

The Dance of Leadership Today

The Ursuline Sisters of Chatham is a small group of just over eighty sisters. Even as we diminish in numbers, we strive together to face the challenges of the future with hope and passion. With contemplative hearts we respond to the invitation to enter more deeply into life's mysteries and lean on the God who is always faithful. Together we are answering the call to be present to this new moment in our history with openness and creativity. We continue our mission to be proclaimers of the Gospel, to be signs of hope and joy for our world, to be, as we describe in our Ursuline Constitutions, "pilgrims in service, mobile and flexible, responding to the needs of the times."

We are strengthened by the words of our foundress, Angela Merici, who said that we would never be abandoned. True to her promise, we experience her presence with us daily. I will reflect here on three aspects of life that ground and carry us forward in the ministry of leadership: contemplation, collaboration and compassion.

Contemplative Approach to Life

There is no way to live a viable religious life today without being deeply rooted in the Divine Mystery. A contemplative approach to life calls us to be attentive, responsive and open to the surprises of the Spirit. This is the call for all leaders and for the whole congregation.

We are living in a time when, as Nancy Schreck, OSF, reminds us, the challenge is not only to work outside the box, but to get rid of the box altogether. Like Oscar Romero reflects, there is value to stepping back and taking the long view as we make collective decisions.

As leaders, we foster a discerning spirit among all community members, reminding each other of our deep roots and the constant call to attend to the needs of the most vulnerable. Not only are we called beyond ourselves to this mission, but contemplation develops in us a spirit of wonder and reverence for all aspects of creation. These elements nourish in us joy and gratitude and move us to reach out to Earth and her inhabitants.

A contemplative spirit fosters an experience of abundance which allows us to be generous and gracious as we approach challenges; trusting as we share what we have in order to bless the future with hope. We realize that this is a time rich with possibility if we are willing to be open and to move forward with new eyes, new learnings and fresh hope.

Energizing Ways to Collaborate with Others

As leaders in religious life, we work constantly to discover energizing ways to collaborate with others in the service of all. We facilitate work with other religious communities, neighbours on all sides, ecumenical and interfaith groups and other partners in the work of justice. It takes energy, enthusiasm and care to develop and maintain relationships. Today's issues demand concerted efforts, combining of forces and inclusive approaches; building bridges and making the path as we go. As Christopher Fry says, "Affairs are now soul size"¹. We work consistently at ways to share expertise, personnel, solidarity in prayer, financial and other resources for the betterment of all.

¹ Christopher Fry, *A Sleep of Prisoners*, (Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 1951. First issued as an Oxford University Press paperback, 1971).

A major source of partnership for Ursulines has been the steady growth of the network of Companions, women, inspired by the spirit of Angela Merici, who journey with us and extend beyond us. At the same time we maintain strong bonds with various circles of women in Peru, a connection established and nurtured for over 50 years. These relationships are important to us and we work at maintaining their viability.

Compassion for Others and for All of Creation

As leaders we encourage a way of life marked by compassion for others, especially for those who are most vulnerable in body, mind and spirit. We strive for ways of communicating that are respectful, inclusive and timely. As we face changes within, among and beyond ourselves, we approach each other with reverence and care, searching together for the most merciful and just solutions to the challenges we face personally and communally.

This spirit of compassion is extended to all creation. For many years we have focused our attention on the cries of the poor and the cries of Earth and on the plight of women and children. As leaders we try to keep this outward focus in the forefront, as the Community members have mandated us to do so.

Dancing Forward

Holding the history of our lives and standing at the threshold, we are poised to hear a tune both distant and near, as we learn new dance steps. The dance of the Spirit invites and inspires us to continue living our story with the same vitality and courage as the women who have gone before us. Who knows where the Spirit will lead us as we dance forward!

Theresa Campeau, OSU