

**Leadership Conference of Women Religious
2026 70th Anniversary Gathering – Orlando, Florida
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Harmony for a New Era: Listening to Many Charisms, One Spirit, One Call

PRELUDE – Entering the Space of Deep Listening

Welcome, everyone, to this gathering marking the 70th anniversary of the founding of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. What an impressive and hope-filled sight it is to see all of you gathered here and to know there are many joining us online. Thank you for your presence, your prayer, and your willingness to enter this sacred time together.

I am inspired by Pope Francis, who said in 2015, “*We are not in an era of change; we are in a change of era.*” Many of us can attest to the rapid pace of change and the surprising frequency with which things we thought would always remain the same are suddenly disrupted.

We gather at a time when the cries of Earth and the cries of those made poor call for our response. The Holy Spirit is asking us to lead by listening. Not indifferent listening. Not surface listening. But **deep, contemplative, Spirit-led synodal listening—the kind that changes us.**

Pope Francis opened the Synod on Synodality in 2021. As we prepare for the synodal process that will unfold in the coming days, I would like us to practice listening and sharpen our skills for listening on multiple levels.

What do I mean by multiple levels? St. Teresa of Avila recognized the ripple effect of our interior life touching everything around us. She wrote in *Interior Castle*, “*What peace can we hope to find elsewhere if we have none within us?*” It is a good question, “*What peace can we hope to find elsewhere if we have none within us?*” St. Teresa’s wisdom invites us to anchor ourselves before we act. This includes a type of listening beyond words. Inner peace is necessary before we can bring Christ’s peace to others.

This is a photo of my Presentation Sisters singing Irish folk songs for fun and relaxation while I play the harp and another sister plays the flute. In my work as a nurse, I have observed that therapeutic musicians help people become calmer and more peaceful. I was especially moved by a harpist who played for elderly nursing home residents with Alzheimer’s disease and a quiet peace settled over them. Something in them recognized the language of music as an invitation to peacefulness.

About two years ago, I began learning the harp, and today I offer a brief reflection through music—an invitation to listen together beyond words. The piece I will play is an arrangement of the traditional song *Dona Nobis Pacem*, a prayer for peace that has been sung for centuries. As you listen, I invite you to observe your interior landscape, to notice what it is like to listen together, and to sense what shifts in the room as we listen.

Before we enter the music, let us pause and prepare to listen—not only with our ears, but with our whole selves.

***Dona Nobis Pacem* — (harp recording)**

What did you notice in yourself and among the group as we listened together? Perhaps you felt drawn into a shared silence. Perhaps you felt more connected with everyone. Perhaps you felt a desire for peace in places of suffering around the world.

Hold onto what you observed. This is the very posture we will need for the synodal work ahead. I invite each of us to listen with our whole self—interiorly, communally, and spiritually.

Today, I want to explore our theme—**Many Charisms, One Spirit, One Call**—through the language of music which offers many metaphors that illuminate what we are about these days together. The title of my talk today is “Harmony for a New Era: Listening to Many Charisms, One Spirit, One Call.”

My favorite new book this summer is the encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas*, by Pope Leo XIV. Pope Leo XIV wrote, “In the era of artificial intelligence, when human dignity is threatened by new forms of dehumanization, ours is the pressing duty to remain profoundly human” (MH #15).

I think music helps connect us with the sacred depths of our humanity and is one possible tool to help us remain profoundly human. Music brings us together and speaks to our hearts across languages and cultures. We celebrate with music and dancing. We mourn and we pray with music because it touches the soul. My hope is that our synodal conversations in the next few days will bring us to that kind of human experience.

And so, with our hearts attuned, let us move into the first movement of our theme: Many Charisms.

MOVEMENT I — Many Charisms: Weaving Melody and Harmony

We are blessed to have **Many Charisms** among us. Each charism is like a musical note. Alone, a single note is simple—beautiful in its own way but limited. Yet when we weave many different notes together—when melody meets harmony, something far more beautiful emerges. Something layered, textured, and alive.

Melody: Distinct Voices

The melody of a piece of music is often the most recognizable part and the sequence of notes that allows us to name that tune. It is the line we hum, the part that stays with us long after the music ends.

But imagine *Dona Nobis Pacem* sung in monotone. Imagine any beloved hymn sung on a single pitch. It would be flat, lifeless, and unrecognizable. To create a melody, we need diversity of notes woven together in a shared rhythm. We need a flow of interculturality. We do not need uniformity to have unity. In fact, the unity of a melody becomes possible precisely because of diversity.

If melody reveals the beauty of our distinct voices, harmony reveals what becomes possible when those voices meet.

Harmony: Encounter and Difference

To add harmony to a melody, we need difference—and that difference strengthens the music of the whole.

The LCWR 70th Anniversary logo shows many strands of many colors woven into a strong tapestry. Ecclesiastes reminds us that “a cord of three strands is not easily broken” (Ecclesiastes 4:12). One of my

friends has a cross in her office that powerfully depicts the strength generated when three strands are woven together into one — and how that strength carries us through difficult times. At times, I feel sad about the demographic shifts in my congregation. This symbol of woven strands reminds me that even if some of us soon find ourselves in small communities, we still belong to — and help weave — the larger tapestry of religious life. We are stronger when we come together.

This is why the wisdom of Sophia Park, SNJM, and Teresa Maya, CCVI, is so important for us today. Their words in *Conversations at the Well* speak powerfully about diversity in religious life. Teresa Maya, CCVI urges us toward **encuentro**—the sacred meeting place where cultures and identities touch. She also writes that “our goal as religious needs to be the modeling of intercultural living...” (pp. 101). Sophia Park, SNJM writes, “Diversity can reenergize charisms among us. Like organic living systems, religious life is nourished and sustained by diversity” (*Conversations at the Well*, p. 125).

LCWR’s initiative, *The Spirit Call Within a Call*, reflects our commitment to dismantling racism and white privilege. This is not a one-time project. It is long-term work.

I invite us to cultivate a spirit of encounter. Look for bridges and connections with one another. Listen for harmony. Just as a choir or symphony brings together many diverse voices or instruments, each taking its turn to carry the melody—we need all charisms in religious life, as well as all people in all vocations around the world, to come together to create the integrated music of humanity.

My Journey as an Inter-congregational Music Composition

These insights about diversity are not abstract for me. They mirror my own journey in religious life, which has unfolded like an inter-congregational music composition.

I am blessed to belong to a peer group of six LCWR leaders who have met periodically for several years. We pray together, share leadership challenges, and support one another. We all serve in the United States, but we were born in five different countries on three different continents. This, for me, is the beautiful harmony of diversity.

My discernment and novitiate to become a Sister of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary were deeply inter-congregational. When I began novitiate in 1999, I had classes with women and men from many charisms. Through Giving Voice, I found peers under age 50 from dozens of congregations. We treasured our home charisms, but we also recognized a shared generational experience—a bond that transcended congregational lines.

My ministries continued this interweaving: nursing within the Avera health system co-sponsored by Benedictine and Presentation Sisters, completing doctoral studies influenced by the Adrian Dominicans, and teaching nursing while living with the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet.

In leadership for my congregation, I have worked closely with my own charism family, attended the International Presentation Association Assembly, served on the LCWR Board, and represented LCWR at meetings with the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious and the Conference of Major Superiors of Men.

Each conference and group has its own concerns, but all share a commitment to Christ’s mission of love. As the saying goes, “We are all in this together.”

I suspect you might be thinking “Wow! Vicky has had an extraordinary number of inter-congregational experiences!” Now it is time for a little audience participation so that you can look around you and see how many of us have been touched by inter-congregational experiences. I wonder by a show of hands:

- How many had inter-congregational novitiate or formation classes?
- How many have ever lived in community with religious from another congregation?
- How many have an educational degree from an institution sponsored by a congregation other than our own?
- How many had retreat directors or spiritual directors of another charism?

I could go on listing more ways that many charisms have helped to shape us. The point is, we bless one another with the wisdom from our charisms.

Listening to Context

Just as a symphony includes not only melody and harmony but also the subtle accompaniment beneath them, religious life includes structural realities that shape our music. As you listen to the people at your table, pay attention to the background music of their congregational context.

Participating in this gathering are some sisters and brothers whose congregations are international, with novitiate classes that ebb and flow across continents. Some congregations have merged. Some have founded new communities or missions. Some belong to large federations or global charism families. Some are coming to fulfillment.

My own congregation, a small independent pontifical institute in rural South Dakota, held our last Chapter in March 2026. We discerned that we will not have enough members with capacity for another Chapter in 2030. We will move toward an appointed leader, or commissary, by 2028.

We let go of many of our sponsored ministries. Our college closed, and the buildings have become public housing and recreational space. One of the nursing programs was transferred to St. Ambrose University. We moved out of our motherhouse and took it down. In the former place of our motherhouse, we are restoring native prairie grasses and creating the Presentation Peace Circle.

This is not a sad song. This is a courageous act of listening to the future and recognizing that we are part of a bigger picture of God’s call to the world and the Spirit’s unity.

My sisters and brothers, we are given the precious gift these days to encounter one another in an international, intercultural, and inter-charismal way. I invite us to be open, curious, and gentle with one another as we enter into synodal conversations. While proudly singing the melody of your own charism, listen for the harmony created by our similarities and our diversity.

MOVEMENT II — One Spirit: Deep Listening and Shared Purpose

As we listen to the music of our many charisms, we begin to sense the deeper current that holds us together. This brings us to the second movement—One Spirit. This phrase can be understood in two ways, and both are essential for our time together. “One Spirit” can refer to the **one Holy Spirit**, the third person of the Trinity, and “One Spirit” can also refer to our unity of mind and heart. I want to explore both meanings, because each offers us a way of listening that is vital for our synodal journey.

Listening for the Holy Spirit

You may have noticed the dove on the logo for our gathering this week. The dove symbolizes the Spirit of God descending upon Jesus at his baptism (Matthew 3:13–17). All of us have experienced some form of the Holy Spirit’s inspiration in our own vocation stories. Each of us has been drawn, nudged, or surprised by the Spirit in ways that led us.

Like the disciples after Jesus’ ascension, we gather with uncertainty about the future and the rapid pace of change. Precisely in the time of the most confusion and ambiguity, the Holy Spirit appeared at Pentecost with a driving wind and tongues of flame over the heads of the disciples. As we share our stories at table, we may be surprised by what the driving Spirit wind sounds like among us—and by who among us shares something that ignites a flame of inspiration.

I think God rejoices when we open ourselves to the inspiration of the Spirit! God’s love is so vast, so immensely generous, that it cannot wait to pour out lavishly upon us! To seek unity with the Holy Spirit—even in a small way—bears fruit.

How can we best welcome the Spirit? One principle I learned from my Benedictine friends is St. Benedict’s “listening with the ear of the heart.” To listen well, we must quiet the noisy chatter of our own ego that dominates so much of our waking hours. A Trappist monk, Fr. Thomas Keating, taught that “God’s first language is silence.” Fr. Keating wrote that “Silence is a true and profound form of communication. It draws us by way of attraction to the spiritual level of our being, the level of intuition and our spiritual will, and beyond that level to the true self (which) is God’s idea of who we are” (p. 56). I think God often speaks in silence. Our shared silence this week creates sacred spaces where the Spirit can breathe among us.

If we listen well, we may notice signs of the Spirit that we would otherwise miss.

Listening for Unity

Not only does the Spirit move within individuals; the Spirit also draws us into a shared rhythm. This brings us to the second meaning of “One Spirit”—unity of heart and mind.

This unity is not uniformity or sameness. It is a harmony of intention.

Have you ever heard an orchestra or band warming up before a concert? Each instrument plays random notes to warm up and tune. The sound is chaotic, noisy, and disorganized. Then the conductor steps onto the stage, raises the baton, and suddenly the chaos becomes music. The musicians align themselves with a common tempo, a shared rhythm, and a unified purpose.

This is how the Holy Spirit draws us together—into a common symphony of life. Religious life is not a solo performance. We honor our different instruments as we join in a shared purpose with each other and with people around the world.

Pope Leo XIV wrote in *Magnifica Humanitas*, “The civilization of love will not arise from a single or spectacular gesture, but from the sum total of small and steadfast acts of fidelity that serve as a bulwark against dehumanization” (#213). I agree with Pope Leo XIV that each of us has a part to play in the music God envisions for the world. Each of us contributes a small part and all our efforts add up to a major influence.

Many of us have collaborated with other people for justice projects, for ministry, and for mission. On Friday during this gathering, we will have the opportunity to collaborate in a Gospel Witness Prayer experience planned by the LCWR Global Concerns Committee. I invite us to listen deeply during this prayer to be open to what God may want to teach us in that experience.

Listening for Resonance

When we listen together with openness, something remarkable happens--certain words, stories, or insights begin to reverberate among us, revealing where the Spirit is stirring. I call this “resonance.”

On the harp, a single chord causes other strings which are an octave apart to vibrate because their frequencies match in a 2:1 ratio. This quiet resonance mirrors how the Spirit moves among us. The vibrations are subtle, quiet, almost imperceptible unless we listen closely. But they are there. Someone may say something that resonates with many others. Our facilitator will ask us to pay attention to the wisdom emerging among us. This type of resonance is often a sign of the Spirit.

We live in a fractured world with harsh political divides. The work we do these days—listening for resonance and seeking unity—is one step toward healing and embodying Christ’s vision for God’s reign of peace.

Let me share another musical example. I once sang in a 60-person choir at St. Catherine University. During warmups, the director often asked us to listen more closely to one another. Sometimes she asked us to match the vowel shape and tone of the people around us so that we blended completely on a single pitch. When we blended perfectly, a pure, heavenly overtone would emerge—an unexpected harmonic that felt like grace floating over our heads. The first time I heard it, my eyes nearly popped out of my head. It felt like a miracle. I believe our unity these days may create similar beautiful overtones.

Synodal conversations call us to deep, transformative listening that fosters understanding. The unity that emerges from this kind of listening may yield fruit we cannot yet imagine.

Listening for Dissonance: The Tension That Teaches

Yet listening deeply also means encountering what is not immediately harmonious. Dissonance, too, is part of the Spirit’s language. Our ears prefer resonance, but the Spirit does not shy away from dissonance. Dissonance creates tension that longs for resolution.

In the Taizé chant *Veni Sancte Spiritus*, the close intervals create a beautiful unease that teaches us to wait for the Spirit’s movement. I will share a recording of this song on the harp with particular emphasis on the dissonant notes so that you can experience dissonance with your ears.

I invite you to a brief contemplative pause to prepare to listen.

Veni Sancte Spiritus (harp recording)

Did you happen to notice the closeness of those dissonant notes on the harp? They are so similar that they are dissonant. Their tension has much to teach us.

We live in a world filled with dissonance—between people, political parties, and nations. The capacity to hold and heal this dissonance is thin right now because most people are overwhelmed and exhausted by

the relentless barrage of shocking news through their devices. I believe that we can help the world learn to either create space to hold dissonance or else to move through it toward resolution.

The work for peace is not just a global activity, it is also close and personal to each one of us.

I am blessed to have a friend with whom I have worked through conflict. Our friendship is strong, but occasionally we experience dissonance—misunderstandings that leave one of us feeling hurt—so we need to sit down and talk things through. Our friendship is stronger because we have learned to speak honestly and listen deeply.

One thing I learned from her comes from author Peter Senge who explains that when we feel irritated by someone, only 10% of the irritation is about the other person. The other 90% is about our own unhealed wounds. When someone “pushes our buttons” or irritates us, it is often a sign that God is holding up a mirror, inviting us to heal something within ourselves. To be clear, I am not talking about harm or abuse which should not be tolerated. I am talking about minor annoyances and irritations as being the kind of dissonance which offers doorways to healing.

When dissonance arises, welcome it. Bring it to prayer. Let it teach you. Allow it to expand your capacity to love as God loves—with compassion for your own wounds and kindness toward the person who revealed them.

Dissonance can be a doorway to transformation.

MOVEMENT III — One Call: Responding Together

Resonance and dissonance alike prepare us for the third movement, One Call. For listening is never the end; it is always the beginning of a response.

Religious life has always been about responding to God’s call. In Luke 9:23, Jesus says, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.” I find it significant that Jesus emphasizes the word *daily*. The call to follow is not a one-time decision. We step out in faith, repeatedly, trusting that the Spirit will guide us one day at a time.

We are living in a moment when the call of religious life is shifting. While remaining faithful to the essence of our charisms, the call we hear today is evolving, expanding, and deepening.

Susan Francois, CSJP, and Juliet Mousseau, RSCJ, wrote in their book *Reseeding Religious Life through Global Sisterhood* that the large institutions built by past generations are declining or receding while the new call requires planting or reseeded for new generations.

Listening for the Invitation to Change

Sometimes the call requires us to change direction—dramatically.

When I began learning the harp, I discovered that my dominant right hand had to relearn everything I knew from playing the piano for over 40 years. The harp technique required me to reverse decades of muscle memory. My hand wanted to move in the same direction that was automatic for me on the piano, but the harp music required it to move in the completely opposite manner. It was humbling. It was frustrating. And it was transformative.

Religious life is asking many of us to do something similar. We are being asked to release old patterns, old assumptions, old structures, and embrace new ways of being. We are being asked to retrain our communal muscle memory.

My own congregation's journey is an example. As I shared earlier, we moved out of our motherhouse and took it down. The most painful part of that deconstruction was letting go of our congregation's chapel where Sisters had faithfully prayed for over 70 years. But we have signs of transformation and new life. In the place where our motherhouse once stood, we are creating the Presentation Peace Circle and restoring native prairie grasses so that future generations will enjoy the quiet serenity of God's creation in the same place where Sisters prayed for decades. It is a bittersweet transformation. My congregation had to learn how to let go of the past and learn to "sing a new song" as Psalm 96 beckons us.

The Gospel of Matthew 18:3 records Jesus saying "Amen, I say to you, unless you become like children..." What can we learn from children about how to adapt during this time of transformation? I am blessed to have five nieces and five nephews. At holiday gatherings, my young nieces and nephews often climb onto the piano bench next to me. As toddlers they begin by pounding the keys. I gently show them how to wiggle their fingers instead of their elbows to play the keys. The little kids copy my fingers, and I praise them for how pretty their music sounds. They giggle with joy at what they learned! Their willingness to try something new teaches me how we might enter this era of transition—with childlike openness and delight.

These individual transformations mirror the broader transformation unfolding for all of humanity in the current change of era.

Listening for the Seeds Being Planted

The profound transformation of religious life is part of a continual cycle—growing in some places, merging in others, and coming to fulfillment in still others. This is not a sign of decline. This is a natural sign of evolution.

Maria Cimperman, RSCJ writes "It is essential to realize that the Spirit's gift or charism to a religious institute is not static; it does not show up in one way and need to remain the same through time. If it is to build up the Christian community, this gift or service in love will take many forms, depending on our contexts and the calls around us" (p. 39).

Religious life has always adapted to the needs of the time. The desert mothers and fathers, the monastics, mendicants, and apostolic communities all responded to the needs of the times. And now, in this moment of global interconnectedness, ecological crisis, and social fragmentation, we are being called to something new.

We are being called to **reseed** religious life—not to replicate the past, but to plant seeds for the future: seeds of interculturality, collaboration, contemplative presence, justice, and hope.

Listening for the World's Cry

The call we hear is not for ourselves alone. Religious life has never existed for its own sake. It exists for the transformation of the world. We are called to listen to the cries of Earth and the cries of those made poor (*Laudato Si'*). We are called to stand with migrants, survivors of violence, and those who are marginalized.

Pope Leo XIV issued a profound call in *Magnifica Humanitas* (2026) to refresh the Church's understanding of Catholic Social Doctrine, to renew our commitment to safeguarding humanity and to create a civilization of love in light of rapid technological advancements and a culture of power that normalizes war and disregards truth.

The suffering and injustices occurring at this tumultuous time in history are nothing short of outrageous. One might be tempted to scream and punch back in reaction to the disgusting abuses of power. Pope Leo XIV wrote (MH #185) "Yet, despite this downward spiral, we can also glimpse a great part of humanity that is striving to remain human and working to build the holy city of coexistence and peace."

LCWR has introduced us to the concepts of Transformative Justice which add tools to our justice promoting toolkit: tools like staying in relationship, building bridges, asking curious questions, and offering invitations for people who do not see injustices the way we do.

We are called to be a contemplative presence in a world that is anxious and fragmented. We are called to be bridge builders in a world that is polarized. We are called to share our wisdom about Catholic social teaching and synodal processes. We are called to be healers in a world that is wounded.

The world is waiting for our response.

Listening Together to Shape Tomorrow

We are not simply listening as individuals. As we listen together during these days, something more than conversation is happening among us. When we speak honestly, listen with empathy, hold silence reverently, and attend to the wisdom rising in the room, we begin to hear the faint overtones of the Spirit's work. These shared moments of resonance — the unexpected insights, the gentle shifts of heart, the widening of perspectives — are signs that the Spirit is shaping something new among us.

Religious life is always changing. The familiar score is giving way to a melody still emerging, one that asks us to listen with courage and humility. We do not yet know the full shape of this music, but we can sense its contours in our shared longing for communion, justice, and peace.

And so, as we gather all that we have heard, "Many Charisms, One Spirit, One Call" — we turn toward the harmony the Spirit is inviting us to create.

FINALE — Becoming Harmony for a New Era

As we arrive at this final movement, I return to the image that has carried us: music. Music is not created by one note alone. It is created by the interplay of silence and sound, melody and harmony, resonance and even dissonance held with patience and compassion. Music is created by our listening—deep, attentive, Spirit-led synodal listening.

As we gather these days, we have the opportunity to create music together that none of us could compose alone. The Spirit is drawing us into a shared rhythm — not a uniform sound, but a courageous weaving of our distinct charisms into a living, evolving symphony. Harmony gathers our differences into something more beautiful and whole.

The Spirit is calling us to listen and respond. We are not alone in this call. Many people in other vocations and faith traditions are eager to collaborate. We are part of a global sisterhood and a global family of

religious life. We are part of a long lineage of women and men who have responded to God's call with courage, generosity, and love and who now accompany us from their place in the communion of saints. We are part of a future that is still unfolding—one that we cannot fully see, but one that we can help to shape.

As I conclude this address, I want to return to the music that began our time together. *Dona Nobis Pacem* —“Grant us peace.” I invite our song leaders to the stage.

Prayer of Blessing

As we sing it now, may we experience “Many Charisms, One Spirit, One Call.”

May our voices become a prayer for peace.

May we trust the rhythm that is emerging.

May we offer our voices with courage and compassion.

May we become, together, harmony for a new era —

a harmony that helps usher in the peace our world so desperately longs for.

***Dona Nobis Pacem* (sung in canon).**

Thank you.

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