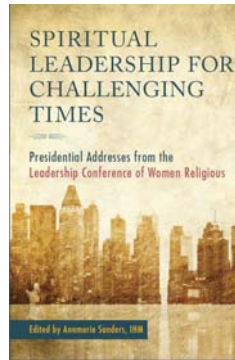


## **Spiritual Leadership for Challenging Times:** *Presidential Addresses from the Leadership Conference of Women Religious*



### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

**1977**

#### **“Go Where There is No Trail and Leave a Path” by Sister Joan Chittister, OSB**

1. Sister Joan Chittister, speaking 10 years after Catholic sisters began their “rigorous self assessment,” asks members of LCWR “to begin to proclaim together and publicly where women religious, after 10 years of search, are beginning to feel that religious life must go.” She offers a model of religious life by telling the story of the siege of Jerusalem described in *2 Kings 7*. With which of the lepers in the story do you identify? Why? Have you ever experienced a similar scenario when trying to resolve a situation in which all choices seem frightening and dangerous? How did you and/or your organization move forward?
2. Note the five times in history that Sister Joan says religious life has been under siege and needed to change so that the religious “could go deeper into life, into service, into God.” Has there been another siege period since 1977 that Sister Joan might add to the list today? What is the nature of this period and how has its effect propelled women religious “deeper into life, into service, into God”?
3. Sister Joan describes a “new vision” of religious life that is in “tension” with the old. Which part of the new vision is most appealing to you? What did you find yourself resisting? Why?
4. Sister Joan states that the “purpose of leadership is **not** to make the present bearable. The purpose of leadership is to make the future possible.” What is your reaction to her observation: “We too have an obligation to go beyond the city gates—to go indeed where there is no trail and leave a path”? Tell about a time when you or your organization went where there was no trail and left a path.

**1980**

#### **“Speak the Truth in Love” by Sister Theresa Kane, RSM**

1. In her address, Sister Theresa Kane says that it is essential to speak the truth to oneself before sharing it with others. “To do so, we must be in contact with our own feelings,

experiences and reflections." Reflect on your own experience that points you toward a truth in your own life. Notice the feelings you have as you remember that experience. Talk about the experience, the truth and the feelings.

2. Sister Theresa challenges us to speak the truth in love to each other, the Church and society, saying, "Whenever and wherever persons are being exploited ...Christians have a serious responsibility to speak truth." When have you spoken truth to others? What made that possible? What prevents you from speaking in the ways you may desire?
3. Sister Theresa delivered her address during the 1980 LCWR assembly. "How has the role of women changed in the institutional church in the last 35 years? What challenges remain as women religious "continue to journey, not only in an identity as women religious, but in an identity as women, as persons"?"
4. Sister Theresa speaks of the need to "become missionaries once again." Pope Francis echoed that call in *Evangelii Gaudium* saying, "All the members of the People of God have become missionary disciples." What does this call mean to you?
5. Sister Theresa concludes her remarks by asserting, "Let us fearlessly, joyously and enthusiastically forge ahead." When can you be fearless? Where do you find your joy? What are you enthusiastic about? What may stand in the way of your feeling fearless or joyful? In your hopes and actions, what are you forging toward confidently during the coming year?

## 1985

### **"The Woman's Word of Testimony" by Sister Margaret Cafferty, PBVM**

1. Amid the tensions of her time, Sister Margaret Cafferty states, "...these are times when the only moral choice is to speak, to act." What are the moral choices you face today in your family or work? What helps you or holds you back from speaking or acting?
2. Expressing concern about nuclear war, Sister Margaret refers to our "...nation that has the capacity and seemingly the will to destroy creation as we know it today." Do you feel the need to bring something of the Gospel to your nation today? Where do you feel the Gospel message should not be applied relative to your nation?
3. Sister Margaret suggests that it is time "to help shape the conscience of the nation." How does the Gospel shape your conscience? How can you apply the Gospel message today to shape the conscience of your workplace, family or nation?
4. During the days of Iran-Contra, in Central America, Sister Margaret recalls that during her travels "people forgive me for being North American before they can talk to me as a person..." She continues, "There is nowhere in Latin America a North American can go and escape the judgment of the poor." Do you feel that persons who are poor are treated differently today, 30 years later, both internationally and in your locality? Have you changed in how you think and feel about people who are poor over the last decade or two?

5. Sister Margaret observes, "Many of our religious congregations were first formed to meet the needs of specific groups of women. ...femininity condemns an increasing number of women to a life of poverty, with little hope of escape." She concludes "...our concern for women today could more appropriately be called fidelity to our founding charism, rather than dismissed, as it often is, as a peculiarly religious brand of radical feminism." How do you feel about women religious focusing help on women who are poor? Are there other groups that feel need similar advocacy?

1989

**"Consecrated for Mission" by Sister Nadine Foley, OP**

1. Sister Nadine Foley indicates in the beginning of her address that the history of women religious in the United States has been characterized by "adaptation in response to the experienced needs of the times and circumstances." Leaders and organizations often face the need to adapt to times and circumstances. What challenges you when you think about the need for adaptation in your personal sense of mission or in your work environment and why? What excites you about it and why?
2. Sister Nadine finds consecration and mission linked rather than separated. She states, "the whole people of God, the church, is consecrated for mission through baptism." Which of her arguments are most persuasive for you and why? Does this part of the address have relevance for you? Why or why not?
3. Sister Nadine discusses the use of the phrase "radical feminist" to illustrate how language can be used to divide. Do you find Sister Nadine's 1989 ideas still pertinent to the struggle by women to avoid being "divided, separated and controlled" in public life and the many other places where women struggle to have a voice? How would you update her ideas?
4. Sister Nadine concludes that for active women religious, "women's issues should not be an isolated agenda but rather pursued within the spectrum of social and political concerns on a global scale." Do you find yourself resisting this idea or does it resonate with you? Why or why not?
5. Why does Sister Nadine feel that adequate compensation for women religious is a "simple question of justice"? Do you find her arguments persuasive or did you find yourself arguing with her point of view? Why?

1994

**"Befriending the Wind" by Sister Doris Gottemoeller, RSM**

1. Sister Doris Gottemoeller opens her presidential address with a poem that "reminds us how susceptible we are to the influence of unseen forces." Using the metaphor of wind, she suggests that women religious know "what it is to be buffeted and shaped by powerful but sometimes unseen forces from every side." She also considers the ways in which those forces can be understood in terms of opposite poles, e.g. simultaneously life-giving/renewing and fickle/frightening. What unseen forces currently "buffet and shape" your life or that of your organization? What presses on

each like winds from the north, south, east and west? In what ways can each of these forces be understood in terms of tensions created AND possibilities for new growth?

2. Asking what their future will be, Sister Doris says that the “future depends, as it always has, on the mysterious work of God’s providence in our regard. But the future also depends, as it always has, on how we answer the depth questions ... which have to be answered in every time and place.” What are the depth questions that currently require your attention? How are you living with those questions?
3. “Prophecy requires engagement in the public issues of the day if the Gospel is to speak to contemporary human needs.” It also requires that we hold our sponsored institutions accountable for the clarity of their gospel witness. Who do you believe is called to hold institutions accountable? What are you called to do, alone or as a member of a group? Can you imagine a range of ways to hold institutions accountable?
4. Considering mission as global, Sister Doris observes, “We know from personal experience and observation how the poverty and suffering in one part of the world have their causes in decisions made in another part, and how the elites of the world conspire to enhance their own positions at the expense of the poor and marginalized.” In what ways do you identify with “the elites of the world”? With “the poor and marginalized”? Sister Doris continues, “Women and men religious constitute a worldwide network of communication and possible response to human suffering.” Where do you get your information about “real needs” around the world? How can you make effective use of this information?
5. Sister Doris declares, “It is time to speak and live our truth without compromise.” What is your truth? What is needed to fully live your truth without compromise?

1996

**"Lift Up Your Voice with Strength" (Is.40:9) by Sister Nancy Schreck, OSF**

1. Sister Nancy Schreck asks, "What can we do as peacemakers in this land of violence?" She urges us "to imagine a nonviolent world, to believe from our depths that violence is not our destiny." She challenges us to "lift up" our voices "say something, do something." Do you agree with her that violence is not our destiny? Why or why not? What would you need to change personally to bring more peace to the place you live and to the world?
2. Continuing on her theme of lifting one's voice, Sister Nancy observes, "When a group of people is empowered, energized, open, creative, when the group shares a mission, the synergy that develops allows them to accomplish almost anything." She encourages members of LCWR to take a more active role in the struggle against violence. She develops several ideas about what makes it difficult for women to speak out. Do any of these problems resonate with you, or do you feel women leaders have developed beyond these barriers? Explain.
3. Sister Nancy states, "real leadership is reflected in the inspired actions of others," and she wonders if leadership should be evaluated by "the degree to which people around the leader are inspired." What is your reaction to this

proposal? Can you imagine your leadership evaluated by how you inspired others to act, particularly in the areas of peace and justice? How might such an assessment change the way you lead?

**2003**

**“Tending the Holy through the Power of Sisterhood”  
by Sister Mary Ann Zollmann, BVM**

1. Sister Mary Ann Zollmann talks of new creation, salvation and resurrection as a way of articulating the story of what was happening in the lives of Catholic sisters in 2003. How might these words and stories describe what you might be experiencing in your personal or professional life?
2. Sister Mary Ann says that “power” has been at work in the sisters. “Counter-cultural, mutual, relational, it is the authentic power integral to the transformation of our church and of our world. It is the power of sisterhood.” Can you identify any similarities between this kind of power and the power needed for church, business, and society to transform?
3. Sister Mary Ann says, “We want to enter into contemplation and stir our God-given creativity...to imagine new ways of responding...” Have you ever spent time daily in contemplation? Do you find a change in your creativity? Do you see any ways this approach could be valuable in your daily life and in the secular world?
4. Sister Mary Ann believes that LCWR and its congregations are called to examine how they use power as leaders. She asks them to consider how to be authentic when they challenge political and religious leaders to use their power humbly rather than arrogantly. To be authentic, LCWR and its congregations must redefine power – not domination but rather friendship in mutual service.” Does this redefinition resonate with you? Have you seen this kind of power at work? What examples in your life situations might benefit from this approach?

**2008**

**“Midwifing a Vibrant Future” by Sister Mary Whited, CPPS**

1. Sister Mary Whited quotes Rabbi Abraham Heschel, who describes a prophet as one who “combines a very deep love, a very powerful dissent, and a powerful resolve with envisioning hope.” In your own life as a leader and member of various communities, do prophets like this arise? Have you found it relatively easy or relatively difficult to be open to hearing them? Why?
2. Sister Mary’s experience leads her to say that “communal perspective” is essential in leadership. She says that “what we do as leaders” is “sharing our personal visions, clarifying what is important to us, learning to see with new eyes, unearthing our mental models, creating the capacity to think together, and making new connections...Strength to move forward comes from ... knowing we are not alone.” Do you find yourself hungry for a communal aspect of leadership, or resistant to it, or something else? Why? Do you have a community with whom to do this, if you choose?

3. Sister Mary sees “a reconciling perspective” as essential to leadership. When there are serious divisions, this perspective requires leaders “to engage in the difficult and honest conversations, to imagine alternatives that can bridge the gaps, to acknowledge our part in perpetuating the divisions, to cultivate unity even as we speak the truth, and, perhaps most importantly, to know when to push and when to simply breathe.” Can you think of someone with whom you or your organization/community has a serious disagreement? How comfortable or uncomfortable would it feel for you to stay in direct and reconciling conversation for the long haul? Why? How might it change your organization?
4. Few communities or organizations habitually make time for “leaders to sit together in silence.” But Sister Mary says that in this necessary contemplative pause, “wisdom emerges, compassion grows and we support one another in labor” to bring forth new life. Can you imagine doing this with others in your organizations or communities? Do you find yourself attracted to or resistant to this possibility? Why?
5. Sister Mary finds that openness to the sufferings of our world can awaken “a hope that allows us to see from the perspective of God.” Do you agree? Why or why not?

**2010**

**“Called to Hope as Prophets Artists, Healers & Lovers”  
by Sister Marlene Weisenbeck, FSPA**

1. Have you ever been the subject of an official inquiry or the target of what you felt were unfair accusations (or something similar)? How did you handle it? Is there something you wish you had done differently?
2. What do you think could be meant by Sister Marlene Weisenbeck’s statement “No one should come into contact with us without receiving our mercy”? How would “giving mercy” consciously distance a person from “all that fragments our bondedness in human communion”?
3. In the first part of her address, Sister Marlene proposes that hope calls us to respond to our time through prophecy, art, healing and love. After reading the entire address, what resonated with you about what hope means, how it can be lived, or how it can be given?

**2012**

**“Navigating the Shifts” by Sister Pat Farrell, OSF**

1. In 2012, Sister Pat Farrell described being in the midst of a shift, a larger movement in the Church and in the world that was creating the conditions for transformation to break through. How did you experience this movement in the various spheres of your life in 2012, both large and small, and how do you experience this movement in the various spheres of your life today?

2. She notes how for years, women religious leaders have reflected together contemplatively, ripening their spiritual depth and readying them for crisis that precedes transformation. How are you preparing for and thriving in this transformational process? What do you need to add to your life -- or do more of -- to thrive during this time? Is there anything that you need to do less of?
3. Describing what is breaking through, Sister Pat names equality, communion, collaboration, synchronicity, expansiveness, abundance, wholeness, mutuality, intuitive knowing and love. Where are you experiencing those qualities in your life and leadership? Can you name those women and men in your life who embody these qualities and offer a prayer of gratitude for them?
4. Preparing for this fresh inbreaking -- of the Reign of God for Christians -- Sister Pat identifies tools that have served women and men in religious life for centuries: contemplation, prophetic voice, solidarity with the marginalized, community, non-violence and joyful hope. How do you employ these tools in your life and with whom? Do you feel called to increase the use of those tools and what do you need in order to do so?
5. Sister Pat invokes images from nature in her address: eucalyptus tree seeds that cannot germinate without a forest fire and the mustard seed which, while beautiful and medicinal, is also an invasive weed. What images are evoked in you as you read and ponder her words?

*These reflection and discussion questions were created by the group, **Solidarity with Sisters**, which is based in Silver Spring, Maryland.*