

LCWR Presidential Address
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In our own words... in our own time...

Address: This address is written as more of a continuing conversation in the mode of our conversations together over the days of this Assembly 2009.

I greet you with the greeting of Francis of Assisi, always presuming the best.

Buon giorno, buona gente! Good morning, Good People.

We left our Assembly in 2008 with the words of Mary Whited, CPPS, calling us to midwife a vibrant future for ourselves, our religious congregations and the church. There was a call to hope and to nurture life.

Over these past days that we have been together here for this Assembly 2009 we have heard and shared many words. There has been much to set our ears and our hearts on fire with encouragement, much to challenge our minds and our spirits and even some to stress and perplex even the sharpest and most experienced among us.

These days and over the past few months, we've heard the experts, the analysts, the committees and the reporters both within and outside of the Church. The voices are all around us. The sheer number of voices can set a stage of chaotic cacophony rather than insight and clarity. So, as I prepared for this sharing with you (Presidential Address) I said to myself, "How many more words? What may we need at this time as we gather? What can "I" really offer?" "What words do I have that may capture the challenge of our moment in the continued birthing of our religious life?" Where do I start?

I come (among you now) not as a theologian, but like you as one who struggles to live out of an honest spirituality and theology of religious life rooted in the Gospel of Jesus. I share questions not as a psychologist, but like you as one who has had some lived experience of the human condition. Community and ministry informing this experience. I am not an historian but I have lived long enough, read and studied enough to be able to claim some lived knowledge of the history of our evolving religious life. (What's that phrase, "not born yesterday.") I am not a canonist (but confess to having a book of the Code that has been worn a bit)... not a legalist but like you I have had to struggle to identify boundaries of our life as we move to more inclusion and integration. I do come here as an elected leader in my religious congregation who like you knows the chaos theory from the buffets of the changes in our church, our culture and our congregations. (The birthing of renewal itself has its own messy "after-birth.")

The time I have to share with you I see as more reflective and rooted in the words of the Gospel of Luke that is the hallmark of the LCWR Call that we have just reaffirmed and the directions of the Shared Futures that give it shape... based in the reality of the time that is ours, chaotic but creative, challenging but exhilarating. The questions that come through as we live our time are as simple as they have always been (but we may miss them, overlook them or take them for granted because of their simplicity): Where is God in all of this? For me? For my sisters? For us? For LCWR? For the Church and the greater human family? Is it God that moves us through and forward? How will I/we respond to what is before us? Maybe it is time to listen to our own words.) [This sharing may be called: In our own words. In our own time.] How true or hollow may they be as we know our own time of chaos and creativity? Listen: Recall the courageous conversations of these days.

LCWR Call:

The Spirit of God is upon us.
God has anointed us
To bring good news to the poor
To proclaim release to the captives
To bring recovery of sight to the blind
To let the oppressed go free
To proclaim this, our age,
As a time of God's favor.
-- Based on Luke 4: 18-19

Prologue

We, the members of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, believe that God's call is written in the signs of our time. Our foremothers and founders stepped into the chaos and the unknown of their day, trusting in God's good guidance and great providence. In our time, we are called to do the same. Inspired by the radical call of the Gospel, led by God's Spirit and companioned by one another, we embrace our time as holy, our leadership as gift, and our challenges as blessings.

Just pause a moment to hold those words.

Stepped into the chaos and the unknown...

Trusting in God's good guidance and great providence...

We are called to do the same...

Holy, gifted, blessed... companioned by one another. (image our first evening ritual standing shoulder to shoulder in our expanding circle)

We as LCWR members come with our own congregation's commitments, varied as the chips of a mosaic. LCWR offers to all of us through its services, through our participation and collaboration with one another to be leaders of religious congregations that minister to the larger and local Church, world and

human family. What one's hands do not reach the other can. We are in greatest service to one another by the solidarity of our sisterhood as Gospel women. Women & Spirit for us is not just a museum display.

How real these words are for us today – 2009...

(In this time of God's favor,) We live in a world where:

- Major social (economic) and global changes create fear, anxiety, confusion, and polarization
- Technology, communication, and information shrink time and distances among peoples
- Inaccessibility to basic resources breeds suffering, oppression and violence (Katrina experience.)
- Increasingly, violence, military force and terrorist activity are used to settle disputes
- Multinational corporations exert control over legitimate governments
- Religion is used to justify political and personal aggression
- Environmental degradation threatens all of God's creation

And where people:

- Long for justice, peace and communion
- Work to achieve the common good
- Hunger for spirituality and meaning
- Claim personal and communal power for change
- Awaken to the wonder of the universe, and the place of humans within it

How are these words, our words, true for you as leader ?

How is your congregation enmeshed in and facing some of these real needs? (What is the agenda that you left at home and yet continues as you are present here?)

HERE. Here we are in New Orleans. Why are we here now, this year having conversations about chaos and not five years ago? Katrina (we have come to use the name like that of a family member).

Katrina is a personal and familial experience of both chaos and destruction.

Chaos vs Destruction... in many ways it is an image for us of so much that is happening in the world in which we minister and live.

Destruction: the total obliterating, washing away of, the dismantling of structures that no longer are able "to hold," to protect and support, shelter life. Katrina teaches us that what was so taken for granted to be the framework of not just buildings, watersheds, dams, schools, homes, hospitals, churches but of simply life itself was swept away by elements that were out of anyone's control. What was once physically there was literally gone.

What did hold, in so delicate a balance, were relationships that shaped new forms of support and strength for life... external and internal. The structure for spirits was being challenged to new forms and new expressions. It still is.

Chaos: elements, fractals, strange attractors, that clash, crash, bump and dance in the creation of new forms, evolving new patterns is similar but not necessarily the same as destruction. (Interesting that the chaos theory was first discovered by Edward Lorenz, a meteorologist, in his attempts to calculate weather patterns in hopes of being able to predict the weather!)

Repeated, seemingly out of control patterns at various stages of life, in chaos, come into new forms of balance at the recognition of the influence of small, breath-like changes or discerned choices in search of fresh energy and life. The influence of those tiny breath-like changes discovered by Lorenz we have come to know as the “butterfly effect.”

Even in our life of relative stability we have been called by the Church (Vatican II and its continuing invitations...Lumen Gentium and Perfectae Caritatis) and the needs of our brothers and sisters to move away from what may have “held” too tightly and suppressed life at some point in its existence. What was once thought to “hold” and give life began to be reassessed, systems began to reshape or fall away in parts or wholes... while the core of our life remained constant new patterns emerged to “hold” this reality. Simply put we are no longer as we once were. We can’t be. But our core commitment remains as Gospel women.

Destruction wipes away, obliterates... chaos can be a call to fresh creativity.

No, it is no mere coincidence that we are here at this time in New Orleans. In my own congregation’s charism spirituality (Sisters of Saint Francis of the Providence of God) I would say that it is Providence that we are here in New Orleans this year.

It is blessing that we are here to share and celebrate life continuing and emerging new after Katrina (and we, LCWR) responded as sister to assist with some small part of this).

It is fitting that we celebrate within this springtime the opening of the Women & Spirit exhibit capturing contributions of women religious to the development and service to the people of this emerging nation (and we had more than a small part in this!).

We come with the Providential intertwining of these experiences of chaos and creativity as we find ourselves in the midst of an unprecedented national Apostolic Visitation of religious congregations in the United States and a Doctrinal Assessment of this Leadership Conference of Women Religious.

These intertwining of experiences provide the backdrop for our gathering these days. We are in the midst of a unique time of Spirit filled chaos and unique invitation to ongoing creativity in the living of Gospel commitment. This is another defining moment in our Conference and our collective histories and future.

How do we positively grasp this time as opportunity to tell our present stories, of how we still are faithful vowed Gospel women in our time with our particular charisms? How do we respond to our call and share the Gospel as we are now?

In this chaos our own time our own words continue to say...

In this time of God's favor, we belong to a church

Whose members

- Struggle to love the Church as both graced and sinful
- Strive to balance traditional teachings with changing realities
- Seek to be a more inclusive, welcoming community
- Hunger for spirituality and the full expression of their baptismal call

And whose leaders

- Experience the pressing impact of a rapidly evolving world and universe
- Struggle with growing diversity in members' views, cultures, and religious practices
- Are confronted with their own humanity and sinfulness
- Bear the call to create structures that free the Church for the ways of God's Spirit
- Carry the responsibility of being welcoming, accountable, and inclusive pastors to all God's People

In this time of God's favor, we lead congregations experiencing

- An evolving (struggling and wounded) Church, world and universe
- Major shifts in identity, resources, members, and traditional ministries
- Diversity of cultures, worldviews, and theologies
- Restructuring within and among congregational units
- A growing desire for contemplation, balance, and simplicity
- Need and hope for dialog with Church's leaders and inclusion in its processes
- Emerging forms of religious commitment
- Growing collaboration with the laity
- Deepened appreciation of and commitment to the created world as holy

We are leaders in this Church... in this time... with the gifts and limitations that each of us possesses.

We have been called into the swirl of what feels like chaos and to a creativity that may not have been anticipated during those pre-election discernments for openness to leadership!

In our world at this time, that we really do live in as a unique "village," we are meant to be carriers of the hope and an expression of Jesus' love and passion for life. To invite and remind our sisters that this is why we are together. We are called to a deepening stance of relationship with Christ at our center that our life has proclaimed quietly since baptism and publically at the time of our religious vows.

This center gives balance and energy through the chaotic swirls and our shared life in this world village.

As we listen to our own words we know that it is through contemplation and prayer that we balance and refine our religious leadership. We must know enough theology (of religious life, scriptures, the Church, morals, ecumenism, systematics...) and learn from those who are expert in these doctrines and disciplines. We must study systems, organization and process so that we also know how to shape, lead and live out of our congregational, institutional missions. We pray to know the direction of the Spirit.

With the words of Jesus ringing in our collective ears, “The gift you have been given, give away as a gift.” We plan to use well the gifts we have been given. Remembering that we are religious... vowed women... religious congregations and corporations for ministry.

Our own words tell us we live in this world and our members hail from this same village address! Our church, too. Psychology may not be our primary discipline but awareness of human experience is primary in working with our members, the Church and the human family. Understanding the human person, the human condition in its vagaries, is essential. While we always hope and look for the best in the other, with an awareness that our congregations, the Church, society, world are made up of unselfish, giving and committed persons... we must also acknowledge that there are those who are less than saints. There are those who are not well and those who are committed, for whatever reason, to being more self-focused (centered), and possibly even security or power seeking individuals. Human condition reality-check is always helpful, even for our selves. Neither jaded, anger laced nor rosy views are especially helpful for a leader but the assistance of an objective, skilled person may be helpful to us in assessing situations in which we may be embroiled. (Darth Vader or Polyanna models of leadership may stir up plenty of emotion but not necessarily chaos induced creativity (emerging from chaos)!)

We need to know our time in its unique setting within ongoing history. We, here, most of us, have lived long enough in religious life to have a lived experience of the past twenty years. So, there is some common time “past” that has shaped our communal and personal existence at this phase of the development of cultural, Church and religious life history. We know that saying that this moment was the last moment’s future. And, we were there and now we are here. No amount of lamenting or longing can change that.

Our present time seems to be moving so quickly because we are globally and technologically connected. (How many Blackberries and iPhones are vibrating right now!?) There is no time to be wasted... but why? For what and for whom? Yet while we have increased need to pause for contemplation, true conversation and reflection, we cannot allow ourselves the extreme luxury to stop to a point of paralysis because we are angry, frustrated or bewildered. Our time of “favor with God” is meant to be a deep listening to discern what God’s call for our next or continuing response in faithfulness may be. And, for the courage to live into that response.

In our own words our Call for response in faithfulness is now. As leaders in this “time” that is ours, so much of what we are discerning is about stretching horizons and understanding the expanding boundaries of our life and missions. This is not simply looking at law and limits but at what creates the boundaries of our committed, vowed life and how and what is calling for inclusion with us... new voices and new members, new ways of ministering. What really does “fit” us and who we are and

what is good but does not “fit” us or we simply cannot do or be because of our own limitations or boundaries. What do we risk and what do we say “no” to? There continues to be a discerning, communal balancing of priorities. These challenges did not end in the 80’s to leave us in zones only focused on our own care and survival.

Religious leader... one who knows chaos theory from living it and doing the bumping and balancing that it calls for now.

Where is God in all of this for me? My sisters? For us, for LCWR?

What is the truth that I am searching for at this time in leadership ministry? Integrity? Faithfulness... Have I and my team been willing to pause to contemplate, discern and define what this is for us and our congregation? In this Church? Society? World?

Here is what we said in 2004 and captured again here in 2009:

In this time of God’s favor, we, the members of LCWR, hear God’s call and we commit ourselves (for the next five years) to

- Ground all our actions in contemplation
- Live and lead rooted in right relationship with all of creation
- Practice honest, respectful dialog towards peacemaking and reconciliation
- Risk being agents of change within our congregations, our church and our society
- Stand with those made poor, particularly women and children
- Welcome new members, new ideas, and new ways of living into the future of religious life
- Mentor leaders for the future
- Collaborate with others to create a future filled with hope

(Affirmed by the National Assembly on August 22, 2004 in Fort Worth , Texas)

No small task we set before ourselves as leaders in this Conference.

Chaos into Creativity...

Participating in the Ongoing Creation Story and the Reality of the Resurrection:

Our own word tell us as religious leaders we must never lose sight of love, hope, faithfulness and generosity and trust. Commitment to God, Jesus’ Gospel way of life, must be at our core. Without these we may be good managers and corporate executives but not necessarily religious leaders. Our vision always needs to be honed, sharpened through the lens of the Gospel.

In our own words, the LCWR Call, we ask ourselves for nothing less, as we live on the chaotic edge of our time in history.

Reflecting these days on the present challenges in our way of life within this Church and world, there was no desire to “hash” and “rehash” discussions, news articles, interviews, blogs, twitters or gossip

but to ask in one another's presence as members of LCWR how we are sister to each other in this experience, what is our truth and how do we act as leaders with integrity through this our time of chaos? We claim and often work from the premise that we as women have other ways of living in and working through conflict and chaos... more relational, respectful, transparent, dialogic, less judgmental and more reflective. The respectful stance is that while holding and relating out of our own truth we are open to the truth of the other. While seeing the specks and beams in the eyes of our critics, we also can see the specks and beams in our own eyes that may blur our vision (as well as theirs). At the same time this does not mean debasing our own expressions of faithfulness.

In our moment of chaos and possible quandary our listening needs to be more than hearing, and our speaking from informed by reflection, study and preparation and less from attack and detraction. This is what we said.

The question is: Is all of this true when we find ourselves in someone else's cross hairs? Can we do this while under pressure, judgment and public scrutiny? Whether in our own congregations, ministries or within the Church itself?

The names of Clare, Catherine, Theresa, Elizabeth, Mary Ward... and other women who have gone before us come to mind, they set the bar for us in many ways. Our challenge as women who follow in their charismatic paths is not to skirt around that bar.

Possibly the gift of the intertwining of these chaotic experiences of our time is that we are looking at who we are, Who it is that continues to invite us into this time and who needs us and our ministerial service. Like other experiences of chaos it may not be how we would have chosen this reflection and response to happen, but it is our moment. It is a defining moment that needs to be articulated in our own words.

Another gift of chaotic and even possibly destructive times is that we are dislodged from our comfort zones, those places of inertia where hum-drum life exists. Chaos may be an invitation to creativity; creating new understandings of life before us and within us, especially the awareness of the presence of God who is the source of all creative grace and energy; creating new awareness of relationship in the human family, our communities, the Church; creating color blindness and color awareness, cultural respect and political justice... creating a new desire to live on the edge of chaos that Jesus stirred up in his own time and continues today.

Conversion, compassion, conviction, wisdom, trust, integrity, passion... the Gospel, the commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, the Two Great Commandments... our charisms and mission calls, yipes, the LCWR Call... these are guidelines for living on the edge of chaos and also for creating chaos

of their own when lived deeply.

We've got the words, the words of Jesus and our founders, and... our own words about this time of chaos and creativity. The challenge for us all assembled here is what do we really do with all of this when we return home, to our desks and computers and agendas and our own chaos? What is it that we need to take from our own words to our own lived reality ?

This, our time of chaos may be inviting us out of the "RE" era of the Church and religious life since the time of Vatican II, which we possibly now have only begun to understand and risk to integrate into our lives.

Is it time to realize that we need more than:

Renewal We need to see the new before us rather than simply dusting off what was new before and attempting to capture freshness where things have gone stale.

Refounding We cannot go back to where we were at the foundation of our committed life, we need to find fresh awareness of our vows and commitment and to see the strength that this freshness gives to our being vowed women in the Church today.

Rediscovering We need to discover what religious leadership is in light of our missions and culture now. Possibly we do need to discover that "no" is a legitimate response to some chaotic or frenetic demands.

Recovering We need to acknowledge, even on days of great longing, that the past was not perfect even in its own time, and that we cannot go back. We know too much, we've learned much, we have prayed and risked too much in responding to the Spirit... As we work for healing and reconciliation in our lives we know from the medical model that even when one recovers from an illness the body, the psyche, the spirit is not the same as it was in the past. We just can't go back, the call is always forward.

Reworking, recreating This could also be a temptation toward re-hashing... But we use these terms most likely in a positive manner meaning to work differently, or to take something that we have been doing that has gone stale and attempt to look at it from a different angle, to shape it anew and when this is done it may not look or work as it did before even though one has worked with the same elements or parts or pieces of information.

Chaos in some sense could be our friend... not with loss of life or injury as with Katrina, but with the stirring and bumping around of the elements of our lives that leave us no alternative than to live and work differently... the call is not to RE our lives but to move not back to comfort zones whose patterns we already know well but to creative zones. At the end of the RE Era we must allow the Spirit of God

creative license for our present as well as our future. At this time of our chaos (sometimes we speak as if there was no experience of chaos in the past since we see the already established patterns in retrospect) we are called to creative transformation, a transfiguration, if you will, from the inside out. There is a call to deeper conversion, contemplation and relationship with our loving God to whom we have vowed our lives. There is a call for attention to our relationships in the Church, the people and the leaders (of whom we are among). There is a deeper challenge in knowing that we live in this first world culture and it calls for our ministerial attention. Its needs, its politics, its people, its economy and its world powers are all around us. There is a call for creative ways in which we shape ourselves as religious community and respond to our internal chaos of leadership, newer and aging members and discerning ministries or outreach. We are called to recognize that we may not have sufficient finances but we do have power and influence in our culture, society, the Church and the world community. We may be local but we are global. We are challenged in new ways to honesty, integrity in keeping our own words and relationships at one with the Gospel.

There is so much more that each one here can share in her own words... this time of chaos is a time of energy and creativity, filled with the blush of the Spirit of God.

Our time, in our own words is centered in God. Religious life continues to be in the creative transformation which is at its core... always deepening and always stretching buoyed by the grace of God. Our experience here within LCWR of the intertwining of the chaos of our time places us like the apostles on the Mount of Transfiguration with Jesus...

It is good for us to look at our life with eyes of creative chaos:

Our religious life is a vowed commitment to the Gospel way of life where together women and men support one another in living into transformation, transfiguration as the Beloved of God. The chaos and gift of the relationships are meant to companion one another on the conversion journey to the high mountain and through the low valleys. The journey is through and within the world and not outside of it, within and for the family of God, in the Church.

In Peter's words, "It is good for us to be here." But, as Jesus said, "No tents necessary."

It is also good for us to go. With Him into the chaos, and into the creativity.

In our own words, we are indeed Women of Spirit, Creating in Chaos.

LCWR ADDRESS 2009

End Notes – Reference and Background Reading

1. LCWR Call 2004 – 2009 Luke 4: 18 – 19
2. LCWR Statement on Apostolic Visitation
3. LCWR Statement on CDF Doctrinal Assessment of LCWR
4. Presidential Address 2008, Mary Whited, CPPS, Midwiving a Vibrant Future
5. Vatican Council II Document: Lumen Gentium
6. Vatican Council II Document: Perfectae Caritatis
7. Papal Document: Vita Consecrata, (The Consecrated Life) JP II
8. Starting Afresh from Christ, CICLSAL
9. Leadership and the New Sciences – Margaret J. Wheatley, 1992
10. Turning to one another – simple conversations to restore hope to the future, Margaret J. Wheatley, 2002
11. PRESENCE, An Exploration of Profound Change in People, Organizations, and Society, Peter Senge, Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, Betty Sue Flowers, 2004-2005
12. Theory U, Leading from the Future as it Emerges, C. Otto Scharmer, 2009
13. Baptism of Jesus, Transfiguration, New Heavens and New Earth, Gospel of Matthew(17) and Luke (9/ and the Book of Revelation (chaos into the New Creation)