

School Sisters of St. Francis

General Assembly Address – Sister Mary Diez, President

Bangalore, India - February 1, 2018

What stirs our hearts today as we come together for the General Assembly of our Congregation in 2018?

Fear? Joy? Uncertainty? Challenge? Excitement? New Hope?

We all feel the currents of change in our world, in our church, in religious life, and in our congregation. Some change is frightening, such as hatred that bursts forth in violence, repression, and persecution. Some change is liberating, such as the witness of love by courageous champions of the planet, the poor, and the dignity of all people. We can look at change as loss, or embrace it as an opportunity to hear God in our midst, asking something new of us. If we look at change only as loss, we risk missing the future that God has in mind for us. Isaiah 43:19 suggests another way to look at change, by seeking to find what God is asking when God says: “See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.”

Our call in this Assembly is to perceive the way that God is making for us, even as we feel like we are wandering in the wilderness and the wasteland.

Our very presence in this room, in Carmelaram, Bangalore, India, signals that this is a new moment for us, as School Sisters of St. Francis. We have been accustomed to coming together in the Motherhouse in Milwaukee for General Assemblies; this is the first held in a different country. And not only another country—this Assembly moves us from the Global North to the Global South, a move that echoes the movement of the Church in this century. Surely Mother Alexia is present with us here today, delighted that we, her daughters, are a global congregation. And she wants to remind us of our charism to be responsive to the needs of the times.

As we begin this assembly we acknowledge that we have grown in our understanding of the transformation to which we called ourselves in 2014. I do not think we have fully grasped—and I personally struggle to grasp—how God is calling us to become new in our expression of community and mission—more united, more intercultural, more committed to peace-making. And perhaps we

have as yet only scratched the surface of what God has in mind as God calls us to come out of ourselves and go to the existential peripheries. How present and how close are we to the people who are struggling at the margins of society? The Steering Committee put a name to the process that will continue our transformation at this Assembly: Weaving together a new heart for intercultural life and mission.

All the words of this theme are important:

**Weaving:** this is work that needs to be thoughtful and intentional, if it is to achieve its purpose; and yet it is immensely creative. So, just as a weaver both has a plan and is an artist, our work needs to engage our rational and our intuitive minds.

**Together:** In 2014, we pledged to move from “I” to “We.” Our work of weaving continues that movement, collaboratively, in community. Together...juntas. . . zusammen.

**A new heart:** Any transformation makes the heart choose anew the commitment to love. It’s more than an *expression of belief*; it is the *action of love*. This phrase reminds us of the Ezekiel 37, the story of the dry bones, reinvigorated with the breath of the spirit, when God said: “I will put my spirit in you and you will live.” The source of our new heart surely is God’s spirit.

**For Intercultural Life and Mission:** These words seem to be two concepts, but in responding to the needs of our times, they offer a unity of idea. St. Francis called us to learn to embrace not only our differences as Sisters, but also to welcome and embrace all whom we perceive to be “the other.” Indeed, intercultural living calls us to work through interpersonal conflicts and self-defeating behaviors as a pathway to new life. But we are also called to address how to strengthen our mission in response to the emerging needs of our times—human trafficking, the plight of migrants, and care for the planet, to name a few. When we bring life and mission together, we can learn to reach across differences to transform both ourselves and our world.

At the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in the US last August, the President, Sister Mary Pellegrino, called on us to change the story we tell about ourselves. For too long, she said, we have allowed ourselves and others to tell a story of diminishment, of loss, of death. It is a false story because it is not the story God has in mind for us. We need to displace that story with a new vision, a

story of communion.

Communion is another term that captures what we have talked about as transformation, as weaving a new heart for intercultural life and mission. In his letter to Consecrated Persons announcing the Year of Consecrated Life, Pope Francis addresses communion as necessary both within our community life, in our work with other congregations, and in our mission. He asks us to live communion together locally, setting aside criticism, gossip, envy, jealousy and hostility, and embracing mutual acceptance and concern. Specifically, he says “We need to ask ourselves about the way we relate to persons from different cultures, as our communities become increasingly international. How can we enable each member to say freely what he or she thinks, to be accepted with his or her particular gifts, and to become fully co-responsible?” I pray that this expectation, also found in *Response in Faith*, will guide our interactions and deliberations at this Assembly.

Pope Francis also encourages us “to step out more courageously from the confines of our respective Institutes and to work together, at the local and global levels, on projects involving formation, evangelization, and social action. This would make for a more effective prophetic witness. Communion and the encounter between different charisms and vocations can open up a path of hope. No one contributes to the future in isolation; [we need to see ourselves] as part of a true communion which is constantly open to encounter, dialogue, attentive listening and mutual assistance. Such a communion inoculates us from the disease of self-absorption.” Strong words, indeed, from our Pope, who is leading us to a sense of what we are being called to.

Finally, the Pope points to all the ways our world needs both *our prophetic witness*--in how we live, and *our working to address the needs* of our world, especially as these affect the poor and marginalized. How can we work on issues related to our common home, to an end to human trafficking, to the alleviation of poverty, disease, war, and all human ills and open up a path of hope? How do we model attentive listening, dialogue, mutual assistance in all we do? We must consider all of this as we seek to weave together a new heart for intercultural life and mission.

I’d like now to take a few moments to look ahead to the work of this assembly, pointing to four strands that we need to weave together.

First, as we renew our Congregational Direction, we are being asked to go deeper into what we called ourselves to in 2014—to be more united and more intercultural in our life and mission as we seek to be peacemakers. Today, we more clearly hear the poor and the marginalized calling to us to look at our mission—directly and through the words of Pope Francis. As Sister Sujita Kallapurakkathu reminds us, “the poor will continue to lead us to the heart of our mission, and indeed, to the very heart of God.” In the work of this Assembly, we must focus first on mission: “Toward what is God calling us today? Who are we growing to become? What do we need to let die for new life to emerge?” (Dunn, LCWR Occasional Papers, 2017). In the spirit of Mother Alexia, how can we shape a renewed focus on mission, with an emphasis on responding to the needs of the time?

We need a second, parallel focus on *how we live* religious life. Ted Dunn (InFormation, 2017) says that “Only a small number of communities will ultimately succeed in giving birth to new life. Those who do will be made up of members and leaders, young and old alike, who are willing and able to engage in the inner work of transformation.” It will take real courage and imagination to envision ourselves responding to the needs of our times in intercultural, intergenerational communities in mission.

As we look at this renewed focus on intercultural life and mission, we need to explore a third thread: the implications of embracing “communion” as we bring new members into our congregation and as we plan for the ongoing development of our members. Formation is critical if we are to express our charism in missions that require us to *enter into the lives and needs of people, especially the poor*. (RIF Preface). We have already begun conversations about initial formation being Congregational formation, both at the GPL meetings with all the provincial leaders in 2016 and in work with the two Indian provinces since that time.

Fourth, we need to address changes in structure that will assist us to both carry out the mission and to assure care for our elderly Sisters. The demographic data we will review at this Assembly calls us to make decisions in the size of the General Assembly and the GA committees and to flesh out the current supplement to *Response in Faith* regarding processes of change in province structures.

All of these aspects of our transformation provide a clear mandate for the next four years, and, therefore, for the leaders we will call forth who have energy and passion to carry our expression of religious life into the future. Who has the passion for mission, for our transformation in communion

with each other and those we serve, to welcome structural changes to support both our mission and our internal needs, to encourage new approaches to formation, and to make a difference where our presence needs to bring new life, new meaning, and new hope (RIF, Principle I)?

As we listen to the reports from the Provinces and Region in the coming days, let us be aware of how all are working with the call to transformation. I want to give one example, knowing that there are many worth sharing. When Sister Cathy Ryan and I visited the European Province in September, we were touched by the work that province is doing to embrace their transformation. They have been working with the Joseph-Stiftung, an organization that works with parishes and religious congregations in planning for the future. One of the consultants reminded the Sisters on the leadership team and the consultative group that they face three transformative questions:

How will you end well?

How will you deal with the Motherhouse as an historic building?

How will you create a space where something new can emerge?

Through their work with the Joseph-Stiftung, our Sisters in Europe are embracing change as an opportunity to hear God in their midst, asking something new of them. May all of us, like them, open our hearts so that, as we face necessary change, we will not miss the future that God has in mind for us.

Diarmuid O'Murchu, in *Religious Life in the Twenty-First Century* (2017), reminds us that ours is a call to “remain radically open to the possibility” of the creative Spirit bringing us into the something new that is emerging. He says that “Such openness will involve a willingness to let go of what has served us well in the past, diligently attending to the discernment of the acute cultural and spiritual needs of our time, and trusting radically in God’s providential care, whatever the outcome” is for us personally. So, while we work to create a space for something new to emerge, we are not the ones in control. We entrust our future to the God who has a plan for us.

Later today we will hear in the Gospel of our opening liturgy about Jesus sending the disciples out to share the good news. They are to take nothing for the journey, but to trust that what they need will be provided. As each of us packed a suitcase (or two) to come here, I suspect we went beyond what the disciples saw as the limit of one tunic and a pair of sandals. In our defense, we are women, living in a different time and we can point to reasons for many of us having a bit more physical baggage for

a trip across continents. But if we read the passage on another level, how might we, even now, put aside some non-physical excess baggage we carry within us. Each of us can ask ourselves if there are things we should leave behind as we begin this journey together.

- Can we leave behind any prior judgments we hold about others and open ourselves to listening to the Spirit speaking in each one who is here?
- Can we leave behind any decisions about what we think must happen here, to allow room for the Spirit to act freely?
- Can we leave behind our strong positions about what is best for ourselves, our mission, or our province or region in looking at the issues we will work with?
- Can we open ourselves to the common good and to calls of the Spirit?

I invite each of you to take an inventory of these kinds of baggage as we begin our time together.

And so, dear Sisters, let us think about how we begin this assembly:

We begin this assembly full of hope, recognizing the excitement and urgency of this particular moment in our history, calling us to weave together a new heart for intercultural life and mission.

We begin this assembly aware of the challenges facing us and trusting in Providence to lead us into the future that God has in mind for us.

We begin by asking for the grace to be radically open to the Spirit, believing that the God who loves each one of us and loves our Congregation is sending the Spirit to be with us in this time of Assembly.

Let us begin.