

SFCC, JUSTICE, AND THE FUTURE

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To be asked to speak at this Assembly on the occasion of our Jubilee and in tandem with so many other fine presenters is a great honor. I thank you for asking me and would like to divide the time roughly into three parts: a talk, small group sessions, and a coming together for final comments.

Recently, I read Patricia Wittberg's The Rise and Fall of Catholic Religious Orders (SUNY 1994). Wittberg is a sociologist and also a Sister of Charity. In this book she uses criteria from social movements to understand why religious communities in the last 2000 years have been born and have died. We all know, of course, that most communities in the history of the church had a brief moment when they thrived and then died out. Few, in fact, survived the era in which they were born. Wittberg wants to know why.

She studies desert hermits from the earliest centuries, medieval monasticism, mendicant groups like the Franciscans and Dominicans, the Beguines--a medieval group very much like SFCC in its economic and spiritual independence of the ecclesiastical establishment--the apostolic orders of the Counter Reformation, and the nineteenth century congregations that make up the bulk of communities in the U.S. today.

Using criteria from social movements, Wittberg holds that three key elements enable a community to thrive. First, its members must get something, whether material or non-material, out of belonging. There was a time, for example, when women joined a religious community to gain protection or social status or more spiritual fulfillment or freedom of movement and association than other women in their culture.

Second, in order to thrive a community must have access to resources: it must be able to support itself materially and have a certain know-how about prayer and spirituality and about ways to organize itself. It must be able to assume some support from both ecclesiastical and political institutions. If all its energies are consumed running from a guillotine or an Inquisition, for example, few will be left over for prayer or mission. Though history shows that a little bit of oppression can help create cohesion among the oppressed, most communities did not survive the Nazis and those that did not support the Inquisition were destroyed by it. One important resource is new recruits, who have traditionally come from a community's institutional and ecclesiastical connections.

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Third and perhaps most important, according to Wittberg, a thriving community has an "ideological frame," that is, a coherent articulation of its purpose, a purpose to which all else it does is merely instrumental. (This "frame" is much like the "charism" of Vincentia's presentation). For the fourth century hermits and medieval monasticism and the Beguines, the purpose was spiritual perfection through ritual, asceticism, and mystical experience. For the medieval mendicants and the post-Reformation apostolic orders, the purpose was evangelization of heretics and non-Christians. Interestingly, when Wittberg discusses teaching and nursing congregations founded in the nineteenth century in Ireland, France, Quebec, and the U.S., she finds that many of them lacked an articulated, overriding purpose. They were seen by the hierarchy as pious and hard workers, and many communities defined themselves in the same way.

Ideological frames or charisms also need supporting pieces like vows, asceticism, a common life, and ministry. Their interpretations vary from group to group and century to century, but, according to Wittberg, "The prospect of a communal lifestyle has been a key attraction for potential recruits to all types of religious communities. This was especially so for women, who were often deprived of other opportunities" to associate with one another (132).

Wittberg's hypothesis is that all three key elements as well as many of the supporting pieces needed to ensure the survival of religious communities are lacking today. She enlists numerous examples and much data to prove her point, and I recommend that you read her book. It has its limitations. She confines her study to Europe and America, and we know that most of the current growth in membership of religious communities is in Africa and Asia. She has also been faulted for taking too little account of the problems of the church and the world that impinge on the welfare of religious communities. Nevertheless, I think it instructive to understand her analysis.

Central to her pessimism about the future of religious communities in our time are the statements of Vatican II, "Lumen Gentium" and "Gaudium et Spes," that called all Christians to holiness and made clear that religious are not superior to lay persons. By proclaiming the importance of the lay state, to which religious belong and are not superior members, Vatican II pulled the pins out from under religious communities as we have known them. Why should a young person become a sister when, for example, all baptized persons are called to spirituality and to ministry? Why should a woman take on the burdens of community when she has numerous opportunities for association with other women in the world today? "By the mid-1980s, belief in the superiority of a religious vocation over that of the average lay Catholic had been largely destroyed" (1240), says Wittberg, and a consequent lack of role clarity has led to communities' inability to project a corporate image that could attract new entrants.

Much more can be said about this, but Wittberg is not optimistic about the future of communities and about the landscape of the Catholic Church without these distinctive markers that we have always known in some form. What is hopeful about the literature of social movements that she draws upon, however, is that it shows there has always been room for those utopian groups, religious and non-religious, that dare to address the "sharpest anguish" of their culture (cf. Frank E. Manuel, Utopias and Utopian Thought, Houghton Mifflin 1966, p. 70). Wittberg challenges communities to dream and to organize themselves communally to address that "sharpest anguish."

She thinks it may lead to new ideological frames that will enable religious life to survive. Some groups have already articulated this new charism to be prophetic witness based on a contemplative spirituality for our time. The chief problem with prophecy as a charism, however, is that it can't be mandated for a whole group. How do you get religious communities, which must honor conscience and the discerning individual, to commit themselves as groups to corporate prophecy? In Anne Brotherton's challenge and our response to it the other day, I think we felt both the appeal and the difficulty of prophecy as charism or "ideological frame."

I hope it is clear why I think Wittberg's research is relevant to our topic today, the future of our community. Just to be sure that we do not too quickly exclude ourselves from the groups that she studies by claiming to be different from other congregations because we are non-canonical, let us remember that non-canonical (or as Ritamary reminded us, "theological") status is not a charism or purpose for being. It is simply a practical means to an end, a mere legal status we choose as an instrument for our larger purposes. Wittberg talks not about canonical communities but about communities as social movements, so her data applies to all of us who gather as groups. The inclusion of the Beguines in her research data would mean we are included also. Like us, they maintained their economic and canonical independence from the institutional church and organized themselves to pray and to do good works in the society around them. They lasted 200 years and were finally suppressed for their mysticism, which was often a code word in the Middle Ages for the suppression of uppity women.

Let us consider Wittberg's research as a means of asking ourselves some questions about the future of SFCC. Are we, for example, on the way out? What is our average age? Are we more concerned about retirement than mission? Do we have a strong sense of ourself as a group? Are we clear about our Purpose? Do we feel good about inviting young people to join us? Do we challenge ourselves to use our resources and imagination so that in another 25 years, an equal or greater number of women our age or younger will be somewhere, perhaps in an inner city basement, perhaps in a Latin American barrio, perhaps in the Philippines, perhaps here, celebrating our Golden Jubilee? As we look at the signs of the times, their "sharpest anguish," what should we be praying about and organizing around?

I suggest that we ask questions like these not because we are desperate to survive but because they are significant questions for the church and the world and because we desire to be faithful. Can we identify the "sharpest anguish" of our times and devise ways to respond to it both as individuals and as a group? Not from a fear of dying out but from the deep desire of our calling? We have thrived for 25 years, joyfully, because we--thanks to Lillanna's vision of community and the access she had to women through her book on collegiality and through bishops and other communities--addressed the anguish of women religious in the Catholic Church in the immediate post-Vatican-II period.

The particular problem of non-collegial religious communities has diminished, thank heaven, but I would suggest that other key elements in our SFCC ideological frame enable us as a group to address the "sharpest anguish" of our times. The three elements I will speak to are our ecumenical

goal, our commitment to collegiality, and the practical feminism that has developed in SFCC. Each of these three addresses in some way the terrible pain of our world and our church today.

1. **THAT ALL MAY BE ONE:** our ecumenical goal. Our world is torn apart by those who insist that "I am Number One, my school is Number One, my team is Number One, my race is Number One, my religion is Number One, my nation is Number One. Consequently, the other is the untouchable." Whether it is Hutus killing Tutsis in Rwanda, Christian Serbs raping Muslim women in Bosnia, Americans bombing Iraqis or Panamanians, China invading Tibet and persecuting Buddhists, Californians refusing education and health care to immigrants, or North Carolinians building prisons instead of schools, each day's news or conversation in the neighborhood unveils some new horror arising from our refusal to recognize that we are all children of the same God. But our call as SFCC is precisely to address that refusal, to be compassionate, to see the other as ourselves, to make peace on both the personal and social level, to be people who go about righting relationships because they will not right themselves. I wear this medallion, fashioned in silver by a brother in Sandra Anderson's basic community in Mexico, to remind me of that and to make a necessary public statement where I live. It says in Spanish that "all may be one," and it drives those people around me crazy who cannot tolerate the use of public money to print government documents like drivers license manuals in Spanish. To me, this symbol, in Spanish, is SFCC at its best.

2. **COLLEGIALITY:** Our world is dying from lack of it. Collegiality is more than just a method of making decisions at community gatherings. It means allowing people a voice, treating them fairly, not making decisions for them but basing all decisions on the combined wisdom of all, opening up creative ways to maximize the participation of even the least--especially the least--in the world's work. It's a radical form of democracy that says every person, not just white male property owners or men who wear purple and red, has equal rights.

Several years ago I sat in a cafe near Lake Titicaca high in the Bolivian Andes waiting on color television a soap opera beamed in from Brazil that was as trashy as anything on U.S. television. Why? It was selling soap powder and Coke and Disney World to the few in Bolivia who can afford them. We now have a global culture resulting from a global economic system. Just as advertising and the media in the U.S. support profits for the few at the expense of the many, so do they elsewhere. But in Third World countries the stakes are higher because external debts have put those countries in hock to programs of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and trade agreements like GATT and NAFTA that force them to produce for export instead of local consumption. That means most people in Honduras and Kenya and the Philippines can't afford to buy food and necessities because they are not expensive imports. The profits from them also go to a few with luxurious lifestyles, and the many no longer have jobs or support from the government for health care and education.

In Mexico, for example, 50% of those able to work are unemployed or underemployed. By the end of 1995, nearly two and a half million more people will have lost their jobs because of NAFTA. And in the long run, these economic programs bring a Third World dimension to countries like our own. Factories that used to be in Los Angeles and North Carolina are now in Mexico,

Eastern Europe, and Indonesia. The paradox: profits are at an all time high, nationally and internationally, but the global economy is weak.

What does this complex economics have to do with us as SFCC'S. Ann Miller and Justina Landeros wrote from Central America to All-to-All this year to tell us to read Noam Chomsky on this. We must listen to the Ann Millers and Justina Landeroses in this community. (Though I would recommend reading Chomsky in small gulps; he can leave you feeling depressed.) Why? Because billions of people are hungry, malnourished, from lack of collegiality, from the fact that a few elites in every country are making the decisions for everybody, and they are following what Adam Smith, the father of capitalism, called the vile dictum, "everything for me and nothing for anybody else.

When we were children, our mothers told us to eat our peas because children in China were starving. Now we are challenged, because of our commitment to collegiality, to refrain from eating hamburger, fruit, coffee, and other products grown on land needed to raise basic foods for local people. Or, because we are quickly running out of things we can conscientiously buy, we are challenged to organize others to stop the non-collegial decisions of corporations, governments, and global financial institutions that are killing people. The "stuff" that we buy--or refuse to buy--can be a new form of asceticism that shows our solidarity with the victims of non-collegial decision making and commits us to act with others on their behalf.

3. FEMINISM. Twenty-five years ago, feminists were few and far between and ridiculed in the media as ugly women and bra burners. Today it is clear that feminist principles are the lynchpin in the new paradigm that must replace old ways of thinking if humans are not to destroy the earth and each other. Feminists seek respect for the earth on its own terms, respect for women as equals to men, a dissolution of the patriarchal and hierarchical structures of governments, corporations, and churches. Feminists want us to sit at the round table and take every human being seriously. Because they are beginning to be heard, feminists threaten the traditional power brokers, who in turn use traditional divide-and-conquer tactics to separate "radical feminists" from "middle-of-the-road feminists" and homemakers from breadwinners and anti-abortion from pro-choice women.

When I came into SFCC nearly twenty years ago I don't remember our saying we were a feminist community the way we spoke frequently about being collegial and ecumenical, but Providence in the form of our experience of the sexist nature of the church seems to have remedied that. Now we seem as a group to have a high level of commitment to the radical notion that women are people too. Now feminism is as much a distinguishing sign of SFCC, I think, as are collegiality and ecumenism, and this trinity of values is, I believe, crucial to our responding to the sharpest anguish of our times and to our growing beyond the anguish.

These may not be the only values that make up the charism or "ideological frame" of SFCC, but they are three that position us to comprehend and address the "sharpest anguish" of our times. I hope that we can reflect on them together and on the need to represent them as individuals and as a group in all that we do. Now we will break into small groups and consider the questions:

1. If it is faithful to the grace that God continues to give, what will the Church look like in fifty years?
2. If a globally just economy were established, what would your neighborhood look like? What would the worst neighborhood in your town look like? The worst neighborhood in the world?
3. If we befriend the earth rather than take charge of it, how will it look and feel in a hundred years?
4. What are some things that we can do as a community to be more collectively and individually conscious of addressing the anguish of our world?

AND I GET THE LAST WORD: on the practicality of acting more intentionally according to our charism.

First, on the topic of corporate statements. I think we resist them because of a lack of trust. We fear everyone won't do the necessary homework to be well-informed about what we have said as a group, and we know that a statement is always as strong as its weakest link. Reporters have an uncanny way of calling the least informed signer of statements! Also, I think we distrust Sister Mary Ego to be our spokesperson, and it is she who most often wants to be.

There are ways to do corporate statements that minimize our need to fear, and I hope we will take up Anne's challenge in the coming year and think of some ways we can do them well, probably beginning in the regions. We might also think of ways to act corporately other than by making statements. For example, could we join together to support financially somebody in ministry or somebody who needs a sabbatical or has a creative idea for a project or a painting or a book or a piece of music? Let's let our imaginations in the coming year play around this corporate effort.

Second, we can use the All-to-All to do more creative reflection on our charism. Am I humble enough, for example, to write in and tell others what I am doing and include some theological reflection on how what I am doing relates to the larger purposes of SFCC? It can be brief (the briefer, the more effective, probably), but it takes time and simplicity to do it, and it may inspire others to do the same? Who will start?

Thanks, again, for the honor and the opportunity.