

Assembly 2022

Presidential Address

We come together today to begin the 2022 General Assembly of the School Sisters of St. Francis. The experiences of the past four years, from our engagement in mission and our reflections in community groups to the challenges brought by COVID in our lives and ministry have brought us to a place of readiness to come together as sisters.

Over these years, as we have studied *Response in Faith*, many of us discovered a richness and depth of meaning in this document that spoke to us in new ways. And, amazingly, some of the ideas we may think of today as “new” were not only addressed 40 years ago in *Response in Faith* and the updated Franciscan Rule, but were surfaced 2,000 years earlier in the Gospel.

Consider three terms we use today: “interculturality,” “encounter,” and “synodality.”

Interculturality

When we called ourselves in the Congregational Direction 2018-2022, to weave together new hearts for ***intercultural life and mission***, we were being asked to renew our hearts—because the Gospel, our *Response in Faith*, and the Franciscan Rule had already expressed the essentials of interculturality.

Consider the quotation from John 17:21 that is at the head of Principle III: That all may be one as you, Father, are in me and I in you. I pray that they may be one in us, that the world may believe that you sent me.

A key message regarding interculturality in the Gospel is that we are to see ALL people as our brothers and sisters, and to seek oneness with them.

Consider *Response in Faith* 22: We cherish the unique call of each woman in our Congregation. Therefore, we *consider with respect each other’s talents, background, culture, and needs*.

Interculturality is especially key to our interactions in community. And it is important to note that the concept addresses many kind of differences, not only different cultures. The key notion is that we are to be open to others, respecting each one, and seeking to understand where each is coming from.

Consider the Franciscan Rule #15. . . In all their works the love of God and of all people should shine forth.

Another key message: Not only respect, but love should guide us in our interactions with others, inside the community and in our service to people. The theme of this Assembly underscores this point: Be witnesses to God's love in the world.

Interculturality, then, is a central aspect of our religious commitment and it is critical to our living the call to love.

Let's take a moment of reflection on interculturality.

- What have you come to appreciate in different ways of doing things?
- How have your own assumptions been challenged in interactions across difference?
- How do you respond to the resistance you may feel to some aspects of another's culture?

Encounter

Pope Francis' encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, focuses on "encounter," a related term that may resonate with some of us more than interculturality. But they are very close in meaning.

A key phrase in the encyclical is a "culture of encounter." Pope Francis says that "To speak of a 'culture of encounter' means that we, as a people, should be passionate about meeting others, seeking points of contact, building bridges, planning a project that includes everyone."

Significant elements of the culture of encounter include respecting the dignity of others, engaging in authentic social dialogue, and being willing to transcend our differences and divisions.

Pope Francis describes "authentic social dialogue as the ability to respect the other's point of view and to admit that it may include legitimate convictions and concerns. . . In a true spirit of dialogue we grow in our ability to grasp the significance of what others say and do, even if we cannot accept it as our own conviction. . .

He adds:

"Let us not forget that differences are creative; they create tension and in the resolution of tension lies humanity's progress."

A culture of encounter is a society "where differences coexist, complementing, enriching, and reciprocally illuminating one another, even amid disagreements and reservations. Each of us can learn something from others."

Encounter, too, is central to our mission to enter into the lives and needs of people, especially those who are poor, as we promise in *Response in Faith*.

Let's take a moment of reflection on encounter.

- Have you grown in being able to listen with respect to ideas or opinions very different from your own?
- How do you see compassion in your interactions with others who may be very different from you?

Synodality

As described by Rafael Luciani, the notion of synodality takes interculturality and encounter one step further to call for a process of communicating and decision-making in religious communities and in the Church. According to Luciani, an Argentine theologian who was featured in a program at Catholic Theological Union this spring, "Synodality demands that we listen and engage in dialogue to establish binding relationships that build community. . . (This sounds very much like our metaphor of weaving together new hearts, doesn't it!)

He notes that, "The process is more than collecting opinions. Synodality is an invitation to foster processes of conversion as we listen to one another and to the larger society while reading the signs of the times together. . .

"Synodality [acknowledges] the need for representation in the various structures and processes of ecclesial discernment. More than a numeric representation, it is about including the diversity of cultures, charisms, gifts, and ministries."

The link to interculturality and encounter is clear as well here, as we look to better live the radical claims of the Gospel as members of a religious congregation and of the Church.

Let's take moment of reflection on synodality?

- What has been your experience of dialogue in the church and in you province or region?
- What are important factors that lead to community-building relationships?

Vulnerability

I want to add one more term to the mix before I talk about implications for our assembly.

The theme of the meeting of the International Union of Superiors General (UISG) in May was "Embracing Vulnerability in the Synodal Journey."

That theme invites us to probe the notions of interculturality, encounter, and synodality to find a common denominator, namely, our interdependence.

While our egos would like to tell us otherwise, none of us has all the answers, none of us can bring change to the world's needs by ourselves alone, none of us has the full picture or the last word.

We are limited and often weak. Rather than being a problem, our limitations can open us to recognizing and receiving what others bring. We need to become aware of our need for others and for God and with that awareness open ourselves to love and solidarity.

Through the course of this assembly, I invite you reflect on our interdependence as members of our congregation. How can we work together to create the way forward into the future? How can we build relationships of mutual trust and support?

Implications for our Assembly

As we begin our General Assembly, I would point to another term that is connected to interculturality, encounter, synodality, and vulnerability: namely, discernment. The same level of respect, openness, listening, dialogue, and sense of interdependence is essential for the work of discernment we are about to engage in.

Again, this is not a new idea. In her reflection on the reading from the Acts of the Apostles for the Sixth Sunday of Easter, Sister Mary McGlone pointed to the **challenges** faced by the disciples of Jesus as they sorted out what should be required of Gentiles who embrace “the way” of Jesus.

She says: “The fierceness of the disagreement among the disciples proved their deep commitment to the Gospel message. When they gathered to debate and pray, their commitment only grew deeper as they recognized the Spirit working through them, forming them into a community more attached to Christ than to their opinions. [repeat: forming them into a community more attached to Christ than to their opinions.]”

“In the words of the preparatory document for the upcoming synod on synodality, they gained the ability to imagine a different future for the Church because they all took part in processes of listening, dialogue, and community discernment.”

At this assembly, we are like those disciples. We can devolve into competing sub-groups or collaborate with God's unifying grace. I pray that we will be like the apostles--able to imagine a different future for religious life and for our Congregation because we choose to take part in processes of listening, dialogue, and community discernment. It is in the context of these processes that the Spirit speaks to us – in each one and all of us together.

Earlier this month, we celebrated the feast of Pentecost, and were reminded of the power of the Holy Spirit in the early Church. Today, we are called to believe strongly enough in presence of the Spirit with us that we will risk dialogue and discernment to participate in the synodality that God expects of us at this time in our history. It seems possible that we too will be able to say, “It seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us that we set a new direction for our future.”

What direction will that be? With the help of the Holy Spirit, the answer is in our hands.

Sister Mary Diez,

June 24, 2022