

Rally in Solidarity with Catholic Sisters

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WHAT AM I DOING HERE? When Linda Donaldson asked me to share words of wisdom at this rally, my first thought was “why me?” Linda explained that they were seeking a lay person who was familiar with Catholic Sisters to share their story and I have worked with many inspirational Catholic Sisters at the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR) from 2006 to 2009. I feel very fortunate to have worked on the museum exhibit called ***Women and Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America*** – an interactive traveling exhibit that provides a glimpse into a world few have seen but millions have shared.

To be honest, public speaking is not my forte - I would prefer to work behind the scenes, I was wavering, but as I prayed for discernment about this unique invitation, the Spirit moved me to go beyond my comfort zone and say “YES” – which countless Catholic sisters have done over the past centuries.

I’m a product of the 1960’s – I REMEMBER Nuns in habit. I was educated by the IHM (Immaculate Heart of Mary) sisters @ St. Peter’s elementary school and the IHM’s @ St. Mary’s High School in NY. My mother was educated by the Sisters of Mercy in Australia. She generously supported her alma mater, All Hallows School, and sent monthly checks for the Maryknoll Nuns in America and abroad, despite her limited income.

I think we could all agree that when we were young, we had a limited understanding of who and what Sisters actually WERE. In my little world, Sisters were teachers, missionaries in foreign countries – and perhaps nurses. Most of the sisters I knew were still in habit and lived in a convent. Obviously, my perception of Sisters was influenced by my sheltered experience and the romanticized image of nuns in the popular movie – The Sound of Music. And who among us over a certain age didn’t watch Sally Fields in The Flying Nun? The story of Catholic Sisters is so much bigger and a lot more exciting - I came to understand this later in life.

My elementary and high school experience with nuns was very pleasant – they gave me a terrific education. I was a hard worker and I think the Nuns appreciated my efforts to do well. Sr. Gervase was strict, but fair. I remember the Nuns at St. Mary's lining up to waltz with my grandfather, Walter Lundell, at the father daughter dances in our gym. Gentle Sr. Hyacinth enjoyed a nice waltz.

I did not have much interaction with Nuns before I was married. I met my husband's delightful cousin, Sr. Anita O'Keefe, a Benedictine, and knew she had been a principal of a school and now worked with her Congregation in Minnesota. We are lucky to be members of Annunciation Church. I will be forever grateful to Sr. Kathleen Griffin, SNJM, our Pastoral Associate, who helped me during my mother's final hours—she visited my mother in Suburban hospital and prepared me for her transition. Two years ago, Sr. Virginia Dunn, SNJM, at Annunciation played a pivotal role in hiring our fantastic new principal, Dr. Gary Beckley.

At LCWR, I was privileged to meet many fascinating and inspirational women who have changed the world. I worked for Sr. Carole Shinnick, SSND, their Executive Director and Sr. Helen Garvey, BVM, the chair of the History Committee.

The ***Women & Spirit*** exhibit shows how, in the early years of American history, Catholic sisters usually came to the states with other immigrants from their home countries – often with a trunk containing all of their belongings. They were sent by Church leaders into remote areas, tending to those in need of medical care, education, and other social services. These courageous faith-filled women helped shape America's social and cultural landscape and improved our lives in so many ways – and they continue to do so today.

At LCWR, meetings usually began with a prayer – everything was done in the spirit of grace and wisdom with a sense of purpose – and an organized agenda. We were often asked how we came to the meeting – people with special needs or concerns were lifted up in prayer - a wonderful way to put your troubles in God's care and concentrate on the work at hand. Friday morning liturgy was an opportunity to learn more about the Old and New Testament readings and pray for special intentions. I felt as if LCWR was my spiritual

home – a busy - productive - efficient - and Holy place. I am grateful the Catholic Sisters accepted me in to their community and I appreciate their counsel and devotion.

I mainly worked with the Sisters on the History Committee, all of whom held demanding jobs in their respective fields, coming together to develop this fascinating museum exhibit – researching, recruiting, and hiring the museum design experts to help plan the concept, vision, and physical aspects of the museum exhibit, incorporating artifacts from many archives of many religious organizations. The Sisters wrote grants and traveled the country on their own time to meet with top management at corporations, foundations, Catholic schools, universities and hospitals, to generate financial support for the **Women & Spirit** exhibit. I am grateful for their wisdom, understanding and fortitude.

We received lovely notes of encouragement and support from many retired Catholic sisters enclosed with their \$5 and \$10 bills as well as beautiful letters of gratitude from corporate donors and foundations with their checks for tens of thousands of dollars. So many people expressed their gratitude for Catholic Sisters.

I learned about pioneers from many congregations:

- the Benedictine Sisters who tended the underserved and provided health insurance to lumberjacks in Minnesota,
- the Sisters of Charity who started an orphanage for abandoned children in New York City called the Foundling Home – I can still picture some of the heart-wrenching letters the mothers wrote thanking the Nuns, letting them know they would come back for their children when they had the means to take care of them,
- the Sister of Charity of St. Augustine who noticed that certain people were not being treated correctly at the hospital and helped found AA,
- the Franciscan Sister who designed an incubator to help nurse premature babies back to health,
- the Catholic sisters who sacrificed their lives - brutally murdered while working for human rights and social justice in other countries,

- the 10 Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate word who tried to save the lives of children of St. Mary's orphanage in Galveston during the flood of September 1900 – all of whom lost their lives
- the Ursuline sister in New Orleans who wrote to President Thomas Jefferson in 1804 requesting religious freedom (Jefferson wrote back to confirming her request – the letter is part of the exhibit),

I am grateful to these women of Spirit who answered the call with a resounding “YES”!

Women & Spirit features the Catholic Sisters who were instrumental in the Civil Rights movement, Sister Nurses in the Civil War, those who are lawyers, advocates, doctors, scientists, pharmacists, artists - those who fight to protect our environment, and many others.

For the past 3 years, the nation's top museums have hosted the ***Women & Spirit*** exhibit to critical acclaim - the Smithsonian, Ellis Island, Maltz Museum of Jewish Heritage, the Cincinnati Museum Center, Notre Dame... and now at the California Museum of History, Women and the Arts.

There are historical artifacts in the exhibit –a poignant invitation by Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary in South Dakota in the mid 1800's reads:

We offer you no salary; no recompense; no holidays, no pensions
 but much hard work; a poor dwelling; few consolations; many
 disappointments; frequent sickness; a violent or lonely death.

Whoever said “YES” to that HAD to be a woman of Spirit with great fortitude!

If you aren't familiar with Catholic Sisters, take a few minutes to visit LCWR.org and click on to ***Women & Spirit***.

I am speaking this morning to honor Sr. Jane Burke, SSND, Executive Director of the LCWR from 2008 to 2011. She was welcomed in to heaven on January 11th of this year – Jane was 63 years old – she had melanoma. I learned that during the last 6 months of her

life, Jane underwent very difficult experimental treatment. Jane knew this treatment would not help her, and in the spirit of her congregation's commitment to education, she chose to continue the therapy believing that her experience would be helpful to other people in the future. I can still picture Jane sitting at her desk, with her leg propped up, busily typing on her computer or talking on the phone – she had a great smile and a wicked sense of humor. She delighted in telling amusing stories about her nieces and nephews – Jane always took time to ask about my family. She must have been in severe pain - she didn't hesitate to Say "Yes" again and again. I never heard Jane complain.

I am grateful to Sr. Jane, Sr. Anita, Sr. Gervase, Sr. Hyacinth, Sr. Kathleen, Sr. Virginia, Sr. Carole, Sr. Helen, and the Sisters at LCWR – Sr. Janet Mock, CSJ, Sr. Ann Scholz, SSND, Sr. Pat Cormack, SCSC, and Sr. Annmarie Sanders, IHM for sharing their grace, wisdom, and good counsel.

LCWR has more than 1,500 members, who represent more than 80 percent of women religious in the US (now about 57,000 Sisters). Their mission statement is clear:

The purpose of the conference shall be to promote a developing understanding and living of religious life by:

- assisting its members personally and communally to carry out more collaboratively their service of leadership in order to accomplish further the mission of Christ in today's world.
- fostering dialogue and collaboration among religious congregations within the church and in the larger society.
- developing models for initiating and strengthening relationships with groups concerned with the needs of society, thereby maximizing the potential of the conference for effecting change.

We often talked about the gifts of the Spirit @ LCWR – wisdom, understanding, knowledge, counsel, fortitude, piety and fear of the Lord.

Inspired by Catholic Sisters past, present and future, and, when we are asked to show our support and solidarity for Women Religious, let us be open to the Spirit, employ these gifts, and answer the call - not with a wavering "why me" - but with an affirming "YES!" and a sincere heart-felt "THANK YOU".