

Summer Gathering Address

Sisters of St. Francis of Mary Immaculate
Joliet, IL

Summer Gathering 2025

By: Sr. Jeanne Bessette, OSF — June 20, 2025

Sisterhood: Lighting the Way for One Another **Summer Gathering Address 2025** **Jeanne Bessette, OSF** **June 20, 2025**

In 2014, Sr. Nancy Schreck, Dubuque Franciscan, delivered a keynote address to LCWR. The title was *However Long the Night: Holy Mystery Revealed in Our Midst*. This was based on an African proverb. (You will remember that we used her image for our 2016 chapter: *However Long the Night, the Dawn Will Break*.)

Nancy used the image of night as a metaphor for the current moment in religious life. Night can be a great mystery – not being able to see clearly what is around us and where we are going. Night can be a metaphor for things coming to an end – the day is over. If day is our bright, shiny living and working, then night signals the end of that. Nancy likened the times before Vatican II as the “dark ages” for religious life – sisters from virtually every congregation were forced to live semi-cloistered lives, hide away in convents, work in the narrow slots of a few ministries, and follow boilerplate constitutions. It was hard to distinguish one congregation from the other except by the design of their habits. It was Vatican II that threw open the windows and sent sisters to figure out who they were – and identify their history, charism and unique identity – in the light of a new day!

And here we are in 2025. We feel like we are living in new “dark ages” in world darkened by deep division, blighted by war, terrorized by

politics, stained with the blood of so many innocent children, some of our brothers and sisters being hunted down by masked militiamen. This is a dark night.

Our Church too has seen some very dark nights – the forces that kept the sexual abuse of children and others in the dark; the rift between different factions in the church before and especially since Vatican II – each side calling the other apostates; the waning of vocations to the priesthood and religious life, almost to the point of extinction in some places. The pain of people loyal to the church but suffering as parishes close and pastors are tone deaf. It’s difficult to see the light in these situations.

At the meeting of the conference of Union of International Superiors General (UISG) in May in Rome, while the church was preparing for the conclave and election of a new pope, those of us who had the privilege of attending heard another talk that used night as a metaphor – but in a different and lovely way. The two people who head the Dicastery for Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life are Sister Simona Brambilla and Cardinal Angel Artime – in that order! (Finally a woman leads a dicastery that directly affects our life!) Because the Cardinal was sequestered for the Conclave, Simona delivered their talk by herself.

She called the current moment in religious life *The Time of the Moon*. She has spent much of her life as a missionary in Mozambique and borrowed an image of her beloved Makua people. For the Makua, the sun “travels alone, the only king and lord of the day. The moon, on the other hand, travels in company, inhabiting

the horizon of communion and sharing that is found in the night, a time of intimacy and privileged expression.” If we see ourselves as the sun, we extinguish every other light around us. Simona suggested that “the moon, by contrast, shines in the night, and its light, reflecting off the stars, enhances and magnifies their splendor. The sun is so bright that it is impossible to look at it. One can look at the moon, enjoy the spectacle of the starry sky and find inspiration in its glow.”

Are we as women religious in 2025 still basking in our own sunlight? Simona wonders if women religious “have fallen into the temptation of measuring evangelical effectiveness by the yardstick of our ‘own light’ – the blazing splendor that extinguishes the light of other stars, a luminous self-sufficiency.” If we can be comfortable living in the night, can we use the dark around us to be happy to be moonlight? Is it now our time to shine more softly in the worlds we inhabit – and allow another generation (or race or gender) to be the other moons and stars and comets? Are we ready to accept that there is a middle ground between being the blazing light and the total blackness of night – and be little moons and tiny, twinkling stars?? Can we believe that our little lights – like all stars – will eventually be extinguished? And it’s okay if new ones are born to take our place.

Nancy Schreck talked about the Holy Mystery of living in the dark – our “middle space.” I would add that, while productive, the middle space still makes us uncomfortable. It is a holding pattern that we are – at least privately – praying to finally get out of and back into the light. How we love that bright, shining light! We took the entirety of Nancy’s African proverb as our chapter theme – However long the night, the dawn will break. But perhaps the dawn meant the wrong things to us, or at least to me. Can it only be dawn if our little religious congregation grows again as some wished to

see it grow – if we finally have women knocking at our doors? If we can dial back the clock and have energy to start new ministries and foundations? Can we be content and inspired if we live out our lives in the moonlight as religious life does indeed dawn in other corners of the world – just as it did when religious life boomed in North America, in Central and South America, as it is now doing in Africa and southern Asia? Religious life is not extinguished – its light shines in different ways in different geographies! Is this not the work of the God of Light?

May I talk for a few minutes about what I am seeing come to light? What are the issues that keep me up at night, that make me go quiet and reflect deeply, that I pray to be enlightened about? Where do I need inner vision, inner light? As a woman, as a woman in our Church, as a woman religious, as a citizen of the United States, as a woman called to leadership, as a woman committed to walking alongside our sisters in Brazil?

How Do We Live Sisterhood?

Sisterhood: Is it the female corollary to brotherhood? God, I hope not. I know, I know, fraternitas is a hallmark of Franciscan charism, but it does not translate that well into English or into our lived experience. We are not brothers-in-arms. We are not the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Plumbers or Teamsters. We are not uniformed men in a “go get ‘em” huddle. We do not have “bro-mances.” WE live sisterhood – and I suspect we are only beginning to understand the bigger implications of this, implications that take us beyond Joliet Franciscan sisterhood.

Sue and I had a powerful experience of AI while we were in Assisi. Powerful when used well. I used AI to reflect on brotherhood and sisterhood.

Here’s AI: “Brotherhood refers to the feeling of fellowship and loyalty among people, often those with shared interests, experiences or

goals. A bond of a group united by a common purpose.”

Here’s AI: “Sisterhood is a bond of friendship and support among women, characterized by mutual respect, encouragement and shared experiences. It can manifest in various ways, from close friendships to community involvement and mentorship.”

That’s the sisterhood that we are called to live – from a Franciscan world view – and which the world needs from us. It is the sisterhood that unites us to other women. It is the sisterhood our elders are living at their various long-term care facilities, perhaps especially at St. Patrick’s with our Carmelite sisters. It is the sisterhood that we experience locally through working with other churchwomen. It is the sisterhood that our sisters in Brazil are being challenged to form with other congregations. It lives across the Franciscan family. It is what we must embrace when it is our time to identify an appointed leader or commissary. It is a sisterhood that must be increasingly global. We need to think sisterhood as we name how we want to share our resources to enfold our legacy. Who are the women who need us? It is sisterhood that gives me hope till my dying day. The Church, the Franciscan family and our world need our brand of sisterhood – and we need to make that sisterhood deeper, broader, richer, full of heart and wisdom and hope.

What Are We Doing to Responsibly Prepare for What Lies Ahead?

In a conversation with Becky one day, I was reflecting on the responsibilities – canonical and ethical – that leaders of religious congregations have: Care for Mission, Care for Members and Care for Patrimony or Resources. They are so intrinsically tied together. She said, “Isn’t that the responsibility of all of your sisters equally?” And I thought, well, of course it is. Peggy, MJ and Sue all broke open these three areas for us. These are part and parcel of our sisterhood! Our mutual responsibility to and for one another.

I worry not only about our sisters who are most infirm. I worry about those taking care of our most frail sisters. I worry about our sisters in Brazil, now numbering 14 good women. I worry about this constantly. Where will we get the stamina? How can we provide for one another’s care without exhausting and doing harm to the caregivers?

With the closing of OLA, we faced and continue to face how and where to best provide loving, affordable, dignified care for our sisters. With the sale of both OLA and JCA’s land to JCA, we will soon have very little land left. With the transfer of our sponsorship of USF to the Third Order Franciscan University Alliance (our PJP), we prepare for when we can no longer ensure the Catholic and Franciscan nature of our works. In Brazil, we are just beginning to explore the future use of San Damiano School, the future needs for appropriate living spaces for our sisters as they age, partnerships with other Franciscans when they need mutual support, the investment of their funds to ensure their care in retirement and aging. They “have miles to go before they sleep” as they search out answers and make plans.

We all do!

Future Leadership

Lastly, I worry about future leadership for the Congregation both here and in Brazil. We absolutely must provide you with more information about appointed leadership of religious congregations. Any of us who have served in leadership roles for the last 10 or more years know that this is an almost-universal issue, at least in Europe and the U.S., increasingly so in South America.

Not only are LCWR and the Resource Center for Religious Institutes (RCRI) guiding us through the canonical and legal jungle that this entails, we also must take direction from the Dicastery in Rome. I participated in online conferences with Sr. Simona and members of her staff this past winter. If they are very clear

about anything, it's that Rome will NOT permit anyone except a religious or a cleric to serve as an appointed leader / commissary.

But we have so much more to learn and to offer to YOU to learn before we make decisions:

What exactly do appointed leaders DO for a congregation?

More importantly, what DON'T they do?

What must we settle before moving to a commissary?

What would be unfair and unwise to leave to a commissary?

When is the right time to identify possible commissaries?

When is the right time to request that the Dicastery appoint a leader for us?

In July and September our Leadership Team will participate in two more LCWR workshops on Appointed Leaders. Those are a few areas that keep me awake at night. Sisterhood, Future and Leadership. If you know me at all, you know that is literally true.

If I can return to my initial metaphor of night, I will remind you that Nancy Schreck ended her powerful talk with the entire African proverb she used – and later so did we: However long the night, the dawn will break. Let us temper that with Simona's comforting belief that it is okay to be the moon in the midst of darkness. To allow other lights to twinkle and shine, showing their colors and textures that can only be viewed in the night. She wrote, "Nighttime can be scary. But night is also the best time for creativity. The moon's discreet glow provides the space for freedom, allowing the seekers not only to see with their eyes but also to imagine, feel and intuit. The moon restores inner vision...It leads to the time of dreaming... a time of hope, expectation and transformation. We feel this challenge on our skin every day: the challenge to read the signs of this nighttime and to interpret them in accordance with the Gospel."

Like the Ruths and Naomis that we are, let us

seek together. Let us face the unknown future together. And let us be moons and stars in one another's nights – lighting the way when we are afraid of the dark.

Reflection by:
Sr. Jeanne Bessette, OSF
Summer Gathering
June 20, 2025