



## **President's Address – Sr. Maryann Seton Lopiccolo, SC.**

Welcome back! Isn't it great to be here in person and see everyone again, and not in a one-inch square on a screen?! It has been four years since our last in-person Assembly and in that time we have changed as a group. Some of our members have moved on to different pastures, and we have welcomed many new members over these four years to carry on their service in our dioceses.

Thanks to our technical support, we were able to meet virtually for the last two years to connect with each other, being nourished by our speakers, our shared prayer and interaction in assembly and also through the two webinars we offered on topics of new importance to us. All of this was good, kept us aware of the larger context of the conference and gave us some ongoing support and hope in times of isolation and separation.

But there's nothing like being together in person with one another. The greetings we've heard today, the delight in seeing one another again, meeting friends and colleagues, meeting new friends, having the time to just catch up and chit chat with one another...All of this is priceless and it is what awaits us in the next few days.

Our theme for this assembly, "*Along the Paschal Journey*," will invite us to enter the human, Christian journey of our lives in general: walking the walk with Jesus, believing with Jesus that all that we experience now leads to new life, a new expression of the journey we call Life. Our life as religious institutes follows that same natural path of birth, growth, expansion, and then decline, hopefully leaving legacies that will grow into the future beyond us.

Many of us are trying to companion congregations along their Paschal Journey; some perhaps further along than others, with fulfillment or completion before them. And we ask, "How can I best minister to them at this time? How can we companion that journey? What should I know?"

The cycle of life is just that, a cycle. It was here before us and will be here after us, but our time is NOW. We are here now to be the responsible and serving people our ministries call us to be, in a new context, a new open arena. And being who we are, we want to do it right, we want to do it well for the sake of others, many of whom might need some life support along the way.

So, we are here, ready and open to draw from our presenters their wisdom, expertise and hands-on experience about this life journey. We also know there is wisdom in this group from our own small part of this new story of consecrated life.

I also want to thank you all for participating in the synod for a Synodal Church as a Conference during the last year. Your input reflected your participation on many levels, as members of our Church, as People of God. Some of you conducted the regional meetings for members of the Conference in each Region. Some participated in diocesan and parish listening sessions as well as in your own congregations. And some did it all!

Our Synod report was synthesized by the National Board over a few sessions and sent to all the members. The report was sent to the USCCB to be included in the National Synod Report.

The synodal experience is a life-changing event for our Church. Pope Francis is challenging the existing structures and boundaries of Church as it has become, to “widen the tent”; go to the margins, bring in those not feeling welcome and embrace those who are already here, yet feel unrecognized. If we do it right, this can be a time of profound healing on a very wounded Church.

Pope Francis' image of the Church as that of concentric circles stretching to the open margins is very challenging. He is saying that the strength of the Church lies in the involvement of her people, the leadership of the faithful in concert with the ordained who instruct, guide and join us all in how to BE CHURCH today. Yet, my sisters and brothers, isn't this who we already are as women and men in consecrated life? Isn't this part of our mission as a conference of vicars and delegates for religious?

Look at your charisms, your congregational Mission, and place it in this synodal process of Communion, Participation and Mission. Are we not right there? Don't we live out those concentric circles every day, always looking for and seeing the face of Christ among the human family and all of creation?

This synodal process puts a new name on the gifts and challenges of living a communal life, of listening, discussing and sharing that we embody naturally by now.

So as we walk along the Paschal Journey together these few days, we may be like the disciples at Emmaus who only saw defeat, despair and disappointment after Good Friday. They turned away from their preferred future without hope. Then, surprisingly, their eyes and hearts were opened to the risen Jesus, unlike anyone they could ever imagine, walking along with them, dispelling their fears, reassuring them that he was alive, his mission was alive and waiting for them to bring to others.

Let's get ready to open our minds, to walking these days together and to letting our hearts burn within us for the sake of the mission of Jesus which awaits us on our return home.