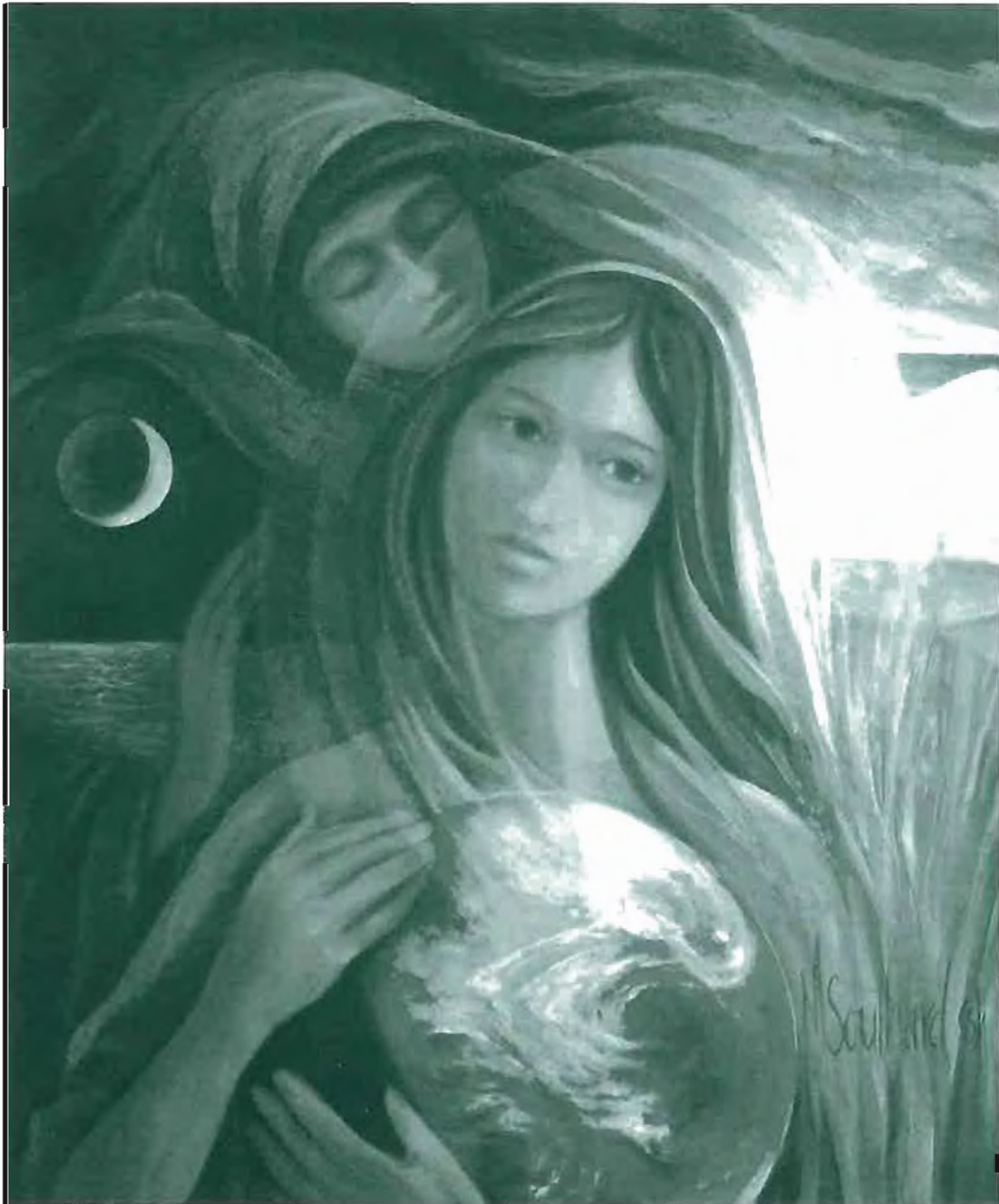


# THE Occasional Papers

The Leadership Conference of Women Religious

Winter 2011



*Behold, I am Doing Something New*

# THE Occasional Papers

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The Occasional Papers publishes articles on topics of interest to the membership of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. Additional copies may be purchased by contacting Carol Glidden at 301-588-4955 or [cglidden@lcwr.org](mailto:cglidden@lcwr.org).

Editor: Annmarie Sanders, IHM

The Occasional Papers  
Advisory Committee:

Eileen Campbell, RSM  
Nancy Conway, CSJ  
Lynn Jarrell, OSU  
Nancy Schreck, OSF  
Mary Ann Zollmann, BVM

Cover Artwork:

Mary Southard, CSJ

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Leadership Conference of  
Women Religious  
8808 Cameron Street  
Silver Spring, MD 20910  
301-588-4955  
301-587-4575 (fax)  
e-mail: [asanders@lcwr.org](mailto:asanders@lcwr.org)  
[www.lcwr.org](http://www.lcwr.org)



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Cover artwork and reflection by Mary Southard, CSJ

*"Mother of the Night, Daughter of Dawn"*

*Out of the darkness of our time, Sophia, our ancient Mother, Creator Spirit comes,  
doing something brand new. She draws close, whispering new wisdom,  
breathing into us the guidance of Earth we need, bringing forth a new dawn!*

# Behold, I am Doing Something New

**M**embers of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious have embarked on a corporate contemplative process to help shape religious life as it moves into the future in ways that are responsive to the realities emerging in the world and church.

The process centers on the line from Isaiah 43:19, "Behold, I am doing something new... Can you not perceive it?" and is designed to enhance LCWR's commitment to:

- Empower the conference to stand on the horizon, alert to the emerging new questions and ideas that impact religious life, and particularly religious life leadership
- Engage LCWR members in an exploration of the significant new questions shaping religious life today
- Provide leaders with resources, analyses, and ideas for exercising anticipatory leadership within their own institutes as they engage the emerging questions with the members of their institutes.

This issue of *Occasional Papers* is intended to assist members to enter fully into this conference-wide process.

*'Behold, I am doing something new ...'*

# The Journey to Newness: Mining the Wisdom of the Exilic Literature

Nancy Schreck, OSF

**T**he quotation from Isaiah bubbling over with promise is a lovely way to frame the LCWR Contemporary Religious Life reflection process. As we begin this reflection it is important to acknowledge that it can be dangerous to appropriate a particular biblical passage to a portion of the believing community. At the same time it is helpful to use our tradition to draw wisdom for the work that is before us. So this article begins in the hope of balancing this process. What is sought is a contemporary hearing of this ancient utterance of promise, of hope and new life. Our desire is to draw water from the well of the experience of those long skilled in the deep traditions about the character, will, and purpose of God. So while there is discomfort at taking a biblical passage intended for the entire faith community and appropriating it to a particular group, we do so acknowledging its larger meaning while at the same time allowing it to help us as women religious respond to our particular time in history.

In order for our promise to guide us well, we need to explore the context that gave it birth. This belief in the promise of newness was formed in the depths of night, in a time when the whole known world of Israel had fallen apart, when to speak about something new seemed as far-fetched as the sun shining in the middle of night. It was born in the midst of exile, when a slight hope pulled from the machinations of Babylon and Persia led Isaiah to boldly claim that something new could happen. And while others analyzed the situation politically, Israel

claimed it was about the revolutionary, subversive, and disruptive presence of God. God was about to rescue, liberate, and transform the people! Now, good as that might sound, it would happen only through the dismantling of much that Israel had come to rely on. Exiled Jews of the First Testament were geographically displaced of course. But more than that, they experienced the loss of a structured, reliable world that gave them meaning and coherence. They found themselves in a context where their most treasured and trusted symbols of faith were mocked and trivialized or dismissed. This is dismantling par excellence.

A long tradition about the character, will, and purpose of God formed the promise: God is always on the side of those who are most marginalized. Therefore in order for the reading to hold promise it must be heard with ears of those who feel most abandoned. "Parent of orphans and protector of widows is God... God gives the desolate a home to live in, and leads out the prisoners to prosperity, but the rebellious live in a parched land." (Ps. 68:5-6)

To understand any scripture passage we must explore its context. To appreciate the Isaiah passage we will briefly look at



*Nancy Schreck, OSF (left): "If God is to be able to partner with us in creating a new future, it will be because we, like the people in the biblical exile, come to know our call to be a prophetic minority."*

both the larger context and the immediate one surrounding Is. 43:19. In the broad context it is important to note that this passage comes in the portion of Isaiah traditionally known as Second Isaiah.

In chapters 1-39 Isaiah is ruminating on the loss caused by Exile. Everything has collapsed: Jerusalem, with the king on his throne and the priest in the temple, has been destroyed; the community is scattered. The break between loss and comfort must be honored and lingered over and Isaiah is careful not to rush to

the necessity for human agency, collaborating with God's transformative power.

In the third portion, Isaiah links the resolve of heaven and the possibility of earth and teaches that it is not enough to be comforted by assurances. Listeners must act! In Is. 56-66 the community is addressed by urgent imperatives to action. They must engage in the hard work of reconstruction. This is not about a return to normalcy. There is nothing left of the old infrastructure. This is a new city, not the old one restored. So after all

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Our call is to understand ourselves,  
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but to an earlier time of our prophetic identity, our deepest foundation,  
to a time when we were free to be  
the expression of our founders' wildest vision.

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comfort. Here, as Walter Brueggemann says, is "the courageous practice of grief." What Israel has always known is that loss and grief somehow permit newness. And by contrast loss denied creates social dysfunction. So our promise of newness is preceded by 39 chapters of grief work. The exhaustion of old things does not automatically create new things. Something else must happen first, grief must be honored.

Second Isaiah and any promise therein without reference to loss (40-55) seeks to have hope without acknowledged suffering. Without the hard and painful work of loss and grief, hope is simply not credible. This hope is too easy. It is too "out of context" to have transforming power. So Isaiah takes us out beyond our comfort zone to that acknowledged place of loss and of wonderment about YHWH and what YHWH is doing. The poetry of hope does not float in the sky, but gets down to real life practicality and leads to

the lovely assurances there is a summons to a departure: you must go and do:

*Rouse yourself, rouse yourself!  
Stand up, O Jerusalem...  
Awake, awake, put on your strength,  
O Zion, Shake yourself from the dust,  
rise up, O Captive Jerusalem, loose the  
bonds from your neck, O captive daughter  
Zion.  
Sing, O barren one, who did not bear...  
Everyone who is thirsty come to the  
water...  
Maintain justice and do what is right....  
Seek God while God may be found....  
Loose the bonds of injustice, undo the  
thongs of the yoke, let the oppressed go  
free,... share your bread with the  
hungry, and bring the homeless poor into  
your house....*

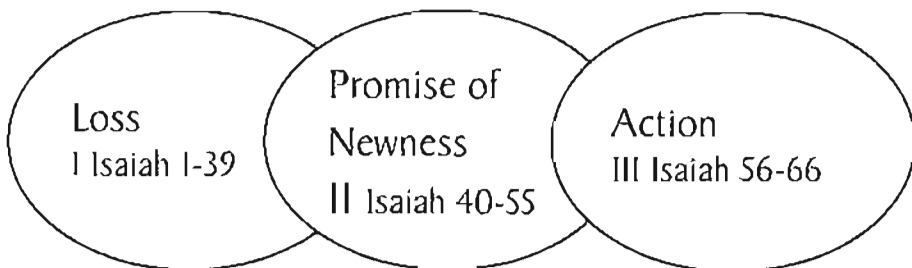
So our promise sits between loss and the action required to create the option of new life.

Isaiah 43: 15- 17 provides the more immediate context for the promise of newness. The verses offer a remembrance of the old – the liberation of the Exodus. A deed done long ago is superimposed on the current drama. Then, just about the time we are ready to believe that God will do what God has always done, this follows: "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert."

Does this really mean to forget the old? In a puzzling introduction to our passage of promise, the listeners are told they are not to think of the past. They are guided to think of the present. This directive is provocative because rarely do prophetic writings give this advice, rather prophets often call for remembering. Why this new encouragement? Because it is a great temptation to remember life when all was well and because what was announced in the past has already come to be. YHWH is reliable.

Faith does not have to do only with the past. It must focus on the present and the future. Literally Isaiah is saying: look upon me as one who makes something new happen now. The future is already begun. It is springing up. God's activity is going forward in a relentless way. We must perceive it. It is not limited to what was earlier, what was of old, and to its interpretation. The struggle is past, from now on they hear the words: "There is a way..." so they should no longer think of the first exodus, but of the second and the tenth and the one we are experiencing now. The text models the function of biblical tradition: the experience of the past helps toward an understanding of things in the present. The continuity of God's faithfulness makes hope for the future possible.

The new thing which God proclaims God's self to be about is the new thing Israel had ceased to expect, to hope for, or believe in. They thought God's saving deeds were a closed chapter. Now what is springing up is a new thing, and Israel is required to be shaken out of a faith that has nothing new to learn about God's activity. Isaiah warns that the real danger is



faith that has ceased to be able to expect anything really new from God.

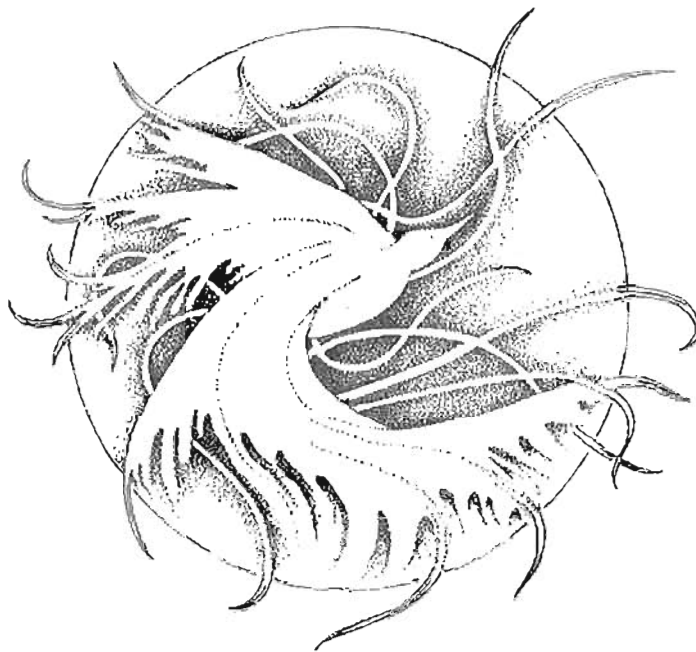
## Some Applications on a More Personal Note

So we take a leap to our own place and time. We are aware that the book of Isaiah is about a real city, Jerusalem, in a very different time. But its lessons strengthen us for our time. The utilization of the metaphor of exile for religious life is not easy or obvious and for some not compelling. But it is for me a framework creating hope in our time. It is about entering a new place which at times feels dangerous and deeply alien. In those times we hear in tender speech turned toward the wounded that God is about to create something new.

How can the wisdom of the exilic literature assist us in our journey to newness? I suggest the following:

**From First Isaiah:** Our dismantling is not only a physical one, and as we work with the many dimensions of our diminishment we are reminded that the promise of newness is born from a great letting go. At times we see the loss without a larger perspective. Have we truly believed that in order for the vision of Vatican II's universal call to holiness to be realized it is essential that there be this letting-go? It is one thing to claim the universal call when the church is full of clergy and religious, and quite another to embrace it when there is no longer the overwhelming number and influence of women and men religious. In a very real way religious congregations are laying down their lives so that this new way of being church can be born.

**From Second Isaiah:** "Do not remember the former things or the things of old." One of our temptations is to remember the "large times" of religious life. We like to go to the more immediate and "successful" memories of ourselves. Isaiah knew this great temptation not to remember deeply enough. Just a few chapters beyond Isaiah's admonition there is an invitation to a deeper remembering. "Look to the rock from which you were hewn, to the quarry from which you were digged." (Is. 51:1) Isaiah



### Artwork and reflection by Arlene Ashack, IBVM

*"PeaceWeaver" is a visual statement that the work of the Spirit in us -- integrating, enticing, enlivening, challenging us beyond our limitations -- is in itself bound to be limited.*

*The invitation is to open ourselves to be touched by the dynamic flow of the "something new" occurring in and around us.*

reminds Israel not to settle for remembrance of itself as a powerful nation but to go to the very roots of its being, to its deepest identity. Here there is substance for the new. This is a critical time in religious life for exploring our deepest identity, not our more recent past. Our call is to understand ourselves, not from a period when we were a labor force in the church, but to an earlier time of our prophetic identity, our deepest foundation, to a time when we were free to be the expression of our founders' wildest vision. I do not mean this in a romanticized way but as a means to know what is demanded of us today. Robert Wicks reminds us that "there is a difference between nostalgia and spiritual remembering. Although there is a certain sweetness to nostalgia, it is but a silver casket when it pulls us into the past so that we can't be in the present." If something new is to be created, it must come from the creative and inventive expression of our deepest story in response to the new time in which we live.

**From Third Isaiah:** The "final" part of the exilic journey is one of action. It is easy to put all our trust in God who

promises to do something new, and then peacefully live out our days in the relative satisfaction of having had a heroic past. But the challenge before us is to ask if we are doing the things necessary to create the possibility of a future for religious life. Solutions that do not come from our deepest identity are a dime a dozen. But if God is to be able to partner with us in creating a new future it will be because we, like the people in the biblical exile, come to know our call to be a prophetic minority. The promise of Isaiah assures us that we have what we need for this work. We are encouraged to know that with God the displaced are on their way home.

Finally doing this work is urgent, not for the survival of any particular congregation or even that of religious life in a particular time and place. We do not do this for ourselves but for the deep purpose of religious life -- that the reign of God may be manifest.

*Nancy is the president of the Sisters of St. Francis of Dubuque, Iowa and a former president of LCWR.*

An Interview with

*Rev. Charles E. Curran*

# What Calls for Our Attention in the Contemporary World

**C**harles E. Curran is a priest of the Diocese of Rochester, New York, who has been serving as the Elizabeth Scurlock University Professor of Human Values at Southern Methodist University since 1991. A past president of the American Theological Society, the Catholic Theological Society of America, and the Society of Christian Ethics, he has also been named the *New York Times* Man in the News and the ABC-TV Person of the Week. He has authored and edited more than 50 books in the area of moral theology.

As LCWR proceeds with its contemplative process to read the signs of the times and probe their implications for religious life, Annmarie Sanders, IHM interviewed Curran regarding what he believes calls for attention today.

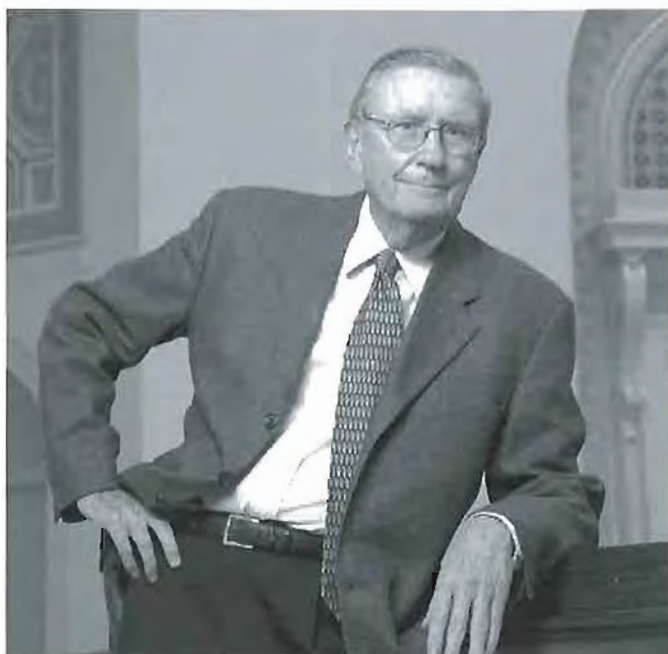
**Q** The major trends occurring in the world today suggest that we in the US could be facing some radical changes in the way we live, relate to the larger world, consume, and survive. What are some of the key questions we (as a nation, a church, as members of religious congregations) should be asking ourselves as we anticipate these change?

Before talking about issues coming down the pike, I want to explain where I stand with the present. I'd like to

start by saying that I am not a totally countercultural person. I believe that there are many good things in the culture and that the culture can teach us some truths we seem to have forgotten. For example, in the US culture we have learned about the importance of freedom, about the role of women, and a lot about human rights. On the other hand, there are negatives, and one that I see as primary, especially in light of the Gospel, is individualism, where the first concern of people is with their own happiness and fulfillment. I'm not opposed to happiness and fulfillment, but in the long-run the question is: How do you find it? Do you find it as an isolated individual looking out for yourself alone or do you find it in your relationships to God and to the communities in which you live?

The danger of individualism is well-expressed in the American idea of success, which for most people is financial success – a good job, a good salary, a big house, a car or two cars or three or four, and a garage to fit them. Connected to this kind of individualism is consumerism and the fact that we consume so much of the world's goods and contribute so much to the negative aspects of the changes in our climate.

Regarding the future, there is no doubt that the major trends will, as you noted, cause radical changes in the way we live, relate to the larger world, consume, and survive. In a certain sense, there are various forms of individualism, for example, tribalism and the idea that our tribe is best, we are number one. This has been a part of the American ethos, and there is no doubt that religion at



*Rev. Charles Curran:  
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on blinders and say  
that we can't change  
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we have always taught,  
then I think we are in  
deep trouble."*

times has played a rather unfortunate role here. We have had this idea that we were God's chosen people -- we were the Promised Land, God had a special place in God's heart for Americans, we were the special emissaries of God to carry on God's work in the world -- and this has colored so much of our thinking and actions. I've never heard a president of the United States of either political party who didn't think God was with us in every war we've waged. There is always a great danger of people manipulating God for their own purposes, and as a nation, we have done that in many, many ways.

In the future, we have to recognize the sort of neo-colonialism we practiced in the past - which was economic, military, and political - is not going to be able to exist anymore. We're part of a global society, of a very interdependent society. We are only one part of it, and granted we might have some leadership roles to play, but to think we can go it alone or that we can get others simply to bend to our ways is just ridiculous - and that is going to become more obvious as time goes on. It's going to be very difficult for us as a society to say we're no longer number one and accept that we have to work in multinational and more dialogical ways with others.

**Q** Do you see any movements happening that are breaking down the pattern that we've created?

Obviously some things are happening as we become more conscious of the global world in which we live. We even see it with the weather. When I was a kid, I didn't know anything about El Niño, but now we're realizing that even weather has a worldwide dimension to it. But it is still going to be difficult for us to realize we are not number one.

**Q** With the rapid shift in our understanding of the world and with numerous advances in the sciences and technology, what do you see happening to the way we think about moral issues? How do we continue to shape our moral judgments in a time of great change and discovery?

From an ethical viewpoint, I would take a sort of middle position on this which is namely that science and technology have made great contributions and we must always be open to them, but we must also be critical of them. The danger is in thinking, "If we can do it, we will do it." We have to recognize that the scientific and technological are only one part of the human, that the human embraces much more, and that sometimes in the name of the human, we have to say no to the scientific and technological.

The issue of dying points out the need to be critical. Just because we have technology to keep people alive, doesn't mean we ought to use it. This means that we may have to turn off the respirator, or say no to the oncologist who says the only thing we can do is give you this new trial drug, the effects of which we are not sure of. We see the need to be critical in the ecological movement. We thought in the past that we could use our technology to do anything we want: build more roads, more malls, and intervene any way we wanted in the ecological structures of our world. It's part of our individualism - we forget that we live in relationship with the natural structures of our society and that they don't exist only for the human good, but rather they have a value and a meaning in themselves. The natural world cannot be used for our own aggrandizement or our own purposes. That line between being open to technological developments and being critical of them is a difficult one.

**Q** The world has also seen a greater diffusion of authority and power over the last few decades with the emergence of new global powers. What do you think might be the effects of this on our lives? Do you anticipate there will be efforts made toward a greater inclusiveness and respect for dissenting views in society and in the church?

I think the danger is that we exist in a very limited time and space, but we make our time, our space, and our culture into something absolute. It seems to me there have been enough

lessons from history to show us that we have to become more inclusive than we have been. For example, take what we Americans have learned from liberation theology, or feminist theology, or what we've learned as a male-dominated world about a preferential option for the poor, or what we've learned about individualism and our own striving after financial success.

The emphasis on inclusivity and diffusion of power and authority is very significant, and we can and should learn so much more from it. However, the danger for both society at-large and for the church is the power of our fear of change. People are fearful about what's going to happen to them. In our country, during the last two decades, for the first time most parents have come to the realization that their children are not going to be as well off as they were. This kind of fear causes people to grab on to false senses of security and certitude. People are holding on desperately in light of changes that are inevitable and are going to take place in our society. I see in some of my students a growing conservatism based on this fear, and it seems to me that this is going on in the church as well.

I am fearful about the church in light of what we see going on today through the Pew Research Center poll conducted about two years ago in the United States. It found that one of every three persons who was brought up in the Catholic church is no longer Catholic today. As a result, the second largest "denomination" in the United States today is ex-Catholics. One out of every 10 people in this country is ex-Catholic. The overall number of Catholics has remained the same because of the large influx into this country of Hispanics. However, we have not been taking very good care of Hispanics, and other faiths have made great inroads into their communities. Also, we are going to have to learn that sometime in this century, the majority of Catholics will not be Anglos.

This implies enormous kinds of changes, and we have to be open to deal with those changes. I worry that we won't be. But, my deeper worry is that the

hierarchy of the church is not willing to face the issues of our contemporary world. Even the Pew Study has said that the reasons why Catholics have left is not because they don't like the Eucharist, or they don't believe in Jesus. The primary reason is because of the church's position on moral issues – on the questions of divorce, sexuality, homosexuality. These are the issues people face in their daily lives, and they are not esoteric, they are very real. I fear that the unwillingness of the church leadership to deal with these tensions on a much deeper level is going to cause more people to give up on the church because they see no change going on there. The church has held a belief that the world is bad and negative. What we have to see is that there is goodness in the world and there is evil, and we have to deal with both.

I think it's a great credit to the Catholic church that we have always been catholic, that is universal. The age-old axiom that nothing human is foreign to the Christian has been a part of who we

speaking about the inferior role of women in their society and in their church. They are determined to do something about this. Changes will happen. What we have to remember is that with our moral teachings, once you get specific, you cannot claim certitude. We have changed our views on so many issues over the years. For as bad as we have been about the role of women, we were so much worse about slavery. We have to honestly face up to the fact that as a church, we have been wrong in the past and, at least on some issues, we have recognized that and finally changed. But if we continue to put on blinders and say that we can't change because what we are teaching now is what we have always taught, then I think we are in deep trouble.

We have to remember that we are a pilgrim church – and this applies to both "sides" – for lack of a better word – the right and the left. The right doesn't want

to admit the church has made mistakes, that the church is always going to be in need of reform. The left sees that the church isn't perfect and is about to give up on it. We have to be willing to struggle to bring about change. There are days when we all will get discouraged, when it seems change isn't coming – and change will never come as quickly as we want it to come. The commitment has to be that we struggle to make it more authentic, to make it more of a true sign of the reign of God in our midst.

**Q** I know you can't generalize about all younger people, but from your work with them, what seems more important to them -- finding a church with certitude or one that is authentic and admits it has made mistakes?

From my experience, I think it's a both/and. There are some who are so fearful of change and are grateful that the one

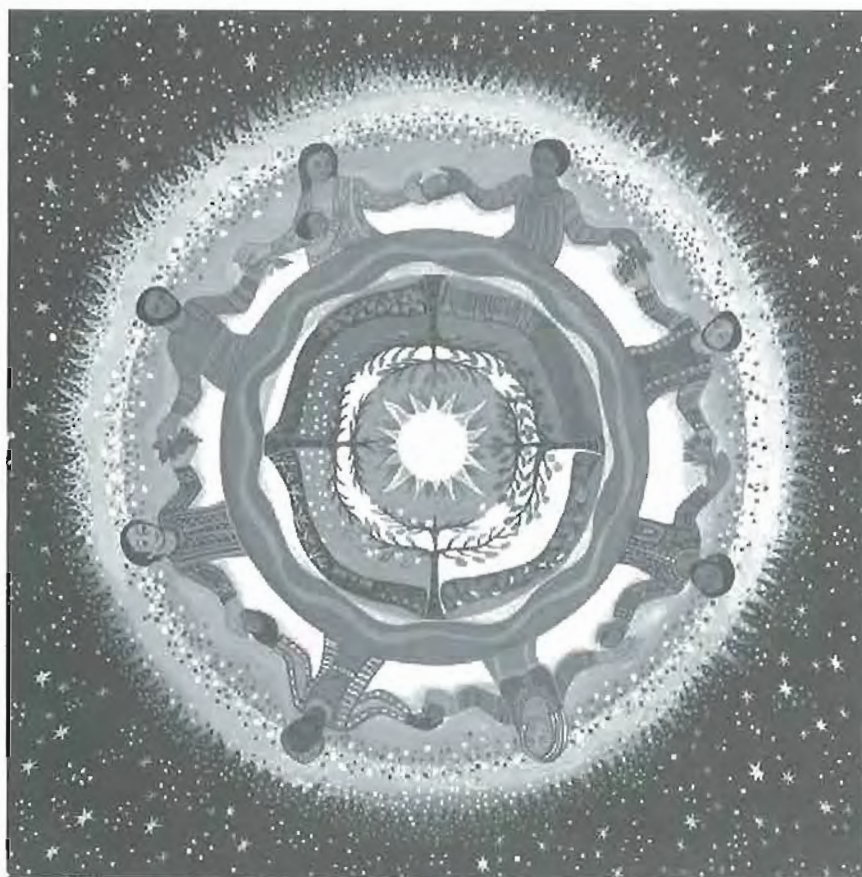
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The leadership of communities of women religious has been a model and template for the rest of the church. Women religious leaders have lived out that tension between the prophetic and the dialogical.

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are. As Catholics we should be open to what is happening all over the globe. We are connected to people in the rest of the world and we can dialogue with them and learn from the dialogue. But we also have to consider the negative part of this and that is, we have to face that Catholicism in Africa tends to be quite conservative. We are going to have to face the same problem the Anglican church is dealing with today with differing viewpoints among its members on divorce, homosexuality, and the role of women in the church.

I attended an international meeting of Catholic moral theologians in Trent in July, and I heard many women theologians from all over the world



Artwork and reflection by Ansgar Holmberg, CSJ

*"The Banquet"*

*We feast at the table of the earth both receiving from and giving to one another.*

thing that doesn't change is the church, despite the fact that everything around us changes. But there are others who are critically asking the questions about why the church is not facing up to the issues of today and, if anything, they are just giving up on the church – and I think that is a huge problem.

Some of the younger theologians are saying, "We weren't even born when Vatican II happened, and the issues you've been fighting for are not our issues. Our issue is: how do we live a Christian life in this world about us?" In many ways they are absolutely right to raise that issue, and they are absolutely right to make it essential. But the danger

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I think there is a danger that we want things much too quickly, too easily, too readily, and we are not willing to continue the long-term struggle that can only be nurtured by hope.

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is twofold. They can be totally critical of society and see it as all evil, but then are not critical enough of the church. I think at times one has to be critical of the church. These issues, especially the ones in my area of moral theology, aren't going to go away and it's because of them that a good number of Catholics in the first world have left the institutional church.

In this country we have Catholic theologians falling into two different groups, and again for lack of a better word, as liberals and conservatives. There hasn't been much conversation between the two groups, they don't associate with one another, they even have their own societies to which they belong. I think it would be better if we could have some ongoing dialogue and discussion since there are many areas where the two groups agree. Maybe the younger people will help us do that.

Religious communities are anticipating assimilating many new realities in the near future. There most likely will be greater diversity in race and ethnicity among

our membership. Communications technologies are becoming more mainstream and pervasive. What kind of impact do you see these new realities having on our shared lives together? What can we do to ready ourselves for these massive changes?

There obviously will be diversity within the United States and the church, and it will only increase. How are we going to deal with a church that will be primarily Hispanic and not Anglo? Are we taking any steps to recognize this now?

I am not an expert on religious life, but it seems to me that ethnic diversity has to become more common. I think we are recognizing that there are going to be different types of religious life – with some people taking vows for life, some not taking any, some who may come to the life for just a few years. I think these are the realities for which religious life needs to prepare, and from what I am seeing and hearing, these kinds of changes are already beginning to occur. I think it is important to remain open to many different possibilities.

What kind of leadership do you feel would be most helpful at this time to ready us for a very different future?

I think religious communities and their leadership are always going to be living out of a tension between the prophetic and the dialogical. The prophetic role is needed to move things forward. However, the dialogical is necessary to make sure that the leader

is in communion with the community. A leader has to listen, has to learn from others.

The leadership of communities of women religious has been a model and template for the rest of the church. Women religious leaders have lived out that tension between the prophetic and the dialogical. They are listening, trying for consensus, working things through. We can see this even in the systems women religious have to choose leaders. Perhaps one of the dangers in the public society is that we solve everything by voting, the majority wins. I think the church at large could learn from you, especially as an example of how a community can choose its leaders.

What questions do you ask yourself when you contemplate the state of the world and the life that is happening around you?

I'd stress first the fundamental belief that there is a Holy Spirit operating in the world and in the church and that belief nurtures and sustains us and gives us hope. But we have to realize what hope is. Hope is not a Wall Street prognostication. Paul in the Letter to the Romans reminds us that if you see something ahead of you, it's not hope. Hope is when you don't see anything. Hope is when in the midst of darkness, you see light. I think there is a danger that we want things much too quickly, too easily, too readily, and we are not willing to continue the long-term struggle that can only be nurtured by hope. We are sustained and nurtured



*"I think this is the way God wants us to live as part of a struggling community."*

Photo by Marie L. Ergo, SL

by this vision we have, and the vision is never going to be fully realized in this life. Hope gives us the strength to continue the struggle. Again, I say, we have to be open to everything that is happening, but we also have to be critical. Living in that tension is always going to be difficult.

**Q** In light of all the shifts happening today, what would you hope the role of the Catholic church would be? What is your vision of church at its best?

Obviously, the church is a community of the disciples of Jesus striving to be faithful to the Gospel in the midst of the tensions in which we live. I think we have all had some experiences of the church at its best, such as the experiences many of you women religious have had

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but we also have to be critical.  
Living in that tension is always  
going to be difficult.

---

as communities. The danger is in seeking community with just those people with whom we agree. The challenge for all of us now is to open ourselves up to even those within the church with whom we disagree. Within the church we have got to learn that, and it's a very difficult lesson.

It seems to me that if we as church can't manage a diversity in opinions, we are never going to get the secular society to do it. At least we have the advantage of starting out with a gospel message that impels us to work in this direction. There is a role that we can definitely play in this regard for the broader church and for the world itself. We have very strong social teaching that talks about the equal dignity of all people, the preferential option for the poor, the danger of individualism and consumerism, the danger of thinking that military force is going to solve all our problems. The

challenge is to live out that teaching and not make it just an appendage. The social teaching of the church is not just for a few. As the bishops said in the 1970s, action on behalf of justice and transformation of the world is a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, of the mission of the church. You can have the best preaching, the best homilies, the best education, but if you don't have social mission, you don't have church. The challenge is how to make the average Catholic much more conscious of this fact.

To their great credit, religious communities have been so good at this in the last 40 years and we are making some efforts in our schools. But where the tire hits the road is where the church gathers for the Eucharistic community on Sundays. It is a great challenge for us to recognize that each individual has to be willing to be broken and poured out for one another.

I think the both/and approach of Catholicism is one of its greatest strengths. We have always believed that the search for truth involves both faith and reason. We believe in scripture and tradition – we have never believed in scripture alone. We believe in grace and good works – we've never believed in grace alone. The danger in the Catholic both/and approach is that sometimes we make absolute the second element rather than seeing the second element in terms of its relationship to the first.

The question raised to many of us, and which we have to raise to ourselves is: Why do we still stay Catholic in the midst of all the problems, all the difficulties? There are many responses we can make, but part of it for me is a theological sense that ultimately I belong to the church. I belong not because I necessarily like the music or the preaching, or even the people. I belong because I believe this is the way in which Jesus wanted his people to have God come to them and they to God. We believe that God comes to us through a Eucharistic community. This is the whole premise of the Hebrew bible and of the covenant. The covenant was not made with individuals, it was made

with a community, and we come to God through the community – with all its problems, with its diversity, with all its frustrations.

I worry when people say, "I'm religious, but I don't go to church." I understand where that's coming from, but I worry about the danger of individualism, that religious is just a me and God kind of thing. This approach loses the important role of the community – a human community, that is imperfect and is never going to be perfect. This is the reason I continue to struggle with the church – despite all of its problems.

A group of us got together in Syracuse this summer after a friend of ours, Frank, died. People were telling stories about Frank, including his wife who talked about giving him a new coat for Christmas. He comes home a week later and doesn't have the coat on. She asks what happened and he said he ran into somebody who needed the coat more than he did. That was Frank, all the way through. Then we all started talking about our struggles with the church. After awhile somebody said, there's got to be something good about the church if it can produce somebody like Frank. I think that's true. There are many living examples of what the church at its best has produced. They are among the primary reasons why I am still part of the church and why I am still working to change it. There is an awful lot of good

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The challenge for all of us now  
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with whom we disagree.  
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that the church can do and it has done a lot of good. It's done a lot of harm, but it has done some good. But above all, I stay because I think this is the way God wants us to live – as part of a struggling community. □

# *Living Contemplatively* Readying Ourselves to See the New

Rose Mary Dougherty, SSND

Recently I was in spiritual direction with someone who was describing her anxiety and confusion about a situation, about which she would be asked to make a recommendation at an upcoming meeting. She talked about the jaundice in her heart that she knew might influence how she saw the situation. She knew she wasn't free and that she couldn't arrive at that place herself.

She went to her meeting. The next evening she sent me an e-mail that she allowed me to modify to include here:

*I began the walk full of my questions about the situation and all the people involved—all newly churned up by a message from one of them this morning. The questions had me in their grip, and try as I did, I couldn't get free.*

*Eventually I began to look at the wonderful huge trees all around the park and invite them to help me. I remembered something I read recently from Benedict XVI's message for the World Day of Peace in 2010: "There exists a certain reciprocity: as we care for creation, we realize that God, through creation, cares for us."*

*I felt as if the trees cared for me by reminding me of God's care for each of us, including each of us in that situation...and that relaxed me and helped me place all these concerns in a bigger picture — that's spaciousness, I suppose. At the heart of the process was a willingness in me to drop the questions and look at my stupendous surroundings, and then the surroundings did their part.*

This person spoke of the need to drop the questions, her questions. Perhaps that is another way of saying that we need to be willing to drop our certainty — what we think we know — for the sake of seeing the more. Shunryu Suzuki, in his book, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, speaks of the importance of "cultivating a 'don't

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"Contemplative seeing" —  
a seeing that is cultivated by a  
readiness for cleansing,  
a willingness to suspend our habitual  
ways of knowing and seeing,  
to see with fresh vision what is ours to  
do or to leave undone,  
to be awake to the new arising  
in our very midst.  
In this is our hope.

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know mind." In relation to this he says, "In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few." It's not that we don't know certain facts or that we deny that we do, it's just that we are willing to hold in abeyance our knowing and our opinions so that we can hear/see the new as it is now.

Some years ago, Carolyn Gratton in *The Art of Spiritual Direction* wrote: "Unless we are grounded in Mystery — unless we experience both ourselves and others as co-participants in Mystery — we find it almost impossible to live in compassionate love of one another for any length of time. Unless we have 'new eyes' that can see the others

contemplatively, it is easy to miss the many-splendored thing that is our life together."

What Carolyn Gratton speaks of is what I would name "contemplative seeing" — a seeing that is cultivated by a readiness for cleansing, a willingness to suspend our habitual ways of knowing and seeing, to see with fresh vision what is ours to do or to leave undone, to be awake to the new arising in our very midst. In this is our hope.

Two examples come to mind that have offered me insight into this contemplative seeing. Perhaps they will speak to you.

The first is a friend's recent sharing about her experience after cataract surgery. She said that what most surprised her were



Rose Mary Dougherty, SSND:  
*"Sometimes we need some practice in knowing that we don't know."*

Today  
the scripture passage  
was about

Ezekiel

who  
was in trouble  
so he collected a lot of  
old bones  
with all the meat  
picked off  
and somehow got them together  
into a pretty productive  
force.

We sisters liked that story.

Suzanne Zuercher, OSB  
Chicago, Illinois

*Behold, I am doing something new...*

**Photo and reflection by  
Margaret Zalot, SSC**

*Sometimes life presents seemingly impossible  
tasks – like being born on a bed of rocks!  
But somehow Mother Goose or Loving God  
nudges us to take the first step, the first flight,  
into a world unknown and allows us to  
approach this life as if for the very first time.*



## Cockleburs and Shrapnel: The Hands of Women

That nearly mindless counting of the cockleburs  
pulled off one by one from the jacket I had worn  
for gathering those wildly yellow blooms beside the lake—  
now at dusk my busy work while watching Lehrer's News—  
that steady motion back and forth from sleeves to sticky pile  
kinetic echoing of women's occupation everywhere.

Who does not remember splinters picked  
from legs that skidded down a bristled post,  
the cinders lifted from an elbow or a knee,  
nettles, stickers, thorns in riddance so methodical?  
The rote of women's hands since time began.

Oh! I have seen the images from those distant zones  
where a grieving mother pulls out shrapnel from her son  
in a new pieta created by our blasphemy.  
I have seen the gaunt and haunted stare of women  
holding to their breasts the lice-flecked heads of infants  
and the scab-encrusted torsos of small boys.

Plucking off, tweaking out the jagged shards,  
drawing forth the poison, rooting out the venom  
one pellet at a time, every thrust pulsating  
with the gentle agony redundant movements make.

Drones that drop their bombs or land mines stumbled on  
have multiplied the spikes of death that women everywhere  
will pick from skins and scalps and bones of their beloveds.

When the anchor starts an update on Afghanistan  
I vacantly continue extraction of the burs  
in arc of cadenced grief joined with energy of women  
digging out in synchrony the residue of death.

*Cecily Jones, SL*  
*Nerinx, Kentucky*



Artwork by Cecilia Yeon Tji, IHM

*Behold, I am doing something new...*

*Behold, I am doing something new...*

## Mendicant

Hollowed out,  
heart-in-my-throat,  
hunger hurting into my bones

I come with cupped hands  
-my begging bowl-  
to the trysting place.

Worried-wheat is poured in  
pressed down  
running over.

My coat is asked  
and then my cloak.  
I stand with sandals  
and a walking stick.  
Enough.

Fetid footpath,  
filled with haunting hollow eyes and  
hungry hands –  
gauntlet!

Set out – sow!  
Stored seed rots.

Carla Mae Streater, OP  
St. Louis, Missouri



Artwork:  
"Feed All People" by Pauline Blandina, OP

## Finding a Seedy Dandelion

You could deceive me with your hair:  
The finely-patterned wisps of white  
quiver beneath a single breath,  
lightly drawn. Equally fragile  
is your slender neck that supports  
illusion with its weary slope,  
as if the vaporous air itself  
proved heavy to the slim arc. Then  
your arms—green, graceful, clinging coils,  
yet brittle—sway before me, lift  
their lovely, plausible frailty.

But still I linger unconvinced,  
having once tested, having once  
touched those hidden, tenacious roots.

Chris Koellhoffer, IHM  
Scranton, Pennsylvania

## Early Gardening

Those first shoots are always a  
surprise.  
What with the snow and all, I'd  
forgotten  
Not how hardy they are,  
But how frail.

The meek inherit the earth again

Kitty Hanley, CSJ  
Albany, New York

*Behold, I am doing something new...*



### Artwork and reflection by Noella Poinsette, OSF

*Fireworks bursting/burning  
- or the seeds of a dandelion eager to impregnate the earth with presence.  
Darkness enveloping  
- or protecting the core of life.  
Energy igniting/drawing all to itself;  
Wisdom birthing in relationship, in poverty.  
And do not our hearts burn moving out from stories of wonder?*

**Artwork and reflection by  
Barbara Cervenka, OP**

*My most recent series of paintings are based on photographs brought by the Hubble Space Telescope. We are the first generation to see these images, to be able to look back so far in time and space. The universe presented to us is beautiful – lightstorms exploding billions of years ago, millions of galaxies, the birth of stars. These star maps show us incomprehensible depths of time and an unbelievable immensity of space, yet they coexist with the minute miracles of earth – the opening of flowers, the symmetry of plants, the perfect geometry of skeleton and shell, the fragile monuments hand-built on earth. In the dark mirrors of these paintings we too can see ourselves reflected.*



**Earth Mother**

Big Round Mother,

Holder of ancient mysteries,

Born of star-fire from time beginning,  
quaked, split and spewed.

Sun gathered moisture churn, spray and soften your surface.  
Light charged weather and wind mold you.

Minute wiggly creatures within you, shape, transform and layer,  
Mountains crumble to give you energy.  
Forests that symphonize, filled with sun power,  
graciously give their rich gifts.  
Bones and sinew of Oh! so many storied living creatures  
All fold within you and give their Maker's love to you!

Patiently you wait in dark shadows  
And heave and grow the seasons  
while bud, bulb and seed are prepared.

Renewing,  
you gather all into Good  
Ever seeking new fertile crevices and furrows  
to create another womb for life.

Helene Mertes, OSF  
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

*Behold, I am doing something new...*

Last evening I sat at table  
Eating the sadness of  
Jew, Christian, and Muslim,  
All passing their minds and hearts  
Filled to overflowing with burdens:  
Fear, violence, terror, and war.

This communion feast,  
Seasoned with passionate desire  
And faithful listening,  
Also served hope,  
For kin of One Light  
Dialogued in love, and  
Peace among us was sweet dessert.

Georgene L. Wilson, OSF  
Wheaton, Illinois

*Behold, I am doing something new...*

**Artwork and reflection by  
Judith Niemet, RSM**

*In sharing my collage entitled  
"War Diminishes Us All," I hope to make  
those who study it aware of the value and ne-  
cessity of forgiveness. New life comes through  
forgiving relationships rooted in acceptance  
and remembrance of God's all forgiving love.*





**Artwork and reflection by  
Doris Klein, CSA**

*"Balancing on the Edge"*  
*Leaning and lifted*  
*on the prophetic precipice*  
*amid the pull of polarities...*  
*the Grace of balancing on the edge.*



**Photo and reflection by Deborah Harmeling, OSB**

*We were at home in soil that*  
*nourished our growth and fed our roots.*  
*Now we are uprooted,*  
*constrained, even tightly bound,*  
*waiting to be planted somewhere*  
*we did not choose.*  
*God is doing "something new" to us.*

## Leap of Faith

A tiny green grasshopper sits  
On the arm of my choir stall,  
So fresh his wings have not grown as  
yet,  
Else I fear some human bean plucked  
them.

He wanders around the stall arm  
Like a little rug rat,  
Wiggles his antennae  
And stretches his back legs as big as  
he.

Suddenly in one giant leap of faith,  
Without a vacillation,  
He soars through the air,  
Over the rail and into the stall below.

He flies! He flies!  
No wings and he flies!  
He lands jarred but on his feet,  
And ready to go!

*Marva J. Hoeckelman, OSB*  
*Watertown, South Dakota*

*Behold, I am doing something*



Photo by Bianca Haglich, RSHM

## Prophet

Let us be  
careful  
of all we throw away  
lest she rise up  
reeking of rot  
like neglected dreams  
brandishing truth,  
that mighty staff,  
disturbing our waking  
peace  
marching like a judgment  
through our perilous  
sleep.

Galen Martini, OSB  
St. Joseph, Minnesota

## Photo and reflection by Baya Clare, CSJ

*Religious women are always trying to move fences; fences that keep us from God and from one another, fences that keep some out and lock some in, fences that limit imagination and hope. The location and shape of the fences change, but the call to confront them with freedom and love is our constant.*



## Mission

Always the ones in need,  
the door knocking at night,  
always the call from far away:  
“Send us women with strong hearts  
and searching eyes.  
Soon.”

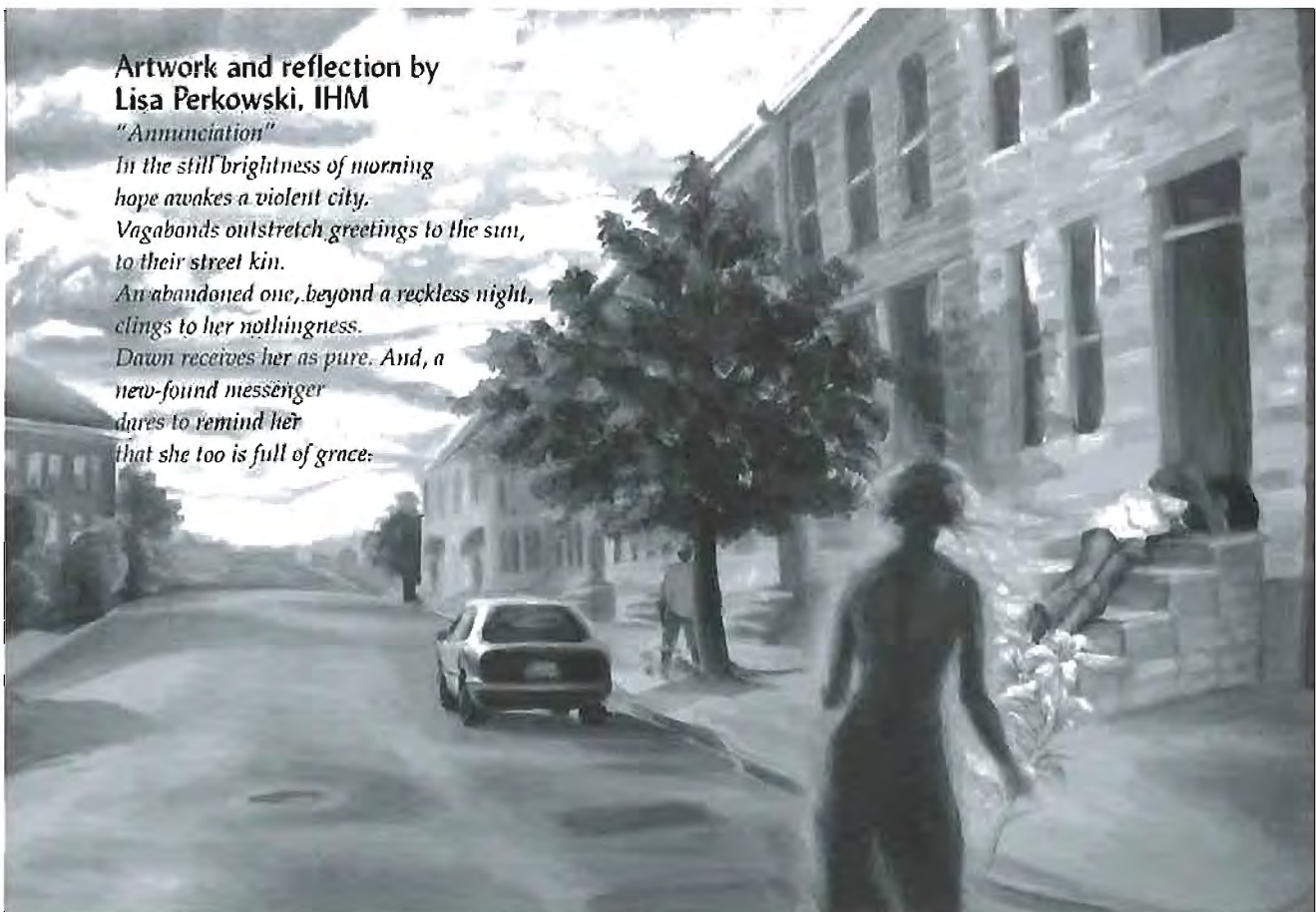
More always went  
than could be spared,  
pulses of fire,  
magnets of light,  
into grimy streets,  
rank caves,  
stark sheds,  
stern prairies,  
swelling fields,  
blinding trails,  
pouring their love like sweat,  
wearing the stench of the poor.

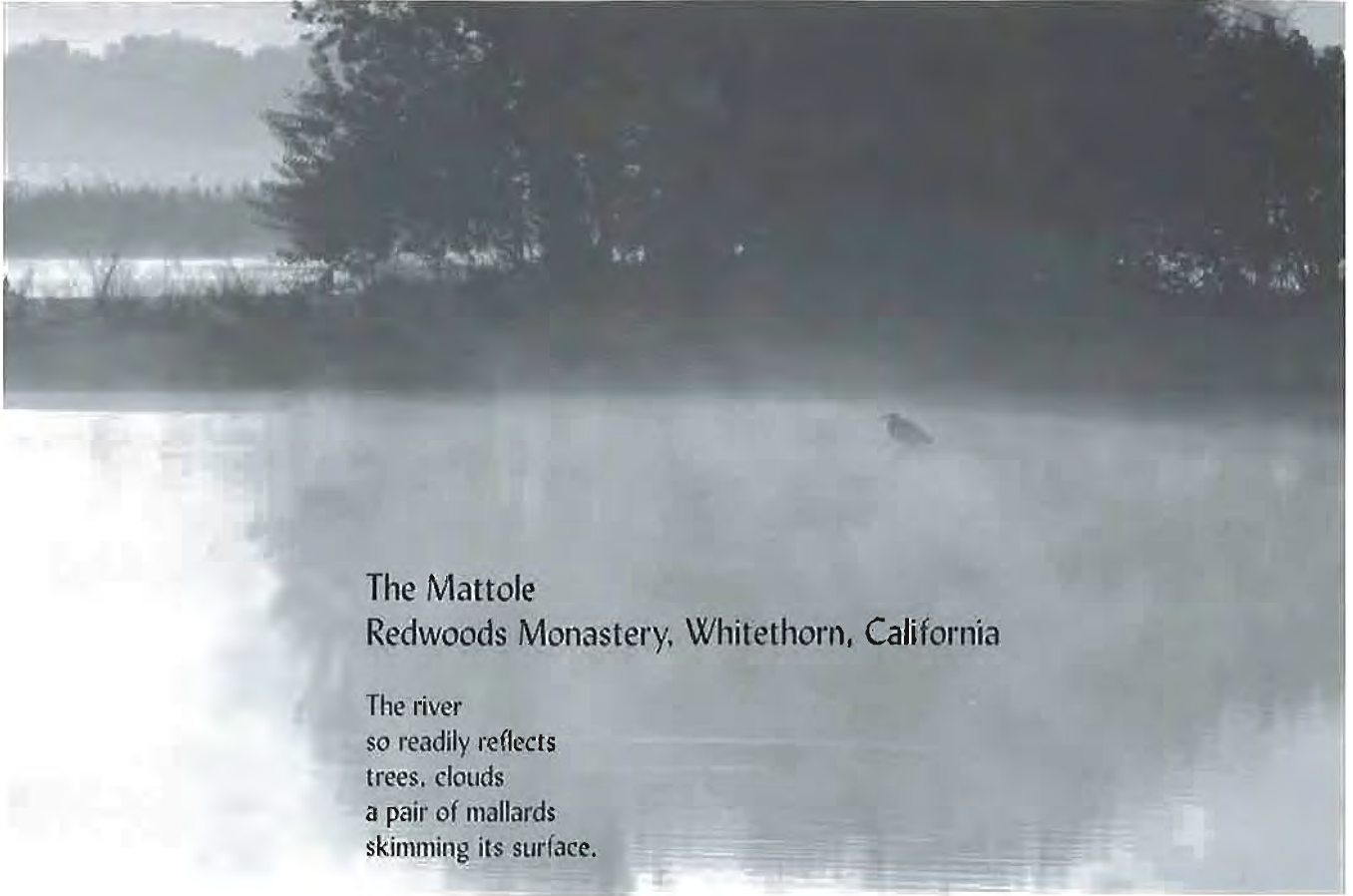
They served themselves up  
like food, like bread.

What love they had! They spent it,  
threw it into the wild wind,  
let their seeds be eaten alive  
or ground into furrows  
of stone and soot.

We who follow, decades later,  
find seeds sprouted, rooted,  
flowers of light  
to wave in the wind.  
We bless those green spikes  
that cracked the sidewalks,  
bless roots tight and twined,  
bless the stubborn love  
that linked the cobbled lives and  
streets,  
that holds them still,  
from the underside --  
sturdy legacy.

Regina Bechtle, SC  
Bronx, New York





The Mattole  
Redwoods Monastery, Whitethorn, California

The river  
so readily reflects  
trees, clouds  
a pair of mallards  
skimming its surface.

The river  
so willingly opens  
to a stone skipped across its green body  
to the osprey diving for a fish.

Photo by  
Marty Dermody, SC

And the river keeps on singing  
its way to the sea.

Could I possibly grow to be like that —  
grow to let the shadows of the world  
reflect in my soul?  
grow to open to the stones of grief  
to the hungers of my sisters and brothers?  
grow to sing my way home?

Kay McMullen, SNDdeN  
Belmont, California

*Behold, I am doing something new...*



Photo by Marilyn Lacey, RSM

If

If Word-Made-Flesh

rolled back the sealed grave's stone  
to walk into the light

If miners entombed for endless weeks

in hard-rock earth  
survived  
sustained by brotherhood  
and trust in love they could not see  
in light far above them

If winter yields to spring

and night to dawn  
again and again and again

How dare we whimper in the dark

pull oblivion's shroud  
around us  
afraid to face tomorrow's  
light?

Maríe Lucey, OSF  
Hyattsville, Maryland

Photo and reflection by  
Margaret Egan, SC

*As we see God in this profound birthing of creation,  
let us seek to find this same loving God  
in the profound birthing of all that is to come.*



## One Small Step

Here is a  
deep  
wide  
wintered memory  
for you.  
Black night,  
shivering cold  
breath hard in your throat  
sending steam in bursts  
dancing in the darkness.  
Black night.  
Stars diamond hard in the sky.  
All is quiet  
all is still  
as the world  
sleeps  
and freezes  
around you.  
Yet  
one of your small steps  
just one  
hesitantly placed  
on the frozen slab of pond  
sends small cracks  
that streak together  
shooting in abundance  
through the ice --  
and the world booms  
with echoed thunder.

Ann Ferry, MFIC  
Boston, Massachusetts

*Behold, I am doing something*

**Artwork and reflection by Suzanne Faulkner, SC**

*"Whirlpool Galaxy"*

*The elements in our oceans, our bloodstreams, DNA, apple pies,  
were formed in the stars, so Carl Sagan named us "Starstuff."*

*The "Whirlpool Galaxy" shows one great galaxy attracted to  
a small galaxy shining in the darkness.*

*If only they could dialogue toward unity, instead of struggle for survival.*



*Behold, I am doing something new...*

## Reaching

A dark night marks time  
once measured by sun and moon.

With the path-finding skills of astronomers  
and the hearts of mystics  
explore the uncharted  
where  
Mystery looms larger than  
the wineskins of tradition  
and informs limping symbols.

Speak with wisdom and passion  
in the mother tongue of hope  
speak to God  
speak of God  
speak to each other  
speak to power  
and speak to all people  
as you sister each other  
into the unfolding new  
of discipleship.

Corine Murray, PBVM  
Dubuque, Iowa



### Artwork and reflection by Nancy Earle, MFIC

*"River of Life"*

*This painting invites the viewer to reflect on words like "radiance," "fragility," "blessing," "journey," "mystery" and the "sacred" in nature. To find in it a space into wholeness and light that opens to the Divine.*



Photo by Annette Brophy, OSB

High in  
winter branches  
nests --  
Imagine  
bird's eyes  
and  
having an  
inkling  
this warm circle  
is only  
a launching  
pad.

Mary Joan Eble, SCL  
Leavenworth, Kansas

*Behold, I am doing something new...*

Artwork by Laurena Alflen, OP



# *For Your Reflection ...*

In order for new life to be realized in my religious institute, I believe we may have to lay down or let go of ...

When I think about my religious institute's "prophetic identity, our deepest foundation, a time when we were free to be the expression of our founders' wildest vision," I image...

Nancy Schreck, OSF notes, "If something new is to be created it must come from the creative and inventive expression of our deepest story in response to the new time in which we live." I sense today's new time is calling us to ...

If I were to choose an image or poetic phrase to capture where I believe religious life is being called, it would be ...