

A Vision for the Future of Religious Life

Called to Restore!

Sowers of Prophetic Hope, here we are! I am grateful for the invitation to be here today, to the UISG President Sr. Carmen Sammut, MSOLA, and the UISG board, and to Sr. Patricia Murray, IBVM, thank you for your trust. As we begin our assembly today, I know hope is in this room simply because we are gathered.

I prayed, struggled, and consulted about this reflection, wondering what gives me hope? What is hope? How do we hope together as women religious? How do we hope in the vision of the emerging future? A few stories came to mind, over and over again, little stories, local stories, simple stories. Pondering them, in my different moments of despair, I began to find hope, and perhaps I am beginning to understand how the vision of the future of our life unfolds around us gently, softly, like my little stories.

The first happened after hurricane Maria had devastated my beloved island of Puerto Rico. My Boricua friends desperately writing on *Facebook* and *Twitter* trying to communicate with loved ones, “*does anyone know if...*”, “*can you communicate.*” During the terrible weeks that ensued, I happened on a story about an organization that was working to restore the magnificent coral reef destroyed by the winds — volunteer divers carrying little buckets, restoring one coral at a time. My first reaction was a cynical smile, how ridiculous and futile. I just wanted to cry because that beautiful Puerto Rican rainforest and its breathtaking coral reef were gone, and here are these fools; what could they ever achieve?! And, suddenly, gently, I felt it—the hope, the call: simple efforts, the seed of hope. They were restoring the dignity of creation, one coral at a time!

My next story happened during a trip to the Mexico-United States Border with all the

sisters from our religious leadership conference’s region in Texas. We visited with the agencies and organizations that have been working to welcome the men, women, and children seeking hospitality in our country. Sister Norma Pimentel, director of Catholic Charities for the Rio Grande Valley, shared her story with our group. When the first wave of unaccompanied minors reached the border, she hustled to create a welcome center in a parish. Calls for help went out, volunteers and donations started coming in. Everyone was busy when the local authorities came and asked Sr Norma, “*what is going on here?*” She replied: “*I am restoring human dignity.*” The men left and returned with more volunteers and donations. Again, as I heard Sr. Norma, I thought, thousands of people, thousands of children, overwhelming numbers. How on earth are we going to welcome them all? And, again, simple hospitality, another seed of hope. At the Mexico-U.S. border, they are restoring human dignity, one person at a time!

My third story comes from Colombia. Visiting Cali, I heard about the long and painful peace process after the cartels, the military, and hired paramilitary had left cities and families scourged by their bloody and violent confrontations. A group of women has been breeding butterflies to work for peace in an organization called *Alas Nuevas*. They gave me a beautiful butterfly, and as I looked at it, I wondered, how can breeding butterflies make a difference in such a traumatized place? And again, gently, simply, hope came upon me. They are restoring peace, one butterfly at a time!

We need to hope as they do, standing firmly and humbly in this painful and overwhelming present reality that is ours, with bare feet. This time that has normalized crisis is our holy ground. Among all the

different crises we are called to live and hope in, the one close to our hearts must be named from the start of this conference: the crisis in our Church. History will judge how we responded to this crisis. One day, women religious will be either accomplices, or prophets, or victims. We simply cannot sit this one out on the sidelines, even when we are being sidelined!

Here we are called to hope in the vision of God for the future. We need to go through this time together, religious women called to communion, called to the discipleship of Jesus, called to be sacraments of the presence of God in our world, consecrated women. We can only hope as religious; we hope because we are religious.

Sisters, we are gathered here to share our stories. What stories can we tell one another about receiving the gift of hope? For hope is a gift given gently, simply, in the midst of despair. A gift we must notice, receive and make real for each other in the sharing. Our gift of hope will overcome fear. We must tell these stories of the simple, quiet, gentle prophecy of compassion that restores, that tells the surprising truth of what God is already doing among us!

I suggest with this reflection that the prophecy of compassion will get us to hope provided we hold a VISION, foster our MEMORY, cultivate our NOTICING, and dare to LEAD.

VISION: To See with Prophetic Hope

Our Assembly calls us to be “*Sowers of Prophetic Hope*” This week we need to reflect with each other, how do we hope as women of the Church? We know “*hope is the gift of communion*,” as I reminded our conference in the United States last year. Hope is the result of the encounter of community. Gustavo Gutierrez writes that “Hope is a gift, a grace, and when we receive a gift, it is not for us; it is for our neighbour.” With faith we must seek the vision of hope found in Jeremiah: God promises a “future with hope” if we seek with all our heart (Jr, 29:11-13, NRSV). LCWR, our conference in the United States, has learned that this vision

of the heart can only be found by tapping the spiritual wisdom of our life in contemplation, engaging in communal discernment. Women religious must be women of vision: seers of hope.

This vision of hope for our challenged and suffering present and for a future filled with life requires that we enter deeply into the mystery of our consecrated life. We hold a public commitment to discipleship in communion, as stated in *Vita Consecrata*: “The fraternal life, understood as a life shared in love, is an eloquent sign of ecclesial communion.”¹ Our exodus journey of renewal that began with *Vatican II* has been a beautiful gift with unyielding challenges; questions about style, ministry, and orthodoxy have fascinated and haunted us. The Plenary Session on the occasion of the 50 years since *Perfectae Caritatis*, held by Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, recognized that:

Even after the wide-ranging and rich process of adaptation and renewal [*accomodata renovatio*] which took place after the Council, the consecrated life may still find itself presented with open challenges that must be faced “with determination and an eye to the future.”²

“*Who are we? Where are we going?*”— are unyielding questions that have divided and haunted us. The renewal debate needs to be left to rest for the sake of the vision of the Reign of God we were called to witness, the people of our time are desperate for hope.

The vision of hope in the promises of Christ requires living into our principles not answers. We are required to live with a nobility of spirit, into the grace and mystery of our consecration. The time for major “undertakings” or apostolic works is over, remembering Sr. Marian Ambrosio’s

¹ *Vita Consecrata*, No. 42.

² Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *New Wine in New Wineskins: The Consecrated Life and its Ongoing Challenges since Vatican II*, Guidelines, 2018, introduction.

beautiful loom - three years ago in this very room—" we are to live into the 'power of the how.'"³ We will journey to the promise of hope by remaining steadfast in our identity. We need to be women of character and virtue now more than ever. To find hope we need to be prophetic, and to be prophetic, our lives need to witness to what we believe and who we are. The way to hope is through prophecy. How do we prophesy as women religious?

The time for words is over, so forgive the ones I am using here! We need a new way of witnessing that will manifest our values, that will be more intelligible and accessible for our time. Gospel news needs to be told in art, symbol and gesture. These are times to share the kind of deep meaning that cannot be found in words. A friend reminded me that the crisis around the world could not be reasoned or problem solved. We need to give our rational minds a sabbatical so that the creative, non-linear, subconscious can help us navigate through story, poetry, art, symbol, and gesture. We have a new apostolic call to offer meaning to a suffering world, with the non-verbal language that our consecrated life can speak with such beauty. We need to offer a prophecy the world can see.

The vision for this kind of prophecy will emerge from the narrative of hope embedded deep in the soul of our charisms. We are a people with a vision, a vision of the love and compassion of God for all creation. Women religious, as we are, young and old, many and sparse, must witness to compassion, like the people in my little stories. Our prophetic vision is in our hearts, hands, and feet. The places we walk, the people we touch, the way we accompany, the prayers we pray, tell the story of compassion embedded in the hope for the Reign of God, where Jesus calls us to follow. We witness restoring dignity to all human beings, to our planet, one simple,

³ Márian Ambrosio, IDP, "Weaving Solidarity for Life-Living and Witnessing as Women Religious of Apostolic Life". "Tejiendo una Solidaridad para la Vida - Para vivir y dar testimonio como religiosas de vida apostólica," UISG Plenary Assembly 2016.

loving spiritual act of compassion at a time. Jose Antonio Pagola writes that "for Jesus, compassion is not just one more virtue, but rather the only way to imitate God, the only way to see the world, to treat people and to react to human beings in a manner most like God's."⁴ Our way to prophecy is through compassion. Compassion all can see, not read or hear, but simply see. We need not do anything more, or anything less.

Prophecy and hope dance in the endless cycle compassion weaves into the future promised by God. Our small simple acts of compassion offer this vision of creation to every single human being as prophecy because we believe!

MEMORY: To Trust our Prophetic Call

The future of religious life is embedded in our memory! For too long we have been obsessed with the future. I cannot even count how many books I have read about the future of religious life, and I can read only in two languages! We have been asking about the future far too long. And yes, we have been worried about the future; in fact, we have been downright afraid of the future. Something went amiss after the fervor that followed the Vatican Council; this was not supposed to happen. Our respective responses, enthusiastic or not, were expected to bring about a new heaven and a new earth!⁵ We have played numbers games with statistics and projections. Our questions about size betray our insecurities, our fear of the future: "*we have more, you have less,*" "*how many novices,*" "*how many ministries*". We have played this game

⁴ Jose Antonio Pagola, *Recuperar el Proyecto de Jesús*, PPC, 2015, Kindle, Loc. 823. Translation Mine.

⁵ Simon Pedro Arnold has spoken of this in Latin America, during the 80s he says "We assisted to what could be called the loss of illusions. Far from embracing the libertarian proposals, the poor accommodated and adapted to the "pots from Egypt," preferring the security of neoliberal slavery to the unconverted hypothetical freedom," *¿A dónde vamos? Una teología de la vida consagrada para un tiempo de crisis y esperanza*, Paulinas, 2012, p. 49. Translation mine.

across institutes, conferences, hemispheres, for so many years, I wonder when we will get off the useless merry-go-round that has exhausted our creative and spiritual energy. We need a collective *examen*, as women religious, but also as a Church, to own the demons that have driven our ridiculous quest for numeric significance. I hope to thank Pope Francis one day for saying that our “founders and foundresses never thought they'd be a multitude”⁶ All the time we have spent on numbers reminds me of the mirror in the *Snow White* narrative, “*mirror, mirror on the wall who is the fairest one of them all.*” Pride is unbecoming to our life, but it has been so tempting, so shiny!

I offer a different lens instead: The quest for the future must begin by remembering. To understand the future, we need to take time to remember. “Remember” in Spanish comes from *re-cordis*, to run through the heart once more. We need to “*re-cordar.*” Memory is the sacrament of presence. As leaders, we must call our sisters to sacred memory and dialogue with our cloud of witnesses to believe in our future. We need to enter into the mystery of our memory, sometimes selective, sometimes painful, sometimes hidden. We need to tell and retell the stories that made us: our pioneer stories, our founding stories, our stories of renewal and conflict; we will find the seeds of hope we need to sow there. How do we remember as a community?

A historian friend of mine warned me about our utilitarian use of history. We tell stories not to find the way, not because we need to solve a problem; not as a nostalgic view of what is gone; we tell stories to know who we are! She pointed me to Umberto Eco's reflection about the forest. In a short essay, he wrote that there are two ways to enter the narrative forest:

The first is to try one of several routes (so as to get out of the woods as fast as possible,

say, or to reach the house of grandmother, Tom Thumb, or Hansel and Gretel); the second is to walk so as to discover what the woods are like and find out why some paths are accessible and others are not.... We enter stories in much the same way; the first kind of reader enters the text seeking to know “how the story ends”... so it is usually enough to read it once. In contrast, to identify the model author, the text needs to be read many times, and certain stories endlessly.⁷

Our most sacred responsibility as leaders of religious institutes lies in symbol and meaning-making. We need to be artisan storytellers so we remember who we are.

When Sister Veronica Openibo, leader of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, addressed the Vatican Summit on abuse, again I was filled with hope. We all stood with her as she witnessed for women the world over. Last month I was in Rome, and thought of her as I stood before every statue of a woman I could find in St. Peter's Basilica after the celebration of the Eucharist. Wandering from one pillar to the next, I prayed to each of them, and asked what witness got you to this place? How did you hope? And, what will we discover about ourselves in dialogue with your stories?

Listening to Sister Veronica, and reflecting on the history of our Church women, I realized why memory is critical at this time. The story of Sr Juana Ines de la Cruz, a seventeenth-century Mexican nun, living in a cloistered convent of the Spanish Colonial period came immediately to mind. Challenged by the Archbishop of Puebla about women and learning, she wrote a defense known as the *Letter to Sister Filotea de la Cruz*. What she did was to remember the story of all the women who had come before her!⁸ Like other learned women of the

⁶ Cindy Wooden, “Spread hope, preach Christ, don't worry about numbers pope says”, CNS, 2017, <<http://www.catholicnews.com/services/englishnews/2017/spread-hope-preach-christ-dont-worry-about-numbers-pope-says.cfm>>.

⁷ Umberto Eco, “the Woods of Loisy”, in *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*, Harvard, 1994.

⁸ Sor Juana Ines writes in defense of her writing by remembering all the learned women from antiquity and then the Christian tradition, *Respuesta a la Carta de Sor Filotea de la Cruz*, 1691. The University of Georgia has her works on line at:

Church, she found the strength to resist in her stories. Their power allowed her to acknowledge the gifts that God had given her, and to this day her poetry and learning challenges and mystifies historians and critics.

While in Rome, I made a pilgrimage to the tomb of one of those women, St. Catherine of Siena, to pray for guidance, to remember this moment in our Church is not unique, that hundreds of years later, the questions about the role of women in the Church continue to claim our attention. We need to bring forward the names of the resilient women who came before us, just like Sor Juana did. We need to remember them, to make them present to the current situation in the Church, not because we want a place at the table of clericalism, but because we are called to make the Church whole! The litany of the women of the Church that have challenged us and called us forth must be prayed in our institutes. The sacrament of memory will make them a real presence in our world today.

I invite you to consider the women of your traditions we need to invoke at a time such as this. Who are the women in every continent, in your institute, whom you remember, whose names need to be recited and invoked at this time?

But we also need to remember the women who have been resilient in the face of terrible odds, women of the margins, indigenous women, enslaved women, abused women. We must honour their names as well. The images that emerged around the world from the most recent *Women's Day* come to mind.⁹ All of them echo the words of Sojourner Truth, the nineteenth century African American abolitionist who fought against slavery in the United States and challenged white women by saying: “*Ain't I a*

woman.”¹⁰ Women the world over are showing this resiliency; they continue to be pillars in the face of incredible adversity and suffering. We need to remember that women everywhere of every culture and faith, in every hemisphere, stand again and again as prophets of compassion. Their story is also our story!

So much has happened since the last UISG meeting. The headlines in country after country have claimed our attention and should challenge us. Recovering our memory should also help us with the divisive and myopic concern about feminism that we frequently hear voiced in society and our Church. Perhaps now we need to recover the memory of our feminist legacy. Precisely at this time when all institutions around the globe are challenged to ensure the dignity of human beings is always protected, our feminist legacy has a word of integrity to offer. *We should all be feminists, our brothers, and fathers, and priests should be feminists!* Yes, I said it, religious sisters should all be feminists, Christian feminists, who committed to struggle and resist to ensure that women and men, and children are all treated as human beings. We need the feminism of compassion found in the stories that have inspired our courage as women religious over the centuries. These stories began long ago with Jesus and the women he encountered. Women who teach us to treat women like Jesus did, respectfully, lovingly. Women who, like Jesus, teach us to take counsel from Mary, his mother, advising him at the wedding in Cana. Women who, like Jesus, teach us to find wisdom in women like the Samaritan at the well; Women who, like Jesus, teach us to accept the challenges of the Syrophenician woman; and women who call us to notice suffering like he did when the haemorrhaging woman touched him. Christian feminism calls us to love, trust, and challenge the men who journey with us. Adopting a feminist perspective will actually make us more faithful to God, our church,

<https://www.ensayistas.org/consejo/about.htm>.

⁹ An example is the exhibit “Mujeres que no bajan los brazos: Historias de mujeres resilientes y valientes,” Medicos sin Fronteras,

<https://www.msf.mx/event/esposicion-mujeres-que-no-bajan-los-brazos>

¹⁰ Aint I a Woman, Sojourner Truth, 1851 Women's Convention Akron Ohio.

our communities, and our families.

We need to remember that Christian feminism finds inspiration in the Genesis story, recognizing that half of all those created in the divine image and likeness of God are undervalued in nearly every social, civic, political - and certainly every ecclesial arena. Christian feminism calls us to notice that women bear the effects of poverty, illness, and violence in disproportionate degrees in nearly every country in the world - and we need to change that reality. We need to embrace the cause of women because we are women religious and this is like Johann Metz said, our “dangerous memory.”¹¹

As women religious, we need to join women around the world in their effort to humanize their lives. I bring to mind the images of women dancing to resist violence, the *One Billion Rising Revolution*,¹² Have we danced with them? Women need us as we are, fewer and older, but present. Memory will remind us, that their cause has been our cause: standing with women who are vulnerable to violence and marginalization is our story. We cannot be absent from the forums where women are in conversation about bringing about the humanization of all peoples, that echoes the touch, friendship and validation of

women by Jesus in the Gospels. We have to share with them the stories of our women, our sisters, who fought in the face of adversity as prophets of compassion. We need to return to our storytelling of the women of faith, the women of wisdom, the women of spirit, on whose shoulders we stand. We need to tell the stories of courage of the women in our institutes who journey with other women creating and sowing hope simply, hopefully, and respectfully. Sister Andrea Lee, IHM, President of Alverno College, recently spoke about these women saying:

We respect each other, enjoy each other and support each other, right until the moment we yield each sister to the welcoming arms of the Lord at the moment of her death. It is that good and that powerful. That very evident strength and what it is capable of accomplishing is part of what drew me to religious life. Watching women teach each other; wanting them to teach me. Seeing joy, goodness, intelligence and commitment coalesce. Slowly coming to see that the power, the boldness we could have together, is power and boldness none of us would have alone. Embarking on a lifelong adventure with like-minded women. Good and wise women taught me that. And that is part of how I came to be where I am today.¹³

Sister Andrea did not say this, but I will: I am sure they were all Christian feminists, like we should be!

Memory will bring out so many stories: the women of the Bible, of our Church, of our institutes, of our time, will speak to us of faith and courage, and resiliency. The call to remember lies beyond the careful narrative of complementarity or even collaboration, this is about the mission of humanization. We need to join our hands, our voices, and our prayer to every cause that restores human dignity because we remember who we are.

¹¹ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We Should All be Feminists*, Vintage Books, 2014. She says in the book published from her TED talk: “Gender as it functions today is a grave injustice. I am angry. We should all be angry. Anger has a long history of bringing about positive change. In addition to anger, I am also hopeful, because I believe deeply in the ability of human beings to remake themselves for the better.” P. 21.

¹² “One Billion Rising is the biggest mass action to end violence against women (cisgender, transgender, and those who hold fluid identities that are subject to gender-based violence) in human history. The campaign, which launched on Valentine’s Day 2012, began as a call to action based on the staggering statistic that 1 in 3 women on the planet will be beaten or raped during her lifetime. With the world population at 7 billion, this adds up to more than One Billion Women and Girls.” <https://www.onebillionrising.org/about/campaign/one-billion-rising/>.

¹³ Andrea Lee, IHM, “Profundo Encuentro: An Adventure of Many Surprises”, National Catholic Sisters Week, March 10. 2019.

As leaders, for example, we should be champions of the *Talita Kum* networks in our countries. But humanization also needs to happen within our institutes. We need to honestly share our stories of complicity and silence, because we have them. We need to lead into transparency and accountability in every area of our institute's life. We need to tell our ongoing story of struggle and courage to build up the Reign of God in the midst of our own Church.

Our memory will inspire our courage. Religious women bear a responsibility for the integrity of human life in their DNA. The time for standing as women with other women is now. The time for standing at the foot of the cross of suffering of so many is now, like the women that have come before us. Otherwise, the compassionate humanization that Jesus called us to witness might be lost on a new generation of women who need to know why we remain self-respecting women who are Catholic.

NOTICING: To live our moment fully

We have been called to lead during a time of profound transformation. I do not need to say this to you as leaders of your institutes. Is this transformation more significant or less than others? Historians will remind us that it is not, but this is the one we get to live through! Whether it is the most significant or not matters little. Change is everywhere — big, massive, challenging, often scary. Borders are changing, maps are changing, the world is “moving,” massive migrations of people, ideas and goods are now possible like never before. Even climate and our understanding of gender are changing. And, the Church which I confess I thought would take another century to ask itself some critical questions, is now asking them! Could it be that our Church is also on the brink of change? Movement will describe our time. Leading when everything is moving requires a whole new set of skills, leading a religious institute looks different than it did before or after the Council. The global south looks different because it is not the same before as

after colonial rule, or before and after the missionaries left. No matter what focus or angle we use, these are different times!

We need to be horizon watchers! We keep watch for dawn because we believe, because we know the night will end. “However long the night”¹⁴, we persevere because we believe the gift of God, the gift of hope, will be ours. We need to be spiritual sentinels for all humanity. On the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated life offered us the document “*Scrutate*”, *Keep Watch!*, calling us: “To search the horizons of our life and our times, in watchful prayer; to peer into the night in order to recognize the fire that illuminates and guides, to gaze into the heavens, looking for the heralds of blessing for our dryness. To keep awake and watch, and to make intercession, firm in our faith.”¹⁵

To respond to our call to prophesy so we can journey into hope, we must lean into our contemplative identity; we must notice everything! Noticing contemplatively is a new asceticism; noticing with prophetic hope requires a long loving look that holds everything before it, no matter how strange, painful or different. We need to be the advance of the *Iglesia en Salida*, the Church that goes forth, because of who we are. The future of our life as religious will be intimately related to our courage to enter into a spirituality of noticing how God's spirit is stirring new insights and hope around us.

¹⁴ LCWR published a book sharing the experience of the conference during the Vatican Investigation, the sisters wrote they learned that: “That the Spirit works in and through groups, not solely through individuals. That contemplation is a powerful gift from God. That God loves not only us, but also those in conflict with us, equally and extravagantly. However long the night, we were made for these times.” *However Long the Night: Making Meaning in a Time of Crisis*, LCWR, 2018, p.10.

¹⁵ *Keep Watch!*, Congregation of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 2014, No. 1.

We need to start by noticing the shifts that are taking place in religious life, overcoming the usual temptations of leadership. The temptation to stay busy with minor tasks that are important but not critical. The temptation to nostalgia, to keep rewinding the videos, when we *used to*, when we *had*, or *were*, or *did*; obsessed with declining numbers and aging, only focused on what is dying. The temptation of our good works! We have done amazing work for our church and the countries we serve: built and staffed healthcare ministries big and small, taught generations of children, but maintaining the “ministries,” however important, can also keep us from noticing the amazing movements taking place before us. The temptations make us short-sighted; they blur the capacity to notice the new.

Overcoming the core temptations of leadership, we might then begin to notice joyfully what is emerging around us — the “shift” of energy for religious life from the global north to the global south. The fourth wave of religious migration currently underway differs from the sixteenth and nineteenth-century missionary migrations, because it is flowing in the opposite direction, or could it be in the right direction today!¹⁶ The entire center of gravity of the Church is moving south, and our noticing is “colored” by our prejudice. How many more times do I have to hear about women seeking entrance to our congregations from countries in the global south that: “*they only want a visa, or an education, or a comfortable life*”? How many times will I hear that “*celibacy is a challenge in their culture*” but clearly not ours?

We also need to notice how we notice!

We need to be asking the right questions, not because we will find the answers but because

questions will guide our noticing. Where is the need? What is ours to do? Who are we today? Who are we globally? How are we globally? Where are we being invited to collaborate, network, build bridges within and across religious life?

A spirituality of noticing will move us to the small meaningful acts of compassion that restore hope. Then we will join the restorers around us, restoring creation, human dignity and peace, one little step at a time!

SOW: To Own our Call as Leaders

The seeds of prophetic hope need to be planted, watered, and tended. This work requires leadership. As UISG convenes the leadership of women religious institutes from the whole world, here we are, the supreme moderators, the general superiors, the leaders of our communities. What is ours to do so we can continue that journey to hope? We have a legacy of leadership. Sisters have been in leadership roles for centuries in institutions, ministries and pastoral work long before women could vote, register in a university, or even own property. This is our legacy; our story is proof that women can lead even in the Church! And when they do, they weave solidarity and sow hope!

We sow hope by doing what is ours to do as leaders elected by our institutes. We are women in the service of leadership, called by our sisters to serve our charism. We need to own this leadership with integrity together with our councils. We lead into a vision of hope by convening, advocating, calling forth, inviting, gathering, inviting to see the whole! We need to dare to lead, as Brené Brown defines a leader as “anyone who takes responsibility for finding the potential in people and processes, and who has the courage to develop that potential.”¹⁷ Our sisters have called us to lead, someone else can plan a funeral or rearrange the furniture

¹⁶ See Mary Johnson's et al new book, *Migration for Mission: International Catholic Sisters in the United States*, Oxford, 2019.

¹⁷ Brené Brown, *Dare to Lead, Brave Work, Tough Conversations*, Whole Hearts, Random House, 2018, p.4.

in the motherhouse. Of course, we call forth the gifts of others; we take counsel; we delegate, and we must lead into community. Leadership in our religious institutes must foster, care, nurture, and create the sacred space that will ensure community, collegiality, and collaboration. The future of hope promised in Isaiah is embedded in communion. Hope is the gift of communion!

To sow hope, we need to lead our way out of our version of clericalism. We need to do our work, name it, call it and confess it. We need to work hard to expel the demons around the service of authority, by exercising the kind of prophetic leadership that will sow hope. We must both recognize the authoritarianism and also call out the rogue individualism that breeds around it. The conference celebrating 50 years since *Perfectae Caritatis*, had some serious admonitions about the abuse of authority in our institutes.¹⁸ An honest examination of conscience will identify the shadow side of our exercise of authority found: in all our institutes. While respectful of culture, we should never use it to justify abuse of authority, favoritism, or even the “new tribalism” that is emerging among us, where belonging requires ideological alignment and which is prone to condemnation of the other and polarization. Our turn to lead is now, we are called as custodians of the body which is the congregation. I pray that when it is our turn to hand on the leadership of our respective institutes, we will do so with a healthier understanding of the vulnerability of its power and authority.

We can offer something from our collective wisdom, our years of discussion, our special chapters, our efforts to make the renewal called for by the Vatican Council real and tangible. Our institutes have been slowly, painfully, sometimes even comically moving

from vertical models for authority to horizontal, even circular models. We need to lead this shift- to sow hope! Respectful of legitimate authority, we have learned to share our gifts. But none of this can happen if we do not assume the responsibility given to us by our institute, if we are not the ultimate “moderators” of our community.

We are leading a life in motion! We cannot afford the time to dock our respective fleets; instead, we need to sail, and repair as we go. We need to lead into a “both-and” where we continue to encourage the transformation and yet offer our sisters sufficient structural certainty that will hold the movement. Vicki Wuolle, CSA images this by saying: “I often refer to the experience as building the ship while we sail, which is an image that helps us in holding the balance between having enough structure in place to offer support to the mission we serve, while also being fluid enough to allow ourselves to be shaped by the reality.”¹⁹ We need to lead beyond the hierarchical model, where we are still the “reverend mother” surrounded by “obedient daughters”- beyond the “tyranny of consensus”²⁰ where because sometimes when there is a leader in every chair, there is no leader! Hope will not thrive in communities with absolute leaders or in leaderless communities. We need to lead into a new way of exercising authority, not by shying away from it, not by hiding behind the flower arrangements for the next feast, but by daring to be real, daring to lead from our vulnerability. We need to be real and honest about ourselves in leadership, the days we wonder why, the days we cannot see the way forward, the overwhelming and grief filled days.

We need to lead into collegiality, collaboration, and networking like never before! The model of solidarity that UISG

¹⁸ *New Wine in New Wineskins: The Consecrated Life and its Ongoing Challenges Since Vatican II*, Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 2018, see numbers 19-28.

¹⁹ Vicki Wuolle, CSA, “Leading: Com (with) passion(suffering),” *LCWR Occasional Papers*, Winder 2019, p. 25.

²⁰ Marissa Guerin, “Resisting the Tyranny of Inclusion in Organizations”, Blog April 12, 2018, <https://www.guerinconsulting.com/blog/resisting-the-tyranny-of-inclusion>.

represents needs to be owned and cultivated. We have been convened; this assembly is a place of collegiality. I would even dare to say synodality! Both collegiality and collaboration also need leadership. One of the most sacred responsibilities we hold is “connecting/networking” our institutes with other institutes, with our conferences, with religious around the world, with other organizations, and of course with the Church. I pray that when Pat Murray comes to the United States in August, she will challenge us to do just that: weave global solidarity. Leaders have the privilege of seeing the whole; leaders have the privilege of meeting other leaders. Sisters, may this Assembly be more than a photo-op with Pope Francis! May this Assembly motivate us to enter into our role as leaders of collegiality and collaboration.

We lead so we can witness to compassion as a congregational body. We collaborate and network so that this journey of prophetic compassion can lead us to a future filled with hope!

CONCLUSION: Called to Restore Simply, Gently

Movement is all around us. The ground beneath us is shifting. The institutions that have shaped much of our lives are required to enter into a profound examination of conscience. Just beyond the challenges that will transform religious life, just beyond, we will begin to see the dawn. A new smaller, more nimble but global religious life is emerging. Leadership will come from a different hemisphere; new cultures will inspire our charisms. The shift has begun and will probably be complete in our lifetimes, perhaps even during our tenure as leaders. And, all this is happening in the midst of massive changes in our world, our countries, and hopefully also our Church. We know this! Perhaps this is why we came to this Assembly to find inspiration in one another, to encourage and call forth, to know deeply, and profoundly that this moment must be faced in collaboration and collegiality.

Pope Francis offered a TED talk where he said that the future has a name, and the name

of the future is hope!²¹ We need to lead our institutes in this faith because we love our charism, our sisters, and those we serve. We lead because we remember, and we lead to create memory. Can we journey into this new time trusting that the core of our stories will be retold in new and creative ways as the new maps emerge and get redrawn? Can we hope as the center of gravity of religious life shifts to the south making a new future possible, less homogenous, less Euro-centric, more diverse, more colorful, more like God’s creation?

We are called as leaders by our communities to lead at this time of great movement is. Are we ready and willing? Can we be brave enough to retell our stories of compassion and courage? Can we show our sisters how they are and have been the soil from which new life will emerge? I believe that when we trust our own stories, when we trust our voice as women, when we stand in our faith in the gift of hope— we will join all those quiet men and women who are gently, simply, lovingly restoring creation, restoring peace and restoring human dignity.

We too will breed beautiful, small and frail butterflies!

(Ref: UISG, Number 169, 2019, pp.14 -24)

²¹ Pope Francis, “Why the only future worth building includes everyone”, 2017, https://www.ted.com/talks/his_holiness_pope_francois_why_the_only_future_worth_building_includes_everyone/transcript?language=en .