

**Leadership Conference of Women Religious
2025 Annual Assembly – Atlanta, Georgia
Outstanding Leadership Award Acceptance Response**

***Hope Unbroken: Journeying in God's Promise*
Mary Pat Garvin, RSM**

Good evening! To say that I am overwhelmed and humbled as I stand before you is quite an understatement! (*and after that video – even more so!*).

I am most grateful to you, the members of LCWR, for your nomination and selection as the recipient of the 2025 Outstanding Leadership Award.

In the past few months, as I have pondered and prayed about this unexpected honor, it became strikingly clear to me, that this recognition speaks as strongly about your own passion and dedication to initial and ongoing formation – as it does mine! If not, the material that you received last Fall about my ministry of the past 30 years would not have “found a home” in your own commitment to supporting and nourishing the lives of your members, from the most recent candidate to your most senior Sisters!

During these last four days, as we have explored our theme *Hope Unbroken: Journeying in God's Promise*, we have all done so from where we stand. Some of you are looking forward to welcoming one or more candidates in the Fall. Others are concluding a lengthy and painful discernment regarding your congregation's coming to completion. And still others are “standing in the gap” or perhaps more accurately “kneeling in the gap” praying unceasingly for wisdom and courage to recognize where the Spirit is leading.

The presentations of Sr. Simona Brambilla, MC, Fr. James Martin, SJ, and Sr. Kathy Brazda, CSJ, along with our panelists, each in their own way, called us to hold fast to hope...God's unbroken, never wavering hope in us to lead at this time in our congregations, our country, and our world.

So where have I experienced hope unbroken in my own life as I have journeyed in God's promise in a ministry that came upon me quite unexpectedly? Pondering this question, I was reminded of a line in one of Mary Oliver's poems. She writes ---

“Keep some room in your heart for the unimaginable.”¹

Truly, the unimaginable came my way the day my congregation's leadership invited me to pursue an interdisciplinary degree in philosophy, theology, and psychology. Having never studied these disciplines previously, the unimaginable was taken up, trust me, with substantial fear and trembling! Yet, as the years passed, the unimaginable took me both figuratively and literally to worlds I would have never dreamed of experiencing. Figuratively, explorations of inner worlds, first my own, and then accompanying those discerning their own felt-call to the consecrated life. And literally, my ministry of accompanying new members, working with leadership teams, and the education of formators has taken me around the globe. Through all the unimaginable twists and turns of my life, though not always clearly perceived by me, God's unbroken hope and promise has sustained me. I am most grateful.

So, to paraphrase the beginning of the first letter of St. John, I wish to share, just briefly, what I have heard with my own ears, seen with my own eyes, and been deeply touched by as I have ministered in initial and ongoing formation, in my own congregation as well as in many of your congregations here in the U.S. and beyond. I invite you to enter into these reflections and perhaps notice echoes of your own experience.

I will share my reflections under three headings: Graced Companionship, Social Mystics, and the Grace of Resilience.

Graced Companionship

Over the years, graced companionship² has become for me the phrase which captures best the deep desires I have repeatedly *heard with my own ears* from new members whether coming from large urban centers such as New York, London, or Nairobi, or small rural towns in middle America, and on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, Argentina or Jakarta, Indonesia. These women, especially with the rise of social media and increased coverage by major news outlets,³ are discovering others, like themselves, across the globe, who despite cultural and language differences, are responding to the same counter-cultural call to religious life.

Today, while respecting culture and charism, we acknowledge the rise of a global sisterhood where interculturality, intercongregationality, and intergenerationality increasingly characterize the face of religious life.⁴ Living and ministering as religious women necessitates first, a deep well of self-knowledge, along with “the capacity for openness and encounter, sharing and collaboration, reflection and discernment in common”⁵ – all requisites of a synodal church in the 21st century.

Social Mystics⁶

What have I *seen with my own eyes* when meeting and accompanying women discerning religious life? Concretely, in Ethiopia, I have encountered young religious teaching kindergarten to children living with Hansen disease/leprosy. In Italy, temporary professed ministering day and night to the unending flood of refugees fleeing the Global South. In the U.S., new members, the “next generation,”⁷ serving in soup kitchens, educational and health care institutions, parishes and social centers, as well as along our southern border.

Like countless women religious before them, including each of you here this evening, these religious of the 21st century are discovering their own call to be social mystics – women whose relationship with Jesus, whose profound experience of the Divine has direct social ramifications. Being a social mystic in today’s world, far from retreating from the deep wounds afflicting God’s people, propel these women towards a vibrant life of service to and with God’s most vulnerable.

The Grace of Resilience

And where have I been *touched deeply* in this ministry? Thanks to one of my congregation’s retreat committees, shortly after the pandemic, I was invited to develop a week-long, guided retreat on the topic of resilience. What I could have never imagined is how the *Grace of Resilience* retreat would bless my life! Attracting mostly our “senior” Sisters (just recently, one astute participant was 101-years young), we explored resilience through both a spiritual and psychological lens.

Several times, at various large convents and retirement facilities, I was touched deeply and brought to tears as their stories of resilience poured forth recounting how they had faced the massive changes that swept through religious life beginning in the 1960's. Over and over again it became evident to me and to the Sisters that they had not only made it through times of adversity but actually had been transformed through adversity. We rejoiced together that what is now known as post-traumatic growth⁸ was offering each of them wisdom and courage to live their elder years rejoicing in their own grace of resilience.

Conclusion

To conclude, I am most grateful having had the opportunity this evening to share with you what I have heard with my own ears, seen with my own eyes, and been deeply touched by through my ministry in initial and ongoing formation. Likewise, each of you, through your own ministry of spiritual leadership have heard, seen, and been touched by many similar experiences. May you continue to lead your membership and support those organizations working diligently to promote a healthy and holy living of religious life, all in service of God's most vulnerable. And may we go forth from this Assembly with hope renewed and unbroken: journeying in God's promise.

¹ Mary Oliver (2009). Evidence in *Evidence*, Beacon Press, p. 43.

² The phrase "graced companionship" originated in the keynote address I offered at the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) 19th Plenary Assembly in Rome in 2013. The full text can be accessed at https://oldsite.uisg.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Boll-152_ing.pdf.

³ The National Catholic Reporter (NCR) launched Global Sisters Report in 2015 to amplify the voices of women religious worldwide. This year, 2025, Global Sisters Report celebrates its tenth anniversary. See "10 years of a great adventure at Global Sisters Report," <https://www.globalsistersreport.org/10-years-great-adventure-global-sisters-report>.

⁴ Susan Rose Francois, CSJP & Juliet Mousseau, RSCJ, Eds. (2024). *Reseeding Religious Life through Global Sisterhood*. Liturgical Press.

⁵ XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (2025). *For A Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission*, Final Document, no.143. https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG---Documento-finale.pdf

⁶ I am indebted to Susan Rakoczy, IHM (Monroe, MI) who has inspired and nourished my understanding of 'social mystic' over the years. See *Great Mystics & Social Justice: Walking on the Two Feet of Love* (2006) and What does Mysticism have to do with Social Justice? in *Scriptura: Journal for Biblical, Theological, and Contextual Hermeneutics*, 112 (2013:1), p. 1-16 <https://scriptura.journals.ac.za/pub/article/view/84>

⁷ Susan Rose Francois, CSJP (2024). Reseeding for Today and Tomorrow in *Reseeding Religious Life through Global Sisterhood*. Edited by Susan Rose Francois, CSJP & Juliet Mousseau, RSCJ, p. 17-35. Susan offers the term 'Next Generation' as an alternative to calling women religious under 70 (Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Gen Z) 'newer and younger members.'

⁸ Psychologically speaking, posttraumatic growth is defined as the occurrence of multiple positive psychological changes experienced as a result of trauma or highly challenging situations. These psychological changes may usher in a fuller appreciation of a person's understanding of self, deeper and more nourishing relationships with others, and lead to a greater investment in living life to the fullest. See Richard G. Tedeschi, Jane Shakespeare-Finch, Kanako Taku, and Lawrence G. Calhoun (2018). *Posttraumatic Growth: Theory, Research and Applications* Routledge Publishers, p. 3.