

**Remarks at the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration of NETWORK,  
Accepting an Award for LCWR**  
*by Pat Farrell, OSF – LCWR President*

It is a great joy to receive this award from NETWORK in the name of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and therefore in the name of the many women religious throughout the country whom we serve. Thank you so much for this gesture. But with or without any recognition of LCWR on the part of Network, I cannot tell you how delighted I am to celebrate this 40th anniversary with you. I feel privileged to be the one to personally give voice to the deep gratitude of women religious for NETWORK's outstanding contribution to the common good.

I am very aware that it was a group of women religious who founded NETWORK. I celebrate that beginning! It's amazing to me that such a number of religious have served in the leadership of both LCWR and NETWORK. I also applaud NETWORK's 40-year process of moving beyond that founding to a widening inclusivity of race, gender, culture and sexual orientation. LCWR's role as a leadership conference is, of course, different from yours. The specific purpose of LCWR is to provide support and challenge to women religious in their role as elected leaders of congregations. However, it would be difficult to do that effectively without the service NETWORK provides. Your vigilance in Washington helps us to keep tabs on how our values are being voted. That service helps us to channel the resources of our congregations. We desire to place the resources of our numbers, our education, our contacts, at the service of societal transformation. Thank you for helping us to do that.

The histories and the efforts of our organizations are deeply intertwined in the same prophetic vocation. We share a common heart, rooted in the Gospel, in Catholic social teaching, in the preferential option for those who are poor, and in our commitment to the flourishing of all women. Many members of our congregations serve the impoverished and excluded on the margins of our society, longing to help change the structures that perpetuate their suffering. You give us practical tools for doing that. You help us to wade through the muddy waters of public policy debate and politically motivated sound bites. We are grateful.

When I think of what NETWORK has done for women religious in our country a personal memory comes to mind. I was in a war zone in El Salvador during the war and after several years of accompanying returning refugees I was in one of the villages and overheard a woman recounting her history to a woman who had recently come to resettle. She said "And then the sisters came and took away our fear." Now my experience had been that it was the people who took away our fear. They were the ones who had taught us how to maneuver the minefields, literally and figuratively, of that situation. But when I reflected on the comment I had overheard I began to think that perhaps we had, with some mixture of naivete and faith, been the fools who rushed in where those angels knew better than to tread. Ultimately, we gave each other the courage and strength to face together a difficult situation.

That's how I see NETWORK's effect on women religious. You took away our fear. For many of us, the halls of Congress seemed an impenetrable bastion of power beyond the reach of our influence. And then 47 women religious, perhaps with a similar mix of faith and naivete, walked into that world. You broke it all down for us, with analysis, training, skill and courage.

You helped us maneuver that maze. And the collective political power of women religious was unleashed as we mutually empowered and encouraged one another. Again, we are grateful.

We thank you, too, for your commitment to civility in public discourse. You have engaged the impasse, in the words of Nancy Sylvester. You have made consistent efforts to seek the respectful human connection capable of getting underneath polarizations and establishing real dialogue. It is the non-violent way and it is the way of the Gospel. Clearly it is a narrow path that requires disciplined, thoughtful presence and expanded consciousness. I celebrate 40 years of sustained faithfulness to that path. In the words of Dr. Martin Luther King: "The non-violent approach...recognizes the need for moving toward the goal of justice with wise restraint and calm reasonableness. But it also recognizes the immorality of slowing up in the move toward justice and capitulating to the guardians of an unjust status quo. It recognizes that social change cannot come overnight. But it causes one to work as if it were a possibility the next morning." Thank you, NETWORK, for your commitment to non-violence .

Thank you for being willing to take action when it can still make a difference, when outcomes are uncertain, when there is no guarantee of support. Your courage under duress has given us courage. With you we struggle to sort out when principles cannot be compromised and where there are spaces that honor plurality and diversity and allow us to stay at the table for critical conversation.

Thank you for not losing heart. It cannot be easy to maintain hope when you see so close up the maneuvering of wealthy interest groups and the domination of the powerful at the expense of those who are marginated. If you can be there and hold onto hope, then we, too, can continue to believe that a new world is possible. Thank you for keeping hope alive, both yours and ours.

We share with you the commitment to walk willingly in the complexities of Church and society. Thank you for your appreciation of LCWR, for this award. Thank you for the commitment we share of speaking our values of justice and equality amid complexities and polarizations, with faithfulness and with hope. Thank you.