I would like to offer my deep sympathy to Mary's family. Walt, Rich and Sandie, Amy and Jen, and her cousins. I would also like to offer my sympathy to Fran and the Congregation of the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood. Thank you for sharing the gift of her life with so many.

"It is with deep sadness that we share the news that Mary Whited died this morning. She died peacefully in her sleep." Those were the opening lines of the LCWR’s announcement of Mary’s death. Sadness and peace. Those words suggest other dualities woven throughout Mary’s life.

“Quiet, gentle, shy”—words used to describe Mary by those who knew her and those who thought they knew her. And she was quiet, gentle, shy. I remember the first long car ride that we shared early on in the Presidency of LCWR. I talked. She listened. I talked some more, and I got a brief response. I talked some more…well, I think you get it. I started wondering just how long it would take to reach our destination that day. But I was lucky. I had heard her presentation to the LCWR Assembly when she was a candidate for President. I learned early on that it was not how much she spoke, but the quality of what she had to say. And I learned to wait and to listen. Others would mistake the quiet and the gentleness for softness, maybe even weakness. In time they would learn.

Underneath the quiet and the gentleness were a strength and a determination that could not, would not be denied. Doubtless, each of you could fill in an example of this in your experience of her in family, friendship or leadership, formal or otherwise. For me it was Mary’s and your community’s vision to renovate the motherhouse, provide for your aging members and collaborate with your lay neighbors in O’Fallon. As time-consuming, as exhausting and as frustrating as the project was at times, (all while responding to the regular responsibilities of leadership) Mary was faithful to that vision, often speaking about it with energy and passion.

Quiet—strong. Gentle—determined. Somehow she held it all.

Those same qualities were obvious in her leadership role in LCWR. The operative word for her leadership style was “with.” Clearly, she knew where God was calling her, but she was deeply committed to working with others—and that included a lot of others. The other Presidents and the executive director, the national board, the religious men’s conference and the other women’s conference, bishops, international groups of religious, and the cardinals and bishops in the papal congregations or committees. Here too, her “quiet and gentle” could be underestimated, but not for long. Mary was articulate, but inviting; clear but welcoming of other styles, other philosophies, other cultures. And she was not for giving in or giving up. Reconciliation colored how she saw herself in every gap and broken situation. Many of you know that "staying at the table” was her mantra.

Her magnificent Presidential address in 2008 captured the essence of the role of leadership for women religious. Using the image of midwife, she challenged us “to expand our vision,
deepen our sensitivities and surface priorities,” and to do it with “courage, imagination and
daring.” And she asked hard questions. She was so good at that. “How do we encourage
our members to hold on to what is needed and let go of what is not essential?” “Can we risk
conversing about our hopes and fears?” “What will it take to embrace the differences?” She
was seized by the question of what new life was waiting to be birthed in us?

These same questions that burned in her heart became the impetus for her continued work
with the conference even after she had completed her term as President. As many of you
know, she missed the last Assembly of her term because she was recovering from her first
bout with cancer. She came back to assume a natural leadership on the Contemporary
Religious Life Committee, emphasizing always the place of contemplation that takes us
inward, “holding the weariness and suffering in both church and world” in order to see with
the eyes of God.

Vision—inclusion. Daring—contemplation. Somehow she held it all.

Perhaps the greatest duality of Mary’s life was the one that she wrote about for the LCWR
publication in the summer. Entitled “Jesus Set His Face Toward Jerusalem,” Mary wrote
about the potential for transformation for Jesus and for us that exists in embracing the
creative tension between death and new life. She says “In setting his face toward Jerusalem,
Jesus moves into a situation of both tremendous challenge as well as great promise. He
purposely chooses to engage in the creative tension that will ultimately lead to his rejection
and death at the hands of his own people. He is aware that by engaging the creative tension,
his mission will be accomplished.” Mary wrote that article before she knew that the cancer
had returned. Her final sentence reads, “As followers of Jesus, we too, must set our faces
toward the suffering and the promise that will come.”

Death—new life. Somehow she held it all.

There is a poem by Lord Byron called “She Walks in Beauty.” You may know it. The poet
describes a beautiful woman. A cursory read might suggest that he is enamored by her
physical beauty and her gentle nature. Words like “soft,” “tender,” “calm,” “grace,”
“peace” define his attraction. A deeper reading, however, reveals a more complex, more
mature beauty, a woman mellow enough to hold lightly the opposing forces of life. She
walks like the night, but there are stars in the dark night sky. The best of dark and bright
meet in her in a delicate balance.

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:
Thus mellowed to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

The poet concludes with a description of this woman who moves through life, able
to hold the dualities that call us to transformation and new birth.
And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below.

Claiming the best of dark and light, holding them softly, calmly yet eloquently.
Sounds like integration. Sounds like holiness. Sounds like Mary.

So we are left …sad…empty… wondering. Why, how could this happen? I don’t have the answer, but I found one answer in Mary’s Presidential address. “And as we walk, we leave behind the familiar… We grieve deeply when older members [of our community] die. We ask “why” when death plucks vibrant members of our communities from active ministry and vital community living. Amid the “letting go’s,” we risk the exodus journey. Drawn forward by the Mysterious Presence, we are led into the desert, the place of ultimate trust.”
Thank you, Mary for showing us how to live the exodus journey into new life. We will miss you. We love you. Because we have known you, we have been changed for good.