

**LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE OF WOMEN RELIGIOUS
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**Imagining Leadership in A Global Community
By Pat Murray, IBVM**

Thank you for this invitation to be among you these days and to share some reflections on “imagining leadership in a global community.” I’m Irish as you can probably hear but I have been living outside of Ireland for over 20 years. As a practical theologian, when I reflect on leadership in today’s global community in the light of God’s word, I move into the world of the imagination. There memories and stories, symbols, and images, nourish my reflections. An Irish writer once described imagination “as something in her head that was singing.” Jesus awakened the imagination of people through stories, images and symbols, challenging his listeners to interpret them, to find the way that would lead to fullness of life. Someone has well said that “stories are data with soul.”¹ Therefore as leaders it is important to encourage storytelling, to explore anew our charisms, to retell our congregational stories, to re-examine our symbols, histories and traditions reinterpreting them in the light of today’s global life and mission. Today I will offer you some images and thoughts for your reflection as leaders but I will first look briefly on our world and religious life today.

Our Globalized World

We are living in extraordinary times. This is not just “an era of change but a change of eras.”² We see new technologies, passing information quickly around the world creating “economic, political, and strategic dynamics, never previously conceived or suspected.”³ We live in a globalized interconnected world where millions of people are on the move within and across continents, fleeing poverty, war and famine, seeking new opportunities in distant places, struggling to build new lives in unfamiliar cultures and contexts. Our world is marked by pluralism, growing differentiation and complexity. While we feel closer to each other and better

¹ Brene Brown, YouTube, Ted Talk on Vulnerability.

² Pope Francis, Address to the National Conference of the Italian Church, Cathedral of St. Maria in Fiore, Florence, Nov. 10, 2015.

³ Passion for Christ, Passion for Humanity: Act of the Congress on Consecrated Life (Paulines Publication of Africa: Nairobi, 2005), 27.

understand one another and our differences, there is a parallel rise in xenophobic and racist attitudes that are often exploited for political gain. We have seen many incredibly sad events when people act out of these beliefs. There is the daily struggle for the basics of life all around us. I have seen homeless people foraging for food in cities and women walking for 4 hours to the nearest well for water. A recent article in the New York Times spoke of the scandal of an ice cream sundae costing \$1,000 and a hamburger \$295 while 25% of the world's children have stunted development because of malnutrition. This is the world of detention and holding centres along borderlands. We have seen rape used as a weapon of war and child soldiers conscripted by militias. We witness destruction of life and livelihood in local wars and conflicts. Millions of people are trafficked worldwide; others live fragile lives in refugees' camps where women foraging for firewood are fearful of being robbed or raped. Life on our planet is threatened with extinction through myriad forms of contamination, pollution and destruction while human life is being devalued from birth to death.⁴ This global scenario tests the very meaning and purpose of our consecrated life and the commitments we make at General Chapters. It tests the honesty of our solidarity with the poor and with the planet, the excluded and those whose right to life is threatened.⁵ It challenges each of us to confront our lifestyles with the demands of the Gospel. It invites us to examine how our living, our mission and ministry should respond today.

Who are we as women religious in today's world?

The face of Consecrated Life has changed dramatically. It has become culturally diverse in its members and in the charisms that the spirit gives.⁶ I am privileged to have an overview because of the 2,000 congregational leaders who are members of UISG. We sisters number over 500,000. They say that not even the Holy Spirit knows how many we are! We belong to different charismatic families, have different spiritual roots and traditions. In these past years however we are discovering that beneath the diversity, we share what might be called "the charism" of vowed religious life, rooted in our passion for Christ and our passion for humanity. Pope Francis has expressed his hope "for a growth in communion between the members of different Institutes," calling us "to step out more courageously from the confines of our respective

⁴ Ibid., 26.

⁵ Ibid., 25.

⁶ Ibid., 27.

Institutes and to work together, at the local and global levels.” This he says “would make for a more effective prophetic witness.”⁷ He invites us to be “part of a true communion which is constantly open to encounter, dialogue, attentive listening and mutual assistance”⁸ reaching out globally to people of other faiths and of no faith. Using new means of communication, religious life has become a transnational network with a global identity. We are pilgrims in a globalised world seeking new ways to express our life and our mission. The Irish poem TRASNA⁹ meaning CROSSING expresses some aspects of the leadership journey that we are undertaking.

The pilgrims paused on the ancient stones,
In the mountain gap, Behind them stretched the roadway they had travelled,
Ahead mist hid the track.

Unspoken the question hovered:
Why go on? Is life not short enough?
Why seek to pierce its mystery?
Why venture further on strange paths risking all?
Surely that is a gamble for fools.....or lovers?
Why not return quietly by the known road?
Why be a pilgrim still?

A voice they knew called to them, saying:
This is Trasna, the crossing place.
Choose. Go back if you must,
You will find your way easily by yesterday’s road,
You can pitch your tent by yesterday’s fires.
There may be fire in the embers yet.

If that is not your deep desire,
Stand still. Lay down your load.
Take your life in your two hands,
(,,,you are trusted with something precious)

While you search your heart’s yearnings:
What am I seeking? What is my quest?
When your star rises within,
Trust yourself to its leading.
You will have light for your first steps.
This is TRASNA, the crossing place.
Choose!

This is TRASNA, the crossing place.
Come!

How then to imagine leadership at this crossing place, as members of a global community? I would like to offer some images and reflections to spark your imagination because we know

⁷ Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter, Year of Consecrated Life, 21 November. 2014

⁸ Ibid.,

⁹ Sr. Raphael Consideine, Presentation Sister.

that we do not just see images “but we see through images.”¹⁰ How then might these images speak to you today as leaders?

1. **Widen the tent of our hearts**
2. **Be present at the borderlands**
3. **Embrace vulnerability**
4. **Celebrate our luxurious cultural diversity**
5. **Engage in web-watching and web-weaving**
6. **Listen to the long notes**

1. **Widen the tent of our hearts:**

The prophet Isaiah said: “Enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back; lengthen your cords, strengthen your stakes.”¹¹ This is a helpful image for religious life today because it speaks of both flexibility and rootedness, unbounded hospitality and secure identity. We are invited not to hold back, to stretch wide but at the same time to “strengthen our stakes,” by ensuring that what holds the tent in place goes down deep. This verse invites us to make space in our hearts, for Christ and for those who live on the margins of life. In this time of rapid change and challenge, we need to ask ourselves again: Are we really grounded. “Is Jesus really our first and only love; as we promised that he would be when we professed our vows.”¹² Have we embraced the vision and values that inspired our founders and foundresses? The Gospel was central to their vowed life “a concrete expression of (their) passionate love.”¹³ Our charisms, are the fruits of their response to the call of Christ. Our founders translated the Gospel into a particular way of life¹⁴ which responded to the needs of their times. How are we being challenged by the Gospel? How is our charism being stretched and enlarged today? Does it expand our minds and hearts into radical and sincere living? Do we have the passion of our founders? Are we also close to the people, sharing their joys and sorrows, seeking to understand their needs?

¹⁰ John Shea, “Theological Assumptions and Ministerial Style” in *Alternative Futures for Worship in Alternatives Futures for Worship*, vol. 6 *Leadership Ministry in Community*, ed. M.A. Cowan (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1987), 105-28.

¹¹ Is. 54:2.

¹² Pope Francis, *Witnesses of Joy: Apostolic Letter to all Consecrated Persons on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*, #1.

¹³ *Ibid.*, #2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, #1.

The responses needed today are often not found in the big initiatives of the past but instead are like tiny mustard seeds - a word of hope, a listening heart, a compassionate presence, a healing glance. This mysticism of encounter happens everywhere – it is “far reaching, personal and outgoing.”¹⁵ We have seen this mysticism in action in our communities at sick beds, on city streets with homeless people, on the borders with separated families, in refugee camps, in hospitals and parishes with people who are struggling– in fact wherever we are. While the needs of the world are complex and extensive, do we believe that it is the small, the hidden, the unknown acts of kindness and love that will transform our world. It is the quality of our presence individually and in our community living, that matters above all, so that people can see the presence of God in us. Pope Francis speaks often about a revolution of tenderness reminding us that “God’s tenderness brings us to the understanding that “love is the meaning of life.”¹⁶ We are called to pour the love we receive from the Lord back into the world – into our communities, the Church and wider society. Through this revolution of tenderness and love, the pope is proposing a humble way to move continents and mountains.¹⁷ This is the Christian revolution that we are called to lead. It is a revolution in the true sense of the word - the return to the origin of the Gospel as a way forward, a revolution of mercy.¹⁸ But in order to be capable of mercy we must quiet ourselves to listen to God’s word and to contemplate his mercy. Then we need to reach out with this *mercying* love first to ourselves as leaders – for we are often hard on ourselves - and then to become mercy to our brothers and sisters.

The image of the tent reminds us of the story of Abraham and Sarah and their hospitality to the three strangers at Mamre¹⁹ which we reflected on recently. Abraham was sitting at the entrance to his tent. Jewish sources recount that the tent was probably open on four sides, therefore Abraham could see anyone approaching. He was probably not feeling his best self; it was the hottest part of the day and to complicate matters God was standing right in front of him and then there were these three strangers arriving.²⁰ As leaders, doesn’t it sound familiar -

¹⁵ Pope Francis, *Witness of Joy*, # 2.

¹⁶ Pope Francis, *Theology of Tenderness*, September 13, 2013

¹⁷ Mt 17,19; 21,21.

¹⁸ Walter Kasper. *Pope Francis’ Revolution of Tenderness and Love: Theological & Pastoral Perspectives*. New York: Paulist Press, 2015.

¹⁹ Gen. 18

²⁰ Marianne Moyaert, “Biblical, Ethical and Hermeneutical Reflections on Narrative Hospitality,” in Richard Kearney & James Taylor ed. *Hosting the Stranger: Between Religions*

everything happening at the same time! We are told that when Abraham looked up, he saw the strangers and rushed out to greet them. He brought water to bathe their feet and invited them to refresh themselves while he went to get them something to eat. He offered them food in abundance and then stood near them under the tree while they enjoyed the food. When the strangers asked Abraham where his wife Sarah was, he replied that she was in the tent. One of them said that he would return in a year's time and that by that time Sarah would have a son. Sarah who was by now at the entrance to the tent, just laughed, she thought to herself that this was simply impossible since she was well beyond child-bearing age and Abraham too was old. When asked why she had laughed, she became afraid and denied that she had done so.

Yet we know the happy ending to this encounter at the tent in the desert – Sarah and Abraham received the gift of new life. The visitors, sent by God profoundly changed their life, creating a future of which they could never have dreamed. We notice that with the arrival of the strangers, Abraham appears to have ignored God, yet he did exactly what God would have wanted, because of his deep relationship with the living God. This is part of Abraham and Sarah's journey in faith. It can perhaps help us to reflect on the meaning of our life as religious today. We can ask ourselves as leaders of our communities: Is God standing before us? Because if he is not, there is a danger that the love which animates us could grow cold.....and the "salt of faith" could lose its savour. To keep our gaze fixed on Jesus Christ "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith"²¹ is our challenge. Today we meet people arriving through the four sides of our congregational tents - people of all ages who want a listening ear, migrants and refugees, those who have lost their jobs, been trafficked, the depressed, the downhearted, those who are "searching for the ultimate meaning and definitive truth of their lives and of the world."²² Some are strangers, others known to us; still others are not physically present but we hear about them, read about them and their struggles in others parts of the world. When they pass by or come to ask for sustenance or just for a moment touch our lives from afar, "what do we have to offer them?" "what is the nourishment that we can give?" "what is the unbounded generosity and (tender)love that is an essential part of our.....community witness."²³ We must provide the practical things needed at that moment but we are called to give more – a radical prophetic

²¹ Benedict XVI, Apostolic Letter, "Porta Fidei": For the Indication of the Year of Faith, 11 October 2011, #13.

²² Ibid., #10.

²³ Patricia Jordan FSM, *Shifting Sands and Solid Rock* (Herefordshire: Gracewing Publication, 2015), 14.

witness, of having a global heart; “of being a pilgrim and prayer presence” ever watchful, “making intercession, firm in faith,” with God and with the world on their behalf.²⁴

What then is the new life that is to be born in us, the transformation that is happening, unknown to us, in and through these multiple encounters? Have we like Sarah sometimes lapsed into a certain cynicism, thinking that giving birth to something new is impossible? Or like Abraham will we stay near the strangers who come, listening to their questions, engaging in conversation, feeling called to new responses. During these past years I have had extraordinary conversations with young entrepreneurs, graphic artists, young people, families and others who are all seeking creative ways to live their faith. Religious life, like the Church itself, is living through difficult times, “the heat of the day.” Far from becoming irrelevant it would seem that consecrated life is perhaps “assuming a new and unexpected role” by showing how to accept and live “the difficulties of the present day with faith and even with joy.”²⁵ In addition we are being invited to join our small efforts for change with other parts of the world. This coming October during the Synod on Amazonia, REPAM (the Ecclesial Network of Pan-Amazonia), is constructing a Tent in Rome to represent the Amazon: Our Common Home. This will be a space of welcome near the Vatican for all who come to attend the Synod but especially to welcome members of indigenous communities; a place to get to know one another, pray together, exchange experiences. At UISG we will try to create this space digitally to help worldwide participation and invite all to “widen the tent of our hearts.”

2. Be present at the borderlands

Pope Francis talks about an outgoing Church, a Church “in uscita,” which needs to move out onto wounded landscapes, to the borderlands. Gloria Anzaldua used the metaphor “borderlands” or “la frontera” to refer to different types of crossings – between geopolitical boundaries, between places of social dislocations and the crossings which must be made to exist in multiple linguistic and cultural contexts.²⁶ Borderlands are everywhere: in our local

²⁴ CICLESAL, Keep Watch, To Consecrated Men and Women, Journeying in the Footsteps of God, 8th September, 2014.

²⁵ Brian O’Leary, Radical and Free: Musings on the Religious Life (Messenger Publications: Dublin, 2016), 5.

²⁶ Introduction to the Fourth Edition by Norma E. Casntu and Aida Hurtado in Gloria Anzaldua, Borderlands: La Frontiera – The New Mestiza, 4th Edition (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012), 6.

neighbourhoods, at national and international levels and very close to home within our religious communities. For Anzaldua borderlands are important places not only for the hybridity that occurs there but also for the perspective that they can offer to those who live there. Living in borderlands produces a certain knowledge, that of being within a system while also retaining the knowledge of an outsider. We have to cultivate this “borderlands” heart and mind. Seeing through “the eyes of others” is essential to gain a deeper understanding, an empathy and compassion, than is deeper than what can be achieved by staying within one’s own social milieu.

“Borderlands” is a rich metaphor. It represents the multitude of places and opportunities where people from different cultures and contexts cross over to one another in order to learn and grow together. This happens through the building of relationships that gift one another and lead to mutual transformation. This is not merely about surviving side by side but it is a process of building deep connections, celebrating and appreciating difference, committing to collaborate together. When Cardinal Montenegro invited the UISG to send sisters to Sicily as thousands of migrants were arriving on its shores, in outlining his expectations, he was very clear about what he wanted. He said: “I don’t want another project, there are many good projects already. I want sisters who will walk the streets, get close to the people, be present among both the local people and the migrants, sisters who will be able to build a bridge of understanding enabling each group to cross over to the other.” Being truly present to one to another, being open to a mutual encounter with the Other who comes as stranger, is a prophetic act in today’s divisive contexts. Today the local people call the sisters in the UISG communities “Le Suore del Mondo” – the Sisters of the World – perhaps that is our new calling?

Today more than ever our presence is vital at the many borders and frontiers that block and separate people. They can be political or physical borders or invisible borders that control the inclusion/exclusion of peoples. The Spanish theologian Mercedes Navarro reminds us that the Christian God is “a frontier God” and that “*to survive at the frontiers one must live without frontiers and be a crossroads.*”²⁷ So in our contemplation, in our prayers, in our outreach, we need to constantly inhabit frontiers and borderlands; we need to live prophetically in the in-between space where we can carry people across the divide of culture, religious, gender, race and

²⁷ Anzaldua, *Borderlands: La Frontiera – The New Mestiza*, 6.

ethnicity. We need to be people who stand at crossroads physically and spiritually, watching and waiting. The concern of our hearts, the power of our prayers and our advocacy can support those sisters who are at physical frontiers in different parts of the world, because in our global sisterhood where one of us is present, all of us are. **Can we ask ourselves: “What does it mean to live without frontiers and be a crossroads today? How can we be present physically and spiritually in today’s borderlands?”**

3. Embrace vulnerability:

A glance worldwide at developments within religious congregations’ points to a life cycle moving through the stages of birth, maturity, loss and diminishment, leading in some cases to conclusion. We are living the cycle of passion, death and resurrection at personal and organizational levels. The majority of congregations worldwide have fewer than 200 members. Many congregations in the Global South, struggle to provide for their members and their ministries, yet believe radically that God’s presence will provide and sustain them. Congregations in the Global North are entrusting their institutions into the hands of lay leaders in trusts, foundations and other entities, with the demanding administrative challenges which these processes involve. It is as if we are all arriving together in the same sacred space, where we are experiencing a greater fragility and vulnerability. In a profound way, this makes us more relevant than ever; it places us in communion with the people of our time and place especially those at the peripheries. While we can be justly proud of past achievements, we also have to acknowledge our past blindness and negligence especially where we failed to protect the most vulnerable among us. This calls us to a deep humility that creates space for conversion and change. We are called to face the future with the same courage and conviction of our founders and foundresses, convinced what matters is our presence among and our encounters with the people of today and their needs. Pope Francis reminds us that “we are heirs to those who have gone before us and had the courage to dream.”²⁸ These dreams were often born in times of great social need with scarce resources. We have only to read our archives to connect with their founding experiences of vulnerability and fragility.

The Scriptures describe desert or mountain wildernesses, where God’s people discover liminal places. They seem to be continually forced into the desert – to take the harder, more onerous

²⁸ Pope Francis, Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, February 2, 2017.

and hazardous route – as an exacting exercise in radical faith.”²⁹ It is here in the desert, that people are fed, five thousand at a time and a new community takes shape. We are constantly reminded that “the place of scarcity, even death, is revealed by Jesus, as a place of hope and new life.”³⁰ Richard Rohr describes “liminal space” as “the crucial in-between time when everything actually happens and yet nothing appears to be happening.”³¹ It is the waiting time. Today we religious seem to be in this waiting time where we are being called to be patient, to allow time and space for the new to break through. In this liminal place we can share our insights with one another and listen deeply as we share how we feel that God is calling us; these conversations can reveal the whispers of the Spirit.

The spiritual writer Belden Lane, reflecting on the death of his mother writes that the “starting point for many things is grief, at the very place where endings seem so absolute.”³² While many of us as religious are living in the place of endings.....faith reminds us that that “the pain of closing” is often “the antecedent to every new opening in our lives.”³³ We know that our experience of weakness, confusion and searching, places us among the men and women of our day. What we have to offer to people today is above all our experience of vulnerability, fragility and weakness and our profound belief that God’s grace seldom comes in the way that we might expect? It often demands “the abandonment of every security” and it is only in accepting the vulnerability that grace demands that we find ourselves invited to wholeness.”³⁴ It is through our own limitation and weaknesses as human beings that we are called to live as Christ lived. The profession of the evangelical counsel of Poverty, Chastity and Obedience is “a radical witness to the power of the Paschal Mystery” as we surrender everything to the one who offers eternal life. **Can we lead conversations about fragility and vulnerability? Do we believe that God is preparing the way for something new in our own lives? In the life of the world?**

²⁹ Beldon C. Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*(London: Oxford University Press; 8th edition, February 26, 2007), 44.

³⁰ *Ibid.*,

³¹ Richard Rohr, *Daily Meditation for Holy Saturday*,

³² Lane, *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes*, 25.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 30.

4. Celebrate our luxurious cultural diversity

The recent document *New Wine and New Wineskins* notes that many religious congregations have passed from almost entirely monocultural contexts to the challenge of multiculturalism. Donald S. McGavran speaks about “luxurious human diversity” and Sr. Marie Chin RSM has referred to “the labyrinth of cultures in religious life.”³⁵ How then to exercise leadership amid this growing diversity both globally and locally? We need to ask ourselves a bigger question “How can we as religious congregations, as institutions with a purpose, a charism, bring a positive contribution to the challenge of global intercultural living? How can we as leaders serve this larger purpose?” The question certainly has its relevance in a world impacted by globalization. Now is perhaps the time for religious congregations to demonstrate a new way of relating with the “other” in our communities, that embodies a hopeful perspective for future life in the world. We know that the only way forward for humanity is to transform the planet into a more open and inclusive place, based on the values of solidarity, justice and dialogue. The Spanish theologian José Cristo Rey García Paredes writes that: *Our identity is planetary and global. We are citizens of the world... How are we to transform (this) vision into some deep and fundamental convictions, assumed by each and every one of the members who share the mission?*

Our communities and congregations are nodal points of a much larger canvas of cultural, historical, and economical dynamics. What happens in one part of the world, or in one congregation or in one part of the congregation, reflects the whole and speaks on behalf of the whole. With that global perspective we begin to realise that the “luxurious diversity” within religious life and our connectivity across the world can make a significant impact. The networks and inter-congregational projects that are emerging today speak prophetically of the oneness of humankind. Many times, in South Sudan the local people - though very grateful for the many ways in which their needs were being met – repeatedly ask the religious living among them “how do you from so many different tribes live together?” This is why it is important to work together and with others in order to learn how to live interculturally, to confronting prejudice and racism and our ethnocentric attitudes and behaviours. We have begun this journey within some of our congregations but it is one that we must continue and deepen. Perhaps we could partner or twin with a congregation in another part of the world in order to embrace this

³⁵ Marie Chin RSM, “Towards a New Understanding of Cultural Encounter in Our Communities” in *Horizon*, Winter 2003, 16.

challenge? **Can we ask ourselves where are we on this inter-cultural journey within our congregations, within society?**

5. Engage in web-watching and web-weaving

The Mennonite theologian and peace activist John Paul Lederach has much to teach us about processes of leadership in today's world. He uses the term "moral imagination" to describe something "which calls people beyond things that are immediately apparent and visible."³⁶ He describes moral imagination as "the capacity to give birth to something new."³⁷ A person with moral imagination seeks to uncover possibilities not yet dreamed of. Reflecting on his work as a peace-maker, Lederach realized that the use of a "web approach" enabled the process of change in many difficult contexts. The lines, connections and knots which we see in a web provide insight into what Lederach calls "a relationship-centric approach."³⁸ The art of web-weaving means that we should look at relationships through "the lenses of social crossroads, connections and interdependence."³⁹ Webs of relationships create the social energy necessary to provide new purpose and direction. Leaders Lederach says, need to learn the skills necessary for web-watching and web-weaving. They need to be able to identify social crossroads where connecting links can be established with others in order to strengthen society's sense of interdependence. At LCWR you have certainly being doing this.

Lederach presents a number of important concepts which can help us be part of leadership at a global level. He speaks about weaving webs, noticing turning points, being yeast and establishing platforms. These concepts have a Scriptural resonance. **Turning points** are those moments of conversion that turn people in another direction. They are moments, pregnant with new life which often arise from barren ground. Here "new things come into existence, old things are reshaped and our ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, thinking and so forth are transformed."⁴⁰ For Lederach, yeast, is usually a small group of people who are in the right place at the right time. They create a pull in an organization or in a society. They are willing to

³⁶ John Paul Lederach, *Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

³⁷ Lederach, *The Moral Imagination*, 27.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 77.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁴⁰ Mark Johnson, *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 212.

risk; to step out and venture into unknown territory “without any guarantee of success or even safety.”⁴¹ Lederach sees risk as a vocation that involves a mysterious journey that allows imagination to rise up and “carry people towards a new, though mysterious and often unexpected shore.”⁴² It means being able to embrace vulnerability and fear. Finally, for Lederach, platforms are relational places which keep groups of people in creative interaction.

In many emerging global religious life initiatives, we can see these elements at work. I’m thinking in particular of the Solidarity with South Sudan project which emerged at the end of decades of civil war because a small group of people wove a web of local, international, inter-agency and inter-faith relationships. Many of your congregations are part of this initiative and indeed played a very significant role in enabling this project. A second example, are the training programmes currently being offered to sisters, priests and brothers who accompany the victims of sexual violence in conflict situations in Central Africa. These programmes link religious with governmental personnel, local and international NGOs and trauma and healing experts. The religious who have been trained are now a source of hope and healing for many in their countries. In addition, they have formed other networks and so are creating new webs of support within their countries. Another example are the 42 anti-trafficking networks led by women religious worldwide including the new network that was established by Talitha Kum in June involving an inter-faith group of women in Lebanon and Syria which includes Catholic sisters and women from 5 other faith traditions. And finally the “Laudato Si” UISG initiative is inviting religious congregations worldwide to join the Catholic Global Climate Movement and make “Laudato Si” known and lived at local levels.

I believe that now is the time for us as religious individually and as congregations to join webs and platforms including those created by others. We can focus on issues which resonate with our respective charisms and bring a faith perspective to these relationships. Together we speak about our concerns to Church leaders and leaders at national and global levels. We make the voice and perspective of women religious heard. Perhaps this is a contemporary way of expressing the parable of the Vine and the Branches. We can be part of “yeast” groups that aim to make a change. Think of the young Swedish student Greta Thunberg who called on students worldwide “to strike for climate” or Malala Yousafzai who campaigns for girls’ education

⁴¹ Ibid., 39.

⁴² Ibid.

worldwide. We can engage in web weaving when we connect with others near and far – through webs of prayer and action. **Can we encourage our members to seek out these generative possibilities? What networks does your congregation belong to or has helped to create? As web-watchers what initiatives should we join or strengthen as congregations? As LCWR? Finally, we need to.....**

6. Listen for the Long Note

In conclusion as leaders we have to listen to the long note. A few summers ago, I participated in a seminar on Creative Leadership in the Burren School of Art in the West of Ireland. The Burren itself is an extraordinary geographical landscape. One of the important karst/limestone regions in the world, there is a certain mystical quality about the place. We were a very varied group of people from different walks of life and from all over the world. We had many good conversations about leadership. At the end of each session, a poet, or a musician or an artist responded capturing the essence of each conversation with a poem, a symbol or a musical response..... because the leader is truly an artist. At the end of one session Martin Hayes, a traditional Irish fiddle player played a piece which ended with a long-extended note. I realized that as leaders, we have to learn to hear and identify these long notes which play out in daily life and which point us to what is happening at a deeper level, calling us to discern how to respond.

St. Ignatius of Loyola asks us to imagine the Trinity looking down on the world and to place ourselves there contemplating the complicated messiness of unredeemed humankind. We can almost hear the Trinity saying “let us work at the transformation of the whole human race; let us respond to the groaning of all creation.”⁴³ The meditation invites us “to descend into the reality of the world and become involved in it, in order to transform it.”⁴⁴ Asking ourselves “How can we be part of the divine plan for the *Missio Dei*, for the redemption of the world? Who are we called to be as women religious, as congregations and as individuals?” Going deeper touches the mystical-prophetic depths of our lives from which all our action flows. The answers lie in being open to engaging in simple acts of encounter and communion with those who are near and those who are far away. We can do this in any place, at any time and at any

⁴³ Fr. Daniel Ruff, SJ, Bulletin of Old St. Joseph’s Church in Philadelphia, Advent 2008.

⁴⁴ Josep M. Lozano, “Leadership: The Being Component” in J. Business Ethics, Published online 23 March 2016,

age. Encountering the other and being in communion with others is at the heart of our leadership as we call ourselves first, then members of our congregations and others to: **Widen the tent of our hearts; Be present at the borderlands; Embrace vulnerability; Celebrate our luxurious cultural diversity; Engage in web-watching and web-weaving and finally Listen to the long notes**

Encounter calls for a profound openness to God's mission in the world. Our faith is "firstly an encounter with Jesus, and then we must do what Jesus does: encounter others."⁴⁵ Living the *mysticism of encounter* calls for "the ability to hear, to listen to other people; the ability to seek ways and means"⁴⁶ of building the Reign of God together. Across the world we sisters as a community of missionary disciples seek to move forward, boldly taking the initiative, going out to others, searching for those who have fallen away, standing at the crossroads and welcoming the outcast.⁴⁷ We are called above all to be a contemplative presence in the world, discerning how to respond to changing landscapes; telling one another what is happening wherever we find ourselves, how we feel called to respond and inviting support from one another.

We need to have these global conversations. We have the communication tools to connect with one another worldwide. Recently at UISG we united sisters worldwide with the sisters in Washington who engaged in an act of civil disobedience to bring attention to the inhumane conditions, especially for children, in migrant detention centres. We could affirm and support the recent letter sent by 62 enclosed communities of Carmelite and Poor Clare sisters to the President and Prime Minister of Italy deploring the treatment of migrants. We know that the presence of God is all around us and that we are connected to each other through ties both visible and invisible. We are being invited "to walk the journey of our lives tenderly holding each other's hands (together with the hands of the least of our sisters and brothers) knowing all the while that it is Christ who is our veiled and shining companion."⁴⁸ Living in Rome gives me a window seat at the life and times of Pope Francis. His is a leadership of global transformation. He shows us⁴⁹ how to blend our personal journey through life in this world with the

⁴⁵ Pope Francis, Vigil of Pentecost with Ecclesial Movements, 18 May 2013.

⁴⁶ Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter on the Occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life, #3.

⁴⁷ EG, #24.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Chris Lowney, Pope Francis: Why He Leads The Way He Leads – Lessons from the First Jesuit Pope (Loyola Press: Chicago 2018).

simultaneous journey of humanity moving towards God. He holds in balance many of the elements presented this morning. He witnesses how the leader must be immersed in the world with eyes open to its joys and sufferings, with a heart broken from sharing the everyday struggle of the people, while at the same time withdrawing to contemplate the face of Jesus. Pope Francis knows himself deeply, acknowledges his vulnerability as a person, as “called but flawed” constantly asking for the support of our prayers. This support enables him to transcend his limitations in service of others with tenderness and mercy. Finally, he demonstrated that leadership involves a creative interplay between past, present and future where “the memory of our roots” gives us “courage in the face of the unknown”⁵⁰- a courage that understands fidelity as “a change, a blossoming and a growth.”⁵¹ Ultimately, as leaders you and I are being called to lead “communities of change..... faithful to the ongoing and unending quest for God in this changing place and time.”⁵²

The journey continues but we know that God’s grace accompanies us.

⁵⁰ Pope Francis quoted in Robert Moynihan, *Pray for Me: The Life and Spiritual Vision of Pope Francis: First Pope from the Americas* (Image Press: New York, 2013), 209.

⁵¹ Sam Sawyer, *Jesuit Post*, 2013.

⁵² Joan Chittister, OSB, *What Are You Looking For: Seeking the God Who is Seeking You* (Paulist Press, New Jersey, 2019), 11.