The Center for Our Concern: Reflections on 45 Years of Research, Education, and Advocacy

Lester A. Myers, Ph.D., J.D., CPA, CFF, CGMA
President, Center of Concern

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Lester A. Myers, Ph.D., J.D., CPA, CFF, CGMA, has a background in accounting, law, strategy, philosophical ethics, and Catholic social thought. For over 30 years, he has served in leadership roles in public accounting, corporate, university teaching and administration, and civil society organizations, with experience in the financial, higher education, healthcare, information, telecommunications, retail, environmental, exempt organization, and public sectors.

Les has focused on organizational integrity and responsibility, helping organizations promote principled leadership and ethical cultures; assess risks of fraud and misconduct; and design, implement, and evaluate ethics and compliance and other anti-fraud programs and controls to prevent, detect, and respond to such risks within the context of leading frameworks for organizational governance and internal control. His corporate citizenship services include stakeholder and public affairs matters involving sustainability, labor standards, consumer protection, financial integrity, and philanthropic engagement.

Les teaches business and leadership ethics, sustainability, law, Ignatian tradition, Catholic social thought, and forensic accounting in various appointments at Georgetown University in undergraduate, graduate, executive, and continuing professional education programs. He also led KPMG’s Exempt Organization Tax Practice in Washington, D.C., and served as a director in the forensic practice in KPMG Advisory, focusing on fraud risk management and investigations. He serves on the boards of Coopération Internationale pour le Développement et la Solidarité (CIDSE) and Global Financial Integrity, and on the advisory board for the Georgetown University Law Center Corporate Counsel Institute. He is also a Caux Round Table Fellow.

His full biography is here.
Introduction

I’m delighted to have this opportunity to help celebrate the 45th anniversary of Center of Concern (Center) by offering reflections in three moments: recollection, gratitude, and hope. Each of these moments provides a glimpse of the changing signs of the times that have touched the Center’s stakeholders in social, cultural, economic, and spiritual terms over these years. These stakeholders include the Center board and team ourselves, and those who work closely with us to help share your voice for global social justice.

In this season of new beginnings, my reflections in these three moments spring, respectively, from:

(1) the Center’s record as an energized and joyful community of work,
(2) the positive differences it has made in the Church and the world, and
(3) the beneficial social transformation it will continue to advance.

Recollection speaks from the Center’s graced history. Gratitude speaks from its abundance of current blessings. Hope speaks from its continuing courageous engagement in and for this young century.

1. Recollection

The founding of the Center in the office of United Nations Secretary General U Thant on May 4, 1971, as a joint project of the Society of Jesus and the predecessor to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops heralded a distinctive platform for convening thoughtful conversations about urgent issues of global social justice in dialogue with Catholic social tradition. Discussions about such a project had occurred at least as far back as 1970.

The founders were Jesuit Superior General Pedro Arrupe, S.J., and Bishop (later Cardinal) Joseph Bernardin, who served as general secretary to the bishops’ conference. The founding of the Center was among a series of noteworthy achievements in the pastoral, thought, and executive leadership that built the reputations of both men as charismatic icons in the Church.
Women religious played critical roles as well, generously providing the seed capital that catalyzed the launch of the Center. Prominent among them was Sr. Mary Luke Tobin, S.L., the former president of the predecessor to the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. The sisters have supported the Center ever since, through their devoted leadership as Center team and board members, as Creative Voices, and by continuing to invest about one-fourth of the Center’s annual capital.

Catholic social tradition, particularly the discourse of Catholic social thought, is a resource to help us take responsibility for our convictions through reason as a complementary form of knowledge with faith. This tradition had reached a new threshold of prominence on the world stage during Vatican Council II, with many voices, vectors, and centers of gravity. Today, this tradition operates in the manner of millennium-ready open-source software to help people think differently and act differently when it comes to individual and collective responses for justice and caring. The root meaning of “encyclical” is something that people pass around in a circle. The invitational quality, inspirational power, and eloquent thought leadership in documents such as *Pacem in Terris*, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Dignitatis Humanae*, and *Laudato Si* have elicited enthusiastic conversation and other productive responses from numerous quarters inside and outside the Church.

With energy and joyfulness, the Center team formed a community of work in 1971 to do its part, listening as well as speaking, and learning from the leadership of the laity, religious orders, episcopal conferences, and people of good will from other traditions.

The team has been doing this since then through core services of research, education, and advocacy in public and private centers of influence around the world. Sometimes this engagement has been in familiar contexts, e.g., in assisting the bishops behind the scenes with their landmark pastoral letters on war and peace, economics, and racism. Sometimes, the team has contributed by taking the voice of Catholic social tradition to broader venues, e.g., interfaith dialogue, corporate and professional leadership organizations, Capitol Hill, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the United Nations.
One of the early and enduring expressions of this community of work came in the development of the Pastoral Circle by one of my predecessors, Fr. Peter J. Henriot, S.J., and another team member, Dr. Joe Holland. This proprietary methodology of a reiterative cycle of experience, social analysis, theological reflection, and action has provided an accessible and helpful discipline for integrating faith-influenced ethics with social service and social action in the context of a complete way of life. This helps to avoid an insular and self-referential faith experience, on one hand, and activism without grounding and commitment, on the other. Neither path by itself would be consequential or sustainable.

People of diverse traditions around the world know the Pastoral Circle well and appreciate its accessible guidance. We are proud of this contribution and, in rebooting it in 2015 with distinctive color-coded iconography, we have restored its prominent role in our work, e.g., in the Signs of the Times Social Justice Calendar and in our advisory services practice. Likewise, in adopting the collaborative content platform of the Community of Creative Voices for Education for Justice and other programs of the Center, we have returned to the Center’s roots as a convener of voices from diverse perspectives.

In these and other ways, we have recollected this 45-year journey by harkening back to our founding and amplifying our Ignatian commitment to be persons for others; by serving the institutional Church through supporting and reinforcing the transformational leadership of Pope Francis on integral ecology; and by emulating the leadership of women religious in taking on human trafficking, domestic violence, and torture.
2. Gratitude

The moment of gratitude reflects affirmation for what the Center is and what it has accomplished, and who its team members are, as individuals and as this community of work. As I have had the privilege of serving as the Center’s fourth president, and the first non-Jesuit, this journey has been a reiterative and autobiographical process for me, my own path through the Pastoral Circle.

As I grew up in Cincinnati, I came to appreciate both Fr. Arrupe and Archbishop Bernardin as personal heroes. Under Fr. Arrupe’s leadership, the Jesuits provided me with a first-rate education in the liberal arts and business; advocated for social justice as a core feature of Ignatian commitment; and modeled through their pastoral, thought, and executive leadership why learning and social justice were inseparable and how both were essential to be persons for others and contemplatives in action.

I came of age with a gentle, charismatic, and courageous pastor in Archbishop Bernardin, who inspired devotion because of his personal qualities. In his respect for the intelligence, experience, and good judgment of his flock, he honored and ennobled his office. As he rose in national prominence, becoming the cardinal archbishop of Chicago, he continued to be an inspiration to me. In his leadership, he showed us how to take responsibility for our convictions as Americans and Catholics and modeled a respectful and productive form of dialogue about matters of public policy and ecclesial governance that sought to bring people together by looking for common ground. We would benefit abundantly from such voices now.

I also had the privilege of working alongside women religious in Cincinnati in leadership roles for the Way of the Cross/Way of Justice, the Coalition for Public Sanctuary (for a Salvadoran family), and Pax Christi Cincinnati. Their example was particularly instructive because it focused on making a visible positive difference for others rather than aggrandizement of attention or honors to themselves. I learned that, to be a leader, in the Church or other contexts, one should be like a Catholic sister.

These experiences from all three influences—the Jesuits, Cardinal Bernardin, and women religious—taught me about the importance of integrating faith-influenced ethics and activism, the distinctions between the complementary necessities for social service and social advocacy, and the need to move beyond activism to long-term, impactful, and systemic change through engagement in policy discussions with the aforementioned centers of influence. It was in large part because of the U.S. bishops’ pastoral letter
on economics, and my resolve to participate in substantive policy responses, that I went Georgetown to design and earn that institution’s first doctorate in business ethics and to earn my law degree with Fr. Robert F. Drinan, S.J.; Prof. Samuel Dash; and other heroes for social justice.

In the wake of my journey from study and activism to professional development and leadership in business and academe around the country, there was an autobiographical quality to my experience of arriving at the Center. I had known of its existence since around 1983 while a student at Xavier. My later learning that the hands of Fr. Arrupe, Cardinal Bernardin, Fr. Henriot, and others had touched the organization was inspiring for guiding me on my own pastoral circle. When I learned that my office at the Center had been the dormitory room of Fr. Charles L. Currie, S.J., who signed my first two diplomas at Xavier, I realized that this was a special assignment. He had earned his doctorate down the street at The Catholic University of America and lived in my office before I was born.

In accepting this leadership role, I realized as well that I would need to draw on this education in business, strategy, law, and philosophy, as well as decades of experience in exempt organization tax law, advisory services, forensic accounting, business development, education, and other areas, to respond to the strategic challenges and opportunities the Center faced. These included long-term structural changes in the social profit sector and philanthropy generally, the effects of the Great Recession, and the evolution of culture and leadership in many faith-influenced organizations to a greater role for professional management for compliance with legal requirements and leading practices for responsible stewardship, for entrepreneurial business development, and for a focus on creating value through programmatic services.

We have embraced and cherished the heart and soul of the Center’s mission, but, because the world has changed since 1971, we know that, to honor this mission, we need to join with it a stronger professional approach to managing the organization. The fruits of Jesuit business, legal, and ethical education have provided terrific resources for delivering on this responsibility, and the process for advancing this transformation is well under way.
I share a sense of gratitude as well for the board and team at the Center, who have been allies in this process, colleagues from diverse traditions and professional backgrounds who share a passion for social justice and who support Catholic social tradition as a powerful resource for advancing it. Our board consists of chief executives, social entrepreneurs, philanthropists, and scholars with the experience, skills, and integrity for governance according to leading practices for social profit organizations.

Likewise, every member of the remarkable core team at the Center practices leadership all the time, in everything he or she does. Some even have served as chief executives and/or board members elsewhere. Though different in their backgrounds and working styles, they share qualities of ingenuity and confidence in themselves and one another that enable them to wield their leadership and wisdom with gentleness, humility, and good will:

- Mr. Aldo Caliari
- Dr. Jane Deren
- Ms. Christine M. Hyland, CFRE
- Ms. Anna M. Misleh
- Sr. Dianna M. Ortiz, O.S.U.
- Mr. Augustine J. Serrao
- Ms. Ann O. Venton

Some of you know our team members for their achievements as social entrepreneurs, artists, educators, missionaries, and champions for social justice and human rights. I know them as my colleagues, mentors, and heroes, people who live the Magis every day, asking always what more they can do to advance the Center’s mission effectively, scalably, and sustainably. These are kind people, who know themselves and what they are about. They inspire me, not just because of what they give to the Center, but because of the abundant gifts they share with the world through it.

The diversity of skills that each member brings to his or her work reinforces a collaborative culture that eschews silos and follows the model of an artistic workshop. Everyone performs both programmatic and administrative work. Because of this, our best work, the work we are eager and proud to share with you, is work that we do together. This team makes the world more just and caring by producing work that is smart, beautiful, principled, and impactful. In naming the center for their concerns, they share voices for global social justice of many around the world, including mine—and, I hope, yours. I am proud of them for doing so every day.
At this time of the Center’s 45th anniversary, I feel gratitude for the alignment between the story of the Center’s journey and my own; for the extraordinarily dedicated people who have animated this community of work since its founding and come together to engage with the signs of the times by not shying away from tough issues; for the members of the Community of Creative Voices who collaborate with our core team and who eloquently have enhanced our research, education, and advocacy out of the diversity of their experiences; and for the members of Education for Justice, donors, clients, foundations, and others who have invested in our work and been part of the Center’s story.

3. Hope

The third moment of reflection—hope—reveals itself in the combination of light and dark grace in the circumstances of the world in the coming decades and how the Center and its stakeholders will respond to them. It is important to remember that hope is different than mere optimism. The latter simply looks at things in the best light. Hope, though, is a theological virtue, a gift that simultaneously requires courageous resolve and humility to accept. Hope is what sustains us precisely when things look grim. Otherwise, there is little benefit to it. It is easy to be optimistic when things are going well.

As we read the front page of the New York Times, though, we see that things generally are not going well, with some challenges very similar to those of 1971 and some of a whole new scale and scope. It is no surprise that the signs of the times change, as the world is a complex and mysterious place and progress is far from linear and constant. What we hope will abide, though, is the Center’s resiliency in fostering for itself and others attentiveness, reflectiveness, and responsiveness. One need only look at the crowded picture of the Center’s founding at the United Nations above to note the absence of one of the critical constituencies for its existence and identity, as there is not a single woman in the frame. It is bittersweet for us to behold, but at least we see it. Looking back to the starting point reminds us of the journey that we have walked together. We walk this salutary journey still, and this counsels us to be mindful of how we will appear as we, and others, look back on ourselves and our time.
My hope for the Center’s future is that its own responses to the signs of the times will align with this evolving consciousness of what the world needs and how the Center can make a positive difference by hosting diverse voices of good will. It will be a center for concerns, as it always has been. However, as we take cues from the opening lines of Gaudium et Spes, the world views of Fr. Arrupe and Cardinal Bernardin, and the leadership of Sr. Tobin and other women religious, the focus never should be about the Center. The Center is the center of and for people, institutions, and our world with concerns bigger than itself. This is why the core of the Center’s new logo portrays the conversation going into and out of an open space of welcoming that is light on boundaries and indicators of exclusion.

There are more highly intelligent and highly educated people alive now than ever before, yet the world never has been in more danger from growing inequality in income and opportunities, institutionalized misogyny, climate change, illicit financial flows, global pandemic, ethnic and religious conflict, nativism and xenophobia, mass dislocations of people, weapons of mass destruction, and other hazards.

The sheer scale and scope of these challenges can be disheartening and demoralizing to many and it is no surprise that people are starving for leadership, particularly when virtually every major institution has reflected behaviors over the past 50 years that have caused a loss in public trust. The reactions to Pope Francis’s visits to the United States and around the world show how much people want principled leadership that will inspire their confidence again. The danger is that some demagogues see this longing, too, and are ready to devote huge efforts to hijack and manipulate these earnest longings to indulge their egos rather than the common good. Narcissistic personality disorder builds walls that block out reason and compassion, the very qualities at the heart of civilization and that, according to Darwin, make evolutionary progress possible.
One of the key ways that I see the Center practicing hope going forward is by amplifying its core founding practice as a convener and leveraging the positive commanding presence of Pope Francis as a pastoral, thought, and executive leader in the world’s consciousness. There is a continuity in the principles and practices of Catholic social tradition going back to at least the late 19th century, with clear pedigree back to the Hebrew prophets.

Yet, each pope has added his own emphasis and Pope Francis is no different, as he enhances our moral vocabulary by reminding us of the important principle of care, both for our common home and for one another. This complements the language of social justice that has become so integral a part of Catholic social consciousness over the past 50 years.

It already has been a challenge for people to aspire to and secure the minimal requirements of justice—social, distributive, and commutative. Now, Pope Francis is looking beyond such default standards, this minimum we can do, to challenge us in the spirit of the Magis to do more, to care. This is a radical and unsettling call when formulating public policy and private action. It is countercultural, because it gives no quarter to complacency. Indifference is not an option and only a globalization of hope will do. Francis’s approach is consistent with a strand of modern feminist thought, one of many achievements for this Pontifex. However, it is authentic to the Gospel as well, in the many renditions of “going the extra mile” in life and working to be perfect as the Creator in heaven is perfect.

Pope Francis has expanded our moral discourse to match the formidable array of challenges the world faces in a seamless web of concern. Francis challenges us, including those who try to teach peace through precept and example. We tend to see his leadership style through Ignatian charisms such as joyfulness and the Magis, and this is fair. However, the reality is that the radical and transformative ways that he challenges us to build a new model for order in the world come from the life and ministry of Jesus himself.
The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals are an institutional reflection of this converging global consciousness about the sort of seamless web that is in Pope Francis’s sights, and the fact of such putative global resolve gives some comfort in response to the challenges the world faces. Despite the modest success of the predecessor Millennium Development Goals, much work remains to alleviate circumstances of profound deprivation around the world that the goals themselves address.

The Center has developed core competencies in many of these issues over the years, including multilateral finance and human rights, global women’s issues, integral ecology, food and agriculture, social justice education, and organizational integrity and responsibility. Some of these competencies have come through internal programs that the Center even has helped to launch subsequently as independent organizations.

In some cases, though, the Center has made effective, scalable, and sustainable use of its resources to discharge its mission through gradations of collaboration with others. Sometimes these collaborations have come in the form of contributions by Creative Voices for Education for Justice or other projects. Other times, the Center has reached out to collaborate, assist, and learn from organizations through joint programming, publications, and/or board service.

The diversity of backgrounds and competencies of Center team members means that the range for such collaborations has been broad and has included “crossover” issues that one does not always encounter in the world of Catholic social justice advocacy. We take our cue, though, from Sr. Tobin, who once wrote, “Go out on a limb. That’s where the fruit is.” Indeed, because of the seamless web of interrelatedness of these issues, the alignment between other organizations and the Center has worked well, including not just the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, FADICA, Catholic Climate Covenant, Jubilee USA, UNANIMA International, CIDSE, and Catholic Charities USA, but also the Caux Round Table, Global Financial Integrity, the Georgetown University Law Center Corporate Counsel Institute, and workshops with Fortune 500 sustainability and corporate citizenship executives.
Another way that the Center practices its new entrepreneurial culture is through emphasizing communications and advisory services in developing and sharing its research, education, and advocacy. We have been delighted to assist faith-influenced and other social profit organizations in crafting dedicated educational and professional development programs and strategic philanthropic leadership plans to discharge their missions for social service and social action effectively, scalably, and sustainably.

Consistent with this web of interrelatedness and our socially entrepreneurial culture, we actively work at the Center to create work product that our members, supporters, and clients will not find elsewhere. We anticipate accelerating such affiliations and collaborations to extend the productive reach and impact of Catholic social tradition and to using more advanced technology and multimedia in the process to make this work product accessible around the world and across cultures, particularly the Spanish-speaking constituencies whose leadership only will grow in importance.

At the Center’s 45th anniversary, I find hope in Pope Francis’s leadership in helping us to discern the interrelatedness of the signs of the times in the current issues that we face and in his guidance in articulating a broader and more proactive moral vocabulary for thinking and acting in response. I find hope in the Center’s transformation into a social enterprise for social justice to do its part in a smart, principled, and millennium-ready way via its growing leadership team, the Community of Creative Voices, and the technology for facilitating globally diverse conversations with a priority for action and positive impact. I find hope especially in the knowledge that the Center truly does this as the center of and for something: the center of a wise and caring community of support and the center for something greater than itself, a vibrant resource and an inviting place for the next generations of those who care about global social justice.

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Conclusion

Reflections on milestones such as anniversaries are bittersweet exercises in that they remind us of journeys underway, but incomplete. The look back can startle because faces, fashions, and contexts can look familiar and alien simultaneously. The look ahead can unsettle because of uncertainty that can deteriorate into the anxiety to which Gaudium et Spes refers, a generalized fear that, however challenging things are now for the world, they can get much worse.

This is why a centering exercise in such moments of recollection, gratitude, and hope provides a salutary discipline and detachment. The reality is that, whether we are looking backward or forward, we are doing it from the sanctity of the present moment. This is the seat of these gifts of recollection, gratitude, and hope and this is an experience we share in joy because, as Ignatius of Loyola would remind us, wherever we have been, and wherever we are going, moments of grace are there and nothing goes to waste.

In these reflections on recollection, gratitude, and hope at the Center’s 45 anniversary, I have shared with you a glimpse of this journey for an unlikely organization that came together with an unlikely name and which, though small, has had an outsized impact in academe, civil society, the corporate and professional worlds, the American Catholic Church and the Vatican, interfaith contexts, government, and multilateral institutions.

The journey since 1971 has reflected dramatic changes in the political, social, economic, and theological dynamics of the Center’s strategic environment and the world, and this current moment of recollection acknowledges both the strides in collaborations inside and outside the Church, and the challenges for the Center of articulating an evolving value proposition that aligns with these changing realities. However, with your support, including by sharing the center for your concerns, we know we’re up to the task.

You were the reason for the Center’s founding and we recollect now with joy the journey we have shared. You are the reason the Center’s board, team, and colleagues around the world labor still in the vineyards today, and we are grateful for you and for one another. You, your children, and the generations to come are the reason we sustain hope and commit ourselves to continued dedication in our work. You helped make our first 45 years special, blessed, and satisfying. We are proud of what we have accomplished with you and we know that, in sharing your voice for global social justice, and with your continued support as we engage with urgent issues facing the world, the years ahead will be an adventure.
Discussion Questions

1. If you were high school age or older in 1971, what would you have named as the top three issues at the center for your concern then and why? What would you name as the top three issues now? How would the means for researching, analyzing, reflecting upon, and acting in response to these issues have differed between 1971 and today? Do you think such responses would have been effective then or could be effective now? Where would they have led then or lead now?

2. If you were younger in 1971, or born later, talk with someone you admire who had such experiences, such as a family member, teacher, journalist, government official, or religious figure, and ask these questions above.

3. What do you think a faith-influenced ethical framework such as Catholic social tradition can contribute in a pluralistic debate about issues of public policy at the domestic and international levels? Is a faith-influenced framework still relevant or helpful for such conversations or will the institutional associations pose distractions due to a lack of shared beliefs or simple distrust for religion, e.g., due to scandals?

4. Is it helpful to portray the challenges the world is facing today, e.g., arms proliferation, drugs, illicit financial flows, trafficking in people, and climate change, as part of a seamless web of interrelated issues, such as Pope Francis does when he discusses “integral ecology”? Would it be more helpful in terms of diagnosing and responding to such issues, and simply not risking discouragement or a paralyzing fear, to deal with them discretely? Why or why not?

5. How do you understand the relationship between social justice and care in terms of local, national, and global issues, and also in terms of issues you deal with at a personal level in your life? What reactions do you have when you see people demonstrate an ethic of care, e.g., Pope Francis taking in homeless and refugees and caring for them? If you were advising him or someone else, what criteria would you use to determine when and how far to go above and beyond the call of the duty of justice, to do more than the minimum?

6. What roles do you see in your life for social service, e.g., working in a soup kitchen or a shelter for survivors of domestic violence, and social action, e.g., working in a community, national, or global organization to perform research, education, and advocacy for systemic change? What personal qualities do you think would help you be effective at each of these forms of response to the world’s challenges? What educational and/or professional qualifications do you have that would help you be effective? If you do not believe that you have the qualifications to perform the kinds of service you would like to perform in such roles, what would you need to do to get them?
Prayer for Centering Concern

Gentle and caring God:

We ask you to be present to all your people who today are experiencing the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of our age.

Help us to be present to them as well, either in person or in our meditations on their real lived experiences, so that we can glimpse the complex and mysterious ways that your spirit unfolds in people’s lives each day, with each birth, illness, graduation, job interview, traffic accident, commitment, separation, and other experience that brings light or dark grace.

Help us especially to apply our senses to the experiences of suffering and deprivation that occur around us and around the world, to teach us empathy that extends outward in local, national, and global circles of concern.

Give us the grace to be attentive, reflective, and loving as the animating energy at the center for our concerns.

Help us to show our concerns by learning and practicing the discipline of the Pastoral Circle in gaining shared experience of people’s lives, performing social analysis, engaging in theological reflection, and committing deliberatively to taking conscientious action, all with a view to continuing this process of experience, analysis, reflection, and action and becoming new creations and more humble and holy servants with each iteration.

In our responses, teach us to be just, but not only just. Teach us to have a conscience that takes risks by caring with a logic that proceeds mysteriously from our abilities to read the signs of the times around us, to know our gifts, and to surprise ourselves by caring for the sake of caring itself.

Help us to use faith and reason as complementary means for taking responsibility for our convictions so that we can appropriate them for ourselves, continue to reexamine them through the Pastoral Circle, and test them by sharing them with others in respectful dialogue.

Help us to be pastoral, thought, and executive leaders through our individual and collective actions so that we can emulate the courageous examples of Fr. Pedro Arrupe, S.J.; Cardinal Joseph Bernardin; Sr. Mary Luke Tobin, S.L., and other women religious who stand for social justice and who care for others all around the world.

Along the way, help us to find our free identity, our authentic selves, and our inner joy as persons for others and contemplatives in action in the center of a circle of meaning, a center of empathy, a center of justice, a center of care, a center of concern. Amen.