Voices of Sisters
Religious Life

Josephite Sr. Jayne Helmlinger, then president-elect of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, greets Pope Francis after an audience during the 2019 LCWR visit to Rome. (Courtesy of LCWR)

by Sr. Carol Zinn

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March 16, 2023

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***Editor's note**: On March 13, 2013, Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio became Pope Francis. This week, leaders of four organizations of women religious reflect on what his papacy has meant, particularly for women religious, in columns for Global Sisters Report. Read more about Pope Francis' 10th anniversary from the National Catholic Reporter.*

The saying "a picture is worth a thousand words" is largely attributed to Frederick R. Barnard, an advertising executive in the early 1900s, describing how he attracted customers with images of products rather than with words alone. The multibillion-dollar global advertising industry exists as testimony to his insight, and a recent study revealed that the images or logos of products are more recognizable than the name or company that makes the product.

As the universal Catholic Church and global community pauses to note the 10th anniversary of the election of Argentina's Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio as Pope Francis, the insight that "a picture is worth a thousand words" comes to mind. It provides a meaningful way to reflect on what this decade of his personal, pastoral pontificate brought to life in the church and world and to those who share with Pope Francis the same vocation: consecrated religious life or, as Francis likes to say, "concentrated Gospel life."

As I prayed over this invitation to offer a reflection on the impact of this past decade of the life, mission and ministry of Pope Francis — shepherd, leader, disciple, mentor, companion, brother, and friend — I returned to the Scriptures of March 13, 2013. I feel confident that Francis prayed with those Scriptures that day. I also

looked to the Scriptures of March 13, 2023, with the same confidence that he would pray those Scriptures as he marked his 10th anniversary as pope.

Leadership Conference of Women Religious leaders stand on the balcony of a Vatican office that overlooks St. Peter’s Square during the 2019 LCWR annual visit. At the time, the sisters held these positions: from left, Sister of Charity of the Incarnate Word Teresa Maya, LCWR past-president; Josephite Sr. Jayne Helmlinger, president-elect; Josephite Sr. Carol Zinn, LCWR executive director; and Holy Cross Sr. Sharlet Wagner, president. (Courtesy of LCWR)

In addition to the Scriptures that bookend his decade of service to the Gospel message and mission of the church in the world, three images stayed with me:

1) Our first glimpse of Pope Francis as he stood on the Vatican balcony after his election and asked the crowd gathered in St. Peter's Square and the millions gathered via livestream to pray — pray with him and pray for him. In that moment of personal and communal silence, the church and world knew that we had witnessed this pope's personal relationship with God and his modus operandi: prayer — deep

personal prayer — as a way of life.

2) His return from the Greek island of Lesbos in April 2016 as he ascended the steps to the plane followed by a single file of 12 migrants he had invited to return to Rome with him. In this visual, we saw how he would minister as pope: present, passionate and pastoral in real time, with real people, in real situations, and for real help and healing.

3) The lone, solitary figure standing in the night rain leading the Good Friday services early in the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2020. We felt his presence and leadership as vulnerability, courage, fidelity and service in any and all circumstances, offering hope, comfort, strength and love.

As women religious in the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, we see in Pope Francis the essence of our shared vocational life: the critical place that prayer, community, service, fidelity, hope, passion and love hold in this life. We resonate with his call to have the Gospel be our daily manual: *Evangelii Gaudium* ("The Joy of the Gospel") without any dilutions or distractions. We hear his challenge in "*Laudato Si'*, on Care for Our Common Home" to live the Gospel message and Catholic social teaching in ways that bring an integral ecology to bear on all our thoughts, words and deeds. We embrace his concept that relationships are at the center of the life of Jesus and that the example of the good Samaritan in *Fratelli Tutti* ("On fraternity and social friendship") must become our response to the signs of the times and the needs of the world.

But it is his commitment to his religious vocation that captures our minds and hearts. It is palpably clear that Pope Francis seeks a "lifelong, undistracted, single-focused God-quest," the words Sr. Sandra Schneiders, a member of the Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary of Monroe, Michigan, uses to describe consecrated religious life. We see in him the depth of prayer; the evidence of the daily practice of discernment; the presence of the joy of a vowed life of poverty, consecrated chastity and obedience; the fullness of a life lived in community in which the common good takes precedence; and the interior freedom of one whose life is in God's hands and for God's purpose.

Sr. Sharlet Wagner, then president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, greets Pope Francis after an audience during the 2019 LCWR visit to Rome. (Courtesy of LCWR)

Thus, the return to the Scriptures of both 2013 and 2023. The responsorial psalm (Psalm 145) on the day of his election proclaimed:

> The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness.
> The Lord is good to all and compassionate toward all his works.
> The Lord is faithful in all his words and holy in all his works.
> The Lord lifts up all who are falling and raises up all who are bowed down.
> The Lord is just in all his ways and holy in all his works.
> The Lord is near to all who call upon him, to all who call upon him in truth.

We, the LCWR women religious, see in Pope Francis that the Lord is, indeed, gracious and merciful.

The Gospel (John 5) that day announced:

> I cannot do anything on my own; because I do not seek my own will but the will of the One who sent me.

We, the LCWR women religious, see in Pope Francis the truth of these words as we recommit ourselves to the same availability and fidelity to the invitations from God.

And the responsorial psalm (Psalm 42-43) for March 23, 2023, proclaims and announces:

> Athirst is my soul for the living God. When shall I go and behold the face of God?
>
> Send forth your light and your fidelity; they shall lead me on and bring me to your holy mountain, to your dwelling-place.
>
> Then will I go to the altar of God, the God of my gladness and joy;
>
> Then will I give you thanks upon the harp, O God, my God!
>
> As the hind longs for the running waters, so my soul longs for you, O God.

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We, the LCWR women religious, see in Pope Francis the embodiment of the psalmist's prayer that one's whole life is a journey to the heart of God now and for all eternity.

As the world and church celebrate the 10th anniversary of the election of Pope Francis, perhaps you might reflect on the Scriptures that he prayed on March 13, 2013, and on March 13, 2023, and bring to mind the images of his service and leadership these past 10 years. Then, in your own prayer, give thanks for this brother of ours, this consecrated religious who calls us to live our consecrated life full of joy, hope, love, faith and compassion.

We, the LCWR women religious, promise our ongoing prayer and support for our brother, Francis.

This story appears in the **10 years with Pope Francis** feature series. View the full series.