

Leadership Conference of Women Religious
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The Dynamism of Love: Leadership as a Time of Light and Darkness
LCWR Presidential Address

Good morning. I am humbled and honored to come before you. I stand here as your sister, companion, and fellow leader, knowing we lead in a time of great upheaval and change in our world, nation, church, and religious Congregations.

I wish to offer my experiences of this past year to help us reflect our call to journey into God's promise of unbroken hope. It is my desire that some of the sacred spaces that were opened to me will be open to you and the conference so that God's promise of unbroken hope and love will shine through our time here together and into the future.

What an incredible year it has been for us!

I am reminded of the introduction to Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.

It was the age of wisdom; it was the age of foolishness.

It was the epoch of belief; it was the epoch of incredulity.

It was the season of Light, it was the season of darkness.

It was the spring of hope; it was the winter of despair.

I can't think of a better way to describe where we are now, as a country and as communities of faith and women religious.

It's all true at once. And that is the tension we are living in. That is the tension we are asked to hold. And it is a holy space.

Our church is transitioning to new leadership, as we both remember and celebrate Pope Francis and the legacy of hope he left to the world and move to embracing the leadership of Pope Leo XIV. (Who I am proud to say is from Chicago like me)

We stand in the midst of a polarized Church, a Church not united in ecclesiology or theology. Where even our liturgical rituals and devotions seem to act as barriers to our unity and prayer.

And it is precisely at this time that Pope Leo continues to invite us to synodality. The new Vatican document, *Pathways for the Implementation Phase of the Synod*, makes clear that synodality is intended to help the church better embrace its own mission of evangelization.

The document says and I quote:

The synodal form of the church is at the service of its own mission and any change in the life of the Church is intended to make it more capable of proclaiming the kingdom of God.

Synodality is a holy space for the Spirit to enter in.

A space in which we as women religious leaders have a unique call and role. Currently we are celebrating the Jubilee Year of Hope and the Laudato Si' 10-year anniversary, and, on a personal note, the 375 anniversary of the founding of my congregation, the Sisters of St. Joseph. In a world that is yearning for hope, peace, healing and encouragement, the Jubilee year of hope gives us a foundation for reflection and celebration, while inviting us to consider ourselves as pilgrims anew.

Our political, economic, environmental, and societal situation shifts constantly, and our hearts are saddened and cry out for mercy and justice for the vulnerable...our earth, the poor, migrants, and the LGBTQIA+ community. Often, we are incredulous about the state of the nation. Yet, we strive to live out of our beliefs, our values of kindness, truth, mercy, simplicity, love, and justice. We wonder how to respond to the many offensive actions that happen around us. We and many others are discerning ways to respond with righteous anger and action from the stance of unifying love. It's messy and emotional and rational and measured. The best and the worst. Right? A holy space for the Spirit to enter in.

In our Religious congregations, we continue to discern our emerging future. We are more and more conscious of our interdependence on one another. Not operating in silos, we are making intentional decisions of how our charism of religious life, with God's grace, can move into the future. Our lives proclaim the importance of this life as a gift to the Church and the world. And at the same time, we mourn the loss of so many sisters, our ministries, and old way of life. Truly a time of light and darkness and a time for us to rely on God's promise of unbroken hope.

It is in this context that we are called to leadership, called to hold the paradox of our time, the holy space and bring forth the light of Christ.

If we believe that there are no coincidences in our lives, only the movement of the Holy Spirit, then those of us gathered here today were born for these times. We have been chosen, incredibly, to be the people for these times.

Being and living and leading in this best of times and worst of times is indeed both a gift and a challenge.

For me, this last year called, actually shouted, at me to respond with hope, vulnerability and a new kind of leadership.

Let me say something that feels tender and important to me, right now, at the start of this reflection.

I believe in miracles
I believe in the power of Christ's transforming LOVE.
I do.

Some of you might find that surprising or interesting, or challenging. But, for me, because of what has happened over the last year, I genuinely believe in the healing of Christ and the power of prayer to bring about miracles. That line by Dickens "It was the epoch of belief; it was the epoch of incredulity" really summarizes this incredible last year.

Most of our most significant leadership lessons don't come from a workshop, (though LCWWR offers many good ones.) They don't always come from coaching or even a retreat. Most of our significant leadership lessons come from experience. This year, for me, they came from discomfort and dis-ease in every sense of the word.

Last September, I went to my yearly retreat and found I couldn't really pray. I felt disconnected, directionless, and distracted. The only thing I heard clearly was God saying **Dread is not of God.**

I did not know then how much I would need that message. On October 2, the Feast of the Guardian Angels, I was diagnosed with cancer. In that moment, everything changed. My world paused. My role in LCWR, my leadership in the Congregation, even my sense of self was uncertain. How could I lead when I had doubts about my own future, my own life, my abilities? How could I plan for a future when I wondered if I would even be a part of it?

Those questions became a doorway, an entrance point to embrace my life, my leadership in a new way. It became an entrance point to encounter Christ, and an immersion into the sacred.

Frightened and uncertain, I began a journey that proved to be one of doubt and hope, fear and trust, vulnerability and strength, which led to deeper immersion into the heart of God, the heart of LOVE. And when I was anxious, afraid, or worried, I had the message from retreat to sink into. Dread is not of God.

Dread is not of God
Perhaps a good message for all of us leading in this time in history.
Thomas Merton wrote,
*A true encounter with Christ liberates something in us
A power we did not know we had. A hope. A capacity for Life
Resilience.
The ability to bounce back when we were completely defeated.
A capacity to grow and change.
A power of creative transformation.
The dynamism of Love
Love comes out of God
and gathers us to God
in order to pour itself back into God, through all of us.
We become doors and windows through which God shines.*

During this year of discomfort and disease, I truly found myself surrendering to the experience, to encountering Christ and allowing myself to be surrounded by LOVE...to be gathered into God.

You see, Leadership is about holding paradox.
It's about letting go of control without letting go of purpose.
It's about being vulnerable and being grounded in something deeper than ego or title.
It's choosing to stay rooted in hope, even though life is uncertain and unsure.
And remembering, Dread is not of God.

Leadership is not perfection...it's presence...presence to self, presence to our Sisters and Congregation and deep presence to Christ.

It's about deep trust in God's unbroken promise of hope.

In the past few years in leadership, I have been aware of St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians which says that we carry in our bodies the dying and rising of Christ. I wasn't sure exactly what that meant, but it often was a part of my prayer. As I embraced cancer as part of me, I wondered even more what that meant, to carry in our bodies the dying and rising of Christ. Even now it is hard to explain. It's truly a mystery.

Somehow, I knew what was happening to me and the lessons that I would learn could be a gift to my Congregation and maybe even this conference. Was I to become a door or window through which Christ shines?

As I continue this personal story, I invite you to listen with your heart to what I believe is being revealed to us during this time of paradox, of hope and despair. How are we being invited into Love, this sacred space, so we can be doors and windows through which Christ shines.

Over these past years, our conference has been inviting us to realistically examine our capacity for leadership and the sustainability of Congregations into the future, all of course, through the lens of religious life and our charism. For me, the urgency of our planning and decision making got more intense as I faced my illness.

I don't know about you but whenever we look at our congregation's demographics, I do the math and see which future age group graph I fit into...where am I in the statistics.

I am 69 years old, considered one of the "younger members." (only in religious life) I knew at least from Trends forecasting data that I was projected to be around for a while (which I hope I am).

When we look at our future, we often assume that there will be sisters both younger and older who will be able to serve on committees and carry ministries and leadership into the future. That is true to a point. But definitely not in the way we are doing it now.

My diagnosis challenged my worldview, and I wonder if we may all need an equally radical change of perspective. We are at a time of both challenge and opportunity, and we need to take concrete actions on behalf of the future of religious life. To reinforce Merton, we are called to the power of creative transformation in this sacred, vulnerable time.

Brene Brown says.

Vulnerability is not winning or losing; it's having the courage to show up and be seen when we have no control over the outcome.

From October 2nd on, I had no choice but to show up and embrace vulnerability and a certain loss of control.

I had to give myself over to God and the medical professionals.

Wait for doctor appointments and test results

Endure the effect of low blood pressure or low blood counts on the timing of my chemo treatments.

I had little control over my schedule or feelings, let alone my energy.

This crash course in vulnerability and powerlessness took place in the bubble of leadership. Leadership, which I believe calls for transparency, authenticity and openness. I felt responsible for sharing my diagnosis with my Congregation and keeping them updated about the journey.

I needed the congregation to understand that I was sharing what was happening to me, not to garner sympathy, but to be accountable to them through the experience. I shared with LCWR and other boards and committees I was on. And of course, the outpouring of support was amazing.

Never underestimate the power of a text, call or card, all which always seemed to come at the time I needed them most.

Yet, I felt vulnerable, showing myself publicly not as the strong, competent person that I perceive myself to be, but as one weak and in need of healing. A new sense of poverty.

It was hard to share.
It was hard to ask for help.
It was hard not to be defensive.

As anyone who has had major surgery knows, recovery takes time and there is a need not just for physical healing but for psychological and spiritual healing as well. One **must truly rely on the accompaniment of others.**

After the surgery, I moved into our Assisted Living Center, living with Sisters whom I hadn't been with on a day-to-day basis since my novitiate. I spent quality time with them at meals and prayers and recreation. Learning to receive, not being the leader or competent one brought me to a new relationship with them as Sister. Entering the sacred space of community with our elders gave me the support I needed, as well as a new way to engage with them. They made sure my needs were taken care of and offered me words of comfort. Julie, 92 years of age, did my laundry!

It was a joy to encounter them again, to experience their deep prayer, joy, curiosity about the world...they weren't retired from mission. They were living it. Their care was a doorway of light and love for me to heal and be present to them in new ways.

In my vulnerability I evoked Christ in them and through their mercy, love and compassion, I encountered Christ. What a gift we have in the prayer and presence of our elders.

We grew together in sharing our giftedness and weakness to live our vocation and mission.

And isn't that the call to community? Isn't that the call to leadership

Maya Angelou says, *When we give cheerfully and accept gratefully, everyone is blessed.*

My leadership team, Marie Hogan, Sue Torgersen, Pat Warbritton and Helen Skormisley made adjustments and allowances in the team meeting schedule so that I could join them. They took on some of my responsibilities and accepted what I could and couldn't do. Their gifts began to

shine as we engaged more deeply in participative and shared leadership. And I learned, I did not have to always do everything. I did not always have to take the lead. The team became doors and windows in which God's light was able to shine.

And the LCWR Leadership, I cannot thank or say enough about. Carol and the Presidency of LCWR-Maureen Geary and Vicky Larson who walked with me this year. I had to accept that I was too fragile and frail to extend myself into this work. Prioritizing my health was my first concern.

Carol, Maureen and Vicky carried most of the load. They allowed me to participate when I was able and supported me through prayer and presence.

Last year, my veil of self-sufficiency was removed. The narrative I told myself of competence, abilities and need to always be the one in charge or do everything changed (and not always by my choice). This self-emptying brought me to radical dependence on God and made room for the Spirit to flow.

As leaders, we each may have our own narrative, the story we tell ourselves about who we are...maybe the need to be strong and competent. The need to keep it together for the sake of the congregation, for the sisters or for the team. The temptation to work 24/7. But it shouldn't take a major illness or injury to bring us to this. When we let go of our pride, our ego and move to more participatory ways of leadership, all of us have the opportunity to radiate Christ and depend on the Spirit for inspiration and guidance.

Illness did not take leadership from me. It reshaped it.

This vulnerability is happening in our congregations, in religious life, and in our conference.

We are challenged by the fragility surrounding us in terms of membership and leadership. The old ways of doing things are changing and when we create a plan it is short lived because change happens so quickly. Plan A becomes Plan B, always evolving to meet the changing times. Pope Francis and Charles Dickens both acknowledged that we live in an epoch of change.

Over the years, many religious congregations have been letting go of power and privilege. Our old way of being "influencers" is no more. The former way of serving in various institutions is no longer possible. So who are we now?

As we look at our world and nation, we see the fragility of the values that we once held. How can our vulnerabilities guide us to partner with others to present a more Christ like vision in the world.

We see examples of this in Sr. Norma Pimental and all who work at the Border and with all our Sisters, Associates and partners who serve immigrants.

We see it in Fr. Greg Boyle, founder and Director of Home Boy Industries and all who work with vulnerable youth or advocate for an end to gun violence.

And in my own Sister Helen Prejean who tirelessly works against the death penalty and all who join her in this work.

I am sure you could name some of your own Sisters and ministries which provide the basis to fulfill God's promise of hope.

While I was physically recovering, I found myself with more time for quiet reflection and prayer, more time to be immersed in the flow of God's love and the presence of Christ, which as Merton says, *liberates something in us, A power we did not know we had. A hope. A capacity for Life. Resilience.*

Along the way many would say to me, "You are so courageous! You are so brave. How do you handle this so well? Sometimes, I was able to take this as a compliment. Simply thank them. Mostly it annoyed me. I thought to myself. What's the big deal? This is who I am.

This is who I am.

One day I was kind of complaining to my spiritual director about how annoyed I was about this. She reminded me of the story in Exodus when Moses asked for God's name.

And God replied I AM.

When we are united with God, **I AM**, our true self, God's divinity shines through. In surrendering to God's strength, we can come to courage and grace and the dynamism of love. With that encouragement, we can face the future through the best and worst of times.

I mentioned earlier that I believe in miracles, literal miracles.

I never was one to take the healing stories of Jesus literally, but I found myself praying for physical healing and encouraging others to do the same. One day I woke up with the words: You are wrapped in a cocoon of physical healing echoing in my head.

As I prayed for healing, I began to understand the miracles of Jesus in a new way.

In the gospels, we see that Jesus was totally receptive to Love, totally united with God. He was summoned by God to focus on the mission so the Love of God could flow through him. We know Jesus often went away to pray. The energy of Jesus' prayer – Jesus' communion with God was the energy that led to the feeding of the five thousand, the healing of Peter's mother-in-law, of the woman with the hemorrhage, the paralyzed man and many others.

When Jesus prayed, he trusted that God could act in ways that defied reality. This trust was manifested in the feeding and healing because Jesus' desire was so deep and one with God.

I came to honestly believe that the more we are given the gift prayer, our energy unites with God's energy and can provide whatever is needed at the time.

United in prayer with others, I believe healing is happening in me. I believe healing can happen in the world. United in prayer with others, we can hold the best of times and the worst of times, the wisdom and foolishness and sink into the sacred space of hope with strength and courage.

Prayer allows us to touch into who we really are...the I AM, our divinity to be united with God and ready to bring our best selves to our lives and leadership to our congregations and to LCWR.

So, what might this mean for religious life at this time. What might this mean for our conference?

I believe that we are being re-called into a sacred space of prayer, to beg for the grace of a deep realization of our poverty to save religious life and to solve the ills of the world — a realization so deep that we accept the grace of surrendering into to the great Love of God.

In that oneness with God, what if we beg to hear God's summons to a new depth of living our mission and charism in this time of paradox?

In this oneness with God, what if we listen so deeply that we hear that we are being summoned together to bring to birth an alternate way of being in the world, a way that holds the potential for a thriving planet, a flourishing church, a dynamic future.

I believe that what might transpire when we are united in Great Love could be a miracle for our times.

Sisters and friends, let us keep our hearts, our eyes on the dynamism of LOVE which can transform and heal the world, aware of the urgency called for and knowing that we were created for these times.

Let us live remembering: Dread is not of God

And rely on the power of prayer and one another to continue our way of encounter and synodality

How much do we really want the healing of the world?

How much do we really want the healing and flourishing of religious life for the future?

We are invited to pray from the depths of our being to be transformed.

How do we reach into our vulnerability, and let go of self

To move into the future, trusting God's unbroken promise of hope??

Remembering Merton:

*Love comes out of God
and gathers us to God
in order to pour itself back into God,
through all of us.*

When we are brought to the depths of our dependence on God,

When we realize we alone are incapable, God can do something.

Christ can break through.

We can sink into the same desire of Christ.

To carry the energy of LOVE, the dynamism of Love

And listen.

Listen deeper and deeper to how God is calling forth healing and new life.

Let's enter wholeheartedly into the best of times and the worst of times.

Knowing the hope of God's unbroken promise can be realized.

With faith and action in the dynamism of LOVE.

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