

MESSAGE TO THE LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS
AUGUST 7-12, 2016

My Dear Sisters in Christ,

I offer greetings from the new Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Christophe Pierre, the Holy Father's personal representative in the United States, who unfortunately could not attend this year's assembly. On his behalf, I wish to assure you of Pope Francis's personal closeness and his good wishes and blessing for this assembly. I am very happy to be with you for this Annual Assembly of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, as you reflect on the theme, "Embracing the Mystery: Living Transformation." I wish to thank Sister Joan Marie Steadman, CSC, for her kind invitation, as well as your President, Sr. Marcia Allen, CSJ, Sr. Mary Pellegrino, your President-Elect, and Sr. Sharon Holland, IHM, your immediate past-President.

Your assembly is an opportunity to encounter one another, to share your faith and pastoral experiences, and to strengthen one another for your mission. Pope Francis, in concluding the Year of Consecrated Life, spoke of the necessity of this encounter: *"Consecrated men and women are called first and foremost to be men and women of encounter. Vocation, in fact, is not motivated by a project that has been planned 'at the drawing table', but by the grace of the Lord who comes to us through a life-changing encounter. Those who really meet Jesus cannot stay the same as before. He is the novelty that makes all things new. He who lives this meeting becomes a witness and makes the meeting possible for others; he also becomes a promoter of the culture of encounter, avoiding a self-referential attitude that causes one to remain closed within oneself."*

In addressing novices and religious shortly after his election, Pope Francis pointed to the encounter with Jesus, as he offered a timely reminder of the need for contemplation: *"If we look towards Jesus, we see that prior to any important decision or event he recollected himself in intense and prolonged prayer. Let us cultivate the contemplative dimension, even amid the whirlwind of more urgent and heavy duties. And the more the mission calls you to go out to the margins of existence, let your heart be the more closely united to Christ's heart, full of mercy and love."*

I am pleased to discover that your speakers will address the theme of contemplation and transformation and to see that there is both time and space dedicated to contemplation. Still, many religious engage the world, handing on the fruits of their contemplation, performing the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. As Women of Encounter, transformed by your encounter with the Lord, you draw those at the peripheries into the embrace of the God of Mercy. It is my hope that the Lord would look down on this gathering with love, so that renewed, you may concretely give hope to the people of this country.

As women of encounter, offering prophetic witness, you know that to reach the poor and afflicted, you must cooperate with others, not only with men and women of

good will beyond the Church, but especially in communion with the bishops in the Church. At the Conference of Major Superiors of Men last week, I quoted something that was said in 1994 by then-Auxiliary Bishop of Buenos Aires, Jorge Mario Bergoglio; and I would like to repeat it today: *“Consecrated life is a gift to the Church. It is born of the Church. It grows in the Church, and it is entirely directed to the Church.”*

An openness and willingness to work with others is part of any successful mission. In his address to Congress, Pope Francis said: *“The challenges facing us today call for a renewal of that spirit of cooperation, which has accomplished so much good throughout the history of the United States. The complexity, the gravity and the urgency of these challenges demand that we pool our resources and talents, and resolve to support one another, with respect for our differences and our convictions of conscience.”*

Cooperation does not mean giving up what we value. Dialogue, our chief tool for engaging others, requires that I propose to the other what I live for and listen attentively to the other. Hoping to move away from an “agreeing to disagree” mentality, we need to promote a culture of encounter in which there is dialogue about what is most meaningful to us. Indeed, you have a rich tradition of encountering those at the margins—especially immigrants, victims of racial prejudice and violence, and those trapped in cycles of poverty. There are many witnesses in this country—St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, St. Theodore Guerin, St. Katharine Drexel, and Mother Cabrini—who remind us not only of the past greatness of women religious but of the concrete fruit that can be borne with courageous effort. Your courageous and heroic efforts give me the occasion to offer to you and God a word of profound gratitude.

In calling the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, Pope Francis wrote: *“Mercy is the very foundation of the Church’s life. All of her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers; nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world can be lacking in mercy. The Church’s very credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love.”* In a very real sense, the Jubilee of Mercy is entrusted to consecrated persons who often are the first to move God’s heart to pour out an ocean of mercy on a daily basis. That is what our world needs—an Ocean of God’s Mercy. The Church and the world are counting on you as you Embrace the Mystery and Live the Transformation. Thank you.