**Summary of the 2023 LCWR Assembly**

**Drawn by Sacred Mystery: A Journey into Hope**

The 2023 LCWR assembly entitled **Drawn by Sacred Mystery: A Journey into Hope** was held from August 8 -11 in Dallas, Texas**.** The more than 700 religious life leaders and guests explored the realities facing US religious life today through a cosmic lens, noting how their story fits with what is evolving and emerging in the larger universe. They also explored how they can grow in awareness of the sacred mystery that surrounds them and trust its movement within their lives and the lives of their institutes.

Main speakers included authors Brian Thomas Swimme, a professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies; theologians Sister Barbara E. Reid, OP, president of Catholic Theological Union; and Sister Jung Eun Sophia Park, SNJM, a professor and workshop and retreat leader; and Margot Fassler professor emerita of music history and liturgy at the University of Notre Dame.

Dr. Swimme set the context for the assembly through his address on cosmological spirituality where he noted that the development of the universe “takes place through the power of relationship, which he says is “the most fundamental power in the universe.”

Tracing the history of the universe from its beginnings to the present, he stated, “After a certain span of time in which all the elements are created in the core of a large star, it explodes. Because of that explosion, we exist. Every element of our body was fashioned inside a star. The explosion of a star is a primary revelation of love at a cosmological level. A love that is a divine give away. A love that holds nothing back. A love exemplified by the history of Catholic sisters. A love that reveals the heart of divinity. The star dies in its final act of generosity, and out of that generosity, the future of the universe is born. Take this image to heart. It is the cosmological form of your love.”

LCWR president Sister Rebecca Ann Gemma, OP reflected further on Dr. Swimme’s insights in her presidential address where she explored how one might integrate the universe’s grandeur into the Christian faith and the lives of vowed religious. She stressed the critical need to not lose hope even in the face of the numerous changes taking place in the world and in religious life.

Religious life, she noted, affords numerous opportunities to be conscious of and live in Christian hope through three familiar elements that help us navigate the journey. Hope through community, prayer, and ongoing learning and transformation. In addition, she shared the obstacles to hope: fatigue, forgetfulness, and fear.

“How do we understand and live a life of prayer today?” she asked. “Do we recognize it as a lifeline that connects us to God and all that is visible and invisible? How often do we stop and marvel that at all times and in all places throughout the world, someone is speaking in the name of all creation: "O God, come to our assistance! O Lord, make haste to help us!" (Ps 69/70 v. 2)? Do we truly believe that selfless prayers of gratitude, lament, supplication and praise not only unify us as a global community, but can actually make a tangible, concrete, real-life difference?”

Sisters Barbara and Sophia explored the invitation to be drawn by sacred mystery as one makes the journey of hope. Sister Barbara looked at the end-of-Gospel narratives and noted, “As we let ourselves be drawn ever more deeply into Holy Mystery, the Gospels point the way for us to journey in resurrection hope. Resurrection is not a happy ending to a tragic death. Nor is it the fulfillment of all our expectations. It is a mysterious, baffling gift that draws into self-emptying, interconnectedness, and transformation. For two millenia, we spoke of how all humans would participate in resurrected life.

“Today we speak of deep resurrection,” she continued. “Recognizing our interconnectedness with Earth and all living things, we now envision the whole evolving world of life will be transfigured by the resurrecting action of the Creator Spirit. Our response to such a gift is awe, self-emptying, and holding on to each beloved one as we create ever wider circles of love in mission.”

Sister Sophia also explored the concepts of mystery which, she noted, is a term that connotes “something that is hidden, an incomprehensible truth that is at its essence, beyond human understanding.”

“We as women religious,” she stated, “have been on the journey to deepen our understanding of the great mystery and to further expand our existence in the unfolding universe. We deal with being puzzled in this new landscape. We naturally are touched by the fear of the unknown and the anxiety of the uncontrollable, yet we can remain steadfast holding one another, and tending the Mystery with hope.

“Our journey begins as we encounter the real … the empty tomb, and it creates the dialectic that draws us forward, reminding us of the changeable and exciting nature of our path,” she continued. “No one reaches a final destination. We do not travel backwards. The essential nature of our path … involves not seeing the end, and the intentional embracing of new worlds, new friends, and new ways of being…. The final destination is itself unknown, and yet our journey never ceases to expand, challenge, and engage us. It is why we are so fully alive; we live by crossing borders, embracing mystery, and creating community. This is how we survive.”

Dr. Fassler drew from her scholarship on the mystic Hildegard of Bingen describing her approach to leadership as the *magistra* of her monastery and inviting the attendees to consider the parallels to their leadership today.

The assembly attendees had opportunities to apply these theological and cosmic concepts by attending one of eight sessions focused on areas of interest for today’s leaders: Intercultural Leadership: A Transformative Element for Religious Life; International Congregations: The Unique Challenges of Our Emerging Future; Making Change Happen: Leaders as Agents of Change; Enlarging the Tent: Collaboration and Expansion of Charism; Possibility Thinking: Living the Call Fully for the Next 20, 30, or More Years; Sacred Encounters: What Are We Learning at the Various Stages of the Journey; Sharing Our Resources: The LCWR Collaborative Administration/Management; and Initiative Rethinking Institute Assemblies and Chapters at This Time of Significant Change. At the conclusion of these sessions, one representative from each session formed a “wisdom circle” on stage where they shared insights that arose from their session into how religious life is evolving and the response this evolution calls forth.

Throughout the assembly, participants were invited to pray with the concept of *ubuntu* and the question: who am I becoming because we are? As they reflected, they expressed their response artistically on an individual mosaic piece that gradually formed a large mandala mosaic that hung on the last day in the assembly meeting space.

In an executive session, the LCWR members heard some preliminary data coming from the interviews that were conducted during the spring with 271 leadership teams that are members of LCWR. The findings are currently being studied by a team working on the LCWR Emerging Future of Religious Life initiative and the analysis will form the foundation for the programming and services LCWR will offer as its member continue to refashion structures and systems that support their institutes and religious life as a vocational choice for generations to come.

During the assembly the members blessed the new leadership for the conference. Sister Susan Ernster, a Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration from La Crosse, Wisconsin was selected as the president-elect. She joins Maureen Geary, OP who will serve as president for 2023-2024, and Sister Rebecca Ann Gemma, OP who will serve as immediate past president. Elected to the national board were Sisters Rose Martin, RSM; Verónica Esparza Ramírez, OP; and Celeste Trahan, CCVI.

The assembly concluded by honoring Sister Donna Markham, OP with the 2023 LCWR Outstanding Leadership Award. She has served in leadership positions in her Adrian Dominican congregation, in behavioral healthcare both in Canada and the United States, and most recently as the first woman president and CEO of Catholic Charities USA.

In her acceptance speech, Sister Donna spoke of experiences in her lifetime of “wordless reverence that led to a certain emboldening of the soul.” Noting that all women religious have had such experiences, she stated, “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,” she added. “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.”

Also in service of this assembly were Sister Maria Elena Martinez, OSF, facilitator; Julie Tragon, coordinator of prayer and liturgy; and Dr. Glen Thomas Rideout, collaborator on prayer.

Recordings and texts of the addresses and other material are available on the [LCWR website](https://www.lcwr.org/assembly).

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