



The Living Charism and Congregational Leadership Today

S. Mary Maher

31 March 2016

The Congregation and Apostolic Religious Life in the Church and World Today

Part I: Challenges in Today's World

Let us put before our minds the theme of this first International Leadership Conference:
The Living Charism and Congregational Leadership Today.

We begin now Part A of our agenda, which is to clarify the *Context of Congregational Leadership Today.*

To situate ourselves in the context of our life and mission, we will spend the rest of today attending to the *Congregation and Apostolic Religious Life in the Church and World Today.* Then, over the next three days, we will take considerable time to explore more deeply the *Congregation as it is Today*, province by province and as a whole.

Only then, with all this as our context, will we be able to consider together our living charism and the challenges we face as leaders to open up the charism to its future possibilities.

In writing this presentation for today, I was “forced” by some power that I hope was the Holy Spirit to begin with the world-situation. It was as if I could begin in no other way. I have been reading and reading, and praying and listening, in the past months – and have been led back always to this one place of beginning: that is, to ask us to bring into our meeting room, into our hearts, into our dialogue, into our coming together as congregational leaders, the situations of suffering and complexity in our world.

If we are going to talk about our living charism, this is the necessary place to begin.

I believe with all my heart that, if we as apostolic religious are to have a future, if we are to participate in the *missio Dei* in the 21st century, we must allow the Holy Spirit to place us in real and effective relationship with the significant challenges facing the human community in our time.

So, there are three parts to today's reflection:

- I. First, let us be bold enough to identify the significant challenges facing the world, the human community, at this time. (*We will spend the morning on this.*)

- II. Secondly, let us consider the situation of apostolic religious life since the Second Vatican Council, with particular emphasis on where we are today. (Afternoon)
- III. Thirdly, let us consider specifically our congregation today. (Afternoon)

I. Significant Challenges Facing the Human Community Today

I will mention five challenges.

1. Economic crises which include two widespread realities:
 - a) the lingering effects of the 2008 financial crisis as they are experienced by ordinary people (as opposed to large corporations or financial institutions) ; this includes high unemployment rates, especially among young people, in developed, industrialized countries.
 - b) global poverty
2. Terrorism
3. Climate Change
4. Evolution of technology and global communications
5. Migration

General Comments:

I want to speak briefly about each of these challenges, but first a few general comments are essential.

- A. These challenges are interrelated and it is vital that we understand the interrelationships.

The three popes we have had in this 21st century have spoken eloquently on all these topics. Most recently, of course, we have Pope Francis' encyclical, *Laudato Si'*.¹

Frequently referred to as the encyclical on the environment, Pope Francis' letter actually reaches deeper into the current situation and tries to highlight the *interrelationships* among the critical challenges of our time. This is very important.

I suggest to you that *Laudato Si'* is a wonderful resource for ongoing formation with your sisters. As Pope Francis himself makes clear, this encyclical "is now added to the body of the Church's social teaching."² It is a great help to foster dialogue with almost any group you can imagine. The Holy Father appeals for such dialogue – "dialogue," he says, "about how we are shaping the future of our planet."³

¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, *Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home*, 2015.

² *Laudato Si'*, n. 15.

³ *Laudato Si'*, n. 14.

We need study, reflection, and informed dialogue because it is possible to be wrong about how these challenges are interrelated. And this can have deadly consequences. For example, migration and terrorism can be conflated – combined, so to speak, into one reality. We see this happening in some of the talk after the bombings in Paris and Brussels. “All Muslim refugees are terrorists and, so, all must be turned away, refused entry,” and so forth. It is a mistake, I think, to believe it is as simple as that.

B. A second general comment is this: We need world leaders who have at least the following characteristics:

- A “moral compass” – That is to say, we need leaders who base their judgments about what is right and wrong on *values* which they have interiorized, and they act accordingly.
- Intelligence – that is, an ability to think, an openness and willingness to rely on experts, to be influenced by wisdom, and to learn from history.

We need world leaders, religious leaders, local leaders of groups and organizations, who have at least a measure of these qualities.

At this point, sisters, I need to say that, as an American citizen, I am disgraced by the strength of support that is being given by so many of my fellow citizens to some of the candidates for the presidency of the United States. The appalling hubris and narcissism and immoral policies being put forward by Donald Trump, and the bigoted ideas that both he and another candidate, Ted Cruz, are now proposing in view of last week’s terrorist attacks in Brussels, are all front-page news in newspapers and in other media all over the world.

In the beginning, I thought Trump’s candidacy was a joke, a kind of “cartoon,” that would soon fade away. Now, I am sick over it. I think it is very dangerous. [It is more than interesting to me that recently the German newspaper, *Der Spiegel*, had a front-page story in which the paper referred to him as the most dangerous man in the world.]

I cannot say enough, sisters, that it is extremely important that we understand deeply – and in the light of the Gospel – the interrelationships among the challenges facing the world today. None of them can be dealt with adequately in isolation from the others. This is a bit of wisdom we need to cling to.

C. My third general comment can best be understood in relation to questions that are never far from my thoughts and my prayer these days: Who are these people cheering for Donald Trump? Who are these people who are so willing and eager to physically assault those who disagree with them? How can it be that there is potential for a significant move to the right also in some countries in Europe and in Latin America – by that I mean a move to exclude people from society and from the benefits of society on the basis of religion or race or ethnicity? Is it possible that this will happen again now? Can it be that British citizens will vote in June to leave the European Union? Will we see that Union fracture, dissolve, especially if other countries do the same thing soon after? It is all entirely possible.

So, my general comment is: We need education that transforms. Something seems to be missing from our educational systems around the world. We do not seem to be forming people to be citizens of their country and citizens of the world. We may be teaching skills, but we are not educating our people to take their place in the world of pluralism and diversity that has been emerging for some time now. Far too often, we encounter people without a moral compass, guided only by self-interest. The only interrelationships they can see among the challenges facing the human community are the ways in which the various challenges affect them personally.

This is not true everywhere, of course. It is not true of *our* schools and ministries. I know that. So, the question naturally comes to us: How can we deepen and broaden our influence, the influence of our educational vision? Can we begin to see already some insights about where our charism may be calling us in the future?

With these general comments in mind, let us now consider each of the challenges. You will notice that I did not list “religious persecution” or violation of religious freedom as a specific challenge. Certainly this is a feature of our world today. I consider it, however, to be included as a major factor in both terrorism and migration as we experience them today. It is one of several forms of violation of basic human rights. Remember: All our significant challenges are interrelated.

I ask you to listen this morning with two things in mind: first, our identity as School Sisters. Bear in mind who we are as a congregation. Secondly, please listen with your particular province in mind. How are these challenges experienced in your province and in the various countries where your sisters serve? I will stop after the brief description of each challenge to give you an opportunity to take some notes.

After this morning’s presentation is completed, you will have some quiet time for personal reflection and then you will go into your provincial council groups. There will be no feedback from the councils, no reports this afternoon. It is just to give you the opportunity to talk to each other as a council about all we will share this morning. Our reflections on these topics will hopefully enter frequently into our deliberations during the rest of the week.

1. Economic crises which include two widespread realities:

- a) the lingering effects of the 2008 financial crisis as they are experienced by ordinary people; this includes high unemployment rates, especially among young people, in developed, industrialized countries.
- b) global poverty.

a) Financial crisis of 2008 and beyond: There is an old saying that we can have perfect vision when we look to the past. We can see how and why things developed as they did. Our vision is much less clear in the present, however, when we try to look to the future and decide how things should develop. Our economic challenges have a lot to do with vision in this sense, a lot to do with how we see and how we fail to see.

I am not going to try in this short space of time to analyze the causes of the financial crisis of 2008. From what I can tell, some of the causes relate to patterns of behavior and decision-making that are just coming to public knowledge now. There have been award-winning books and documentaries

about the whole affair. It is a picture of deception and greed, with a sad measure of simple carelessness. Like many of you, I try to understand what I need to understand to participate in meetings with our financial advisors.

What we do know that is of interest to our understanding of contemporary challenges is that there is a lot of anger in people today. They feel that governments have let them down. In some ways they have a point. Corporations sometimes press upon governments to take away laws and regulations that protect workers' rights. Corporations – not all, but many – seek the least expensive ways to get work done – so where they can get cheap labor, avoid pension funds, demand longer hours of work, they do it.

The so-called middle class is gaining strength in China, while, at the same time, it is disappearing from many other countries of the developed world. Increasingly, it feels as if there are two classes: the rich and everybody else. And everybody else is struggling and most of them are angry about it.

The point I want to make for our purposes today is that this anger and frustration felt by many people, especially young people who are looking for work, creates an environment of polarization and exclusion which does not help but, rather, seriously hinders, reasonable approaches to all the other challenges facing us today. Hopefully, you will see what I mean when we continue on.

b) Global poverty: The second economic crisis is a defining characteristic of the world today. I refer to global poverty. Just take in these statistics. Some 2.7 billion people live on less than \$2 dollars a day. Extreme poverty causes the death of 50,000 people *each day*, approximately 34, 000 of whom are children under five.⁴

The United Nations estimates that 1.2 billion people lack access to clean drinking water; and 2.5 billion people do not have access to adequate sanitation, which leads to water pollution, which in turn leads to diseases that are among the leading causes of death worldwide. For many of us, this reality can remain an abstract idea. For others of us it is painfully real.

Consider also this: The wealthiest 1 percent of the world's population possesses wealth equivalent to that held by the lowest 57 percent. Approximately 85 individuals now own as much wealth as the lowest 50 percent (or 3.5 billion persons).⁵

The obvious issue of “distribution of wealth,” which these statistics bring to the fore, creates difficulties that block the road to eliminating extreme poverty. Even to use those words, “distribution of wealth,” is anathema in the religion of the market. What is beyond doubt, however, is the fact that we have the resources to eradicate extreme poverty worldwide. This has been true for decades. For some, it was the promise of the new millennium. Why do we not do it?

Is one reason the fact that other problems are regarded as more important and urgent? For example, between 2001 and 2013, the United States spent approximately \$200 to \$400 billion dollars annually on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In that same period, its contribution to foreign aid was between \$16 and \$30 billion annually. Some problems, obviously, are regarded as more important or more urgent.

⁴ Matthew T. Eggemeier, *A Sacramental-Prophetic Vision: Christian Spirituality in a Suffering World*, (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2014), p. ix.

⁵ References to the work of various researchers who produced these statistics and many more can be found in Eggemeier, *A Sacramental-Prophetic Vision*, p. 106.

This conclusion points to the real scandal of global poverty. In its extreme form it could be eliminated rather easily. We have the means to do it. The economist Jeffrey Sachs, well-known for his 2005 book, *The End of Poverty*,⁶ maintains that we could eliminate the most devastating consequences of global poverty if foreign aid were to be increased to \$200 or \$250 billion dollars a year.⁷ This is entirely possible. Again, why do we not do it? It is a big question for which we, the human community, must someday answer. The people who suffer extreme poverty are invisible to decision-makers. But they are not invisible to God. Are they invisible to us? I ask myself.

Brief pause for note-taking

2. Terrorism

This is a global phenomenon now. The purpose of terrorist acts is to create panic and fear in the hope of furthering some political, social or religious objectives. Such religiously or politically motivated use of force or violence against persons or property is designed to intimidate a civilian population, a government, or *any* group, really. And it can be highly successful, if we allow it to be. Sadly, we can say that all of us have been impacted by terrorist threats and acts. It is a significant characteristic of the 21st century.

The attacks we saw in Brussels last week placed the fear and horror before us once again. We can feel helpless, and, at the same time, we can be lifted up by the heroism and character of true humanness shown by some of those directly affected by these events. As with the bombings in Paris last November, the world unites in solidarity. People of good will fly the colors of the injured nation. It is a collective sign of resistance.

There are no easy answers or simple solutions to the threat of terrorism. That is perhaps the most important thing we can say about it. Those who try to convince us that they have the answers and that they can quickly fix this mess are deceiving us and telling us what we would like to believe. What we need is more international collaboration. We need leaders who can help us understand and live with the fact that there are no easy answers, leaders who can inspire us to work together toward what we School Sisters call “a more just and truly human world.”

What we find instead, I am sorry to say, is that it is increasingly hard for leaders to get elected or to stay in office with this kind of realistic and values-based approach to our serious global problems. People are afraid and their fear leads to violence against others. This is the kind of atmosphere that produces grave injustices and serious deterioration of unity in individual countries and in the world. This is a time for us to remember who we are, a time for witness to the Gospel we profess to live by. This is the time for our charism.

Brief pause for note-taking

⁶ *The End of Poverty: The Life You Can Save*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

⁷ See again Eggemeier’s summary in *A Sacramental-Prophetic Vision*, p. ix.

3. Climate Change

On the same day as the attacks in Brussels last week, another story found its way to the front pages of the newspapers and on the internet headlines. However, it was almost completely overshadowed by the human drama unfolding in the capital city of Europe. The story concerned the publication of a paper by climate experts which claimed that carbon emissions are transforming our planet much more quickly than previously predicted.⁸ The paper argued that, by the end of this century, (so, in the lifetimes of those born today), we could experience the complete flooding of coastal cities and more terrible storms than any that have taken place in modern history.

However we may judge this new information, it remains true that there is a genuine consensus among climate scientists that the next few decades offer a critical time for us to act to minimize the effects of climate change. After that, the damage irrevocably done will affect the planet for thousands of years. Thousands of years . . . the only thing needed for this to happen is if people in the developed world continue to live the same lifestyle they live now.

I think to myself: The elections of leaders around the world which are taking place now and in the near future are no small matters. The results of these elections will have lasting consequences.

It is interesting to observe how quickly and strongly we respond to terrorism, but we do not seem to be able move decisively on climate change, one of the greatest threats facing the world, one that will have decisive impact on future generations.

What we find in many sectors of society, especially in the developed world and among some world leaders and candidates for public office, is skepticism about the truth of climate change and global warming. This is astonishing when one considers the fact that *98 percent* of the scientific community supports the position that human activities have changed the climate.⁹

Sisters, we are trying to notice the interrelationships, the connections, among the world's significant challenges. It is important to highlight here the clear interrelationship between global poverty and the refusal to recognize the challenge of climate change. The lack of recognition or awareness of the impact of patterns of human consumption on the environment is *directly related* to the strength of the belief in the market economy and commitment to unlimited economic growth.

I purposely used the word "belief" in the preceding sentence. Some argue today that the market is one of the most successful 'religions' in human history.¹⁰ Not evil in itself, the market economy nevertheless becomes deeply problematic when it is made absolute, when it functions as a kind of god around which society directs its time, attention and devotion. It offers a vision of secular salvation based on the fundamental values of self-interest and accumulation.

The force of this belief blinds people to the fact that a significant influence on climate change is the increased amount of carbon dioxide (CO₂) in the atmosphere. We face a serious level of destruction of the biosphere because of the devastating effects on all living things. Developed nations contribute disproportionately to the current amounts of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere,

⁸ The chief author was James E. Hansen, a former NASA scientist.

⁹ Pallab Ghosh, "Study Examines Scientists' *Climate Credibility*," BBC News, 22 June 2010, (see: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/10370955>).

¹⁰ Eggemeier, *A Sacramental-Prophetic Vision*, p. 113, quotes David Loy on this point. Other authors who argue in a similar fashion include Johannes Baptist Metz, Harvey Cox, Philip Goodchild, to name a few.

but it is the poorest countries in the world that will suffer the most devastating effects of climate change. These are facts available to anyone who is not blinded by unquestioned assumptions and convictions about the way things are and ought to be.¹¹

I offer just one statistic to give us some perspective. The population of the United States is about 315 million people. It has been estimated that if the world population of 7 billion people used natural resources at the same rate as the United States, the earth would be able to support only 1.4 billion people.¹²

How do we address this? How do we move hearts and minds – and thereby change behaviors? We have wisdom to offer, sisters, and witness to give. We do so already. I wonder if we are sufficiently aware of that, of the significance of the stances we take and the actions in which we engage for care of the earth, our common home? Do we recognize and give thanks for what God is doing in us and through us? And, more to the point for our Leadership Conference, are we open to where and how God is calling us in the future?

Brief pause for note-taking

4. Evolution of Technology and Global Communications

The evolution of digital technology in daily life has allowed rapid global communications and networking to shape modern society in profound and still-unfolding ways. It is so important that we recognize this and reflect on it from the perspective of the Gospel. There is great potential here. It is incumbent upon all responsible persons, but especially educators, to evaluate critically the role and uses of communication technology and the impact they have on human development and relationships. This will be an ongoing challenge. I am not going to say more about it here, because it will come again in the course of our conference.

Brief pause for note-taking

5. Migration

I know we are all familiar with the challenge of migration in the world today. The images, especially of the children, haunt us, and the issues are profoundly complex. There is often not agreement within a country about migrants and there are very difficult conflicts occurring between countries about the issues involved in handling the crisis. I will focus my remarks on three points:

- a) The few things that everyone can agree on.
- b) Some facts that are not well known.
- c) Some indications about the direction for a Christian approach to migration (and to the other challenges we have been considering).

¹¹ In paragraph 16 of the Introduction to *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis alerts us to watch for nine recurring themes in the encyclical, one of which is “the intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet.” Indeed, the theme is repeated throughout the encyclical. See especially numbers 48-52.

¹² Fred Magdoff and John Bellamy Foster, *What Every Environmentalist Should Know about Capitalism*, (NY: Monthly Review Press, 2011), page 28; quoted in Eggemeier, *A Sacramental-Prophetic Vision*, p. 44.

- a) **Points of agreement:** Migration has been a part of human history from the beginning. However, today more people are migrating than ever before. In the mid-1990s, about 145 million people were living outside their homeland. In 2013, the number was about 232 million people living outside their homeland. That is an increase of about 60 % in just 20 years. In 2014, the number went up sharply again. The number of displaced persons is even greater when you add the number of those who are “internally displaced,” that is, forced to move from their homes because of conflict but yet remain in their own country.

Wars and human rights violations in many countries are the main reasons for the sharp increase in asylum-seekers and refugees worldwide. In 2014, the two top countries of origin of refugees were Syria and Afghanistan. Almost four million Syrian people were displaced in that year and about 2.6 million Afghan people. Many of these were internally displaced and many other millions sought protection outside their homeland in other countries.

These facts we know. Where did all these people go? Those facts are less well known.

- b) **Some facts that are not well known:**¹³ The vast majority of refugees are hosted in developing countries.

For example, 95% of Syrian refugees are hosted in just five countries: Turkey (2.2 million); Lebanon (1.2 million); Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. The rest of the world is coping with the other 5%.

95% of refugees from Afghanistan are hosted in two countries: Pakistan (1.5 million) and Iran. The rest of the world is receiving the other 5%.

Because of the magnitude of the situation, we tend to view migration as a problem in itself. For sure, it is a very hot political and social issue, causing great divisions in receiving countries and also between countries that share borders. We can even say that it is a potential challenge for us in the congregation. The tensions caused by the clash of cultures, identities and religions create a combative atmosphere. It is difficult to think clearly about the most basic questions, such as: What is the relationship between a country’s national security and the human insecurity of homeless, hungry people at the border?

One fact keeps coming through everything I read and learn about migration. It is a fact that is not widely recognized – namely, this massive movement of peoples will continue regardless of the policies of nation-states. Migration will continue to transform communities around the globe – so much so that “the 21st century has been referred to by some scholars as *the age of migration*.”¹⁴

No doubt, migration is one of the most complex issues challenging the world today. We cannot lose sight of the fact that it is a symptom of deeper crises related to war, poverty,

¹³ *World at War* Report, UNHCR Global Trends in 2014; (UNHCR = United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees).

¹⁴ Daniel G. Groody, CSC, “Crossing the Divide: Foundations of a Theology of Migration and Refugees,” *Theological Studies* 70 (2009): 638-667. For the foregoing, see pages 638-40. Groody gives reference to Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, (London: Guilford, 2003).

persecution, lack of education, violation of fundamental human rights, and even natural disasters. It is, in a sense, all the world problems wrapped up into one reality that sits right on the front doorstep of many of our homelands.

What are we to do? I offer just a few perspectives on this question, which relate also to the other four challenges we have mentioned.

c) Indications for a Christian approach to migration (and to the other challenges we have been considering):

First, we must not forget, rather we must nourish, our Easter-faith. Jesus rose from the dead. Everything is changed by that. There is no evil, no power of death, that God cannot overcome with love and mercy. Do we believe that? If so, then even in the face of the overwhelming challenges we are considering this morning, we have cause for joy and peace. Christ is risen! I know that my redeemer lives. Amen. Alleluia.

Secondly, in the congregation-wide dialogue leading up to the 24th General Chapter and at the Chapter itself, the congregation will need to deal with the challenges coming to us from the world today. It cannot be otherwise if we are really going to discern what it means to say that “content with little, we joyfully direct our entire lives toward that oneness for which Jesus Christ was sent.”¹⁵ That is as clear a statement of our mission, our purpose in being, as we can get. We are about to enter into a congregation-wide process to discern what it means for us now and going forward into the future. The Holy Spirit is with us and will guide us. Of that I am sure.

What does it mean for us to take on the mind and heart of Christ in today’s world? What does it mean to give our entire lives for that oneness for which he was sent by the Father into the world? Maybe we can consider the following ideas as moving us in the right direction:

- We seek not to limit our love and mercy to the borders of our nationality or our religion. Rather in all the ways we can, we move from division to solidarity, from polarizing to unifying.
- We want to replace the globalization of indifference to the suffering of others with a “revolution of tenderness.” This striking phrase comes from Pope Francis’ description of his hopes for the Jubilee Year of Mercy. It reflects beautifully his central theological understanding of God as mercy itself.
- We want to resist the globalization of superficiality that can result from constant and instant electronic messaging. We want to overcome that by a contemplative stance, which is itself a prophetic stance in today’s world. We do not want to give up reflection, silence, pondering and carefully considering complex issues in dialogue and with an attitude of humility.

In short, we want to direct our entire lives toward that oneness for which Jesus Christ was sent. That is what we do in relation to the significant challenges facing the human community today.

Brief pause for note-taking and send to reflection and groups (give times)

¹⁵ Theme of the 24th General Chapter.