

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

**LCWR Outstanding Leadership Award Response**  
**Donna Markham, OP**

Let me begin my remarks this evening with a story.

In January 2020, the influx of migrants along the southern border had become overwhelming. Catholic Charities agencies' case workers had been working since the inception of the pandemic, often on the front lines with people homeless in our cities and homeless because of migration. People with nowhere to go came to our agencies in droves. These dedicated young case workers lacked proper PPE and many became ill from covid. Several died. From our National Office of Catholic Charities, we struggled to get masks and gowns to our agency frontline workers. Many of you helped. Sisters sewed masks, congregations contributed financially. We all can recall how terrifying those days and months were.

By January 2021, millions were dying. Homelessness had reached gargantuan proportions. We were witnessing a full, global humanitarian crisis that had no hint of ending soon. The border crisis had become untenable and Catholic Charities workers struggled to respond as best they could. They were exhausted; the diocesan Charities Directors were frantic over how to care for so many people as well as support and protect their indomitable, young staffs. Then, somewhat miraculously, the first vaccines became available in January of '21. You all remember that those over 75 were among the first eligible to be inoculated.

Deeply worried about the young case workers and about their leaders, and admittedly in somewhat of a state of desperation, I gave Carol Zinn a call. "Do you think any sisters over 75 and vaccinated might volunteer to help us along the border?" I asked. Carol said, "Let's give it a try. I'm *sure* our members will help!" Thus, through Carol's leadership and my query, began an extraordinary collaboration between LCWR and CCUSA. Well over 300 sisters volunteered to go to the border. I found myself moved to tears. They went fully aware of the risks. They went knowing of the hardships of life as a volunteer in a humanitarian crisis. They went! At the

national office, my teammates (many of whom are young and had not met any sister but me) were flabbergasted. “Who *are* these sisters? Why would they ever take such a risk at their age?”

Sisters, there is no way for me to convey the profound witness to hope that women religious, in understated, quiet humility and with incredible competence, provided to tens of thousands of case workers—young and old—and to migrants and homeless people. Our sisters knew exactly how to assist, how to organize, how to take appropriate charge! This experience is but one of many examples of the extraordinary goodness that permeate religious life, even as our physical fragility and vulnerability is evident. I cannot stand here in front of you and not thank you from the very depths of my being for your solidarity, your generosity, your leadership. I am so honored to be a part of you.

Serving in faith-driven leadership, especially in times of multiple and escalating crises, changes us. We will never be the same again. Fear diminishes. We become emboldened to take norm-shattering risks in radical service to the mission. The human anguish and call to respond are so compelling that any concern for our own safety simply dissipates. We no longer are uncomfortable with the tears that accompany our encounters with such mystery. Like the ancient Celts, I believe we are standing in the “thin place” with our very beings poised at the edge of a translucent veil between what *is* and what is yet to come. More than a physical place, for me it is a soul-shaking state of awareness where fear disappears, caution abates, and the flooding of the Holy envelops. There seem to be no words to articulate such experiences where some deep connection to the Sacred becomes tangible. These are places where the awe of life, in its mystery and in its anguish, pierces to the core.

There is no longer any room for postponing radical response as the awareness of urgency floods into us. It is the place of the soul where leaders are stripped of anything that prevents us from acting with clarity and conviction. Time is short and the cries of earth and her suffering poor are shrill. We are compelled to do something.

I know you, like me, have had such experiences of wordless reverence that lead to a certain emboldening of the soul. Keeping vigil by the bedside of a

dying sister friend; receiving a Ukrainian female soldier having survived unimaginable torture in a Russian prison; holding a broken grandma of a child murdered in Uvalde; standing at the edge of a village now totally erased by the consequences of climate change; receiving a migrant who survived trekking from Afghanistan through 15 countries and the Darien Gap to escape death from the Taliban. No matter the cost, we respond.

Such experiences strip the noise away from touching into the very heart of the gospel.

You and I have our own inner reservoirs of profound encounters that have changed us, transformed us, converted us. Standing along the holy edges of profound suffering, we know we will never be the same again. And we become even more emboldened to live religious life in all its full radicality.

For me, I am no longer afraid of what may become of me in speaking truth or doing what I know to be right. I know you understand this and live it with me. We will allow absolutely nothing to prevent us from reaching out in compassion. This is the gift and the hope I believe we women religious leaders offer to our broken, angry world today. As my young staff wondered, "Who are these sisters? Why would they ever do this?" we know the answer. Because we cannot do otherwise.

I am honored to walk among you as your sister and friend. I know I stand in a sacred, thin place of the heart and soul alongside you and we will continue to live together in love, in boldness, and in the sustained assurance that we are not alone. We are with strong companions. God is truly in our midst as we stand at the edge of that veil between what is and what is yet to come.