

Cosmic Catholicism: A New Calling for a New Era

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Good morning and best wishes on this General Chapter of 2016. I am honored to share these several days with you and confident that the results will yield another fruitful period in the life of Adrian Dominicans. I am glad that I was invited to come a day early to share in the sacred space of this gathering, especially Table 31!

Thank you, Attracta, for your invitation and your hospitality. Your leadership is important not just for this community but beyond in wider circles as well. I appreciate your lovely introduction. I know your ghostwriter, my beloved friend Carol Coston with whom I have shared so many rich moments in the pool, on protests, in the kitchen, and at prayer, more hearty laughs than I can recall. She embodies Adrian Dominicans for every era! Fruit trees that she has planted on this campus will feed generations to come.

I am grateful to the Chapter Committee, the liturgy leaders, technical workers, facilitators, and staff whose preparations made this lovely event all that it is.

Thanks also to Mary Weeber who provided me with Adrian Dominican materials to acquaint me with the community's ethos. I appreciate the work of Elise Garcia and the Communications people who tell your story with style in print and on the web.

I regret that I did not meet Mother Mary Gerald Barry who presided over an era of phenomenal growth, perhaps rivaling only Dominic himself for shaping who you are today. But I feel as if I have met her more than worthy successors in the remarkable

sisters, associates, ministries, and projects of your amazing community. It is especially gratifying to meet sisters from the Philippines and the Dominican Republic, to know that sisters from Edmonds, Washington, shape this group, and to experience the underlying commitment and trust that ground Adrian Dominicans especially in these challenging times.

Attracta assigned me a modest little task: “Share with us a bigger God concept that would broaden our understanding of God, of Jesus, of the Spirit.” Imagine such an assignment! Once I do that I will explain the cure for the Zika virus, cancer, and the common cold before we go to lunch; when we come back, I will enlighten you about the 9th planet, cloud computing, the outcome of the 2016 presidential election, and how to solve the problems of the Middle East! Bad enough that Attracta gave me such a grandiose theme, worse yet that I accepted it!

I propose to explore “Cosmic Catholicism: A New Calling for New Era.” “Cosmic Catholicism” is where I think many of us locate ourselves in terms of faith. It is a framework for locating our shared beliefs in postmodern times. We come from an era when fidelity was measured by how closely one adhered to the “true faith.” Now, with a bigger cosmic canvas, there is more room for diversity, more ways to understand truth. Rather than diluting the power of the Christian Gospel, this expanded cosmic concern has the potential to expand it exponentially through links with many traditions as well as deeper insights into our own. Think of a picture that is growing so large that it has outgrown its frame. Roman Catholicism is simply too small a canvas for the Cosmic Catholicism we are living.

“A New Calling for a New Era” is equally powerful as we leave behind post-Vatican II days and engage in cosmic contemplation and planetary action. Pope Francis put his finger on this when he said, ["We are not living an era of change but a change of era."](#) That change is manifest on many fronts—cultural, economic, religious, scientific. Of course religious life is not exempt, requiring a renewed reason for being.

A new era requires new thinking. I assumed that new ideas would be welcome here when I read what Sister Rosa Monique Peña said on the occasion of the opening of Santa Catalina, the house of discernment and formation in the Dominican Republic (February 2016): “We Dominicans never mind starting something new. That has been a trademark of our Congregation.”

So we venture into the new, unafraid of the size of the task. As the women of the Grail remind us, “Together, we are a genius.” I would add that life is too precious and we are too privileged to waste time on the small stuff. Who else has the time and money to gather like this to think ahead for a decade? We claim it as a necessary luxury. But many people on the planet worry about what they will eat for breakfast tomorrow. In Flint, Michigan, today people do not know where clean water will come from to bathe their children. So the needs of the world set our agenda—the racism, economic injustice, sexism, ableism, speciesism, heterosexism, colonialism that privilege some and oppress others. We experience these problems in cosmic dimensions.

Besides, Mother Barry settled the crucial question of how to put the kneelers down in chapel—NOT with your foot, but with your hand—so that we could get on to weightier matters. (*Mother Mary Gerald Barry, OP: Ecclesial Woman of Vision and*

Daring, Nadine Foley, Editor, Adrian, MI: Adrian Dominican Sisters, 2000, p. 32.) You have to appreciate the level of detail that occupied those early leadership teams!

My topic, “Cosmic Catholicism: A New Calling for a New Era” reflects the daunting nature of the task, and requires a certain humility. Let me simply offer my perspective for your consideration, my hopes for your common embrace, and then let’s talk.

I do not pretend to be an expert of things Adrian Dominican. But I have spent some time combing the materials, talking with people, and reflecting on your community. I may be mistaken, but I conclude that you are in the vanguard of religious communities—morally, spiritually, and economically. You are doing or have plans to do what other groups only dream of doing—promoting ecojustice and racial justice, shared responsible use of money and property, innovative education and health care, pastoral work, justice and care for immigrants to name just a few of the myriad arenas in which you live out your commitments.

When you are in the lead there is, by definition, no one you follow. So my sense is that rather than simply moving forward, your next steps are to go deeper, and to do it all lightly. Let me explain what I mean.

Histories, chronologies, even our lives can seem to have a certain linear, one step after the other character despite their complexity, the spiraling and doubling back to go forward. I love your video, “[A Living Journey](#).” What a brilliant synthesis in music, poetry, and visual images. I find your timeline, “[A Walk through History](#),” a compelling story told with verve. When I tried to imagine who/what comes next, I did not see an obvious linear, forward march next step. I think our new era requires something else.

Rather, I imagined you going deeper and doing so lightly. The Council suggested as much in its report.

I began to see not simply another congregational leader, however skilled and charismatic, but groups of women and waves of energy. I recalled some Cuban American friends of mine, graduates of Barry University in various degree programs, who love your community. Their words rang in my ears—“Those women, those Adrian Dominican women and what we learned with them.” It was not one person to whom they pointed, but to many of you to whom they referred. Your students, now mature professional women, know themselves to be more competent, more confident, more committed because of you, lots of you who shaped their lives.

Then I thought about new projects and institutions. Those will emerge, I suppose, as the capacities of the community permit, given age and numbers. But what is more vivid in my mind is your impact and influence. I see waves of spirit energy rippling through a terribly troubled world, permeating culture, shaping new alliances, and lighting up the horizon with incandescent hope. It has Adrian Dominican written all over it, not on blueprints and plans as Mother Gerald had, but on hearts and in alliances, on rocks and rivers and fruit trees, and in common work for justice.

Religiously speaking, all of that invites going deeper—to sharing about the big stuff, the big God, what really motivates us, the Jesus of the Gospels, the Cosmic Christ, Goddesses, Kwan Yin, Brigit, and so much more. It means confronting what we are not sure of, what we have let go of, what never made sense in the first place, what seems reasonable now if not true forever. It speaks to naming where we disagree, what we doubt, how we struggle to be faithful, what we can live with because no one has the final answer,

what it feels like to be spiritually empty-handed at times. That is where I think we are—at the nexus of doubt and diversity, at the corner of hope and help, on the way to a deeper place that we'll get to by skipping hand in hand.

The lightness is crucial. With all due respect, as we say in Washington, a community does not become all that you are and cherish without seriousness of purpose and very focused work. I appreciate that. At the same time, people come and go on this planet without ever thinking once about some of the things that keep some of us up at night—is God male, am I still a Catholic, do I really belong here if I don't believe in Purgatory, what should I give up for Lent, how can I stay in community with someone who believes things I reject? These may sound familiar even if you have never voiced them to yourself. Important as these matters are, in the final analysis I am persuaded only love and justice ground our collective being. Getting those right is key.

So I commend a certain lightness that allows us to dig deeply while holding loosely. As a mother, I am reminded of this constantly. When the temptation to be a helicopter parent kicks in, that urge to be involved in every aspect of a child's life, I am reminded of my sister's good advice to be a kite flying parent instead, to hold firmly so the other can soar from a grounded place. I think we have to give one another this kind of space religiously, to encourage one another to fly with the spirit knowing that we are anchored in one another. It does not mean I will like everything you say or do or believe or pray, but I will defend to the end your right to it just as I expect you will do the same for me. That mutual willingness to nurture one another's very disparate spirits is a new call in a new era.

“Cosmic Catholicism” is one way of naming this today. Several people have used the phrase offhandedly, but I want to claim it, ground it in a concrete understanding of what can seem quite diffuse and amorphous at first glance.

By “Cosmic Catholicism” (I am still debating on capital c’s or small c’s for both) I mean a spiritual and religious embrace of all that is (‘catholic’), of the ongoing divine creation of human, animal, and plant life that we can see, and so much that we cannot see. In partnership with science, our embrace just keeps getting bigger and our responsibilities more intense to safeguard the goodness of Earth and what lies beyond in the cosmos. In terms of theology and the world’s many religions, there is a growing variety of ways of expressing what is most meaningful and valuable. In terms of action, there are infinitely more and more people with whom to collaborate for justice. This is the stuff of 21st century faith that shapes communities and serves as a springboard for interplanetary life. How did we get here?

That story has many chapters for which I will provide the briefest of modern outlines, leaving the medieval details with Dominic and Catherine.

Vatican II was our religious watershed of the last century. We know too well how many Catholics, including many women religious, embraced the progressive agenda of the Council, engaged in renewal, took on social, economic, political, theological, and spiritual commitments to global well-being. We also know that such efforts, rather than being rewarded, met resistance from male church leaders, for example, the Apostolic Visitation of women’s communities and the Doctrinal Assessment of LCWR. The spiritual dissonance created by such experiences causes us to rethink everything.

In the bigger picture, the rise of the nones, not you n-u-n-s necessarily, but the people who check ‘none of the above’ when it comes to religious affiliation is part of this new era. A recent [Pew Research Study](#) indicates that 23% of U.S. adults identify as nones, and Americans, like Europeans and others, are becoming more and more secular, that is, less and less religious, over time. Put this together with the Catholics who appear to be [“declining both as a percentage of the population and in absolute numbers](#).” The new survey indicates there are about 51 million Catholic adults in the U.S. today, roughly 3 million fewer than in 2007.” The growing number of “former Catholics” is one of the largest denominations in this country.

Most Catholic families note that some members are no longer church-going Catholics. Even more families say that younger people are less likely than their elders to be engaged in organized religion, suggesting a trend for the future. Still more families experience a change in their *way* of being Catholic. The values of love and justice endure, but the way these get lived out is new—sometimes in another denomination and often as “spiritual and not religious” as the phrase goes. My sense is that such people are not “nones” in that they have no faith at all. Rather, I think we do not know how to measure the new ways in which people reverence others, the divine, and Earth in ways that do not conform to neat categories and labels. I believe there are more Cosmic Catholics than we know.

The rampaging elephant in the Roman Catholic living room plays a role here too. The priest pedophilia cases and episcopal cover-ups have shaken Catholics to our cores. The problems of the Archdiocese of Boston are well portrayed in the Oscar-nominated film “Spotlight.” Spoiler alert if you haven’t seen the movie: one of the most powerful

parts is at the end when what occurred elsewhere is mentioned. There is a screen that shows other dioceses where similar problems took place. Audiences have gasped at the length of the list, filling two screens eventually, of the names of cities all over the country where priests have been credibly accused and cases adjudicated.

According to the [National Catholic Reporter](#), “The U.S. Catholic church has incurred nearly \$4 billion in costs related to the priest sex abuse crisis during the past 65 years...” Horrifying as that may be to anyone who has ever put a dollar in the collection basket, it is harder to put a price tag on the lives lost, the faith destroyed, the families ripped apart, the ministries ruined. This has led to a new very unappealing era in Catholicism.

James Joyce in *Finnigan’s Wake* described Catholics as, “Here comes everybody.” I agree, though I think he could never have imagined just how many and varied we are. I expect that our children’s experiences of Catholicism will be as different from ours as our experiences were from our parents’ faith. Today’s young people are growing up as Cosmic Catholics, not as pre or post Vatican II Catholics. They are learning about Earth’s origins and stars, not simply what kind of vestment to wear for mass. They were stardust and unto stardust they will return. The link over time is to sacrament and solidarity rooted in the Jesus movement and lived out in communities of Cosmic Catholics over time.

Today’s children are maturing in a context in which many faith perspectives are respected and honored. Catholicism is no longer better than, or even first among equals, but equal among equals. No one religion has the final, correct-for-all-time answer. That is new. It is not just for children but for us as well.

This new reality requires a different kind of faith than the certainty that characterized an earlier Catholic worldview. It invites a variety of perspectives, a range of practices, and respect for diversity both among religions, and perhaps even more so within traditions. Being religious this way takes practice. That is why we are called practicing Catholics!

At the same time, religion takes place in the public arena whereas spirituality is a largely internal matter. So institutional forms of religion matter, like the institutional church to which groups like the Adrian Dominicans are connected. If the institution does not catch up with people's expectations, there are simply many other competing options in the marketplace and people will vote with their feet. Continued recalcitrance on justice for women and for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer Catholics is so scandalous that I fear some will go cosmic and leave the Catholic piece behind. I think that would be a loss because our Catholic heritage, so powerfully articulated in the Gospels, is a rich resource. It seems pointless to jettison rather than incorporate it.

So I recommend relying on your particular Dominican way of bringing together prayer, study, ministry, and community that has stood generations of your sisters in good stead. What might that constellation look like in this new era of Cosmic Catholicism and how can it expand the good?

Let's start with **prayer**, perhaps the hardest piece of this because it is where we are most uniquely ourselves. Not surprisingly but rather ironically, this seemingly benign practice can generate the most friction, the deepest misunderstanding, the hardest feelings. I think this is because our deepest intuition is that we want to be one—one with the divine, one with each another, one with the cosmos—and yet our individuality begs

expression too. It is almost inevitable then that we will clash here and that it will be painful. But seeing this dynamic—the urge to unity and the reality of uniqueness—may help us to pray deeply with lightness for all.

In this new era, I think a good strategy is to embrace **Mystery**, the locus of prayer, with the lightness I mentioned earlier. After all, what makes me so sure that my way is right for anyone other than me? And what gives me the insight to proclaim someone else's God/ess too small or too male, or too pagan, or too powerless? Treading lightly as we dare to go more deeply into our own contemplation assures that others can do the same. I do not need to agree with you to love you, nor imitate you to do justice. But sometimes I need to hold your hand. I offer you mine. The rest, as the rabbis say, is commentary.

Study is another place in this new era where change is afoot. The Internet has revolutionized *how* we study and the demands of science and technology have changed *what* we study. But I think the biggest shift is *with whom* we study, namely, not alone, but in **collaboration**.

Think of how you struggled to get your advanced degrees, to distinguish yourself as a scholar, teacher, minister, medical worker, whatever you did to prepare for your work. Much of the preparation was individual, what we in theology often referred to as the Lone Ranger approach. Today, collaboration is the name of the game.

Many fields have not caught up with this yet, but it is amazing to see how Japanese manufacturers taught the rest of the world how to work in teams for more effective, economical results. Likewise, though most of academia has not figure it out yet, feminist scholars encourage our colleagues to work collaboratively in multi-disciplinary

teams of activists and academics, in multi-generational teams to freshen the content that gets passed on.

A good example is the [Virginia Tech Research Team](#) that conducted the Flint Water Study that broke the story 100 miles north of here. The team included young and older people, undergraduates and professors, women and men all focused on the same problem. One sparked the other in finding clues. Their teamwork, not simply that of Professor Marc Edwards who is credited largely with uncovering the problem, made all the difference. Collaborative study is becoming normative. Teaching students to work in teams is a new skill set for this new era. What does this mean for us?

I realize you have chosen not to deal with administrative structure this time around, but I think there is an important clue here about how knowledge is generated and shared in our era that might guide your thinking about future forms of leadership. Do you really need one Prioress, to whom is she prior, and does that still make the most sense given the world in which we live? Is that model left over from a smaller worldview? This community's Council modeled team work in their report to the Chapter. Each member was essential to the mix. So I wonder if it is just, efficient, or even useful to name one person as the Prioress when a whole team is needed to do the work. I believe Cosmic Catholics need teams not just committed individuals. It is something to ponder for future decisions making.

Your third area of common concern is **ministry**. I understand ministry as the exercise of **creativity** in response to need. Even in the narrowest sense of ministry, namely religious leadership, there are some emerging models of training that reflect the new needs of a religiously diverse world. There are programs of study where Catholic

students, Presbyterian students, Jewish students for the rabbinate, and Muslim students becoming imams all take classes together. Innovative programs (Hartford Seminary in Connecticut and Chicago Theological Seminary, for example) are preparing students for ministry together the way law and medical students train in the early years of the degree programs. They all take the same classes; they specialize later on. So there are Muslims studying with Catholics, Jews with Methodists in classrooms of future ministers. Of course few if any Catholic dioceses would entrust their fair flower seminarians to such a process. But they are not the role models. The needs of the world not the proclivities of any particular tradition shape ministry, that is, shape the exercise of creativity in response to need.

That definition serves well in the broader sense of ministry in which I think you use the term. Creativity comes in many shapes and sizes. The needs of our cosmos are literally infinite. So your future ministries will take shapes you cannot even imagine today. Your own Pat Siemen provided an object lesson in this approach at the Yale University conference celebrating the centenary of geologist Thomas Barry. On such an auspicious occasion in such an austere place with some people who considered themselves of great consequence, she donned a jester's hat and briefed the assembled on new legal theories and practices that make the universe itself a part of the justice equation. The hat made the outfit. Pat showed how to be creative in dealing with enormous need, to go deeper but to do so lightly. That is creative ministry in Cosmic Catholicism.

Community is the fourth component of your tried and true schema. There is no sense in claiming that we are connected to all that is in the cosmos if we are not at the same time connected to some people and some things in very explicit and not always

easy ways. That is what we have meant by community. In this new era, I think the calling is to find the **locus of love**. In the same way that God is experienced diversely, study is done collaboratively, ministry involves endless creativity, so too, I think, will community take forms we have yet to imagine but it is still the place of love. Earth community is not just a happy phrase; it is increasingly a reality for many of us. Our animal friends are just as much a part of our lives as are humans, and sometimes they are even more cooperative!

I can imagine that religious communities of women are finding that your members belong to many communities—at least the lucky ones do—because no one group, just as no one intimate partner, can meet all of anyone’s relational needs. So envisioning community as a locus, a place where love’s energies flow, is a reliable way of seeing the webs of relationships that emerge over a lifetime. I think this approach takes some of the burden off of daily life with one another. I know it does in a family where each person has friends well beyond the nuclear family. The hard part is managing to attend to friends at a distance, around the world, something I am sure you find when you stretch from the Dominican Republic to the Philippines, from Norway, Canada and Taiwan. The locus of love helps to prioritize resources and time. Wait until we land on Mars and those sisters want to be friends!

I have tried to introduce Cosmic Catholicism as a framework appropriate for your future self/communal understanding. I have suggested that you go deeply and lightly at the same time as you move along together. In this worldview, prayer becomes a font of diversity; study becomes a collaborative, team sport; ministry emerges as creativity in

response to need; and community is a locus of love. I hope those elaborations on your historical formula prove useful at least for opening discussion.

Cosmic Catholicism is tied deeply into the roots of who we are. I conclude with a happy example of what I mean. The wise Irish feminist theologian Dr. Mary Condren has been writing about the importance of mercy long before this Year of Mercy was declared in Rome. She discovered that the “dew of mercy,” those early morning drops of compassion, are what many world religions connect with female images of the divine.

[Mary Condren writes](#), “In the Hindu spring rites, the Goddess Saraswathi is said to be clothed with a garland as white as dew drops, sitting on a lotus, while the gods, Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva, pay tribute to her. The Chinese, Kwan Yin, is a special protector of women and children whose name means ‘she who hears the weeping world’. Kwan Yin is often pictured pouring the dew of compassion or mercy onto her special devotees.” Mary Condren goes on to describe her favorite, St. Brigit, “who healed a brother and sister, the one disabled and the other blind, when she poured the morning dew upon them.”

February is Brigit’s month when her cloak is laid outside the night before her feast. What is retrieved the next morning is what Mary Condren calls “the dew stained cloak of Mercy.” It is used to heal, protect, and bless. What a contrast to the old battle garb. I love the image.

This “cloak of Mercy” may remind you of another Bridget, one Catherine Bridget, or Bridget Catherine, also known as Mother Mary Gerald Barry. Listen to her “Exhortation” for echoes of Brigit:

“Let your souls just satiate
In God’s fountains clear.

Then besprinkle **dews of love**
On your neighbor as you move
Through this earthly realm,”

Mother Mary Gerald Barry, OP: Ecclesial Woman of Vision and Daring, Nadine Foley, Editor, Adrian, MI: Adrian Dominican Sisters, 2000, p. 57.

I commend to us “the dew soaked cloak of Mercy” as a fitting garment for Cosmic Catholics. Let it become a new habit, in every sense of the word, for this new era. Put on this new habit and wear and practice it in good health. Thank you.

Questions for Table Discussion

1. How does Cosmic Catholicism play out in your life?
2. With whom would you like to share “the dew soaked cloak of Mercy”?
3. What excites you as you imagine Adrian Dominicans in ten years as a deeper, lighter approach shapes spirituality, structures, and most of all, people?