

Congregational Assembly October 22, 2021

Reflection by Patricia Siemen, Prioress

*Awakening to Love -
A call to soul work that leads to boldness of response at the peripheries*

Welcome

Good evening, *buenas noches, magandang umaga*, my Sisters and Associates.

It is so good to be with you as we open our virtual Congregational Assembly. Our prayer, of risking the journey, draws us into our communal Dominican histories and raises up the lives of beloved women who have gone before us. They, and so many unnamed others, left the comfort and security of their homes to face the extraordinary challenges before them, journeying across distant oceans and foreign lands, daring to learn new languages and customs and devote themselves to meeting the urgent needs of God's people with great love and generosity.

I am sure that in addition to being inspired by these powerful stories from our collective lineages, each of you can also summon one or more stories of your own risk-taking as a Dominican in loving service to God's people and creation.

These stories speak to our 800-year history of Spirit-centered responses to critical challenges in our world over the years. They provide inspiration for these next two days as we engage with one another exploring what will be our own boldness of response to the peripheries of our day and the emerging future.

What will we risk now as we face the future with hope? What new landscapes – of culture, mindsets, or “home” – are we being called to enter? How are our hearts, minds and souls awakening to transformative change that is being asked of us at this pivotal moment in history?

These are a few of the foundational questions before us as we move toward our General Chapter of 2022. This Congregational Assembly, planned by the General Chapter Planning Committee, is intended to provide us with opportunities to engage in meaningful conversations that will help inform the elected Delegates and our decision-making in February.

Insights from General Chapter Planning Committee

I want to share a few insights that have emerged from the work of the General Chapter Planning Committee during the past year and a half that provide context for this Congregational Assembly and our General Chapter preparation.

- First, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have never had a chance to meet in person. Instead, we have only met by Zoom, every month over two days. No General Chapter committee has ever had this kind of planning challenge or experience.
- Second, because two members of the Committee are in the Philippines, one is in the Dominican Republic, and the others are in the South, Midwest, and Western United States, our monthly Zoom meetings have taken place in the mornings and evenings – as we are doing this weekend – to accommodate our wide time zones.
- Third, as we began to meet, we realized the critical importance of engaging professional language interpreters so that all Committee members could fully understand one another and speak from the fullness of their hearts. This is another first experience for a General Chapter Planning Committee. It has increased our consciousness of the need to hear deeply the voices *of all of us*.
- Finally, our practice of reaching into our own inner depths of soul to get to know one another as a planning committee confirmed the importance of having all of us enter into our General Chapter preparation through this sacred portal. We have felt that the *way* we prepared for General Chapter is as important as the content, perceiving the importance of approaching the General Chapter of 2022 through the lens of awakening to the heart of our inner lives – both individually and communally.

These steps gave rise to the General Chapter theme of *Awakening; Despartar; Pagkamulat*. We sensed there is much for us to awaken to as women dedicated to the Dominican charism of seeking truth. Discerning the truth evident in global complexities; in new anthropological, planetary and scientific insights; in greater understandings of troubling human history and relationships; and in deepening faith and spirituality through contextual, ecumenical and interfaith experiences.

Movement to Awakening Circles

The General Chapter Planning Committee landed on the concept of inviting everyone to engage in *Awakening Circles* as a way to prepare ourselves, inwardly and intellectually, to questions of meaning and belonging vital to our future. We felt a need to engage in our Chapter preparations from an awareness of evolutionary consciousness and its impact on our spirituality. At the start of the last century, Teilhard said, “My deepest conviction is that we are on the eve, just now, of recognizing that our Cosmos is nothing else, fundamentally, but the slow birth of a universal consciousness – an awakening universe, a spiritual(istic) evolution.”

What a powerful insight – and how vital to our understanding, as Dominicans, to comprehend the implications of evolutionary science for our spiritual traditions and God’s beckoning call to us. Our Awakening Circle conversations have been offering us a fresh look at our sacred Christian mysteries in the midst of the collective beauty and truths of ancient traditions, our global community and the natural world. They help us ask the question of “who are we as humanity today?” They encourage each of us to go deeper into our soul work, and hopefully,

deepen the spiritual life and collective soul work of the Congregation. It is from this communal reflective and contemplative stance that we approach the discernment of what is uniquely ours to do at the upcoming Chapter.

As our planning committee continued to work together and consider other needed General Chapter preparation, our own cultural, geographic, and age differences helped us focus our attention on one of the most significant shifts occurring among us as a Congregation. Today, we are an international Congregation with a critical need for intercultural competency, racial and cultural awareness, and comprehension of diverse age perspectives and ways of speaking about our personal and communal realities.

International, Intercultural Identity Revealed in Livestreams

This became clear as the 16 Committee members on our Zoom screens – representing original homelands in Cuba, the Dominican Republic, the Philippines and the United States – continued to awaken us to who we are as Dominican women of Adrian. While the Congregation has had an international presence since at least the 1940's, most of us have perceived ourselves as a US Congregation. We clearly ARE *based* in the US and are significantly influenced (often unconsciously) as a first-world nation and a largely white privileged group. But the reality is that we are, and have been, intercultural, interracial, and international for years. It is an incredible blessing to fully *awaken* now to an intentional shifting of our identity as an international, interracial, intercultural Dominican Congregation and member of the global sisterhood.

As a General Chapter Planning Committee, we wanted to draw greater awareness among all of us to this critical pivot in our identity as we enter into our General Chapter process. For this reason, we proposed three livestream presentations that we hoped would provide all of us with a glimpse of the diversity among us as a Congregation, and the many ways we respond to the Dominican charism and mission, whether in the Philippines, the Dominican Republic or the United States.

The livestream of our Sisters in the Philippines and those who minister in the Dominican Republic offered us rare views of their lives and ministries since they are so geographically distanced from the majority of us living in the US. The livestream of Sisters who are under 70 offered a glimpse of the dominant international and intercultural context among our younger members – and the diversity, energy and hope that these 50 women bring to our Dominican life now and promise to continue to evolve into the future.

The fourth livestream by the General Council offered not only a report on the 2016 General Chapter Enactments and what our Congregation has accomplished during the past five and a half years, but also the significant pivots we have made to provide viable pathways toward our emergent future. These include structures to help future vowed Dominican life emerge in the U.S. and to ensure viable institutional sponsorships, sustainability initiatives, governance, and campus planning. They include structures to enhance the Dominican charism among Associates and other partners in mission; to continue the critical work of dismantling racism and cultural bias in our Congregation, church and society; and to respond to the escalating climate crisis and ecological degradation.

These four livestreams are companions to the Awakening Circles in preparing us for General Chapter of 2022. And now this Congregational Assembly is providing us with time to talk together about the implications of this Chapter work: Who are we becoming as 21st century Dominicans? What are the implications of this shift in identity with one another? And what is the work that is uniquely ours to do as Dominicans at this pivotal time?

Other Insights

Before turning this over to all of you for your own fruitful conversation in small groups, I would like to share a few additional insights and awakenings shaped by these past five-plus years in leadership:

- We all know well and must not lose mindfulness that we have been living in a time of great loss as a Congregation, going from 675 to 471 members since 2016. The next six years promise a continuing experience of grief and loss – and will awaken us further to our declining capacity to do what we have long been able to do individually as a Congregation.
- At the same time, we also know that our younger members have been cultivating strong relationships among themselves and with other Dominican Sisters and women religious. We can all sense the new religious life that is emerging through our Pascal mystery. One clear awareness is that while we will continue to be smaller in number, we are growing richer in diversity and in our global dimension, expanding our capacity to respond to the emergent future.
- All of us have experienced an increased capacity for, and richly promising engagement in, collaboration with other Dominicans and women religious, and with our Associates and other partners in mission.
- Our nearly two-year experience of living through the global COVID-19 pandemic has gifted us with opportunities to enhance our communications, using technologies that nurture our sense of belonging despite huge geographic distances between us – as well as reduce our carbon footprint.
- Our engagement this past year in a national US racial reckoning has pivoted us to a profound intentional commitment to disrupt and dismantle racism, white privilege, and cultural bias. It calls on us to enter our deeply evolving Christ consciousness as a way to heal this personal, national and global soul sickness.
- Our commitment to mitigate climate chaos and ecological degradation, linking the cry of Earth and the cry of the poor as named so clearly in *Laudato Si*, has pivoted us toward an unyielding call for sacrifice and action to avoid planetary catastrophe.

Back to Identity and Response

So when we look to the question of identity and “who are we becoming” let us make sure that we do not live with a mistaken identity. Who we are becoming is a much larger question than only who are we becoming as Dominicans of Adrian. It is a wider question of both human identity and evolutionary consciousness. Our identity is that of human Earthlings, of inspired persons who are related to a global and even universal family and web of life.

When we don’t know that we are in relationship to wider circles of life, we create incredible crises and imbalance for life on Earth. As we experience our identity as sisters and brothers to all beings, we become as Pope Francis says, “a wider we.” When we know we are here to bring beauty, joy, hope and harmony to the larger world, we can live reciprocally and humbly with others. Then we can risk freely, commit passionately, and joyfully embrace with expectant hope the work that is ours to do. Knowing who we are will determine our bold responses to the critical signs of the times and the peripheries of the world.

As Dominicans of Adrian, we say, “in the mission of Jesus we discover and identify ourselves.” This statement places us within the rich Gospel and Dominican traditions that have emerged within the larger evolutionary context. This identity determines the choices we make day by day in living out this mission. In doing so we, like Rainer Maria Rilke, will “live our lives in ever widening circles.”

The transformative power of suffering and vulnerability

Perhaps the extraordinary suffering of Earth – and of humanity – these days is an opportunity to break open our hearts and become vulnerable with one another. All major spiritual traditions, including our own, recognize the transformative possibility that lies within vulnerability. Surely our very mourning, tears, and anguished crying out, as we touch the Earth’s and each other’s pain, can break open a greater trust, a greater vulnerability, a greater willingness to enter into communion with one another. Surely these times of anguished suffering can break open our hearts to one another and those we have yet to meet. Perhaps it is from this compassionate stance that we can discover our identity anew and intentionally shape an inclusive beloved community.

Remaining rooted in the ancient wisdom of contemplative prayer, Christ consciousness, and the vulnerability of the Paschal Mystery, we will be both individually and communally readied to pivot into “creating the deeper grooves of consciousness” that Elise García quoted from Carmelite Constance Fitzgerald in her recent LCWR presidential address. Those “deeper grooves of consciousness” will help shape our creative acts of General Chapter and draw us into deeper communion with one another and a wider “we”.

Conclusion: Relationship and Mission

As I conclude, I want to ask you to consider two other key areas of our life as Dominicans: relationships and mission.

Regarding relationships: How have you deepened your relationships with one another over these past five years? Have you found concrete ways to widen your relationships with people from other races and cultures? Are you finding ways to enter into conversations with people with whom you disagree, with people who are dismantling the common good? Are you helping to create a compassionate world where there are “no more strangers”?

Regarding mission: As Dominicans, we are called to study, build community, pray mindfully, and preach with our very lives. Today as we face so much division and confusion regarding “truth,” I recall Dominic’s broken-heartedness over the plight of the Cathars. Dominic, too, lived in an era of ‘false truths,’ where people were destroying one another. He preached God’s love to the people by day and prayed during the nights, often crying out in distress about what would happen to the people. He prayed and listened deeply. Are we as committed to pray for mercy and transformation as he was? Dominic sent his friars out two by two to places of brokenness, need and new ideas. Is this something we need to consider again?

As we pivot into this beckoning future, let us remember the rich gift of community and our long legacy of risk-taking. Let us *lean into* the transformative power of Christ consciousness as we tenderly accompany one another. Let us trust deeply in the inner wisdom and stirrings of God’s emergent future.

Together, let us awaken to Divine Love.