

HOMILY FOR THE OPENING OF THE 2010 GENERAL ASSEMBLY

A warm welcome to our friend and Capuchin brother, our celebrant, Father Al Veik.

WILLKOMMEN, BIENVENIDA, NAMASTE, WELCOME to each of you as we gather to pray together and celebrate the opening of this General Assembly of our international congregation.

We have finally arrived at this moment after months, even years, of preparation, perhaps nervous, yet excited and confident that we stand together at a new threshold at this time in our history. We do not come with ready-made answers but we come with a freedom to be open to the mystery of what is unfolding in our lives as School Sisters of St. Francis around the world. Just as Francis gathered the friars together for the Chapter of Mats, we gather together today from around the world to strengthen our bonds of community and to be renewed and inspired to continue our mission into the future.

We believe God has empowered each one of us to share in the responsibility and the opportunity to create our future in this global-multicultural community. In RIF 19.2: *“We commit ourselves to contribute to community life, sharing hopes and expectations, taking responsibility for planning and evaluating our life together”*.

The primary concern of the General Assembly, from RIF 68, is *“to maintain the spirit and purpose of our Congregation and to promote our mission within the current needs of Church and society”*. Our foundation is strong. We have the advantage of drawing courage and inspiration from our foundresses, Mothers Alexia, Alfons and Clara. They risked crossing an ocean in order to follow their prophetic dream because they listened deeply to an INNER CALL. With a global vision they responded to the great needs of their time. Each of us is now called to carry this spirit of our foundresses forward. Their spirit and vision and dream will live on in us as we create our future in this international congregation.

- How will we respond to the needs of our times?
- What are our dreams for the future?
- How will we translate our foundresses’ belief: *“Nothing is impossible”* and *“The needs of the time are the will of God”* into today’s reality?

If we have the passion of our adventurous foundresses, what challenges will we have the courage to face, what dreams will we fulfill, who are we called yet to become as the Franciscan Face of the Gospel around the world?

We, the members of the General Assembly, are called to *“form an international faith community with a mission, not only to our Congregation, but also to the Church and world”*. (RIF 67)

We gather today from around the world: Europe, North India and South India, Latin America and the United States to form an international faith community in which we share our stories of how we are the FRANCISCAN FACE OF THE GOSPEL IN A MULTICULTURAL WORLD.

Our international faith community is blessed by the prayer and support of our Sisters, Associates, friends, former members, families, other religious congregations and local churches within the five provinces from which we come. We are surrounded by the love and energy of our Sisters and Associates who have gone before us and who are walking with us now on our spiritual journey as we gather for this 2010 General Assembly. Please take a moment to think of those who were most dear to your heart and silently call forth their presence and guidance today.

There is an energy that we create when we come together as an international congregation. Can you not already feel it in the hallways, the dining room and in this chapel? It is the same kind of energy that we hear about in the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles when the people gathered in Solomon's temple to see the many signs and wonders of the apostles' work and ministry. We are told that when the crowds gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and distressed, a marvelous thing happened: all were healed!

What marvelous things will happen as we gather together during these next two and a half weeks to set a direction for the next four years and choose a new Spiritual Leadership Team for our international congregation?

Together we are invited to dare to ask the open hearted question during this General Assembly: **WHAT IS THE DIVINE ASKING OF US** as individuals, as delegates, as provinces, and as an international congregation at this time in our history?

We are gathered in community to listen to God's voice reflected in our experiences and in our world. It is in listening in community that we strengthen our inward and outward vision. When we listen to the dreams and visions of all of us from around the world, then we will embrace the present moment and know that our future is filled with possibilities.

Let us listen carefully to our deep inner voice as we participate in this work of the Divine. We have the strong inner belief that the Divine is leading us and going before us. We have what we need to participate in this Divine Energy. *"I know well the plans I have in mind for you, says our God, plans to give you a future full of hope. When you call me, I will listen to you. When you look for me, you will find me. When you seek me with all your heart, you will find me with you, says our God."* Jeremiah 29:11-14

As we listen to the Scriptures today, what is the Gospel saying to us as we begin our General Assembly?

For our reflection, I invite you to focus on Thomas in this gospel story.

When Jesus came to the locked room that first Easter night, he found the disciples gathered in fear for their lives – except for Thomas. Noting the details of the first part of this Gospel, where was Thomas? Why was he not locked in that room with the rest of the disciples?

Could it be that Thomas was the "brave" one? Could it be that he was absent from the locked room because he was not terrified of the powerful people who had killed their beloved Master? Could it be that he was the "deep thinker", off by himself, pondering the week's events, trying to make sense of it all?

When the other disciples did meet up with Thomas, they told him: “*We have seen the Lord*”. At that point, Thomas only wanted to experience the Risen Christ being alive and real. Does not each one of us here today and those gathered with us in spirit around the world, want to experience the Divine Presence of the Risen Christ within and around us in our daily lives? When Jesus came to the disciples again a week later, Thomas was present. The Risen Christ then invites Thomas to touch his wounds and says: “*Peace be with you*”. Jesus extends that same invitation to each of us: “*Touch my wounds*”. Then we too will be healed and experience the Peace of the Risen Christ.

What an invitation and challenge for Thomas and for us as we begin this General Assembly! How will we touch the wounds of Christ in today’s world?

- Are we ready to take the risk of touching the wounds – the pain – of Christ?
- Do we have enough courage to reach out and touch the wounds and pain of the people we live and work with in each of our five Provinces around the world?
- Are we willing to take the time to acknowledge and honor our own personal pain and the pain of the suffering people of the world?

Are we willing to embrace and touch the wounds of Christ in others?

- When we see the violence in Iraq, Afghanistan, Africa, Latin America, India, Europe, the US and in areas from which we come,
- When we see the wealth of a few and the misery and hopelessness of many,
- When we see so many without jobs, homeless and hungry,
- When we see our planet in great peril?

Are we willing to embrace and touch the wounds of Christ?

- When we encounter mass displacement in our world,
- When we see refugees and people who are targets of prejudice,
- When we see victims of natural disasters,
- When we experience the lonely in our own communities?

What is important when we experience the pain from touching these wounds is that we also experience the power of interconnectedness with all of humanity and the web of life. The realization of this interconnectedness gives us new energy and a new awareness that it is important for each one of us to bring Christ’s peace and healing to the wounded in the world.

Jesus says, “*Touch my wounds.*” and feel a connection with all of life. We say in RIF 3: “*We are in the world to be for it a source of new life, new meaning and new hope*”. One of the signs of new hope may be our commitment to become a community of many cultures. Be the Franciscan Face of the Gospel in a Multicultural World. This is the challenge before us as we begin the General Assembly of our international congregation.

Being multicultural in our membership and in our ministries is a great gift, but also a great challenge. It is a long and profound journey that involves not only the spiritual dimension but also the human dimension. A multicultural community is not just a community of people from different cultures living together, but a constant invitation to deepen relationships, to share visions and to create a future together.

What does it mean to be a multicultural community?

- It means being aware that Gospel values are lived in different ways in different cultures.
- It means recognizing and welcoming differences among us, and incorporating these differences into our community living.
- It means knowing how to be open to the practices and traditions of others to the extent that each of us is changed in the process of creating something new.

Most importantly, becoming a community of many cultures means witnessing to a multicultural world that it is possible to be ONE in mind and spirit in the midst of diversity. It means finding ways to come together with ONE heart, creating a spirit of belonging among us, and knowing that the Spirit speaks through each person regardless of age, color, gender or race.

May this General Assembly give us the inspiration and openness to experience the power of being ONE in spirit in the midst of the energy and diversity of the many cultures of our Sisters and Associates around the world! This, then, will be our gift to ourselves, our congregation, our church and our world.

Danke, Gracias, Dhanyavad, Nanni, Thank you for standing together at this challenging threshold in our history. In the spirit of our foundresses, Mothers Alexia, Alfons and Clara, let us go forward with courage to create our future as School Sisters of St. Francis.