

USCMA Presidential Address 2022

My dear USCMA members and friends,

Good Morning and thank you for the morning prayer to guide our day! Thank you, Megan and team.

It is my honor to serve as the president of the USCMA with the dedicated board members who are supportive and as concerned with the future of the USCMA as I am. Thank you to our board members who are here present.

Special recognition to Don McCrabb as our executive director. I have known a few executive directors of other organizations in my life of ministry and they all have one quality in common: passion for the organization they serve so that its mission can be fulfilled. Don falls into this category, too. Thank you, Don.

What a wonderful re-encounter this weekend is! Since our last in-person Conference in 2018 much has happened in our world, our country, our lives and of course in our organization of the USCMA. We have lived through situations unknown by us beforehand. We have experienced tragedies in our families, with our friends and our religious communities. Our loved ones have gone home to eternity, perhaps too soon in our eyes and hearts. Will we never be the same? Of course we don't even know what "the same" is anymore. Some children have only had the experience of wearing masks and this seems so natural to them.

Do you remember Holy Week of 2020? In the Diocese of Joliet there were no in-person Holy Week services. How strange and empty that felt for many of us. Sitting in front of the TV was just not the same as being in church. On Thanksgiving Day in 2020 I was alone in Pembroke Township where I minister in a small rural community. The Motherhouse was in lockdown and my family canceled the usual family dinner. By the grace of God a couple, Coco and Angie, stopped by and gave me a complete Thanksgiving dinner with even two desserts! Everything seemed so surreal.

But even in all that we went through, grace was with us. Grace continues to be with us. We celebrate this weekend: a "Grace-filled Future." Much has been written about grace and there are many definitions of it. St. Paul writes God's response to him when he begged to have the thorn removed from his side (How many times have we begged for the same!): " 'My grace is enough for you, for in weakness power reaches its perfection.' And so I willingly boast of my weaknesses instead, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I am content with weakness, with mistreatment, with distress, with persecutions and difficulties for the sake of Christ; for when I am powerless, it is then that I am strong." 2Cor. 12: 9-10.

God's grace **is** enough for us. But do we really believe that? If we do, and if we have done our part to collaborate with God's grace, we will be strong and filled with the Joy that living the Gospel produces in us. Our continuous challenge on this life's journey, however, is to be content with weaknesses, mistreatment, distress and difficulties. I don't know about you, but I am not there yet!

A future always begins with a past and is rooted in a present, so let us look at these moments in relation to the USCMA. I recall vividly the last time the board and I met in Washington D.C. before the pandemic. We were having a lively and serious discussion about our mission as a Catholic association. We raised many questions which demanded clear and concise responses. Who are we really serving? What is happening to the membership and why do some feel that the USCMA has no more to offer? Can we clearly articulate our mission? Who are today's missionaries and how should we be defining them? Are there missionaries who are not sitting at our table? How can we reach out to them? It went on and on. Many questions and very few answers.

So we set out to ask our members to help us understand our organization. All of the board members were given a list of members to be contacted and seek answers. Some members answered with honesty and a real desire to help. Some responded to our calls but couldn't talk now, but would get back to us. (Hmmm.) Some never answered phone message or emails. Of the responses that we did receive, one bothered me very much: Many members felt more like recipients of what the USCMA could produce, but did not see themselves as members with the duty to participate and create together. And God's grace was still with us.

It then became evident that we needed professional expertise to help us decipher all the information swarming in our minds. We looked at various consultants and contacted Bob McCarty to tackle this enormous task which we felt we really needed. Our finances were weak and no one was knocking on our door with grant moneys. Bob actually scared me on one of his initial talks with us. We could be facing the dissolution of the USCMA. Actually, a friend of mine questioned me when I first became president. He said: "Do you want to be known as the LAST president of the USCMA?" When he asked this, it sounded rather improbable. But when Bob said it, it sounded like it could really happen. And God's grace continued within us.

So last March, 2022, in Washington Bob guided us through reflections, deep and honest thinking, and discussions, and we, as a board, decided that the USCMA is a viable association that has a mission in the Church with God's people, but that a restructuring process would be necessary. It would take a lot of work. Our first important step happened during these days when we composed our new mission statement. It reads: "The USCMA is a community of faith leaders engaged in networking, formation and advocacy for God's mission." "It is when we are weak, that we are really strong."

The board launched a series of Townhall meetings to introduce our new mission statement and explore how we should restructure programs, services, member engagement, development and finance, and governance. Many of you participated in one or more of those meetings. These meetings were framed in the synodal process – a process designed to encourage one another to speak freely, to share their reality, and to accompany one another as we listened for the movement of the Spirit among us. Now it is our turn.

The rest of this day will be spent learning about this restructuring process and how each one of us can be a part of making our vision statement come true. Each one of us will be asked to participate actively in the process, not as a recipient, nor observer, but as a faith leader, a member of the USCMA, who desires to advance God's mission. This truly is a grace-filled future.

During this time of reflection and returning to the discussion table about our future, the USCMA has continued to participate in many activities which have and are contributing to a sound mission understanding. Many of you have attended our webinars and have expressed how important they are to your personal formation. The office, which is Don and his staff, produce Encounter, our mission reflection online newsletter. It also has been appreciated for its informative and educational information.

As the public face of the USCMA, Don participates in many other organizations. He is an active member of the Executive Director Network. They meet monthly, by Zoom, for mutual support and some programming to support the professional development of Executive Directors and provide a Lenten Day of Renewal for staff.

He is an active member of the Third Wave of Mission. This has been an initiative that USCMA has supported for many years. They, too, are reflecting on their future and how they are being called to serve. He also supports the Twinning Program of America as a consultant.

The USCMA and other organizations, of which you can talk to Don later, have organized the Catholic Care Coalition. It was created while the pandemic was developing and has as their core purpose to promote global vaccine acceptance and equity. Other important goals are:

1. To activate the network to respond to humanitarian crises in keeping with Church teaching.
2. To amplify how the Church cares for the poor, others in need, and the common good.

3. To facilitate a deeper appreciation of the mission and activities of member organizations.

There are 62 members in the coalition. All this is part of God's mission that we embrace.

Don is the convener for this organization and with our blessing, as a board, he dedicates 25% of his time to this great ministry. This is a good example of what can be done when likeminded organizations come together, sharing their human and financial resources toward the same desired end.

You can imagine how the mission of the USCMA has changed and evolved over the years. And hopefully, we will be able to see together how the mission of the USCMA is also changing and evolving to meet the needs of God's people.

I am very confident that if I could speak individually with everyone of you, we could see how your present ministry fits under the USCMA umbrella. There are possibilities just waiting for us to create; ways of integrating, supporting and promoting the various mission activities that we engage in because of God's call. This is the vision that has been coming into my mind during this time of reconfiguration.

Could you embrace this vision, too? Are you a faith leader who desires to work with a community of other leaders to bring to fruition God's mission? Do you feel that the Spirit continues to breath within us, giving us the courage and creativity to risk everything for God's mission? Do you believe that the power of the Risen Lord is stronger than the forces that seek to destroy God's love?

Recently I came across a reading from the prophet Habakkuk. It is from chapter 2: "I will stand at my guard post, ... and keep watch to see what God will say to me, and the answer that he will give to my complaint. Then the Lord answered me...Write down the vision clearly upon the tablets, so that one can read it readily. For the vision still has time, presses on to fulfilment, and will not disappoint. If it delays, wait for it, it will surely come, it will not be late." (Repeat the key phrases.) pause

How powerful are these words!

In the various organizations in which I participate today the key word that we find in our reflections is collaboration. In the past we were a silo people. Certainly religious life was because we had the personnel, the institutions, the benefactors who supported us and we didn't need anyone outside of our organization. I am post Vatican II but what the elder sisters told us about those days, seems so strange now. There was a distinct competition and creation of territories, and collaboration was not even seen as a

possibility. My experience with dioceses does not go back that far, but I have seen the same silo ministries among parishes even today.

The silo model is not the model of the Spirit. She calls us to join hearts, strengths, intelligence and all the gifts that God has given us so that God's mission, the mission of love, can reach all peoples, allowing them to express this love in various manners.

Can we really do this or am I dreaming beyond reality? I find encouragement and the power of fire in the words of Ilia Delio, a Franciscan theologian, who specializes in the evolution of divinity. She writes in her book: *Christ in Evolution*,

“Christ is the power of God among us, the fullness of the earth and of life in the universe. We humans have the potential to make Christ alive; it is what we are created for... If we allow the Spirit to really take hold of us and liberate us from our fears, anxieties, demands, and desire for power and control, then we truly seek the living among the dead; we can live in the Risen Christ who empowers us to build this new creation.”

Let us dedicate today and tomorrow with this end in mind. To embrace and work for the fulfillment of God's mission, recognizing that we are leaders in this calling. God has placed God's trust and confidence in us, that is why we are here. Can we correspond to God's trust and confidence? Do we believe in the grace being poured out on us at these times?

Let us, faith leaders, joined together as members of the USCMA, contribute to this new creation with passion, endurance, and love.