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“Continue Courageously, for the Love of God”

Religious communities face many challenges these days as we seek to live out our deep-rooted call to be faithful to the Gospel, to our mission. Some challenges are obvious. Others are less obvious and perhaps go deeper, touching the very core of our existence. Such challenges might include finding others to care for the elders among our communities or evaluating the feasibility of retaining the convent or monastery in which we have been living for decades, even centuries. Some might call us to evaluate the effectiveness of our ministry amid changing times. Some might even call into question the very purpose of our existence.

This kind of challenge calls forth a variety of responses. If we pay close attention, such a response is rarely a one-time response. If we are faithful, we make a discerned response, taking the next step in the process, and then the next, again and again until we finally relax into the response to which the Spirit is calling us. That response then turns the key that allows us to know we are “home,” that this is the place from which we are being asked to move forward . . . even if “forward” looks rather peculiar, given our decision. We find ourselves in a place from which most of us would not expect to start . . . a place that allows us the opportunity to look into the mirror at the possibility of our own death—chosen freely and with integrity.

The Franciscan Sisters of Mary (FSM) were faced with just such a choice. It was not an easy decision—nor did it happen quickly. But through discernment over years, we determined that we were called to redirect our focus, our energy, on revitalizing ourselves as Franciscan Sisters of Mary. If new members came, we would welcome them—but we would no longer actively recruit them.

How did our discernment lead us to such a decision?

A REALITY CHECK

Discernment begins with information. When we made this decision back in 2001, we began our consideration with the fact that, since 1979, no one had joined our congregation and stayed. For twenty-two years, we had gained no new members. (At the time of our 2001 Chapter, we had 178 sisters. In 2005 we did have one woman who had left us for 25 years re-enter the congregation; she remains with us today.)

We faced other facts as well: The generation gap between our sisters and prospective members was becoming wider and wider. And our energy for and commitment to recruiting new members were dwindling as our average age increased. How relevant was our community lifestyle to the young women we would hope to be recruiting?

For the previous twenty years, since 1981, we had spent a fair amount of effort addressing areas related to vocation recruitment in attempts to attract women to our congregation. Many other congregations were attempting some of these initiatives as well, with varying degrees of success. Some of these initiatives included:

- Updating statements of philosophy, policy, procedures, evaluation tools, program goals, objectives and content covering recruitment, admission, postulancy and novitiate;
- Asking local communities to include recruiting new members as a community goal;
- Having members of the formation team visit other local communities of women religious to exchange information and skills and to explore vocation awareness;
- Setting up formal preparation for vocation ministry; and
- Collaborating with other congregations to promote and foster vocations.

In 1999 we engaged in the LCWR Viability Study, *A Critical Juncture*. All members of the Franciscan Sisters of Mary were involved in this study. We identified the following concerns:

- Implications of the lack of new membership;
- The eventual future closing of our motherhouse, St. Mary of the Angels Convent; and
- Time and geographic distances that militated against deepening relationships within the congregation.

At that time the congregation's leadership team put before us "the need to explore the demands and responsibilities that are ours if we choose to recruit new members or if we choose to make meaning without new members."

Reflecting on these concerns led us to begin to understand that, without new members, with the looming potential loss of our motherhouse, and with the realization that some of our relationships were not all we would want them to be, we were facing some serious work. These challenges confronted us with the reality that our core being as Franciscan Sisters of Mary was being touched and we were being nudged to look squarely at ourselves, without blinders, without masks.

We responded to that nudge. We recognized that the issues we were facing were much broader than new membership—we were being called to consider the viability of the congregation itself.

A WATERSHED TIME

We brought our discernment to our Pre-Chapter meetings in 2000. During these meetings we agreed upon five areas we would pursue as the issues for our FSM 2001 Chapter. One of these areas was new membership.

In February 2001, just prior to the Chapter, each sister was asked to share her reflections on this topic with the Chapter members by completing a survey on the topic of new members. Among other questions on the survey, sisters were asked: "Shall we put more effort into attracting new members? If yes, what will we be inviting them to?" and "Shall we decide not to take new members? If so, what then?" The sisters' responses were sent on to the Chapter.

During the April 2001 Chapter, the question of membership came up very frequently because it was not easy for Chapter members to open themselves to the possibilities that issue raised. More than once, time was given for Chapter Members to go off alone, to pray with a discerning attitude in order to see where they stood.

Finally, the following four positions emerged:

1. We will not take new members.
2. We will not exert more energy into attracting new members.
3. We will redirect our focus, our energy, on revitalization; if new members come, we will deal with that issue when it arises.
4. We will exert more energy in attracting new members.

Chapter members were given time for individual reflection so each could identify where she stood on the issue given these possible positions, and why she held her particular position.

Upon reconvening, members grouped themselves according to their position on the issue. Each shared her reasons and considered the implications of the group's position in six years from that time. The members in the four groups then further considered: "Are there any alternatives or options open to us, given the position we have taken?"

The four groups reported their findings to the entire assembly. Once more, members were given reflection time to consider the four positions, taking into consideration the new information that had been shared. One by one, each sister shared her thinking.

Initially, the vast majority of Chapter members had chosen position 4: "We will exert more energy in attracting new members."

As we continued our conversations, however, we recognized that the goal of revitalizing the congregation—rather than recruiting new members—was our true objective. We were deeply aware of the mission we had—to be the presence of the loving, serving, compassionate, healing Jesus—and our call to carry it out. We were also deeply aware that times had changed, and that these new times demanded that we be creative and explore new paths, new options. We wanted to focus on pursuing our mission, on living out our faithfulness to the Gospel. In order to be open to revitalization, we needed to accept that we couldn't put most of our energy into simply recruiting new members.

We were beginning to understand that "success" for our congregation wasn't a "numbers game." In the end we recognized that we needed to move on, to address the other issues our Chapter was facing, issues that were at the heart of our religious life: mission, quality and depth of relationships, and spirituality.

A NEW VISION

So the decision was made: We would redirect our focus, our energy, on revitalization. If new members came, we would welcome them and deal with the process of formation at that time.

Part of that decision meant that we would no longer have a formalized recruiting program.

Over the years we continue to have inquiries from time to time from women who are interested in exploring religious life. We have a sister who responds to every single inquiry we receive. She shares honestly with each one of them, explaining who we are at this time in our congregational life and exploring with them the fit between their possible call to religious life and where that might fit with us. We have always been—and still are—open to the miracle!

But we have also turned our attention to many other significant parts of our lives. We have pursued and continue to pursue the spectrum of revitalization.

We have directed our energies into exploring new horizons. In our 2007 Chapter we opened ourselves to questioning some of the “givens” of our congregation—for instance, holding on to a motherhouse that no longer fulfilled our sisters’ needs. In our 2011 Chapter, we unanimously chose a focus, flowing from our congregation’s mission, of compassionate care of creation in collaboration with others. While we are still in the early stages of moving our focus forward, we have opened ourselves to caring for God’s creation in new and imaginative ways.

For the most part, I would describe us as at peace with this decision.

The decision does call into question the congregation’s present and future. Why are we here? We are here to live out the Gospel, not attend to our own survival. We have no more sure way to live . . . this is the way Jesus lived. I think we only came to this realization in any depth when we were faced with this “life or death” choice—that to move forward in faith may result in losing a way of life we deeply cherished.

Sometimes people are faced with a choice in life—to spend time trying to make sure we “survive,” or to face reality as it is and truly *live* the moment we have right here, right now. And at the same time to be open to and ready for the miracle!

LIVING THE MIRACLE THAT IS

We have experienced many miracles since we made that decision back in 2001. So far it hasn’t included the miracle of women entering our congregation. But we see what has been happening to us over these past thirteen years as miracles in our congregational life.

Some of these miracles include:

- **The freedom to deal with our own revitalization—a gift we longed for as we witnessed in the buildup to our 2001 Chapter;**
- **The desire to explore and to live what being in mission means for us at this time in our lives;**
- **The deepening belief in and commitment to religious life as it**

continues to evolve;

- **Building our sisterhood;**
- **Learning that letting go is transformative and brings us to places we could never have imagined—and so many, many other blessings!**

Over these past thirteen years we have seen more clearly that how we live our mission as Gospel women may not be inspiring the women we once wished would join us. But we are able to pass on our Gospel presence to those with whom and to whom we have ministered. We have learned to be creative as we pass on our sponsored ministries—a health care system involving more than twenty hospitals, a birthing center, a center for abused women, a home for teenage mothers, hospice centers, and many other ministries—to our lay sisters and brothers.

We have let go of our beloved St. Mary of the Angels Convent, and now more than half of us live in a retirement residence built by five congregations of religious sisters. The letting-go process was transformative for every one of us, whether we lived at the convent or not. The process took more than two years, with many of us involved in the ten Transition Teams we formed to complete the process. The transition built our relationships with one another and for many took those relationships to a much deeper level than ever before. It also nudged us into creating ways to be present to our employees at the convent as we said good-bye to them.

It has challenged us to find ways in our new environment to bring the Good News to a place where we are not in charge, where we live next door to Mr. and Mrs. Smith, or Mr. Jones or Ms. Wells—not Sr. Mary or Sr. Laura.

We continue to update our spirituality—to find fresh ways to approach God and listen to the whisperings of the Holy Spirit. We often share reflections with one another, articles and books we have read that we find inspiring and insightful. Because we were hospital sisters for so many years, over the years most of us hadn’t kept up as much as we might have wanted with all that was happening in theology and spirituality. Now we are hungry for those topics—and we are gifted with the time to pursue them. As we do this, we build relationships among ourselves and create structures

that allow each of us to participate as fully as is possible, depending on our level of energy, in the activities and intentions of the congregation.

We continue to live in the mystery that has always been religious life but that in our own times seems to be even more a mystery. We wonder, *How can a lifestyle that is so alive as it is now apparently be dying at the same time?* I’m certainly not going to attempt to answer this question here.

But I would say that in the mystery of it all for us, the Franciscan Sisters of Mary, our mission, our life together, our fidelity to the Gospel has not suffered because of that decision we made in April 2001. If anything, that decision set us on a journey to discover in greater depth the Gospel of Jesus for our times and awakened in us an awareness of how we live that Gospel for the sake of all creation today.

The final recorded words of our foundress, Mother Mary Odilia Berger, are “Continue courageously, for the love of God.” I believe we were courageous in 2001 when we made the choice we made. And I believe we continue to be courageous today as we pursue the journey of transformation to which that choice led us. The journey of this tiny group of 97 members as it chooses to revitalize itself affects the whole world. Nothing that is for good is wasted in the transformation of the world. That insight is at the core of the Gospel message.



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