

February 19, 2025

Dear Sisters,

I am writing with the report I promised last summer as a result of our extraordinary chapter in June. Let me provide a historical context.

June of 2024

Fifty sisters were able to gather for three days to consider important topics regarding our future. Among those sisters were six of our members from Brazil. These delegates had also participated in all of the pre-chapter meetings and conversations in order to be prepared for the work we undertook together. A few more sisters would have been eligible but were unable to attend because of health reasons or travel issues. (Please be aware that ALL sisters had the opportunity to offer input ahead of the extraordinary chapter through Zoom meetings, Local Chapters and in-person conversations at our four long term care facilities.)

Topics and Results of the Extraordinary Chapter

After a couple of sessions led by the Living into Our Legacy Task Force, we convened the extraordinary chapter and together considered four topics. The first two were put to a vote and passed unanimously.

1. Change the length of the Central Administration term to six years.

2. Change the minimum number of Councilors to two.

In September I sent a letter to the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life requesting these changes to our Constitutions. We are still awaiting a response but not at all surprised that it is taking time.

We also asked delegates to come to consensus around two additional issues but did not require an official vote. Much deliberation, conversation and prayer went into these two proposals.

3. We are not actively recruiting new members in the United States and, if approached,

we would respond that we do not have the capacity nor resources to accept new members but would encourage them to seek another congregation.

4. We accept that our mission as Sisters of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate is moving toward fulfillment and completion.

Mindful of realities in religious life in North America, we reached broad consensus on the first point about new membership in the U.S. However, because of many concerns raised about how the completion statement would affect our sisters in Brazil, we tabled that item until all of our sisters in Brazil could grapple with their reality and with their future. I promised to meet with our sisters in Brazil in September and make a report back to all of us.

Individual Meetings with Sisters in Brazil

In September I traveled to Brazil with Sr. Ruth Berry. Our sisters brought in a Sister of St. Joseph (Rochester, New York) as a translator. Over the course of three days, I met individually with our 14 sisters for approximately an hour and a half each. The translator assisted 12 of our sisters and me. Each sister was invited to raise her own issues and questions, tell her own story and bring me up to date with her joys, challenges, plans, etc. I did ask all sisters a few of the same questions related to vocation ministry and accepting new members as well as about issues related to future planning: ministry, health, retirement, living arrangements, our school and convent, our properties. And, of course, I heard a fairly wide range of opinions, ideas and hopes.

During the weekend that followed these interviews, the sisters held an assembly to make and receive reports, to hear my feedback on the input they had provided and respond to it, and to make some decisions for this next year. I reported back on five themes that all sisters touched on in some way. These themes encompassed a variety of opinions and insights.

- Interpersonal Relationships
- New Members
- Roadblocks / Challenges
- Concerns
- Positive Convictions

Some of what I related back to our sisters was difficult for them to hear. Let me break out one that is significant as they face their own future, much as we are doing in the U.S.

Vocation Ministry / New Membership in Brazil

Thirteen of the sisters had said privately to me that they should not pursue new vocations or that it is unlikely that they will have new vocations. They expressed great surprise that so many of them reported this. I asked the translator to confirm that this was what was expressed, and she assured them it was. However, toward the end of their two-day assembly, they voted unanimously to throw themselves into vocation animation for the next three years. (Three years is the period of time before our next general chapter.) If that does not bear fruit, they know they will have to face the same conclusion we have regarding new members in the United States.

Painful as it was to hear, they do agree that they tend to be satisfied with the status quo and find it difficult to talk about painful realities. Nevertheless, our sisters are extremely positive about using their talents, intelligence and faith to face their own future. They are ready to be realistic and are determined that they are not too old to change.

A Mandate to Prepare for the Future – NOW

Related to the issue of what happens to our congregation in Brazil when there are no more North American sisters, all of us, sisters in both Brazil and the U.S., still have much work to do. Our sisters in Brazil are relieved to know that they can request to live according to the constitutions of the Sisters of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate even after the congregation in the U.S. has come to completion. What that would look like needs to be determined with the assistance of a canon lawyer in Brazil who understands religious life. Our sisters in Brazil (and other congregations who have members in more than one country) have other options as well – either to form a collaboration (association) with other congregations or to join another congregation before they can no longer sustain themselves.

They have agreed to undertake the following work:

- **Identifying a canon lawyer who will work with us to determine their actual options as Franciscan women apart from the “mother congregation” when that time comes.** (The sisters have already identified a canon lawyer who wrote an opinion about their future options.)
- **Forming closer, intentional, inter-congregational associations/collaborations with other women religious in their region.**
- **Putting together a committee of sisters and lay advisors to modernize their finances, including making investments to provide future resources.** (They have identified people to form an advisory committee for finances.)

- **Planning regarding the future of San Damiano School and convent, their large property in Goiania, other owned real estate, being able to maintain current mission sites and ministries.** (One step toward this has been naming a committee to study the school.)

Our Brazilian sisters' current Regional Council will be in place until January of 2028. They will hold a formal assembly in September of 2027. The goal is for them to have much, if not all, of the above planning and actions well underway or completed by that time so that the members can make a determination about their own future viability.

Closing of Extraordinary Chapter

Since our sisters in Brazil (and our Central Administration here) have much to do over the next couple of years before they can determine their future, we have decided to close our extraordinary chapter without asking for a consensus about coming to completion in the U.S. or in Brazil. Since we know we will not accept new members in the U.S., we will surely come to fulfillment over the next couple of decades. Our planning in North America – regarding care of members, care of our mission, care of our patrimony and resources – will all be influenced by this difficult but evident reality. As you well know, this planning is underway. And our sisters in Brazil are doing the same.

As all of us sisters continue to face the future as “Pilgrims of Hope” and with a healthy dose of reality, let us also continue to live our fullest life in the present moment. Let us hold one another in prayer and with great affection. Let us be sources of encouragement and wisdom to one another. And let us be the compassion of Christ to one another and all we encounter.

With deep affection,

Your sister,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jeanne Bessette, OSF". The script is cursive and elegant.

Sister Jeanne Bessette, OSF

President