knows* that voice. His moving ahead is only in response to a person. Like Martha and Mary, who knew Jesus well, Lazarus trusted in Jesus's love. This is what enables us to move ahead in our own lives and in our community discernment: knowing who is calling us—Jesus.

Lazarus comes out, bound head and foot in his burial clothes. Notice that he is wearing them, while Jesus's burial clothes are rolled up and remain in his tomb. Why? Because Lazarus will need them again; Jesus will not.

And what does new life look like? Well, Lazarus doesn't know. And neither do we!

Lazarus must have wondered NOW WHAT? And we, too, wonder, NOW WHAT?

Perhaps a NOW WHAT might look like this:

And what does new life look like? Well, Lazarus doesn't know. Neither do we. But let's consider a few possibilities, based on the three characters in our story who encounter Jesus.

Like Martha, can we be open to Jesus' challenge about how we spend our time? About what we're doing? Martha is working hard, but she's doing the wrong thing for that particular time.

So what are we invited to do now, based on the signs of the times? Let me be bold and suggest one thing.. As we all know there is a dramatic shift in many young people's desires for the church, and it is more towards the traditional. Some of us may be uncomfortable with that, others may welcome it. It's not everywhere, but overall, many younger Catholics seek more traditional devotions, like Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, and more traditional liturgies. Are we spending time offering these paths to holiness for young people? Likewise, many young people strongly desire a sense of community? What can we do to help our communities teach them about community?

In other words, are we busy about many things, but not the right ones? What are we doing in the course of a day as leaders of congregations, organizations, ministries? Are we about the work of the Gospel, building relationships, building bridges, free from the need to feel gratified

that we have done something others can see, and freed from the need even for the approval of our familiar places?

One sister suggested this: What if we kept a “Martha Journal” and noted what tasks fill our hours? What would we see? How would what we’re doing reflect the invitation Jesus offers us today? How are we called to identify the work of these times, which is based on the signs of the times, signs that are different than they were even a few years ago. New wine in new wineskins. What if we saw our communities as networks of Marthas who helped each other see when we drift away from the work of the Gospel even when we are busy about many good things?

In short, what are we called to do?

Like Mary, can we grow in interior freedom so that we can more fully rely on Jesus, and then offer the world and each other a contemplative presence? Notice that in this story Mary doesn’t initially rush out to see Jesus. She waits for Jesus to call her. Mary is free of the need to do, do, do and instead listens. Also, Mary does something that probably bothers the more active Martha: she stays behind. But that’s her role. So where are the places where we need to step back, to pray and listen more? Even at the risk of initially not knowing what to do?

In short, how are we called to pray and discern?

Finally, like Lazarus, can we let go of whatever keeps us unfree? All the ways to which we have become accustomed to living, thinking, loving, praying, working, serving, creating, responding and leave those grave cloths in the tomb, knowing that death never has the last word—that with God all things are possible---that this change of era in which we find ourselves is where God needs us to be and the unfamiliar land of “not knowing” no longer leaves us hesitant or timid. In short, what are we called to leave behind so that we can move ahead?

One of my favorite quotes on this comes from the former Superior General of the Society of Jesus, Servant of God, Pedro Arrupe, SJ. And it’s on that kind of freedom, which is really about conversion:

"Conversion is not a giving away of something that we can well afford to lose. It goes much deeper than that. It is a putting away of something that we are: our old self with its all-too-human, all-too-worldly prejudices, convictions, attitudes, values, ways of thinking and acting, habits that have become so much a part of us that it is agony even to think of parting with them, and yet which are precisely what prevents us from rightly interpreting the signs of the times, from seeing life steadily and seeing it whole."

Can we like Lazarus, fully trusting in Jesus, confident in the future, because we are confident who it is who is calling us, respond to God's voice? 0Because the invitation for all of us, as religious, as women and men, as Catholics and Christians is indeed, every day of our lives, to “Come forth!”



Maybe it is the transmission of our charism to lay people. Maybe it's smaller groups of religious working together. Maybe it is a grateful and grace-filled path to completion, savoring the graces that we have been given and that we have shared. Maybe it's a surprising number of new vocations in countries we didn't expect and used to have a hard time finding on a map. Maybe it's a turn towards traditionalism in ways that seem surprising to us. Who knows? The key is surrendering to the future God has in store for us, which is always a future of hope unbounded and a few life in surprising ways. The key is trusting in that voice that says to us, every day of our lives, Come forth!