

CMSWR at 25: Gift Received

Your Eminence, Cardinal Justin Rigali; Most Reverend Andrew Cozzens; Mother Agnes Mary, and members of the Board of the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious; Mothers and Sisters:

We are celebrating this weekend a Silver Jubilee. That calls for a real celebration.

As the theme of this assembly and of the titles of the plenary addresses indicate, everything about this celebration speaks of a *gift* that has been given - and that implies generosity, joy, gratitude, and thanks-giving.

What a gift it is to be here together this weekend, to have this time to remember and reflect – and, yes, this time to celebrate.

And, at the heart of it all, what a *Gift* we have received!

Isn't that just the point? Everything - *absolutely everything* - that prompts us to come together this weekend is about a beautiful, deep, and profoundly mysterious gift, a *grace* received from God for the good of the Church: the religious life itself.

I have a feeling, though, that if St. Paul were to send us an anniversary card at this CMSWR Assembly, in honor of our 25th Jubilee, it wouldn't read,

“CONGRATULATIONS for a job well done!” More likely we would open the card to find a message such as the words Paul once wrote to the Corinthians:

Who confers distinction upon you? What do you possess that you have not received?

(1 Cor. 4:7)

And, of course, St. Paul would have a point. It is a point with a delicate and necessary corollary attached, one that you and I were taught as children and that many of us have taken great pains to teach to our students in the classroom: When one receives a gift, one says, “**Thank you.**” Gratitude is in the very air we breathe this weekend at Drury Inn!

I was asked to reflect with you this afternoon on *CMSWR at 25: Gift Received*. St. Paul’s words to the Corinthians have been very helpful to my own reflections, as I asked myself, “Is the CMSWR itself the gift we are talking about here? Is that the gift received? In some ways, yes; for who among us is not grateful to the Church for her understanding and trust in giving formal approval to the **Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious** in 1992? In that year of its founding, the CMSWR received the gift of canonical recognition as a council of major superiors of religious women, erected under canons 708 and 709; and its statutes were approved provisionally, for five years. In describing its spirit, a statement provided by the CMSWR at that time noted that:

...the Sisters of this Council, bound by the specific call to ‘live for God alone’(*Perfectae Caritatis*, 5) in the religious life, wish with the guidance of the Holy Father and assisted by the bishops of the United States, to support one another mutually in preserving the gift of their respective vocations and in progressing “still more in the life in which God has called [them], for the increase of the holiness of the Church, to the greater glory of the one and undivided Trinity....” (*Lumen Gentium*, 47)ⁱ

Imbedded in this statement is far more than a declaration of all the great things the CMSWR intended to do. No. This very statement-of-spirit rests upon the Church’s teaching about the gift that **religious life itself** is to the Church’s life and holiness. The CMSWR was founded on an abiding sense of its dependence on the Church for its existence and identity. It is a gift to us, as its members, only insofar as it enriches and enhances our union with the life of the Church and with one another, and assists us in the faithful living of our consecration within our own institutes.

Almost exactly 25 years ago, on October 23, 1992, the CMSWR held its very first National Assembly at Techny, Illinois. The talks given that weekend also indicate that the first National Assembly, like this one, had an air of gratitude about it, and of hope. His Eminence James Cardinal Hickey, Archbishop of Washington at the time and the CMSWR’s Episcopal Liaison with the Holy See, began by asking the Lord’s blessing on the work of the new council. His prayer could easily be ours this afternoon:

Heavenly Father, we call upon You in faith, hope, and love....Give us, Lord, a spirit of loving fidelity; renew the religious consecration of the Superiors who are part of the Council;....give to all of us who take part in these proceedings a spirit of hope in your promises, as we look to the future. Help us to open our hearts to Christ, to trust in his loving and redeeming Presence, as we plan for the future and seek ways to strengthen religious life...[G]ive us a spirit of charity so that we might ‘speak the truth in love’ and work for the good of the whole Church in a spirit of loving cooperation....ⁱⁱ

Speaking at that first assembly about his own role as “helper, advisor, friend,” Cardinal Hickey expressed aspects of the gift which the CMSWR was intended to *be* in the on-going religious formation of its members, based on “the relationships envisioned in Canons 708 and 709” (the sections of the Code under which the CMSWR and all conferences and councils are established). The Cardinal said he wished to help the new council in the relationships which were so necessary to its life:ⁱⁱⁱ

- Its necessary and direct relationship with the Holy See
- Its relationship with the Episcopal Conference of the United States
- In developing its relationship with the LCWR and CMSM
- In establishing and strengthening strong relationships with one another, providing what he called “a wonderful way to discuss the challenges, opportunities and problems” that member communities face in common

The superiors gathered at that first assembly 25 years ago received valuable insights into the nature of the gift they had received personally in the creation of the CMSWR. Also a gift were the “directional signals,” as he called them, which Cardinal Hickey offered to the group:^{iv}

- “First,” he said, “we must always gather in a **spirit of prayer.**”
- Second, “... **a spirit of fidelity to the Church’s teaching**”

Here, the Cardinal gave very honest and insightful counsel to the members at their first meeting, reminding them that the new Council in no way sought to be divisive, but simply “to remain at one with the Church in its teaching on religious life” and in all its teaching. “The gifts of serenity, wisdom and strength,” he insisted, “are so important for all you say and all you do as members of this Council...”

- Third, “**a loving confidence in the future of religious life**”
- And finally, “**great and open honesty**” – having good lines of communication and developing honest and open exchange of ideas

Cardinal Hickey’s words of counsel continue to provide directional signals for *us* this weekend, as we renew our purpose and consider our strategic plan.

And so we are grateful to the Church for the gift we have received in its approval of the CMSWR; and for the responsibility with which it entrusts us, the expectations it places on us. Our Assembly this weekend is a time of profound gratitude to the Church for a **gift** received.

In reflecting on the CMSWR as a gift received from the Church, we would do well to ask ourselves, “Why would the Church *do* such a thing?” The Church, by its very nature, is all about *communion*, never division (as Cardinal Hickey cautioned our founding members). Anything she does flows from this desire to fulfill her purpose of bringing about communion of God’s People with God Himself, “*in the ‘love [that] never ends,’ ...*”^v In other words, at the heart of the Church’s approval of the CMSWR must have been her desire to foster and nurture communion and holiness - not just ours, but through us, the holiness of the entire Church. Through our lives of consecration, we are united with *all* religious in a mystery much bigger than ourselves - a mystery directed to the “increase of the holiness” of the entire Church. And the Church’s holiness, of course, is based on a much more fundamental gift and mystery. The Catechism tells us:

“...holiness is measured according to the ‘great mystery’ in which the Bride responds with the gift of love to the gift of the Bridegroom.”^{vi}

And so, the CMSWR is a profound gift from the Church to us as member communities, a gift intended to foster, nurture and enrich the *response* our communities make to the “gift of the Bridegroom.” The deeper our response, the deeper and more genuine the influence each of us and each of our communities can have in the world, which is so devoid of a sense of God, and so lacking in a sense of his love.

We give thanks for the lovely and deep gift that the CMSWR is to us, its member communities, in so many ways:

- Providing us with a channel of communion and communication with the Holy See, as she nurtures consecrated persons by her teaching on religious life, her guidance and encouragement, her wise legislation and direction.
- Offering us the vital gift of communion with one another for mutual support and sharing of resources. This is never, of course, so that our communities will become just like one another, but rather so that each community can be better able to become more deeply who it is, and who it is meant to be in the life of the Church.
- Giving us an appropriate avenue for communion with other conferences of religious men and women, united as we are in our common desire to give ourselves in love for the Church and for all God's people.

We have been enriched during these 25 years through the initiatives of the CMSWR in which our communities have been privileged to participate together:

- regional assemblies in which we explore together various topics relevant to our consecrated lives today (such as the talk given just last month in Chicago by Archbishop Rino Fisichella at the motherhouse of the Daughters of St. Mary of Providence on the *Relationship between Catechesis and the New Evangelization*);
- formators' workshops;

- educational opportunities to help us navigate our way through such challenges as appropriate use of technology and the internet; and various issues facing the wider Church that affect our apostolates
- resources to help us in caring for the physical, mental and spiritual health of our sisters;
- Events sponsored by the CMSWR, such as the wonderful Eucharistic Congresses in 2004 and 2009; the symposium in 2015, reminding us of our call “To Wake Up the World”
- The CMSWR’s *Domus Sanctae Mariae* Guadalupe in Rome, providing a place for our sisters to study, live and grow at the very Heart of the Church
- I think of the ways in which the CMSWR benefits from the presence and example of member communities from other countries who serve in the United States. Their cultural gifts and the influence of their spirituality and apostolic zeal enrich us all. One of the most recent initiatives of the CMSWR which I think is a timely opportunity for sharing and support are the summer courses offering formative education for Spanish-speaking women religious serving the Church in the United States. Not only do the sisters have the opportunity to study Church documents in their native language, but the classes themselves give them an opportunity for personal spiritual renewal and sharing with other religious.

- Also mutually enriching is the gift of simply witnessing to one another in our efforts to be faithful and to serve the Church in the ways she needs; and, of course, coming together and enjoying one another's company - just having fun together.

All of these things are aspects of “the gift received” - a gift that can enrich in some way every community that belongs to the CMSWR, and enable each of our communities to strengthen its response to all that the Love of the Bridegroom will ask of us in those places where He calls us to be and to serve.

In all of this, we give thanks today for the sacrifices and the fidelity of those who have gone before us in these 25 years, especially those who were personally instrumental in the founding of the CMSWR. We realize that the **gift received** is in many ways the fruit of their own gift of self; their perseverance and openness to grace; their courage, prayer and joyful hope - and all of this not without sacrifice and suffering. I think especially of Cardinal Hickey himself, always such a kind, steady and strong presence in the life of the council; and I think of the sisters who were the founding Board members, especially the first officers of the Board: Mother Vincent Marie Finnegan; Mother Mary Bernard Nettle; Mother Mary Quentin Sheridan; Mother Christine Born.^{vii} The fact that they would not *want* us to thank them is all the more reason to do so. *Thank you, Sisters*, for allowing God to use you. Our gratitude extends, through you, to all of the sisters, unknown and

un-named, who have provided in some way for this avenue of grace for religious life in our country. Especially do we thank those who have generously accepted positions of leadership in the CMSWR over these 25 years, most recently Mother Agnes Mary Donovan and the sisters on our current Board.

It is important for us to take full advantage of this time of Jubilee, for as we know, Jubilees are a time when grace flows freely. Having thanked our founding sisters for their openness to grace, we must ask ourselves this weekend, “What is the grace that God is offering the CMSWR here and now? How does He want to use us?” The gift we were given 25 years ago wasn’t given so that we could turn in on ourselves, but so that, as women consecrated to God in the service of the Church, we might all the better *go out of ourselves* in love for God and others. It is in our very being as women to *receive* in a *giving* way, to bear fruit always in new life.

To return to that Jubilee message from St. Paul: “*What do you possess that you have not received?*” This is a beautiful moment of grace for the CMSWR, a moment which calls us to remember our dependence on God’s grace and our dependence on the Church; our dependence on the example, support, and prayers of one another. It is a time to delight in the gifts of the past and look forward with hope to the future and the graces it holds. Thanking God for this gift, let us ask

Him what He wants of us, here and now. And let us beg Him to help us, as individual communities and as a Council, to be *receptive* to the graces He has in mind to give - to *receive* them in a *giving* way.

Later this afternoon we will come together in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, before the Lord who is the Giver of all gifts. How shall we pray, in this Jubilee moment of grace? What shall we say to Him? It seems to me that Our Lady has already given us the words that should mark our celebration, and that she will pray them with us at Vespers:

***The Almighty has done great things for [us] –
and holy is his Name!***

Mother Ann Marie Karlovic, O.P.
October 13, 2017

References:

ⁱ Informational brochure, *Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious in the United States of America*, “Spirit of CMSWR,” undated.

ⁱⁱ Quoted in booklet of *Proceedings: First National Assembly of the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious in the United States of America*, Techny, Illinois, October 23-25, 1992, “Opening Remarks by His Eminence, James Cardinal Hickey, S.T.D.,” pp. 1-2.

ⁱⁱⁱ For the points that follow, see *Ibid.*, p. 2.

^{iv} cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

^v Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, 773; 1 Cor. 13:8; *Lumen Gentium* 48.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, quoting St. John Paul II in *Mulieris Dignitatem* 27.

^{vii} The full founding Board included: Officers Mother Vincent Marie Finnegan, O.C.D., Superior General of the Carmelite Sisters of the Most Sacred Heart of Los Angeles, Chairperson; Mother Mary Bernard Nettle, I.S.P., Provincial of the Baltimore Province of the Little Sisters of the Poor, Assistant Chairperson; Mother Mary Quentin Sheridan, R.S.M., Superior General of the Religious Sisters of Mercy of Alma, Michigan, Secretary; and Mother Christine Born, Prioress General of the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia of Nashville, Tennessee, Treasurer; as well as Mother Mary Bernadette Black, O.S.F., Regional Superior of the School Sisters of St. Francis in Panhandle, Texas; Sister Ellen Curran, S.J.W., Superior General of the Sisters of St. Joseph the Worker in Walton, Kentucky; Sister Ann Marie Friederichs, O.S.F., Provincial of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Immaculate Heart of Mary in Hankinson, North Dakota; Sister Patricia King, F.M.A., Provincial of the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (Salesian Sisters) in Haledon, New Jersey; Mother Mary Ingeborg Rohner, O.S.F., Provincial Superior of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Martyr St. George in Alton, Illinois; Mother Mary de Chantal St. Julian, S.S.F., Superior General of the Sisters of the Holy Family in New Orleans, Louisiana; Mother John Marie Stewart, D.L.J.C., Superior General of the Disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ of Channing, Texas; and Sister Veronica Volkmer, M.S., superior General of the Marian Sisters of the Diocese of Lincoln, Nebraska.