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Crossing the Threshold: Weaving Global Solidarity for the Life of the World

Sr. Carol Zinn, SSJ

"...I will not leave you orphans, says the Lord, I will come back to you and your hearts will rejoice...that they may all be one...why are you standing there looking at the sky...may the eyes of your hearts be enlightened, that you may know what is the hope that belongs to His call...let us hold unwaveringly to our confession that gives us hope...for the One who made the promise is trustworthy...how were you baptized...if then you were raised with Christ, seek what is above...do you believe now...come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in them the fire of Your love...the Holy Spirit will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you."

(Scriptures from 7th Sunday of Easter, Feast of Ascension, 9 May and Pentecost Sunday)

*Earth, I am. Fire, I am. Air and Water and Spirit, I am
Earth, you are. Fire, you are. Air and Water and Spirit, you are.
Earth, we are. Fire, we are. Air and Water and Spirit, we are.
(Lakota Sioux)*

It is an honor for me to be here with you as you gather for the 2016 UISG Assembly and celebrate the Golden Jubilee of this important, significant and much-needed network of the leadership of women religious around our world. If the UISG hadn't been created in 1965, surely it would be created now because now, more than ever perhaps, we women religious must think and act and pray and lead as one.

The time for individual, autonomous, sovereign nation states is over, we often observe and lament as we watch what is happening in and to our world and all of God's People and Creation. We have to be careful with that observation because that same critique can be said of us. For far too long, and in some cases while it might have been somewhat necessary depending on the culture and the historical foundation, the individualization of mission, the autonomy of ministries and the sovereign nation-state-like charism lock on which we stood firm and fast and ferocious has finally begun to cease.

Yes, the UISG invites each and all of us to embrace the times in which we live: times of increased interdependence, accelerated communication, globalized travel, widespread intercultural relationships, unprecedented peril and promise, historical interfaith and inter-religious dialogue and unimaginable vulnerability and vision. The mission of UISG is needed here and now. The members of UISG are needed today and tomorrow. And the manifestation of UISG is needed again, anew, each day and every day. Earth needs UISG. The world needs UISG. The Church Whom

we Love needs UISG. The future needs UISG. Religious Life needs UISG. You need UISG. The time for the lone wolf is over, says the poet. It is time for working, walking, and witnessing together, for the life of the world.

Happy Jubilee, UISG. May this Assembly put into place the manifestation of the promise and mission of UISG so that the world may be touched in new and healing ways with the love of the One in whom and through whom we have our being, Jesus Christ our Lord, Word-Made-Flesh, God-With-Us, even here, even now, ever faithful.

As I considered the theme of this Assembly, “Weaving Global Solidarity for Life” and the three lenses through which the theme would be addressed: for the Planet; with those living on the margins; and our life and living as women religious”, I was keenly aware of the order in which the topics emerged for the planning committee. It is most appropriate to begin with the most comprehensive venue into which all of life and our vocation as women religious is situated.

The phrase, “a long, loving look” has been ascribed to the practice of contemplation. And indeed it is an apt description of the practice of placing ourselves in the presence of our good and gracious God, through the power of the Holy Spirit, and with the companionship of our brother, Jesus the Christ as we open ourselves to the ongoing revelation of God’s unconditional love, mercy, healing and joy. Our contemplative prayer and life stance takes us out of ourselves with the Gospel message of self-emptying love so that we might be that self-emptying love to all the world.

In the spirit of taking a “long, loving look”, I would like to explore some components of how we might be weavers of a global solidarity for our Common Home, planet Earth. I’d like to offer this exploration in three (3) parts:

1. The Power of Worldview and the Conversion of Mindset Needed
2. The Mutuality of Relationships and the Conversion of Heart Needed
3. The Witnessing of Earth, Fire, Air, Water and Spirit and the Conversion of Will Needed.

In the first part, I will offer some reflections on the impact of how we see the world with the understanding that while we can only see the world from where we stand, we are living in times demanding that we shift where we’re standing, at least metaphorically and figuratively, but also literally. Truly a conversion of mind, thought, thinking and perspective is needed.

In the second part, I will offer some reflections on the necessity of mutuality in all of our relationships, with all living beings and with Earth Herself. Without this mutuality, our way of relating in the world devolves into competition, survival of the fittest, domination and control of the many by the few and conquest over rather than compassion with. Truly a conversion of Heart and capacity for connecting is needed.

And in the third part, I will offer some reflections on the ways in which we, women religious leaders and those whom you lead, might give witness to the truth that we are called to be Earth, Fire, Air, Water and Spirit for the life of the world. Truly, a conversion of will is needed because the temptation is too great for us to gather here, be inspired perhaps by each other, be challenged by each other and yet, return to our own place on Earth, wake up the next morning and continue our lives and our ministry as if this gathering happened on another planet other than the one we call our Common Home, Earth.

Before we launch this reflective journey, let me make some observations. The topic of the ecological and environmental crises we face on Earth is overwhelming on many levels. The amount of data that exists on the multi-faceted aspects of this crisis is beyond comprehension. The scope and impact of the crisis is serious cause for pause. Trying to do justice to this reality lies way beyond the limits of the Assembly and certainly beyond the parameters of this session.

If this Assembly were held in May 2015, our task this morning would be insurmountable, the range of scholarly references would be endless and the focus of the content would be unwieldy. Fortunately, we gather here in May 2016, 13 months after the publication of *Laudato Si'*, a prophetic, poetic, poignant and practical reflection and call to conversion. In just 246 paragraphs and 44,000 words, we have a comprehensive, cohesive, cogent and compelling invitation to look at our current reality, open ourselves to the grace of conversion and transformation, move towards an integral ecology, chart a path of sustainable love and compassion for all beings, and reclaim our role as co-creators with the God of All Creation.

Our Jesuit brother, Tom Reese, offered a summary of the main messages in *Laudato Si'* in his June 2015 publication in *America* magazine. This could offer us a foothold on the breadth and depth of the teachings as we begin our own exploration here this morning:

1. The spiritual perspective is now part of the discussion on the environment.
2. The poor are disproportionately affected by climate change.
3. Less is more.
4. Catholic Social Teaching now includes teaching on the environment.
5. Discussions about the environment can be grounded in the Bible and Church tradition.
6. Everything is connected---including the economy
7. Scientific research on the environment is to be praised and used.
8. Widespread indifference and selfishness worsen environmental problems.
9. Global dialogue and solidarity are needed.
10. A change of heart is required.

It is my hope that we have all made the time to at least read *Laudato Si* and perhaps read it thoroughly and seriously. Maybe we've had the opportunity to study it or plan to do so. Maybe our congregations are praying it, teaching it, embracing it and embodying it in all the ways they can. Therefore, I am going to use *Laudato Si'* as both the context and content for this reflection. With its ink still drying on our minds and hearts, immersing ourselves in the encyclical seems the most faithful and meaningful response to its Gospel call.

****Lakota Sioux chant****

Part One: The Power of Worldview and the Conversion of Mind Needed

In Part One, I'd like to begin with a story, invite you to take a test, present the characteristics of the prominent ways in which our world is viewed today and then suggest a way forward that embraces the conversion of mind needed for these times and placed before us, women religious leaders, as a way to live our radical response to the Gospel message of Jesus Christ, for the life of the world.

- Story
- Test of Earth knowledge
- Characteristics of prominent worldviews today
- Conversion of Mind: Spirituality of Earth

First the story: We have a Queen in our family, she is 8 years old and her name is Mackenzie. I know that we all have these members of our families and they bring us great joy and blessings. They can also speak profound words of wisdom and truth in great innocence and humility.

When Mackenzie started school a few years ago, I had the opportunity to ask her how things were going about 2 months into the school year. Her answer was quite amazing. She simply looked at me and said, “You know, Aunt Carol, it’s actually very boring.” Of course that led to a conversation about what the source of the boredom was and how she tried to move past the experience of being bored. I even tried to help her know that boredom comes from within, but she was not really interested in that idea. For her the boredom was coming from external circumstances. Finally she took a deep breath and said, with great emphasis, “Aunt Carol, do you know that there are some children who need to hear the same thing over and over and over again.” She really couldn’t believe what she was experiencing at school. For her, hearing the same thing over and over and over again was just a bit beyond what she expected in school!

I think of that conversation with Kenzie whenever I consider the concept of worldview. It does seem that we humans need to hear the same thing over and over and over again in terms of Earth, Our Common Home, in that it is our home, the only one we have at this moment in time and it is common to all living beings on the planet—not just humans.

Test of Earth knowledge: As a way of understanding the concept of worldview, I’d like to invite you to a simple test about the planet. No need to worry about being prepared for this test—you are all prepared for it by virtue of living on the planet. Like all simple tests, there will be 5 questions and you may not share your information with your neighbor.

Question 1: Draw a picture of Earth, Our Common Home

Question 2: How many oceans are there on Earth, Our Common Home? (1)

Question 3: How many land masses are there on Earth, Our Common Home? (1)

Question 4: How many continents are there on Earth, Our Common Home? (5)

Question 5: How many species are there on Earth, Our Common Home? (8-10M)

In order to get a sense of the vastness of species on Earth, let’s do a visual right here in the room. (Demonstrate the approximation of species by dividing the room into the various groupings of species: insects, flora/fauna, bacteria/fungi, other, humans). The visualization of the relative scope of humans to all the other species is humbling to say the least. When we recall that science tells us that our species needs every other species in order to survive and, conversely, all of the other species could benefit sevenfold without the presence of humans, it becomes immediately clear that we humans need to hear the same thing over and over and over again.

Characteristics of prominent worldviews: If a picture is worth a thousand words, let’s take a look at the two prominent images of our world today. The first one here is the one that continues to be taught in schools around the world and remains the mapped image of Earth. And this second one, the image of the planet from space, taken in 1969, continues to be used as a decoration more or less. This is the one that is displayed on Earth Day for instance, while the former one is often referred to as “the real world”. There are very distinct and critical characteristics of each of these images of Earth and I find them quite compelling as we try to discern what will get us, as humans and especially as international women religious, across the threshold so that we really begin to live and act and pray and lead as one.

Characteristics of the “western/northern” worldview: perception, relationship and humanity’s role

1. Everything is seen, understood and experienced as being separate from everything else. (Water, oceans, land, continents, species, humans, religions, cultures, races, gender, economies, politics, etc. are all seen not only as distinct and diverse, but as stand-alone entities.)

2. In a separate worldview, the relationship understanding is that of a ladder. (There are some species, races, cultures, economies, religions, etc. that are simply perceived as being higher/better than others)
3. In a ladder-like relational, separate worldview, the role of humans is understood to be one of practicing the illusion of control. (Everything from the mis-read of Genesis [dominion] to the current mis-read of global climate change [political science] reflects this notion of humans thinking that they are actually “in control”)

I suggest that while we might be quick to see how this worldview plays out among others (i.e., politicians, lawyers, leaders, churches, educators, etc.), it is important to recall that this worldview is alive and well within and among us, also. It was only a few decades ago when we were presented with the awareness that all are called to holiness and that religious life is not on a higher rung of the holiness ladder than marriage or single vocations. And in the not too distant past we know that the competition among charisms lived quite a full life among us as women religious. Perhaps it is still breathing in some parts of our minds and hearts. Or in recent times, we've seen how challenging it can be for us to really work together because of the sense of ownership we might be tempted to retain over our novices, our ministries, our fiscal resources, our land, our buildings and even our charisms, as if they belong to us and us alone. And Pope Francis has called us in these immediate times to remember our first vocation and to see the times in which we find ourselves as opportunities for grace and conversion and joy and to cross any artificial boundaries we've created in our minds and hearts. Truly, the only boundary is within the Heart of God and our vocation is to give witness to that Heart and lead others beyond boundaries that try to put limits on that Heart.

The image of Earth from space has only been with us since 1969. Not a very long time, really. And certainly not long enough to transform our view of the world. It is important to remember here that while this image is relatively new to some of us, it's a view of Earth that continues to shape how many of our indigenous sisters and brothers, the first peoples of nations and many religious and spiritual traditions have lived for centuries and continue to live and act and pray and lead as one.

Characteristics of Earth as seen from space: perception, relationship and humanity's role

1. Everything is seen, understood and experienced as being connected to everything else (there is only one body of water, one land mass, one community of life based on the unity found only in the celebration of diversity, one desire to share in the fullness of life and the praise of a being/energy “beyond oneself”)
2. In a connected worldview, the relationship understanding is that of a circle. Whatever happens to one member in the circle happens to all members of the circle. The joy, hope, pain and anguish of one is the joy, hope, pain and anguish of all. Until all are free, no one is free)
3. In a circle-like relational, connected worldview, the role of humans is understood as choosing to participate in the emerging, ongoing and irreversible transformations. (Every choice we make, regardless of the content, support or weaken our capacity to choose for the whole, for the common good, for the life of the world. The more practice we get at choosing from the perspective of participating in the holy process of conversion and transformation, the closer we move towards mirroring the likeness of God in Whose Image we are made)

Conversion of Mind: So what kind of conversion of mind is needed as we consider the power of our worldview and how challenging it is to literally learn to see in a new way, a way that reverences all of life, recognizes the Source of all life, respects the diversity inherent in the community of life and reconciles current ways of thinking and being, planning and acting that overwhelmingly and repeatedly fail to foster the health and well-being of Earth, our Common Home? While scientific, sociological, ecological, economic, cultural and corporate approaches have been

tried, they have yielded less-than helpful fruit in terms of actual conversion of thought and mind. What appears necessary for these times is a spiritual approach, one that reaches, touches, heals and transforms our minds. Laudato Si' offers such an approach to a Spirituality of Earth:

“We are not God. The Earth was here before us and it has been given to us. This allows us to respond to the charge that Judeo-Christian thinking, on the basis of the Genesis account which grants man “dominion” over the Earth has encouraged the unbridled exploitation of nature by painting him as domineering and destructive by nature. This is not a correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church. Although it is true that we Christians have at times incorrectly interpreted the Scriptures, nowadays we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God’s image and given dominion of the earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures.” (67)

“Together with our obligation to use the Earth’s goods responsibly, we are called to recognize that other living beings have a value of their own in God’s eyes...each creature possesses its own particular goodness and perfection...each of the various creatures, willed in its own being, reflects its own way a ray of God’s infinite wisdom and goodness. Man must therefore respect the particular goodness of every creature, to avoid any disordered use of things.” (68)

“Our insistence that each human being is an image of God should not make us overlook the fact that each creature has its own purpose. None is superfluous. The entire material universe speaks of God’s love, his boundless affection focus. Soil, water, mountains: everything is, as it were, a caress of God.” (84)

“From panoramic vistas to the tiniest living form, nature is a constant source of wonder and awe. It is also a continuing revelation of the divine. To sense each singing the hymn of its existence is to live joyfully in God’s love and hope. Alongside revelation properly so-called, contained in sacred Scripture, there is a divine manifestation in the blaze of the sun and the fall of a leaf.” (85)

“The universe as a whole, in all its manifold relationships, shows forth the inexhaustible riches of God. God wills the interdependence of creatures. The sun and the moon, the cedar and the little flower, the eagle and the sparrow: the spectacle of their countless diversities and the inequalities tell us that no creature is self-sufficient. Creatures exist only in dependence on each other, to complete each other, in the service of each other.” (86)

Lakota Sioux Chant

Part Two: The Mutuality of Relationships and the Conversion of Heart Needed

In this part, I again begin with a story, invite you to take another test but this time about Earth’s reality, present characteristics of the Gospel message so needed for these times and then suggest a way forward that embraces the conversion of heart set before us, women religious leaders, as a way to live our radical response to the Gospel message of Jesus Christ, for the life of the world.

- Story
- Test of Earth reality
- Characteristics of Gospel message
- Conversion of Heart: Spirituality of Wholeness

First the story: A mother sent her 8 year-old daughter to the corner store for a few items and she began to worry when the little girl was gone longer than necessary for the trip to the store. After several hours of concern and many efforts to try and find her daughter, the mother turned around in her kitchen to see her young child standing there.

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Initially, the mother was tempted to correct the child for being gone so long without saying where she was going. But, the little girl started speaking first. She said that she was aware that she was gone a very long time and she was sorry if that made her mother worry. Upon questioning, the mother discovered that the little girl did not get lost nor did she stray off the road to the store nor did she go anywhere else other than the store. When the mother asked her what took her so long, the little girl explained that as she was walking to the store, she noticed her friend sitting on the road holding her broken doll and crying very sadly. The mother was very taken with her daughter's compassion and sympathy and inquired whether the daughter helped her to fix the doll or get it repaired by someone else. To the mother's surprise, the daughter explained that she did none of those things. When asked what took her so long, then, if she didn't help the little girl, her daughter merely said that she did the only really helpful thing in the situation which was to sit down next to her very sad friend and help her cry.

This poignant story captures the core of our vocation, it seems to me: to be present enough to the reality around us that our hearts are moved deeply enough to prompt an appropriate response. It is so easy for us, women religious, to avoid the reality in which we find ourselves as a species and as a community of life. It's easy because the reality often times stands right in front of us and still we do not see it for what it is and therefore are unable to fully respond to it. Instead, we can be tempted to respond to what we think the reality is or respond out of our own reality rather than to the actual reality.

Test of Earth's Reality: As a way to try to grasp the reality of Earth, I invite you to a little test. Only two questions this time. And each answer is only one word. So, this should be quite easy and go quickly.

Question 1: As you consider Earth, Our Common Home, what do you think is the single most serious challenge experienced by the human species? (Poverty)

Question 2: As you consider Earth, Our Common Home, what do you think is the single most serious challenge experienced by all the other species as a whole? (Poverty)

It's probably surprising to realize that poverty is the answer for both questions. Truth be told, it's not so much poverty that's the answer because poverty is a created condition. It doesn't exist except as a consequence of behavior. There is no want or scarcity in the natural world. It functions on an economy of abundance. There is enough for all in other words, the only place where that principle fails to find expression is when it comes to human-related interactions.

And so poverty in some very real ways is not the answer. The more accurate answer is the presence of the obscene accumulation of wealth by the few at the expense of the needs of the many. In other words, both the environment and the human family suffer because of the dynamic interaction between the few and the many, between wants and needs, between those who have and those who have not.

Poverty is the symptom that the human interactions are out of sync, are not based on the common good, are not focused on Care of Our Common Home, Earth.

It is difficult to imagine that there is anyone on Earth today who has not seen the images and/or statistics of poverty. We know that 8/10 people are under-educated, under-housed, under-fed and under cared for in terms of medical treatment. The other 2/10 are over educated, housed, fed and cared for. We know that 7/10 people cannot read (and that 6/7 of them are women and girl children). We know that 1/3 people subsist on less than \$1 USD. We know that 4/5 people are unable to drink the water around them while the other 1/5 has more access to water than they know what do with.

We also know that water is a right and not a commodity; that land is a gift to be tended lovingly and not property to be owned by the highest bidder; that all species are expressions of the Creator God and not for the use and abuse by humans; that the current conflicts around the world are connected, for the most part, to some aspect of natural resources being fought over from religious/cultural/ethnic perspectives; that patterns of production, consumption and reproduction are part of the fabric of a first-world dominated global economy; that the drug wars, gangs, violence against women, trafficking of women and children and the unprecedented movement of peoples on/from/into every continent on the planet are consequences of political and economic policies of exploitation and manipulation; and that deforestation, GMOs, soil depletion, river/ lake/ ocean pollution, air quality, species endangerment/extinction, habitat deterioration, coastal village and commerce disappearance, and global warming indicate a planet in need of tremendous healing and return to its Creator's design of wholeness and wellness.

And yet even with all this information, the most serious human and environmental challenge continues to be this presence of poverty caused by the wants of the many having priority over the needs of the many, regardless of their species. And while there are signs that some conversion is taking place and some progress is being made in terms of wealth re-distribution, the overarching reality is that when the leaders of the world gathered in September 2015 they were compelled to put forth a global agenda for 2030 by identifying and committing to Sustainable Development Goals. And, again, as in September 2000 with the Millennium Development Goals, the very first goal reads: eradication of poverty with a description of specific targets that will indicate the progress towards this goal as the year 2030 comes closer. So serious is the issue of economic disparity that every international and national gathering has it as one of its meeting agenda items. So serious is the impact of poverty on the environment, that every environmental effort takes into account the economic and social dimension of sustainability. And so serious is the reality of poverty that every faith tradition, including ours, focuses its attention on the most marginalized and vulnerable peoples as a way to live out the tenets of the sacred texts. This reality, the extreme suffering, pain, anguish and injustice rendered by some humans on their sisters and brothers and all of God's Creation clearly breaks our hearts.

And yet, what to do? How to address the issue? What is the remedy? Who can dare to offer it? From where will the courage come? And why does it take so long for Earth's reality to reach our hearts? And perhaps even more startling, why does it take so long for our hearts to be moved to action? Even with all the ministry efforts of women religious around the world who focus on the needs of those children of God who sit outside the city gates and beg for mercy, still the needs prevail. What is it that we are not seeing in terms of eradicating poverty? How is it that for all of our direct service the impact of poverty runs rampant around our world and touches the life, health, sustainability and viability of everything that lives?

Characteristics of the Gospel message: Perhaps our hearts have become broken enough by the literal suffering in our world that we are ready to have the words of the Gospel message seep in and prepare the way for conversion. Our Jewish sisters and brothers often pray that the Word of God might be on their hearts. This seems an unusual place for God's Word to land—we typically pray that God's Word might be in our hearts. The wisdom of the Torah teaches that God's Word can only really sit on our hearts until our hearts are broken open by the pain and suffering in the world. Once they are broken open, then the Word of God that has been sitting on our hearts can fall into our hearts; thus, beginning the process of conversion. It just may be that for all the decades that women religious have been on the forefront of responding to the needs of those who suffer, the time has come for us to really be heartbroken by what we see as we look at our local, regional, national and global world and allow the pain and destruction of ecosystems, social systems, political systems, family and tribal systems, economic systems and institutional systems, including our own, to finally resonate with our consciousness in such a way that moves us to action that binds us together to think and act and pray and lead as one.

This will be a challenge of critical proportions, though. It is a well-known fact that women religious are among the most educated group of women on the planet today. It is also understood that religious life has emerged as a first-world lifestyle regardless of where the religious live. This is for the simple reason that education is an important and necessary constitutive element of our life. And this is a good and helpful element. Surely we don't want to move towards less education. However, the level of education present among us, as a whole sub-species of the human community, tips the scales of our mind and heart towards the temptation of becoming quite comfortable in our comfort zone. It also creates an occupational hazard in that the phenomena of entitlement creep can do just that—creep into our minds and hearts. And it presents the eternal challenge of trying to minister at the edges and peripheries of our world while we ourselves live in the center. It is quite difficult, if not impossible, to journey to the margins when one's home is situated far from the margin either in mindset or actuality. The built-in security, access to resources, and education are gifts for sure and we often use those gifts at the service of others. At the same time, they create the space for a numbness of consciousness and its consequential blindness of heart that can easily become a lens through which we think and act and pray and lead as one.

In Scripture, we see quite clearly the message of Jesus about the manner of discipleship. Time and time again we see a trinity of choices set before Jesus that he in turn sets before his disciples. Church teaching, Catholic Social Teaching and more recently Vatican Council II teaching and *The Joy of the Gospel* all capture this trinity in profound and prophetic ways.

The mutuality of relationships pivots on choosing love over fear, every single time and in every single circumstance; mercy over judgement, every single encounter and in every single experience; and inclusion over exclusion, every single opportunity and in every single venue. It is so clear how Jesus lived his life out of this pattern of mutuality. Every relationship he had, created, met, observed demonstrated his fundamental option for love, mercy and inclusion, even when everything and everyone around him tempted fear, judgement and exclusion.

And we see that the practices of humility, hospitality and holistic perspective sustained Jesus' capacity for choosing love, mercy and inclusion. With humility, hospitality and holistic perspective as daily practices, it becomes part of one's nature to stand in solidarity with all that lives and welcome all as neighbor, sister and brother. Humility starkly points out the temptations to arrogance, righteousness, and callousness of heart. Hospitality staunchly opposes the instinct to think or feel attitudes that sound like "not in my backyard (of neighborhood, country, congregation, local community)" or "we can't do that (take in a refugee family, truly pray with another faith tradition, engage in meaningful relationships with those who are least like us, really create partnerships among ourselves that test the boundaries of ownership and control)". And holistic perspective systematically critiques a way of being in the world and in relationship that calls into question whose needs are primary, whose agenda is addressed and whose presence is both faceless and voiceless.

How honest, welcoming and holistic we can be with each other will pave the way for a conversion of heart needed by the larger world that could happen through our witnessing to it. The cost will be great. The cost not to witness such humility, hospitality and holistic perspective will be far greater. Perhaps part of our vocation at this moment in time is to witness to the capacity for conversion that lies fallow in the human heart.

In some ways this seems so simple that we might wonder why or how we more often than not fall short of making the Gospel choices. The soul-depth truth is that these Gospel choices are not easy, popular, successful, or user-friendly. We run the risk, time and time again, of holding lightly what we've come to know as our prestige, our power and influence, our possibility of failure, and our propensity for achievement—all in service of those to whom we minister. Nestled in our heart's mind though are the perennial temptations Jesus faced in the desert. In the desert of our own lives and ministry of elected ministry we face the same temptations. Thinking and acting, and

praying and leading as one will surely shift the tectonic plates of security, safety, comfort and control. Fear, judgement and exclusion are templates for us, even if they are our defaults, they are templates nonetheless. And it takes daily attentiveness to discern when we allow our default templates to reign.

Conversion of Heart: So what kind of conversion of Heart will prompt us to weave global solidarity for the life of the world? How can we move beyond the ways in which we have come to think and act and pray and lead as one? How might we find the courage and vision to actually cross the threshold at which we've been standing for decades now? Where do we turn when the choices before us are stark, serious, sobering and self-effacing? We can turn to Laudato Si' for some practical and prophetic conditions needed for conversion of heart in a Spirituality of Wholeness:

"The human environment and the natural environment deteriorate together; we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation. In fact, the deterioration of the environment and of society affects the most vulnerable people on the planet." (48)

"It needs to be said that, generally speaking, there is little in the way of clear awareness of problems which especially affect the excluded. Yet, they are the majority of the planet's population, billions of people. These days, they are mentioned in international political and economic discussions, but one has the impression that their problems are brought up as an afterthought, a questions which gets added almost out of duty or in a tangential way, if not treated merely as collateral damage." (49)

"In different ways, developing countries, where the most important reserves of the biosphere are found, continue to fuel the development of richer countries at the cost of their own present and future. The land of the southern poor is rich and mostly unpolluted, yet access to ownership of goods and resources for meeting vital needs is inhibited by a system of commercial relations and ownership that is structurally perverse." (52)

"A sense of deep communion with the rest of nature cannot be real is our hearts lack tenderness, compassion, and concern for our fellow human beings. It is clearly inconsistent to combat trafficking in endangered species while remaining completely indifferent to human trafficking, unconcerned about the poor, or undertaking to destroy another human being deemed unwanted." (91)

Lakota Sioux Chant

Part Three: Witnessing of Earth, Fire, Air, Water and Spirit and the Conversion of Will Needed

In Part Three, I'll begin again with a story, invite yet another test—this one has only one question and a one-word answer, so the tests are getting easier, or so we think. Next I'd like to employ the characteristics of Earth, Fire, Air, Water and Spirit as a way of understanding how we might move forward together. And then suggest some practical next steps for women religious to embrace the conversion of will needed for these times as a radical response to the Gospel message of Jesus Christ, for the life of the world.

- Story
- Test of Earth Awareness
- Characteristics of Partnerships
- Conversion of Will: Spirituality of Influence

First the story: I return to our family Queen, Mackenzie. I asked her how things were going midway through second grade. She responded with great enthusiasm that she was a leader and that's how things were going. Of course, I prodded about what being a leader meant. She thought for a while and then explained that the teacher says she is

leader and calls her a leader. Upon further conversation, I was trying to help her see that the teacher was certainly inviting all of the children to be their best and do their best, etc., Kenzie stopped me and declared that while the teacher was encouraging all of the children, she was, in fact, a leader! And the explanation of why that was the case was quite profound: Kenzie simply said that she was a leader because the teacher always asks her to do things first because she's not afraid to make a mistake.

Leadership: ability and freedom and courage to try things first because there is no fear of making of a mistake! Would that leadership on every level in our world, nations, states, cities, neighborhoods, churches, temples and mosques, congregations, ministries and communities exercised that kind of leadership.

The freedom and courage needed today to resist the temptation to be afraid of stepping out in response to the critical issues of our times looms everywhere in our world, even in this room and in each of our minds and hearts. The resources needed to eradicate poverty are readily at hand; the resources needed to honor Earth's capacity to heal and flourish abundantly for all of life are readily at hand; the one resource that is blatantly absent is the one that is most needed: will, choosing to think and act and pray and lead as one. Whether we are critiquing the global landscape of political, economic, social, ecclesial, cultural or educational leadership or whether we consider our own capacity for freedom, courage, fearlessness and will that resource is lacking.

Why is this so prevalent? How does this resistance continue to have such a hold on us, all of us and each of us? In what ways does it manifest itself, even among us, here and at home in our congregations and communities? Perhaps a quick test might shed some light on this mystery.

Test of Earth Awareness: Imagine for a moment that we, women religious around the globe, committed to addressing the symptom and poverty and its cause: the unbridled and obscene accumulation of wealth garnered by the wants of the few being met at the literal expense of the needs of the many. How would we need to work together in order for our witness to a radical response to the Gospel message in this historical and cultural context to become a reality? I'll give you a hint: the answer is only one word! (allow time for engagement at tables)

I'm going to surmise that the answer "partnership" barely emerged and if it did, there is very little understanding of what it actually means. There are some key ways that humans attempt to work together:

Competition: whereby two or more people work against each other for the same goal;

Cooperation: whereby two or more people work with each other for the same goal;

Collaboration: whereby two or more people work with each other for a shared goal freely and willingly using processes and resources to do so;

Partnership: whereby two or more people work together in creating a shared goal freely and willing using processes and resources to do so with total mutuality of power, influence over the outcome.

We women religious are quite adept at cooperation and even collaboration. Many wonderful projects exist demonstrating our ability to work together in service of God's people and all Creation. The international community recognizes that need for partnerships as the way into a future that is healthy, whole, sustainable, just, peaceful, and viable for all members of Earth, Our Common Home. While all partnerships are collaborations and cooperative in construct, the reverse is not true. And we tend to use the word partnerships quite freely even though the efforts we're describing fall far short of true partnerships.

The most compelling aspect of a partnership revolves around the dynamic of power and control. In order for a collaborative effort to upgrade as it were to a partnership, the very goal trying to be achieved needs to be mutually

discerned and the resources, all of them, need to be “put on the table” and offered with no strings attached. And the outcome needs to emerge and unfold and develop as the partnership evolves. The need for flexibility, error, change of direction, shift in planning, and even the presence of failure demands a freedom, courage and fearlessness beyond what many of us are used to offering.

The very best example of a partnership is the miraculous process of conception. Our 7th grade science and high school biology teaches that this remarkable act of reproduction by all species is not merely an act of cooperation and collaboration. It is a partnership in the fullest sense of the word. The individual cells bring all that they have to the effort, they give over their own identity/power/influence in the process of creating together what neither one of them can do alone. And the new entity, while containing every bit of the original cells, is an entirely new creation. Science even ascribes a new name. In fact, the original cells cease to exist, they have died in the act of creating together what neither of them could have done alone.

When the international community talks about creating partnerships in order to meet the 2030 SDGs or address global crises, it becomes easier to see why it is so difficult to do. And the countries and governments that have the most to give over are the ones who resist becoming partners. This pattern is found not only among the typically wealthy, developed, so-called “first world” countries, although it does play out in greater starkness among those stakeholders. The pattern is alive and well within and among all nation-states and governments. The human desire and tendency for power and control exists everywhere and when the political and economic atmosphere in the global neighborhood is dominated by this energy, the creation and achievement of true partnerships all but disappears on the horizon as a dream, an impracticality, totally unrealistic, a Pollyanna mode of behavior.

It’s humbling to realize how women religious are perceived by the international, diplomatic community. We’re described as:

- a. Worldwide presence and effective/efficient network
- b. Long histories
- c. Present in very hard places
- d. When the going gets tough, we don’t leave
- e. Accomplish a lot with a little
- f. Come to table for persons and issues not our own (women, children, planet)

Might we be ripe for creating true partnerships? How can we learn how to do this? Where do we turn for insight, guidance, modeling, and benchmarks?

Characteristics of Partnerships: Perhaps we could look to the presence of God’s Spirit in Creation and see how Earth, Fire, Air, Water and Spirit can teach us to think and act and pray and lead as one.

Earth: consistency, responsible, reliable, respectful, persevering

What if we exercised these attributes of Earth in creating partnerships with each other and many others in order to weave solidarity on the Planet? What if we committed to plant a tree for every member and every ministry every year? And what if engaged the most diverse groups to join us? Or what if we joined groups already doing this very act? What if we really partnered with each other leaving here knowing that all over the world, women religious were going to be partners and begin replenishing and restoring the very life-giving soil of Earth, Our Common Home? And by doing so, weave a web of thought, action, prayer and leadership around the world? Simple, strategic, sacred and sustainable partnerships.

Fire: creative, transformative, enthusiastic, courageous, vigorous, zealous, daring, decisive

What if we initiated efforts to transform our heart, mind, home, neighborhood, community, congregation every month of the year? What if we committed to transforming our worldview, transforming our capacity for compassion, transforming our comfortable comfort zones, transforming our complacency, transforming our inertia? And what if we engaged with each other and others to do this really hard work of transformation? What if we really partnered with each other leaving here knowing that all over the world, women religious were going to be partners and set ablaze the fire of transformation thereby replenishing and restoring the very digestive system of Earth, Our Common Home? And by doing so, weave a web of thought, action, prayer and leadership around the world? Simple, strategic, sacred and sustainable partnerships.

Air: vigilant, kind-hearted, trusting, clarity, optimistic, joyful

What if we created conversation circles on the political and economic issues to address the environmental concerns each season of the year? What if we made use of the venues we have to invite others into courageous conversations about the issues that really matter right where we live? It is increasingly clear that the way one changes the world is to change the world where one's feet are. What if we reached out to our local political and economic leaders in ways that fostered partnerships in order to create barrios, neighborhoods, villages, towns, cities in which all beings are nourished and nurtured to live life fully and freely? What if we really partnered with each other leaving here knowing that women religious, all over the world, were going to transform the very respiratory system of Earth, Our Common Home? And by doing so, weave a web of thought, action, prayer and leadership around the world? Simple, strategic, sacred and sustainable.

Water: nourishing, healing, sustaining, understanding, forgiveness, compassion, mercy

What if we provided healing and reconciliation rituals that took place on significant international remembrance days?

8 March	International Women's Day
22 March	World Water Day
22 April	Earth Day
22 May	Bio-Diversity Day
9 August	Indigenous Peoples' Day
21 September	International Day of Peace
17 October	International Eradication of Poverty Day
8 December	International Human Rights' Day

What if we were intentionally inclusive of all religions and faith traditions in our locales? What if we extended this inclusion to all sectors making sure that there was some public awareness of these rituals? And what if we offered "take-home-rituals" so that families, businesses, schools and places of worship could engage in rituals that heal and reconcile? What if we really partnered with each other leaving here knowing that women religious, all over the world, were going to heal and reconcile the very circulatory system of Earth, Our Common Home? And by doing so weave a web of thought, action, prayer and leadership all over the world? Simple, strategic, sacred and sustainable.

What appears necessary for these times is a spirituality of influence that points us to the integration of what we know with the fortitude of will to actually choose to create and commit our resources of time, energy, personnel, mission, charisms, and ministries in the service of generating partnerships for the life of the world. *Laudato Si'* is filled with elements of a Spirituality of Influence based on the Gospel message of Jesus:

“The most one can expect is superficial rhetoric, sporadic acts of philanthropy and perfunctory expressions of concern for the environment, whereas any genuine attempt by groups within society to introduce change is viewed as a nuisance or romantic illusion or an obstacle to be circumvented.” (54)

“Every violation of solidarity and civic friendship harms the environment. In this sense, social ecology is necessarily institutional, and gradually extends to the whole of society, from the primary social group, the family, to the wider local, national, and international communities.” (142)

“The extreme poverty experienced in areas lacking open spaces, or potential for integration, can lead to incidents of brutality and to exploitation by criminal organizations. In the unstable neighborhoods of mega-cities, the daily experience of overcrowding and social anonymity can create a sense of uprootedness which spawns antisocial behavior and violence. Many people in these conditions are able to weave bonds of belonging and togetherness which convert overcrowding into an experience of community in which walls of the ego are torn down and the barriers of selfishness are overcome.” (149)

“The gravity of the ecological crisis demands that we all look to the common good, embarking on a path of dialogue which requires patience, self-discipline, and generosity, always keeping in mind that realities are greater than ideas.” (201)

“An integral ecology is also made up of simply daily gestures which break with violence, exploitation, and selfishness. In the end, a world of exacerbated consumption is at the same time a world which mistreats life in all its forms.” (230)

Lakota Sioux Chant

Spirit: animating breath of God, maintaining and sustaining the presence of Holy Mystery.

How to think, act, pray and lead as one with this animating breath of God? Do we make it harder than it really is? Do we plan in such a way that the process itself extinguishes the very animation? Is it possible that the resistance to cross the threshold is real enough for us that we stop just short of taking that step, together?

In closing, perhaps a final story could enliven Pope Francis’ call to religious to “Wake Up the World” and cross the threshold that will weave a global solidarity for the life of the world.

My Dad died on a Sunday afternoon in 1996, in his own home, sitting in his own favorite chair. My brothers and sister and I were a family tag team in union with the wonderful hospice professionals.

My one brother and I were present that Sunday afternoon along with my Mom and my 2 year-old niece who called me “Carmel” because she didn’t yet know how to say “Aunt Carol”. When my brother came to the house to relieve me for a few hours, I went upstairs to rest. I’m sure you know how you rest in those kinds of situations, with one eye and ear open on alert for the next step in the journey.

I was resting for about an hour when I heard little footsteps coming up the stairs and into my room. I remained still with my eyes closed. Before I knew it, my niece climbed up onto the bed and was leaning over me with her hands on my cheeks. She was whispering, “Carmel, Carmel, Carmel—are you in there, Carmel?” I laughed and she asked me if I was happy since I was laughing. I looked right into her beautiful, innocent eyes and said that I was happy. She then sat up straight, looking at me from above and said with total clarity and conviction: “Good, Carmel, because Daddy

and Pop-Pop need you downstairs right now!” My brother had sent her up to get me for what were the final hours of my Dad’s life here as we loved and prayer and sang him into eternity that day.

I think of that experience as we come to the end of this reflection this morning. Truly we are in living in times where the World and all of God’s Creation whisper louder and louder to us: Are you in there, women religious? What is your worldview? Are you really seeing what you’re looking at? Do you really see the multiple opportunities for you to be the fullness of a radical response to the Gospel in these historical and cultural times? Are you able to see what is and can you see what could be if you were weavers of a global solidarity? And can you see the challenge and cost that weaving will be to you?

Of course, we want to give a positive response to that question. Yes, we are “in there” and yes, we are happy. Happy here means the kind of joy about which Pope Francis speaks. A joy that is contagious and palpable. A joy that comes from the Heart of God and our faithful response to our vocation, not counting the cost of that “yes” spoken and lived in great happiness.

So then the moment comes when the world and all of God’s Creation awaits the joining of our minds and hearts in a way that embodies the current call: “good, because the world and all of God’s Creation need you right now.” We are needed in ways, perhaps, that we have never been needed before. We are needed to weave global solidarity for the life of the world.

Sisters, are you in there? Are you happy? Good, the world and all of God’s Creation needs you right now!

Sr. Carol Zinn, SSJ

Dr. Carol Zinn, a Sister of St. Joseph from Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia, PA has ministered in the formal and non-formal education profession. Dr. Zinn served on her Congregation’s leadership team and in the Presidency of LCWR (Leadership Conference of Women Religious) for a 3 year term, 2012-2015. Sr. Carol served as the main representative for the Congregations of St. Joseph, an NGO in General Consultative Status with the Economic and Social Council at the United Nations. She represented over 15,000 Sisters of St. Joseph who live and minister in 57 countries.

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