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Presidential Address: Divinest Sense at the Heart of Religious Life

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Introduction

As I was writing this address, I received a fair amount of advice, both solicited and unsolicited. The advice was not so much about what to say as about how to decide what to say. Boiled down to just a few words, the advice went like this, “Be yourself and speak from your heart.” It was good advice, so I *am* going to speak from my heart, and I’m going to talk about passion which is, after all, located in the heart. I want to begin by sharing with you a particular passion of mine. I love theme parks! I love the crowds, the junk food, the tacky souvenirs, the rides, and most of all I love the roller coasters! I almost never have the chance to indulge this passion of mine, but when I do I enter into it wholly and I enjoy it thoroughly. That’s why I was so excited when I found myself this past June with the rare opportunity to share a day at Universal Studios in Orlando with Sister Teresa Maya, who I have discovered, to my joy, is also a theme park junkie. Though perhaps not quite as much of a roller coaster enthusiast.

When Tere and I walked into Universal Studios that morning in June, the first ride that met our eyes was a big, red, monster of a roller coaster called the Rip Ride Rockit Roller Coaster. This coaster comes out of the shoot and immediately throws riders onto their backs as it climbs straight up at a 90-degree angle, as if crawling up the side of a 12-story building. It crests the top and plunges riders down into a heart-stopping drop. From there it moves into a twisting loop followed by a series of drops, loops, and banks. I looked at the Rip Ride Rockit Roller Coaster and my eyes lit up! Tere’s did not. However, by sheer coincidence it happened to be my birthday, and as a birthday present to me, Tere offered to go with me on this ride.

We got in line and as we moved nearer and nearer to the boarding area I began to hear Tere muttering things like, “This is crazy,” and, “Why am I doing this?” and “People die on these!” I said, “Tere, it’s okay, we don’t have to do this,” but she insisted, “No, it’s your birthday. I want to do this with you.” We reached the front of the line, and as we climbed into our seats and the attendant lowered the shoulder harness, I heard Tere repeating as a sort of mantra, “I hate you. I hate you,” and the ride took off. Well, despite Tere’s assertion that “people die on these,” we both survived; we screamed and laughed our way through it, and we got off grinning like fools, high-fiving each other and saying, “That ride was awesome!”

I begin with this story because as I consider leadership in religious life today, I sometimes feel as if we are all together strapped into one gigantic Rip Ride Rockit Roller Coaster. Our ministry of elected leadership in our congregations can throw us onto our backs, turn us upside down, lead us to scream and to laugh and sometimes to mutter, “This is crazy. Why am I doing this?”

Speaking Divinest Sense in Our World Reality

If the dips and the twists and the turns of the roller coaster we’re on do seem like a bit of insanity, that insanity may be the divinest sense that Emily Dickinson speaks of in her short, eight-line poem, *Much Madness*. (Show slide of poem). The poem begins, “Much madness is

divinest sense to a discerning eye. Much sense, the starkest madness.” Emily Dickinson’s poem speaks to me of the passion that impels us to choose and continue to choose religious life. Don’t we all know that this “madness” we have embraced is, for those called to it, deep down divinest sense? And don’t we all know that much of what is preached and acted upon by those charged with leadership in our world today, and that is accepted by so many as sense, is truly the starkest madness?

I’m going to speak this morning of divinest sense in response to our world and national realities, and then move to divinest sense and the emerging intercultural, intergenerational reality of religious life here in the United States, and finally of divinest sense and our demographic reality. First, our world and national realities.

Over the past few years many of us have watched with increasing anxiety as the madness of nativist populism spreads across our globe. I’m not speaking here of “populism.” Far-right idealogues have given populism a bad name in recent years, but there is nothing inherently racist or far-right in populism. At its core populism is simply an ideology that is of and for the people. Nativist populism is something far different. It has been defined as “an ideology espoused by far-right and radical-right politicians with a core opposition to immigration.” These politicians typically speak and act in opposition to the establishment, to what they call the elite, and to those who are different from the imagined norm of the dominant group in their society.¹ They use tactics such as fearmongering and scapegoating to divide society into “us” and “them,” and they hold themselves out as saviors who will protect “us” from “them.”

Nativist populism continues to spread across the United States and Europe and is now on the rise in Latin America. As one scholar stated, “The rise of right-wing nativist populism ... threatens to create a world of walled-off nations filled with intolerant citizens living in fear of the ‘other.’”² Political scientists tell us that this rise of nativist populism will make it increasingly difficult to reach international consensus on global issues, such as arms control, climate change, refugee protections.

We have seen the ugly but entirely predictable results of the tactics of division on display on our television screens and in our newspapers over the past few weeks. Hate-filled rhetoric has fueled hate-filled violence. Our hearts have broken for our immigrant friends, our sisters and brothers, who no longer feel welcome or even safe in their adopted home. For American citizens, born and raised here, who are told to go back to where they came from. For children who live each day in fear that ICE will come and mom and dad won’t be there when they get home from school. For desperate families fleeing poverty and violence who are met at the border with derision and inhumanity and cages.

In the face of this starkest madness, what divinest sense can religious leaders offer? As I consider the forces of fear and intolerance moving across our country and our world, I have the image of a gathering storm. As much as we religious would like to hold back that storm, and as

¹ Papademetriou, Demetrios G; Hooper, Kate; Benton, Meghan. “In Search of a New Equilibrium: Immigration Policy Making in the Newest Era of Nativist Populism”, Transatlantic Council on Migration, November 2018, p. 1.

² Nordgren, R.D. “Age of Turmoil: Surging Nativist Populism and its Possible Impact on Public Education.” *Educational Leadership and Administration: Teaching and Program Development*, v. 28, pp. 1-15, Oct. 2017, p. 9.

hard as we might try, we are powerless to do so, just as religious in previous times of moral crisis were powerless to hold back the storms of their own day. But this does not mean that we can do nothing. While we can not hold back the storm, we women religious *can* stand together in the midst of it, our arms linked with one another and with our sisters and brothers in faith, and we can speak a different word, a Gospel Word. We can demonstrate another way of being. With our witness and our work and our words we can speak divinest sense.

Pope Francis said to religious in his apostolic letter on the year of consecrated life, “In a polarized society, where different cultures experience difficulty in living alongside one another, where the powerless encounter oppression, where inequality abounds, we are called to offer a concrete model of community which ... makes it possible to live as brothers and sisters.”³

In the face of so many reasons to despair, religious leaders are called to speak authentically of light and to model hope. And we do that best when we connect, when we come together with one another and with others of good will. We model hope when we risk arrest in nonviolent defense of immigrant children; when we stand together in silent solidarity on the courthouse steps witnessing against the sin of racism; when we send letters, sign petitions, and call our congressional representatives; when we join our voices in protest and when we sit silently together in prayer. We model hope when we are attacked and refuse to respond in kind, and when we reject ugly rhetoric designed to divide us, and choose instead to speak words that disarm and bring people together.

Our world longs for the words and example of hope people of faith can bring *when* we live and speak authentically. While some elected leaders seek to scatter through promotion of fear, we are called to gather through promotion of hope. I am not referring here to a type of Pollyanna whistling in the wind, but of a hope that is rooted firmly in reality and trusts confidently in God. I am speaking of a hope that walks hand-in-hand with our passion for a just and caring world.

As I speak of a just and caring world I must address a group that may find it particularly difficult to see religious leaders as signs of hope - those who have known physical or sexual abuse in our Church. We must recognize that we serve during a time in which too many of our religious leaders have given grave scandal. The stories that continue to emerge of abuse in our Church shock the conscience. Bodies have been violated and souls have been abused by some of those charged with shepherding God’s people.

We have all been affected by this scandal. We have listened to the trauma of survivors, and have felt shame for the church we love and outrage over the crimes committed. We have journeyed with our lay sisters and brothers as they have grappled with what it means to continue to be faithful in this moment in our Church. And we have heard the stories of women religious, both in the United States and around the world, who have themselves been abused by clergy or by other religious

It is a source of deep pain for us that in some instances our own Sisters have been perpetrators of the abuse. This is a truth that we must not attempt to avoid. How can we speak divinest sense in the midst of this reality? There is no easy answer, but we can begin by listening, by

³Pope Francis. *Apostolic Letter on the Year of Consecrated Life*.

being present to the pain, by rejecting the path of cover-ups and secrecy, by calling for perpetrators to be held accountable, by resolving to do what we can to promote a church in which both body and soul are held sacred and each one's dignity is respected

When religious life is its best self it is prophetic, and in exercising that prophetic call we are stronger when we are able to discern and lift our voices together. The signs of our times reveal a particular call in our day to reach across borders to nurture and strengthen our global sisterhood. We women religious are connected across the globe as never before. Geography no longer limits us; technology opens up possibilities that were undreamed of when we were growing up, and even when we entered our congregations. As elected leaders in our congregations we have a unique opportunity to cultivate the growing bonds of our global sisterhood.

When I speak of our global sisterhood I'm speaking of our solidarity and support of one another. I'm speaking of the oneness that we experience as religious despite national boundaries and differences of language, skin tone, dress, and cultures. I'm speaking of our common mission within our variety of charisms. Those of us who have participated in the triennial UISG gathering in Rome have experienced the sense of oneness and the energy that is generated when religious gather from across our global Church.

In the face of the rise of nativist populism that's leading to the breakdown of global institutions, our global sisterhood is a unique gift and a grace. Michelle Obama is quoted as having said, "There is no limit to what we, as women, can accomplish." Imagine what a world-wide network of women religious can accomplish when we come together and allow our shared passion to energize us!

Global sharing of our realities and matching of resources with needs is truly divinest sense. This is not about one group giving and another group receiving. All parts of the world have gifts and all parts of the world have needs. In the sharing of needs and gifts, we will all be strengthened in our service of the Gospel. We already have examples of the witness we can give and the good we can do when we join together to address injustice and evil. Just look to how our congregations have collaborated in response to needs at our southern border. Or consider the prophetic example and work of *Talitha Kum*, the UISG project that has helped to build and connect networks of women religious combatting human trafficking. These networks now cover 77 countries. Or consider Solidarity with South Sudan, a project in a war-torn country that offers a powerful witness of religious from different countries and ethnicities living and working together. And we can do so much more! I believe it is critical that we seek out and remain open to opportunities to connect, to work together, to reach across barriers and boundaries and strengthen our world-wide network. We can do no less for our Church and our world.

Living Divinest Sense in Our Intercultural, Intergenerational Realities

I move now to divinest sense in our intercultural, intergenerational realities here in the United States.

The call to global sisterhood is one clear sign of our times. A related sign of our times is the growing diversity we experience in our congregations and across religious life. This growing diversity calls us to live and minister in increasingly intercultural settings.

As I speak now of diversity in religious life and of intercultural living I am speaking primarily of ethnic and national diversity. I recognize that multiple diversities exist within religious life, and I don't minimize the importance of the various cultures to which we belong and in which we operate. I focus today on our ethnic cultures as I address the demographic shift that is occurring within religious life in the United States as we become increasingly made up of religious from a wide variety of ethnicities.

Our understanding of our intercultural reality continues to evolve and I know from being in the midst of the turbulent waters of internationality and interculturality in my own congregation that the challenges are significant. In fact, I sometimes wonder as we navigate these waters whether we're dealing with starkest madness or divinest sense! Perhaps it's a bit of both. A lighthearted story may illustrate one significant aspect of those deeper challenges, that of communication.

When I began my first term on the General Leadership Team I lived with a Sister from Bangladesh, Sister Philomena, who had also been elected to the team. Shortly after we both moved to the generalate in Indiana she and our director of novices, Sister Brenda, went on a directed retreat together. Philo had never made a directed retreat; our sisters in Asia tend to do preached retreats, so she felt a bit nervous. She needn't have worried. She returned from the retreat bubbling over with enthusiasm. She loved it, and she told us all about the retreat as we sat in the community room that evening. The next morning I was sitting next to Brenda, the Sister who had accompanied Philo on retreat, waiting for Mass to start and Philo came over and said to me, "I forgot to tell you something. I had a message while I was on retreat." I wasn't quite sure how to respond to this. I wanted to be culturally sensitive. I didn't know whether it was appropriate to ask her what the message was. So I cautiously said, "Oh, really? You had a message? That's nice." She said, "Yes, I had a message, and it was *wonderful!*" Now I was really unsure of what to say, and with some hesitation I replied, "That's great. Umm...Would you like to share the message?" And Brenda said, "Massage! She had a massage!"

Philo enjoyed that story and laughed any time I told it. It's a humorous example of some of the challenges involved in intercultural living. Those challenges are significant and I've learned that a keen sense of humor is essential as we travel the road.

We've set out with all good will on a journey of intercultural living, but I find that we too often start tapping the brakes as we begin to live into the implications of operating as true intercultural communities. (Show slide) Father Anthony Gittins tells us in his book *Living Mission Interculturally*, "A community that is polarized into 'us' and 'them' will never achieve intercultural living. Only in a community that is striving to become 'we' can it possibly succeed." ⁴ (Remove slide) Our task is to strive to become ever more "we." We speak increasingly of ourselves as intercultural congregations, but we're still discovering what it means to live and operate in intercultural ways, and I believe that religious life as a body is at the early stages of that exploration and discovery.

⁴ Gittins, Anthony, J., *Living Mission Interculturally*, Liturgical Press, 2015, p.5.

Living as truly intercultural congregations will inevitably involve both a sharing of power and a loss of privilege by the dominant groups, and just as many are unaware of the white privilege that exists within society, those of us who are members of the dominant groups (whatever those groups may be) in our congregations may fail to fully recognize the privileges that *we* enjoy. I believe that if we want to succeed in moving from “us” and “them” to “we,” we have to examine the ways in which what’s viewed as the norm for our congregations and for religious life are actually simply the norm for the founding cultural group or the largest cultural group.

As leaders we must ask ourselves, “How well do we enable those coming to us from different realities to be fully themselves? Are our unconscious biases limiting our congregations and our sisters and brothers?” When all are able to fully share of themselves and their gifts, we all can become fuller participants in God’s mission.

I want to spend a few minutes talking about one other particular area of diversity within religious life, that of generational or age diversity. We have a growing awareness of the challenges of living and ministering with varying national and ethnic groups, but we may be less aware of the challenges presented by a diversity of generational groups.

Donna Fyffe, who has been facilitating the LCWR emergent planning process, has spoken and worked with younger sisters around the globe. She recently told the LCWR Board that she hears young sisters expressing a deep loneliness. They long to belong and to be valued for their own giftedness and what they can contribute. Donna said she has heard this repeatedly from every part of the world, and she has heard it often enough to be convinced that it is not an anomaly. As Donna stated, “It is a pattern that needs deep consideration by our larger religious life leadership bodies for the sake of global religious life.”

Younger members are yearning to be heard, to contribute, to influence the discussion and decisions and directions of their congregations and of this life.

In previous ages each successive generation in religious life was a large enough group that it made itself heard and exercised influence in the natural course of things, as it came of age in religious life. That is no longer the case. The numbers that make up the newer generations are tiny in comparison to the numbers that make up the more experienced generations. Adding to the complexity, the newer generations tend to be more culturally diverse. The current demographic situation means that the older generations will have to do a little extra work to consciously make a space for the ideas and influence of youth. And youth will have to do a little extra work to assume its voice and make itself heard.

We all recognize when we are simply being listened to and when we are actually being heard. Young people are no exception. We need to hear one another, including the youth in our congregations and in the broader church and society. This does not mean simply agree with them. That’s not what they want. It means engage with them, and with their ideas and their insights, even when those ideas and insights may challenge what we have struggled for and hold dear. We must not insist that the same things that fired our imaginations fire their imaginations. And we have to recognize that they will do leadership differently than we have done it, and that’s okay.

My congregation used to sponsor a clinic in a remote area of Uganda. There were almost no vehicles in the area. The staff all walked to work, many of them very long distances. One morning one of the workers arrived about an hour late. Sister Mary, the sister in charge, asked him why he was so late. He responded simply, "Sister, last night we ate the rooster," and he went about his work. It took her a minute to realize that the rooster was what awakened the family in the morning. Last night they ate the rooster, so he didn't wake up and therefore he left late for his long walk to work. There is a lesson here for us. Let's not eat the rooster! Let's not consume the voices that would wake us up, from whatever direction those voices may come.

We need the voices of newness every bit as much as we need the voices of experience. If we would be whole, then we also need the voices of various ethnic and national and cultural groups. And we particularly need those voices when they are uncomfortable for us and when they wake us up. Can we truly listen in order to hear the divinest sense within the words they speak?

Divinest Sense and the Madness and Mystery of It All

I move now to divinest sense and our current demographic reality within religious life. In recent years I've heard reassurances voiced to the Sisters on various occasions. The reassurances go something like this, "Yes, the numbers of religious are declining, but what is happening in your congregations is not your fault. There are much broader societal and demographic issues that account for the decline in numbers." While this is absolutely correct, the assertion that what's happening is not our fault presupposes that what's happening is somehow bad. We don't say, "It's not your fault," when all is well. I challenge this assumption that the shifts taking place in religious life today are somehow wrong. I do not say that these shifts are not painful, but it is possible for a situation or experience to be painful, even excruciatingly painful, and not be wrong.

This life we have each chosen and love is a part of the grand mystery of God, the mystery of creation, the mystery of this cosmos teeming with realities seen and unseen, known and unknown. I am reminded of a favorite quote from Teilhard de Chardin: (show slide) "Whoever would believe only what they can fully comprehend must have either a very long head or a very short creed." The nature of God and God's creation are overflowing with mystery, and there is so much that we do not know, we cannot see, we cannot comprehend. (Remove slide).

One final story: About six months after my arrival in Uganda, on April 7, 1994, we were hosting a Come and See program at a retreat center. We Sisters were listening to the BBC on the radio that evening, and we heard the news that eight nuns and six priests had been killed in a retreat center in the neighboring country of Rwanda. We were horrified. We had no idea in that moment of the horror that was to follow. This was one of the first massacres of what was to become the Rwandan genocide.

The genocide began on Thursday of Holy Week, and as the death toll mounted, I was struck by the juxtaposition of the Easter alleluias with the absolute horror I was seeing in the newspapers, and in the faces and stories of the refugees who fled to our area. I began to question everything that I believed, including the very existence of God. How could a loving God allow such atrocities? I found an answer to my questioning one day when I asked myself whether there was anything at all I knew. I realized that I knew God existed. I knew that deep down. Was

there anything else? I knew that God was good. That was all I could come up with. God exists and God is good. How could I reconcile God exists and God is good with the poverty and death I saw around me? Slowly an answer came to me, "God exists. God is good. I cannot understand God's goodness." Our concepts of goodness and love and truth are only the tiniest fragment of God's goodness and love and truth. We would have to take our concepts and explode them to come close to God's goodness and love and truth.

I do not pretend to understand all that is occurring with and within religious life today, but I know that God is good and I know that God's goodness continues to pour forth within and through our Sisters and our congregations. We see our congregations and this life we love with our earth-bound, finite, linear eyes. God sees us within the vast mystery and grand sweep of salvation history and the cosmos. We are called to walk this path in the most authentic, faith-filled and passionate ways that we can, and to enter into the utter madness and mystery of it all.

Walking this path with passion includes looking at our current situation with clarity and considering what we are able to do. We can become overwhelmed by the magnitude of the need and the reality of our numbers and age. An obsession with our numbers and median age only serves to demoralize and foster feelings of defeat. Part of our task as leaders is to help our congregations be realistic about our demographics without being defeatist. Those of us whose congregations are dealing with completion particularly know what it means to embrace reality with passion and courage and with a deep-down faith in the God who continues to call and guide us. When we understand that our witness is at least as important as our work, and that neither our witness nor our work is dependent upon age and numbers, then we can look reality in the face and smile at it.

God's revelation through scripture and history proclaims to us over and over again that God works through the small and the vulnerable. We have such difficulty actually believing this. We are, after all, creatures of our culture, and our culture tells us that youth plus size equals strength equals success. But authentic religious life is countercultural. We know from our own life experiences that when we are most vulnerable, at those moments we are most open to God. As it is true of individuals, so it is true of institutions. When we are small and vulnerable we can stop trying to conquer the storm, and can instead stand in the midst of it, arms linked, speaking a different Word. It is not that God could not or did not use us in our strength. It is that God can use us and does use us in a different way when we open our arms and embrace our vulnerability.

The question for us is whether we will embrace with passion and commitment all that God is doing with us and revealing to us in the here and now. And let us remember that passion is not dependent upon age or numbers. Old and passionate are not mutually exclusive terms, just as young and passionate do not necessarily go hand-in-hand. My congregation may be young and growing, or toward the end of its life cycle and facing completion, or somewhere in between. No matter where we are on this spectrum, we are called to continue to live and love and witness and work with passion.

Do we believe that our congregations are exactly where God wants them to be at this time? That religious life is exactly where it is meant to be at this time? We make a mistake when we attempt to do the impossible of trying to live forever and fail to fully embrace the now. It is not

ours to see the future of religious life, nor is it ours to direct the future of religious life. We can thank God that our task as elected leaders is not to create a plan for the new to emerge; it is to create a space for the new to emerge. We are called to create a space for the young, to create a space for the growing diversities, to create a space in which the Holy Spirit is free to work. If we can do this, and do it with passion, then the future will emerge, and it will be good.

So, let's live this life with passion! Not a cheerleader type of Rah! Rah!, but passion of the heart. Our members do need competent leaders who can read a balance sheet, chair a committee, and develop a strategic plan. But more than any of these competencies, our members, our church, and our world need leaders with passion! The type of passion that takes risk in service of the reign of God. The type of passion that leads us to keep getting up when we keep falling down, that moves us to walk into situations from which we would far rather walk away, that compels us to speak a Gospel Word even when the world seems deaf, that moves us to stand up and reach out our arms and wrap them around the entirety of this moment in which we find our congregations. Because if this life is worth anything at all, it is worth living passionately.

My friends, we are all on a gigantic, life-long, Rip-Ride Rockit Roller Coaster of religious life. Sometimes we're laughing in sheer abandon and enjoyment, and sometimes we're holding on for dear life and wondering why in the world we got onto this ride in the first place. But we are all on it together, from the 20-somethings to the 100 +'s, from the East to the West and across the globe. As we travel together let's each make sure to have a message and a massage. Let's not eat the rooster. And when we get off that coaster at the end of our lives and we look back, and we see through eyes of divinest sense the hills and the drops and the loops and the twists we have traveled, I firmly believe in that moment we will be grinning like fools, high-fiving one another, and saying, "That ride was awesome!"