Voices of Sisters
Religious Life



As part of the 25-year celebration of the founding of the Dominican Sisters of Hope, Sister of Charity of the Incarnate Word Teresa Maya, former president of LCWR, gave a talk on "Hope: The Gift of Communion" on Jan. 12. (Courtesy of Dominican Sisters of Hope)



by Jo-Ann Iannotti

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This year, 2020, marks the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Congregation of the Dominican Sisters of Hope. As a relatively new congregation of women religious, it is the result of the union of the former Dominican Sisters of Newburgh, New York, the Dominican Sisters of Ossining, New York, and the Dominican Sisters of Fall River, Massachusetts. They were officially proclaimed a new congregation on July 20, 1995. To celebrate their silver jubilee, they are planning a special series of events at their Center of Hope in Ossining. The first of these was a reflection day on Jan. 12 led by Sister of Charity of the Incarnate Word Teresa Maya, former president of LCWR. Maya's theme was "Hope: The Gift of Communion."

Whether it is a single person or a corporate entity, the 25th anniversary of one's existence is a milestone to celebrate.

The Dominican Sisters of Hope acted on the call to start a new congregation. Every one of us who was present for the moment when we knew we were called to be "Hope" knew it was a moment of the Spirit — a movement of the Spirit within our corporate body. We've shared the story of that moment, over and over again, with friends, family and colleagues, and the story never gets old. The story hasn't aged, but we have.

Because of that, in this anniversary year, we are looking at ourselves and our mission through new lenses, with new gratitude, with acquired wisdom.

This year will be a time to explore how we are being called to go deeper into hope, and find more life. To discover how hope is calling us and exciting us to be new now at this stage of our individual lives and our corporate life, we called upon Sr. Teresa Maya to join us in that reflection and asked if she would share the promptings of the Spirit which she would feel when she dared to put on the mantle of hope.

The following are my reflections on that day and what I felt she gave us as "prompts for a hope-filled life" as we move into the future. I decided to place them in three categories: those by which I was encouraged, those that surprised me, and those that remain a challenge.

Encouraged

By the very title Teresa chose, I was encouraged that she put flesh on hope. Hope is one of the theological virtues, and we can sometimes get caught up with any one of them as a mere idea/ideal.

Early on, Teresa reminded us that hope becomes real because of those whom we encounter in community, whether that community is those with whom we live daily life, or work, or randomly co-create the many environments in which we live.

The heroics called for in each of these communities lies in the execution of and the attention we give to the smallest of details — exercising our commitment to the present moment wherever we find ourselves. Teresa emphasized through so many examples that it is in being with others and for others that we encounter the Divine. Surprisingly, we discover the Divine under human cover.

Teresa also encouraged us to connect to the gift of our universe and how intertwined our life is with all of creation. The story of the universe is our story. The varying styles and shapes and colors the universe puts before us bring us face to face with a multifaceted Creator. Teresa shared an ongoing love affair she has with the shape of all things spiral. She is drawn by that shape and lured into its pull to go deeper and deeper into the Divine.

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Surprised

What surprised me that day were the sample quotes she shared from the writings of both Pope Francis and Pope Benedict XVI. Francis' words generally were more familiar, at least with the subjects more recent in my memory. She noted that Benedict wrote three encyclicals, one on each of the theological virtues. But I was stopped dead in my tracks when she quoted Benedict from his encyclical *Spe Salvi*, "Saved in Hope."

Elaborating on hope, Benedict wrote: "Faith is the substance of hope."

Teresa emphasized that he used the word *substance* "in its fullest theological sense." That caught me off guard. "Fullest theological sense," she explained, meant that it had the weight of the words we now use in the Credo at Mass — "*consubstantial* with the Father" — of the same substance as the Father.

Hope and faith are intertwined. Hope and faith are about the future. In fact, she went as far to say, "Faith draws the future into the present. The fact that the future exists changes the present. All that God requires of us is that we do our part."

This pairing of hope and faith is an intoxicating combination. This definition of hope as being of the same *substance* as the faith we say we exercise — of the faith we say we are grounded in — is something that will take me years to live into! I was caught by these words and then I began to wonder how much else I not given much attention to, during the brief eight years of Benedict's papacy? And so to Pope Benedict I say, "Mea culpa."

And it put me face to face with the fact that I want to know more of what Francis is saying in his writings *now*. And even more broadly, I wonder: "What else and who else do I now either consciously or unconsciously ignore?"

Challenged

The challenges that I've taken from this one day have spilled over into some of the simplest of things:

- Don't take community for granted.
- Be slower in judging others and myself.
- Enjoy the now more fully, in whatever form it takes.
- Embrace fears; maybe even be brave enough to run toward them.
- Be grateful that today has happened.

If you too would like to consider challenges to your life through the gift of hope, you can access Teresa Maya's complete day with us here.

The thread of grace she wove for us, we're happy to share with you.

[Jo-Ann Iannotti is a Dominican Sister of Hope. She recently retired as art and spirituality coordinator at Wisdom House Retreat and Conference Center in Litchfield, Connecticut.]