

LCWR Outstanding Leadership Award 2017

How can I thank you adequately for honoring me? I deeply appreciate your warm welcome and your many personal expressions of appreciation. From the moment Sr. Joan Marie Steadman called and asked me if I would accept LCWR's award, I have remained awed and somewhat embarrassed by your trust. Great women religious, giants, have received this award in the past: Mary Luke Tobin, Mary Daniel Turner, Margaret Brennan, and other outstanding leaders in the American Church. Beside them I feel very small. With some of them I have been privileged to walk closely this long journey of religious life since Vatican II. I know the courage, the spiritual depth, the self-transcendence, the intelligence, the wisdom, the creativity, the endurance, it took to serve and lead religious women as they did. So many great women come to mind – too many to mention by name. You are among them – great women!

It is very important to me to take this opportunity to bear witness to and to thank a long line of LCWR leadership for the faithful and courageous support, collaboration and friendship they/you have offered to contemplative women over many years. Some contemplative communities, including my own, have been associated with LCWR since its beginnings as CMSW. Full membership was explicitly denied us in a letter to Sr. Mary Luke Tobin in 1967 by the Sacred Congregation for Religious lest we lose "the true meaning of contemplative life" by associating with active sisters. Nevertheless, your leaders took on our interests as their own. They represented our concerns in Rome when we had no voice and when they were admonished for supporting us; they offered their intellectual and material resources, their facilities and their diverse expertise gratis for our renewal processes; Margaret Brennan devoted a large portion of a major address to the Canon Law Society of America to the complicated canonical situation of contemplative nuns. Over 50 years LCWR leaders, you among them, have modeled a reciprocal relationship, a communion, with contemplative nuns that has enriched both ministerial religious life and contemplative religious life.

I believe the award you give me this evening is rooted in this mutuality, interdependence and communion. As a member of the oldest community of religious women in the thirteen original states, I accept your treasured award as a recognition of the value you place on the lives, the spiritual experience and the contribution of the contemplative nuns of this country. My specific role has been to give contemporary voice and interpretation to the Carmelite mystical tradition and the contemplative experience, but I know that my work, and therefore this award, point far beyond me to the spiritual significance in the world today of the dedicated, faithful prayer of contemplative nuns who may never speak publicly. I want this award to be for them and especially for my own community of Baltimore Carmel, in whom I am rooted, and which has been, since Vatican II, a courageous leader in sharing the contemplative tradition and prayer in numerous ways with the wider community.

Relationality, mutuality, interconnectedness, communion, union with God: these are the facets of contemplative prayer that claim my attention now. They coincide, I believe, with the movement within LCWR communities in recent years and your accent on contemplative dialogue and prayer and the theme and direction of this assembly. We have spent many years interpreting the darkness (*impasse, dark night*), analyzing and understanding the transitions, purifications, losses – in our personal lives, in the lives of our communities, and in society, politics, and culture - but now is the time (as you, yourselves have asserted so strongly) to live into and decidedly influence a new evolutionary stage of consciousness: communion.

The Dark Night of contemplative prayer is about being grasped by God, transformed; it's about having the familiar boundaries of our souls stretched and stretched so that we become more and more capable of holding within ourselves the full relational life of Jesus Christ. The conflicts, misunderstandings, losses and dyings, together with our myriad embodied experiences of Christ in prayer and ministry these past years, have all been and continue to be at the service of our becoming Christ, his identity shaping our graced identity, our becoming humanized and divinized by the human and divine Christ, his knowing and loving becoming

ours, our becoming conscious with Christ's very consciousness, his whole relational life becoming ours. This is is breathtaking!

It means being drawn into the mutual dynamic relationships, the communion, that constitute Trinitarian life. The identity of our God/Trinity is communion. Just imagine knowing Abba, the Source of life, as Jesus Christ knows Abba, experiencing being under the sway of the Holy Spirit the way Jesus Christ experiences being with the Spirit's persuasive influence, being united with every human person, every living creature, the earth itself, the cosmos, precisely because we are in Jesus webbed into this Trinitarian dance of life and communion.

The great human beings we today call mystics – Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Ignatius, Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Sienna, and other Trinitarian mystics – witness to and offer us this astounding hope. By deepening and widening the channels of human consciousness, they have carved into evolution a pathway available to us. They offer us a compelling contemporary challenge pointing to a transformed personal and communal relational identity and Christ consciousness characterized by communion and interdependence.

This is obviously not new, but a new ontology with emphasis on the interconnectedness and interdependence of everything in the cosmos is developing among some philosophers and theologians and the Trinity is coming into its own in a fresh and thrilling way due to evolutionary and cosmological developments in science revealing the deep patterns of interconnectedness and relationality in the universe. A new evolutionary direction is being given to humanity that marvelously converges with our faith in a Trinitarian God whose creative life and love underpins and empowers all creation, marking it, directing it, supporting it, with the pattern and movement of its own pure relationality and communion. In this convergence of theology and science, we are being given intimations of the fulfillment, the End, what God is bringing about. We have got to open ourselves to the challenge of living through Jesus Christ into the vibrant life of Trinitarian communion and allow this radiant pattern, this orientation toward relationship, to permeate and transform our consciousness. (There is much writing

being done in theological circles on Trinity and particularly in the area of theology/science. Read as much as you can and let it underpin your prayer.)

The very bleakness, disunity, deceit, cruelty, violence, cowardliness, and lack of compassion in our own country and far beyond demand this of us. The degrading condition of our earth home and the increasing extinction of other species demand this of us. The multitudes of poor, starving, suffering, displaced, migrant, violated, murdered people – women and children - clinging to our souls demand this of us. A massive unconscious resistance to interdependence is at work fighting against the new stage of cosmic consciousness that is struggling to emerge. Certainly, a sign that something – a new epoch - is strengthening on the invisible level of spirit! We don't know how long this emergence will take, nor how far-reaching the opposition, disturbance and turbulence will be, but what vast energy fields of communion and interdependence would be created on this earth, in our cosmos, if our consciousness were more closely aligned with the consciousness of Jesus Christ, if his relational identity were more nearly ours, if we could share more explicitly in the all-embracing, pulsing dynamic of Trinitarian life! This union, this gift, is the goal of contemplative prayer, for which you long, and it isn't only for "eternal life," as you know so well. It is the heart of all engagement. Wherever, whenever, these experiences of deep communion happen, the transformation of humanity and the evolution of human consciousness are more assured.

May we be given the contemplative grace to cut deeper grooves of conscious relationality and communion in the evolutionary path we are treading so that others may follow. May we make our own evolutionary contribution toward laying down permanent capabilities for creative communion and cutting deep cosmic tendencies for transforming love and relationality into the universe. Prophets of communion! This is my dream for us, my sisters. It is your dream as well. It is what is in my heart.

Constance FitzGerald, OCD

August 11, 2017