

## 2017 EXTENDED COUNCIL

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#### OPENING ADDRESS

#### *DARING THE MYSTERY OF ENCOUNTER, A COMPASSIONATE JOURNEY*

GOD MORGEN; BONJOUR; GODMORGEN; BOM DIA, BUONGIORNO, BUENOS DIAS,  
GOOD MORNING

Thank you for your willingness to travel to this beautiful country with fresh air and friendly faces as together we bravely live our theme: **Daring the mystery of encounter, a compassionate journey**. As children you may have used this phrase, “I dare you to do it”, whatever the “it” might have been...jump off a high branch of a tree, throw a rock through someone’s garage window, let the air out of a bicycle tire or even a car tire to get back at someone, or whatever. The “dare” always implies a risk, and some fear and some persuasion by those who are daring you to do something or to be something.

Well, YES, quite honestly, the General Council, as a result of our prayer and reflection, have dared each other and each of you to fully enter into the Mystery of Encounter.

Mystery is a wonderful word! It is both inviting and repelling. Inviting because as humans there is a part of us which likes to be engaged in and to try to solve mysteries, things which are difficult to understand or even at times seemingly impossible to understand. It is a challenge for us. It is the detective part of us that likes to investigate and figure things out. The word mystery can also be the opposite, that is repelling or something we resist, because it means entering into the unknown and into a situation over which we have no control. And yet, just the pronunciation of it, saying the word ‘mystery’ is very alluring and attractive, almost drawing us into itself, into the unknown. So what happens when you hear the word ‘mystery’. Say it slowly to yourself in your own language. Are you drawn into its allure, or are you repelled, resisting its invitation and wish to move away from it?

We know that Saint Paul in his letter to the Colossians speaks of the ‘mystery’ of God as Jesus Christ, and of the glory of this ‘mystery’ as Christ being in each of us. (Col. 1:26-27, 2:2) The word mystery is used to refer to a revelation of God’s purpose. Sometimes the word Mystery is used as an image of God or a name for God in prayers. Complicated theological concepts are also referred to as a mystery, i.e., the mystery of the Trinity. We live with the “mystery” of our faith, and of knowing and having a deep personal love for a God who we have not physically seen. And we all experience the mystery of being human and living and working with humans each day in a now imperfect world, made so by humans. We see catastrophic and deadly events unfolding all over the globe, whether they be weather related, politically motivated or economically induced by greed. It is always a mystery why the same areas or cultures or countries suffer from these events again and again. Mystery is an integral part of who we are called to be.

Like the woman at the well, are we captivated by and attracted to the mystery of life-giving water? Or, like the initial thoughts of the Samaritan woman, is it our instinct to resist and move away from such

mysterious water for fear of what it might demand from us? Yet, all of us as leaders within our congregation, have willingly come to these days to explore and unpack the mystery of encounter and to drink life –giving water. So I guess that we are accepting the dare!

What does it mean for us as Sisters of St. Joseph and as leaders, to fully enter into the mystery of an encounter with another person, knowing that each human is a mystery yet to be understood? How do we prepare to meet the sacred and the unknown in that person or situation? Where is there space for our own mystery in that conversation and encounter? Why is it that it is easier to go into a room and take control and move out, than it is to walk in, welcome the other and just be a compassionate presence, watching and listening attentively?

Yes, as leaders we are called to lead. But we cannot lead unless we first take the time to see with clear vision the person or reality and take the time to listen to the many facets of the sacred in front of us. This seeing and listening is the encounter. Either we are open to see God in these moments or we are closed and if so, there is no real encounter of the mystery of the Holy within the person or situation. We can compare an encounter to looking at a gem or jewel or a diamond. Yes, each encounter is like a diamond, glistening in the sunlight. We need to take the time to look at the diamond from various perspectives to see its flat angles and its fractures, both of which reflect the light, allowing it to be fully illuminated. Is this the spirit in which we approach meeting with someone or dealing with a situation?

As leaders, sometimes it is not easy to walk into the encounter with the other. Nor is it easy to enter into the mystery of the other, whether it is a member of our own team, a sister in formation or a sister experiencing difficulty within herself and others. We feel like we are on uneven ground, not certain where it is safe to place our next footstep. But we are not alone in these questions. We follow in the footsteps of Moses, dear Joseph our patron and Mary Magdalene, to name a few leaders who have struggled with and been blessed by sacred encounters. Moses, whose life as an infant began with the mystery of encounter when the Pharaoh's daughter, a young woman from another culture and religious belief, saw Moses in the basket by the river and acknowledging and accepting his reality, offered him new life. She was drawn to the mystery of this baby in a basket, and entered fully into the encounter, allowing herself to risk operating outside of the law. Later in his life, Moses receives his mission while exploring the mystery of a burning bush that is not consumed. Moses took time to attentively look at this bush and to listen to and encounter God there. This sacred encounter enabled Moses to change the direction of his life and to lead God's people to freedom.

St. Joseph's struggle with the mystery of encounter was often played out in his dreams. It was there that he could see the whole picture and the light within his particular reality. With this clearer vision, Joseph received his mission from God. His encounter with the angel of God empowered him to be the presence of compassionate love within the mystery of his love for Mary and the birth of Jesus.

Mary Magdalene, healed by her encounters with Jesus, became a woman of faithful love and accompanied Jesus to the very end. Mary was able to enter into the mystery of the empty tomb, letting go of her deep grief long enough to seek a clearer understanding of what she was seeing. Sharing her vulnerability with the gardener became the door to a new sacred encounter with Jesus. Her openness and persistence set the tone for this encounter and allowed her to receive her new mission which she proclaimed to all with great joy.

Each one of us has had an experience of a sacred encounter with one of our sisters, a moment when in all her simplicity and vulnerability, a sister reveals the loving face of God to us.

Yes, we are not alone, but as leaders, how do we truly live into and enter the mystery of the many encounters we face each day and do so with compassion? Do we allow ourselves to share our vulnerability in these encounters? It is often in allowing ourselves to be vulnerable that makes the encounter one which helps us to go beyond ourselves and to be a presence or a voice for the poor, the persecuted, the unwanted and those discarded and displaced by society. How can we bring ourselves to be open to such vulnerability?

In my reflections at the opening session of the 2015 General Chapter, I closed with the lyrics of a song, entitled “Somewhere” a song from the musical West Side Story. It is a story of love in the midst of violent conflicts between neighborhood gangs. The words are:

There's a place for us,  
Somewhere a place for us.  
Peace and quiet and open air  
Wait for us Somewhere.

Somewhere.  
We'll find a new way of living,  
We'll find a way of forgiving

Somewhere . . .  
There's a place for us,  
A time and place for us.  
Hold my hand and we're halfway there.  
Hold my hand and I'll take you there  
Somehow, Some day,  
Somewhere!

Two years ago, I encouraged us to join our hands and our hearts and to make this journey to the “somewhere”, to the place where God will continue God’s work in us. Now two years later, I am more convinced than ever that the place called “somewhere” that God has and continues to lead us towards, is into the “deep”, to the inner space where we meet God. It is in this space of freedom where we allow ourselves to be loved in all of our brokenness, to drink the life giving water. It is where we take the time to explore the mystery of our own vulnerability, to touch our giftedness and to see our own beauty. It is in this space of inner depth where we can face our fears and prejudices. The soft comfort of this sacred space allows us to let go of our past hurts and insecurities. The surrounding peace ignites our desire to freely offer authentic love again and again. This “somewhere” is a place of contemplation, of deep communion with God, of silence with no need for words but only giving yourself time to be attentive to the Mystery of God in your life.

This type of personal prayer known as contemplation brings us beyond our usual prayer of sitting and reflecting on the gospel for 30 minutes. Contemplation is a journey unto itself. Contemplation moves us beyond meditation to a more profound experience of God. It is time we gift to ourselves, time to be with Jesus, to be with Jesus in our reality, the details of the day we had or will have. It is time set aside to deeply enter into silence, to just be. It is our encounter with God, allowing ourselves to see with clearer vision and to listen more attentively to God. Time spent in contemplation opens us more and more to be ready to receive the Sacred in our lives.

Our religious life is lived within our world reality. The global context in which we live is increasingly complex, needy and demanding and our lives reflect these same characteristics. It is more difficult to be leaders in religious life today than in past generations. So how do we equip ourselves to lead into the mystery of our future, a future we not only believe in but one we look forward to living? How do we accompany and lead our sisters into this future so that they can dare to engage in the sacred encounters in their lives as they journey with others toward freedom and fullness of life? It is time to focus more on the contemplative aspect of our lives as religious, so we can make the journey to the peripheries and to the areas of greater need, offering and experiencing the grace of contemplation with God's people. Certainly as leaders, spending more time in contemplative prayer will help free us from being caught in the web of administration and management.

Sister Pat Farrell, OSF, a former President of LCWR, reflected on the gift and call to contemplation at last year's LCWR Assembly in the United States. I would like to share a few lines from her talk:

*The indwelling presence of the Divine is forever accessible to us. We need only to wake up to the mystery of Love always present, always capable of transforming us and our world... Contemplation is an intentional opening to that Life within our life, that Heart within our heart. To pray in silent attentiveness is to drop a line into the all nourishing abyss of Holy Mystery. It is to drop the line deeply enough to touch the Fertile Emptiness from which all creative movement springs. The Divine movement within aligns us with what is deepest and truest in us. That Love is always present, has always been present, but needs to be liberated in us, consciously embraced, and allowed to become all in all. This Love invites our complete surrender..."*

If we are faithful to this contemplative time, surrendering ourselves to be nourished by Holy Mystery, then we will bring this Love to each encounter. We will be empowered to share this Love on our compassionate journey... the compassionate journey whose name is called the service of leadership.

We dare you to go to the place called "somewhere". Meet the God within and let the grace of contemplation fill you with that Love, bringing it to all you meet on your compassionate journey.

God bless you!

Thank you.