

**The Music in the Heart of God that Sings through Our Lives**  
**Presidential Address – Carol Zinn, SSJ**  
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Welcome to Nashville, TN, where country music surrounds us.

Welcome to an experience of the Heart of God where Mystery resides, is revealed and yearns to be received by those of us who put our ear to God's Heart, listen carefully and follow freely no matter the cost.

Welcome to the melody, rhythm and silence that timbres us anew even as we embrace these contemporary times of uncertainty yet unimaginable desire to remain faithful to the vocation we so love, this religious life.

As we gather, let's locate ourselves where we really are.

We are in the Gaylord Opryland Hotel, in Music City, a city known from the early 1700's as a place where music tells the story of love and life lived and loved and the home of The Grand Ole Opry.

We are in the smallest portion of the Continent of the Americas where abundant natural resources, industrial and technological advances are a way of life, and people around the world yearn for the freedoms we enjoy. We are in a place where the gap between the obscene accumulation of wealth and abject poverty widens as we take our seats this morning. We are in a place where most recently tens of thousands of women, mothers and children, our southern neighbors, hear the poignant Christmas narrative refrain: "There is no room for you in our inn." And we are in a place where religious life continues to evolve remaining true to its lifetime of evolution.

We're on planet Earth—our global neighborhood—shared with all other human and living beings. We struggle to live in relationship with all of God's creation on whom we depend for our very lives and for whom God makes us lovingly responsible. We're in this world where millions of our sisters and brothers are held captive by poverty, fear, and violence as we watch the quality of their lives unravel on our iPads and smart TVs. We are in this world where since we last gathered:

Syria used chemical warfare on its own citizens; attacks happened at the Washington, DC Navy Yard and a Kenyan shopping mall; tragedies happened on land, at sea and planes fell from the skies; crises erupted in the Ukraine, Pakistan, Mosul and ISIS; Russia exercised power anew; Nigerian schoolgirls were abducted; the Ebola outbreak spreads; cease fires in the Holy Land bear little fruit and peace seems a distant hope.

We are in this world that continues to marvel that our Church, whom we love, offers Francis our brother, our religious brother, who touches our world as a Jesuit Franciscan or a Franciscan Jesuit insisting that mercy is a way of life and "who am I to judge" is a mantra of discipleship.

So here we are in Nashville, TN, Music City, for our 2014 Assembly with the theme of Holy Mystery Revealed in our Midst. Why is it important to know where we are—really know where

we really are? Because revelation happens where we are! It happens where we really are. And it's not easy to be really where we are these days.

This week's Scriptures remind us of this challenge.

Elijah's experience of the mountain's tiny whisper. Peter's stepping out of the boat to stand on the meniscus of revelation. Ezekiel's awareness that those marked with the "thau" are the ones who stand amid the lamentations and speak revelation. Matthew's Jesus teaching that relationship is the ground of revelation— where two or three gathered in Christ's name find Christ in their midst.

This reflection, "The Music in the Heart of God that Sings through Our Lives," invites us to really be where we are and open to Holy Mystery's revelation.

Recently, the Grand Ole Opry celebrated the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its permanent home, which is right next door to us. One of the songs sung that night, "When I Said I Do," by Clint Black and Lisa Hartman Black proclaims "be really where you are." As we experience it, reflect on the mystery revealed.

How could we be right here at The Grand Old Opry and not have country music? All our religious lives we've been singing that depth of fidelity haven't we, since we said our "yes", til the end of all time? We gather here as faithful women of the Gospel, disciples of Christ and daughters of the Church whom we love. We're faithful citizens of this country and the planet. We're faithful contemplatives in action, carriers of our founding charisms and faithful partners with our Trinitarian God. This Assembly comes at a time when our consciousness is increasingly heightened to the lamentations of our world, country, Church, and vocation. And we are called to stand in those lamentations singing the music in God's Heart. As we begin this significant and important Assembly, may we know where we really are, who we really are, and who we're really called to become.

It's said that music is the language of the heart and metaphor is the conduit of revelation. Let's look briefly at five elements of music as metaphor for the song we're called to sing.

## **FIRST:MELODY AS CONSECRATED LIFE**

From Vita Consecrata:

"How can we not recall with gratitude to the Spirit the *many different forms of consecrated life* which (he) has raised up throughout history? What an extraordinary richness--this permanent element in the history of the Church: the host of founders and foundresses, of holy men and women who chose Christ by radically following the Gospel and by serving their brothers and sisters, especially the poor and the outcast." (VC 5)

- 1) In music, melody is the pleasing series of notes forming the main part of a song. The melody of consecrated life through the evangelical counsels is to BE the presence of Christ in the world as Jesus was present in his world. What was his manner of being in the world? Poor (completely and freely available); Chaste (single-mindedly inclusive); and Obedient (focused on furthering God's presence in the world regardless of the cost).
- 2) Are we singing with full voice the ways in which God's creation and Christ's Body cry out for justice, inclusivity, compassion? Perhaps we're singing in muted tones

the authentic and radical message of the Gospel and the vision of a VC II Church as the People of God, all the People of God, walking together. Maybe we're merely humming the evolution of human consciousness as a holy sign of the times and the emergence of new expressions of religious life as manifestations of the Spirit. Possibly we're only lip-syncing the theological insights that speak God's word, anew, reminding us that everything is already One. Likely we're only whispering that Oneness from within and beyond the natural world to the most meaningful and sacred relationships regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, economic status, or belief system.

- 3) What does the melody of our consecrated life sound like? Is it really poor, are we completely and freely available for God to use us as God chooses? Is it really chaste, are we openly embracing all that comes to us? And is it really obedient, are we focused solely on furthering God's presence in the world regardless of the cost, whether we understand, agree or feel attracted to God beckonings? We look to the Gospel to see how this life is lived and we learn that the real melody is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. Nothing more and nothing less. That's where he encountered Holy Mystery revealed. So it is and will be with us.

## **WHAT IS THE MELODY OF OUR CONSECRATED LIFE AND ARE WE SINGING TO THE LAMENATIONS?**

### **SECOND: HARMONY AS CHARISMS**

"How can we proclaim Christ to a world that is constantly changing"? "What I want from religious is that they wake up the world by being real witnesses to a counter-cultural way of life." (Pope Francis' conversation with members of USG, November 2013)

"...only in this way will you be able to reawaken hearts to truth and to divine love in accordance with the charisms of your founders...the charism of religious life is the fruit of the Holy Spirit...Let us not forget that every human institution is prone to become set in its ways and threatened by formalism." (Apostolic Exhortation on the Renewal of Religious Life, 29 June 1971, P11)

- 1) In music, harmony is the combination of different musical notes played at the same time to enhance the melody line. Much like the combination of different musical notes, there is a combination of different charisms at work in the church for the life of the world. We've learned how to harmonize in these years since renewal. There was a time when our charisms were in competition with each other and we rejoice that those days are past for many of us. We've harmonized across charism boundaries to serve unmet needs and we remain vigilant in feeding the hungers of our day. The hunger for spiritual nourishment and theological reflection, the hunger for sacred and welcome space to share faith's journey with others, the hunger for non-violence and respect for all, the hunger for a world that really mirrors the Gospel are real hungers for countless people.
- 2) Are we hearing a newly emerging harmony challenging us to discern a charism of religious life? What would religious life look like if we were to harmonize our charisms anew that freed us to live this life more fully, more creatively, more boldly, more at the periphery? Perhaps our current experience of living into the smallness of religious life out of the large institutional reality of religious life these past years is the beginning of a dissonant harmony, a harmony that takes more attention, more asceticism and more

letting go of the familiar in order to be more faithful to the music in God's Heart. Could it be that the divestment of buildings, ministries and land is the prelude to a new harmony?

## **WHAT IS THE HARMONY OF OUR CHARISMS? AND ARE WE SINGING TO THE LAMENTATIONS?**

### **THIRD: RHYTHM AS CONTEMPLATIVE CONSCIOUSNESS**

"The encounter with the Lord sets us in motion, drawing us out of a self-referential lifestyle. The Christian life is determined by verbs of motion, is a continuous search. It forms in us a contemplative view of history, enabling us to see and hear in everything the presence of the Spirit, and (His) special guidance so as to live in time as God's time. Contemplation opens us to our prophetic capacity. The prophet is the one "who has piercing eyes and listens and speaks the words of God, aware of three aspects of time: the promise from the past, the present being contemplated, and the courage to point the way to the future." (Excerpts from "*Rejoice...*" Letter to Religious, Towards the special Year for Consecrated Life. Circular letter from the Congregation of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. February 2, 2014)

- 1) In music, rhythm is a regular and repeated pattern of sounds or movements that hold the piece together. A Contemplative Consciousness both grounds us and compels us towards the future. Religious life is a radical response to the Gospel lived in a particular historical and cultural context with its rhythm of a consciousness that is contemplative and contemplation that deepens and raises consciousness. We see this rhythm in the life of Jesus: retreating to places of solitude and emerging more clear, more committed and more conscious of his life's purpose and mission. His contemplative consciousness and fidelity to mission deepened in tandem. It is and will be no less for us.
- 2) What do we expect when we implore Spirit to shower us with graces that will open our way of seeing anew and understanding that our ways of thinking, planning, organizing, processing, and believing are always dependent on God's desires and dreams and not what we want to hold on to or deem immutable. All of life is an ongoing series of unrepeated transformations. Our choice capacity as humans is to discern if and how we are going to participate in the transformations. We are called to live in this world knowing that we know THAT we know as well as knowing WHAT we know. Our lives will be different because our contemplative consciousness is formed by God's hand as was Jesus'. As we welcome such costly graces, can we drink from this cup?
- 3) These times just might have the right circumstances and challenges to take us to a depth previously unknown. It is possible that this journey is exactly where a contemplative consciousness leads because if we were more certain, comfortable, clear, or if situations were more predictable, prescriptive or plausible, we might not yield so much certitude, abandon or insistence.

## **WHAT IS THE RHYTHM OF OUR CONTEMPLATIVE CONSCIOUSNESS? AND ARE WE SINGING TO THE LAMENTATIONS?**

### **FOURTH: TIMBRE AS COMMITMENT TO COMMUNITY**

"The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the (men) of our times, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts. For theirs is

a community [composed of (men) of (men) who,] united in Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit, (who) press onwards towards the Kingdom (of the Father) and are bearers of a message of salvation intended for all (men). That is why Christians cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history." (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1)

- 1) In music, timbre is the quality of the sound from which its source, independent of pitch or volume, can be inferred. As consecrated religious, our timbre is a commitment to community. The quality of it shapes our every encounter. Typically we have separated these two characteristics of the consecrated life most often applying commitment to the vocation and community to a lifestyle. What might it mean for us to rebirth our commitment to community?
- 2) Commitment to this life is simply that: a commitment to the life. It's a commitment to living the Gospel. The life is not about the ministry nor is it for the ministry. The life is not about or for the Church. Rather, this life is lived in and through the Church for the life of the world.
- 3) Living in community remains a key element of religious life and an ongoing challenge to nurture and sustain it. The witness of our community living speaks that it is not only possible, but preferable, for all living beings to live in a community of well-being where all are welcome, needed and respected.
- 4) What if our commitment to community broadened beyond our wildest imagination to include the full diversity of the human community living within the broader diverse community of life? What if we stretched our understanding of community to really embracing our lay sisters and brothers in meaningful and life-giving ways, to really engaging young people in faith seeking and prayerful ways, to really experiencing other faith traditions in constitutive and reflective ways, to really expanding our circle of partners in mission and ministry in strategic and comprehensive ways? Perhaps the timbre of our religious life has a growing edge to it. The quality of our commitment to community cries out for widening our tents and offering the largesse of our hearts in ways that will surely transform us.

## **WHAT IS THE TIMBRE OF OUR COMMITMENT TO COMMUNITY? AND ARE WE SINGING TO THE LAMENTATIONS?**

### **FIFTH: SILENCE AS CONVERSION**

From Edwina Gateley's reflection on Mary Magdalene: "...you returned to the empty tomb and stayed there—it was there in that deep and silent space that the Risen One whispered your name, Mary, leaping you into another world—hurtling you from reality to the Realm of God. How was it with you then, Mary of Magdala? Standing in the place of revelation, singular woman witness of the Resurrection?" (excerpt from *Soul Sisters: Women in Scripture Speak to Women Today*. pp. 129-130)

- 1) In music, silence is the deliberate and planned absence of sound or noise. In religious life, the yearning for conversion of heart and mind readies us for the Paschal Mystery journey. Without deliberate and planned absence of the sound and noise of familiar desires, ideas, directions and insights, we run the serious risk of missing revelation. The voice of God, the life of the Word Made Flesh and the inspiration of the Spirit ground us and free us.

- 2) As we welcome a deeper silence are we prepared for where new paths of conversion will emerge? As we age our capacity for newness thins even as our desire for silence thickens. We're tempted to enter new silences through old patterns and to name as new conversions prior ones dressed differently. All that we know about this life must be held lightly so conversion of worldview, ideology, ecclesiology and theology of this life in view of the God of the Future can emerge.
- 3) This conversion born of silence done both alone and together. In doing so, may render us unrecognizable even to those who know us. This journey requires a strength of vulnerability and a heart of fierce love. This choice will ask more of us than we may feel ready or able to give.

## WHAT IS THE SILENCE OF OUR CONVERSIONS? AND ARE WE SINGING TO THE LAMENTATIONS?

With these metaphors we ready ourselves to listen to the music in God's Heart. What is the music in God's Heart? What are its lyrics?

Clearly we find the music in Scripture, sacraments, Catholic Social Teaching, the documents of Vatican Council II, the interaction among faith, science and other disciplines, our own Constitutions, longstanding and contemporary theology and spirituality, and our lived experience, to name but a few places.

I offer three current places where we softly hear the music in God's Heart evoking our attention because it sings to the realities of our world, Church, country and vocation and responds to the lamentations in which we stand.

First, in the apostolic exhortation, *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*, the refrain is simply and profoundly:

*"With Christ joy is constantly born anew."* In both formal and informal interviews, with impassioned clarity, Pope Francis identifies what that joy born anew looks like as it stands in the lamentations:

Discernment is a way of life. Community matters. Relationships come before anything and everything else. The Church serves as a field hospital welcoming all. Consecrated life is to wake up the world with its mystical and prophetic presence. The co-essential dimensions of ecclesial communion are the hierarchic and the charismatic.

Yes, modeling joy with authenticity and audacity for the life of the world is the music in God's Heart.

Second, in her book, *Perseverance*, Margaret Wheatley offers insights about how our hearts will be pierced as we respond to the lamentations.

We live in a world of extremes and polarities. People take positions at the far edges of an issue, and then scream across the distance they created. Perhaps we no longer seek the quiet space of center. Humility and curiosity is what shifts us to the center. Just by being curious we move towards the middle ground, with its fertile promise of new ideas and new relationships. (p.47)

In every situation we discover that the resources we need are already there. We have more than enough to work with. It's our task to notice the abundance and figure out how to work with it. What's possible, given all that we have? (p.101)

Yes, witnessing perseverance with curiosity and courage for the life of the world is the music in God's heart.

Third, in her young life and with her prophetic words, Malala Yousafzai challenges us with laser like wisdom to transform the lamentations by our very lives.

"So here I stand—one girl among many. I raise up my voice not to shout, but that those without a voice can be heard. Even if there is a gun in my hand and my attacker stands in front of me, I would not shoot him. This is the legacy of change I have inherited from Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela, Gandhi and Mother Teresa. This is what my soul is telling me."

"One child, one teacher, one pen and one book can change the world." (Excerpts from her United Nations speech on her 16<sup>th</sup> birthday, 2013).

Yes, becoming transformational leadership with integrity and imperative is the music in God's heart. The lamentations abound and multiply. Our fidelity lies in being where we really are and allowing God's music to sing through our lives.

In closing, perhaps one of Rilke's poems or ballads captures how our song of fidelity would sound at the Grand Ole Opry.

She who reconciles the ill-matched threads of her life, and weaves them gratefully into a single cloth—

It's she who drives all the other loudmouths from the hall and clears it for a different celebration where the one guest is you, (O God).

In the softness of evening it's you she receives.

You are the partner of her loneliness, the unspeaking center of her monologues.

With each disclosure you encompass more

and she stretches beyond what limits her to hold only you. (p.64)

May we enter the work of this Assembly mindful that the music in the heart of God sings through our lives. And Holy Mystery yearns to be revealed in our midst as it was in the beginning, is now and will be forever. Amen.

#### Sources

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