



☞ **Celebration 2016** ☞  
**Fifty Years of God's Love and Mercy:**  
**The Fiftieth Anniversary**  
**of the Franciscan Federation**

**The Presidential Address**  
**By Kathie Uhler, OSF**  
***Hilton Milwaukee City Center***  
***June 18, 2016***

**INTRODUCTION**

Greetings, everyone, on this auspicious occasion! I don't have a joke, but I have a lovely anecdote that Dorothy Day tells about life at the Catholic Worker. She said the pace at the Worker was not always chaotic. And they found that many times when they were quieted down and just sitting around, some of the most important things happened. For example, "One day," she said, "they were just sitting around talking and Peter Maurin walked in." This is a type of contemplation, a kind of passivity where one is still but on alert. The calm, perhaps, allows the impact of the environment into our consciousness.

And this leads me to my remarks today on Franciscanism and our emerging future.

**FRANCISCANISM TODAY**

In May, 2015, Pope Francis held a special audience with OFM friars and offered words to them, but they were truly words for all members of the Franciscan Family. He said, "You have inherited authority with the people of God with your minority, fraternity, meekness, humility, and poverty. Please preserve this! Do not lose it. The people love you." The pope urged us further: "It is important," he said, "to recover a consciousness of being carriers of mercy, carriers of reconciliation and carriers of peace. Fruitfully realize this vocation and mission and you will be more and more a congregation that goes out."

This is our call from as far back as Vatican II and, now, from Pope Francis, to intensify our charism – "...to be more and more a congregation that goes out." We have this call because of our legacy, our tradition; and we are recognized worldwide.

We Franciscans are part and parcel of our day and age – characterized as the information age, and this, the Internet and social media, is not all bad.

We Franciscans are being inexorably led by information technology into larger fields of compassion, to deeper levels of consciousness, and into forming larger wholes. There is a dynamic to life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to which we, each of us, more or less resonate and dance.

Listen to this:

"A human being is part of the whole, called by us 'the Universe', a part limited in time and space. One experiences oneself... as something separated from the rest – a kind of optical

delusion of one's consciousness.... Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty." (*Einstein quote from Letter of 1950, in NYT 3-29-72; NY Post 11-28-72.*)

We are being gathered into new wholes, inexorably, but also intentionally. Last year at AFC 2015, we Franciscans – many of whom are in this room today -- participated intentionally in a survey on the future of the Franciscan Federation, as conducted by the Dare To Image Ad Hoc Committee of the Board. A majority of the responses identified the need for a more inclusive and even global organization or movement that would include all the Orders of the Franciscan Family, as well as Franciscan-hearted people. You will hear more about this organization later in this conference.

#### FRANCISCANISM AS AN OPEN SYSTEM

Franciscanism has proven adaptable and open to change as the centuries have rolled on. Franciscanism and, by extension, the Franciscan Family, is an open system, after all. It is an open system with patterns of relatedness: these patterns are primarily our common story and common traditions

We keep the memory of our evolutionary path alive – this is integrity, wholeness. Along with this, Saint Francis charged us to do what is ours to do. Thus there is a radical openness to the Franciscan ideal, and a resulting diversity and individuality at the local level. There are in Franciscanism, then, co-relative values: our freedom and autonomy at the lived, local level and our common story and charism that serve as touchstones behind us and ahead of us.

Another way of putting all of this is:

We Franciscans are a whole, whose tradition prizes a radical openness that impels us to becoming more engaged, as Pope Francis said, to be more and more a congregation that goes out, conscious of forming more wholes of compassion and peace.

#### OUR PROPOSAL FOR A NEW ENTITY

As stated in "The Proposal Toward a New Entity," the Dare To Image Committee shifted their focus from redesigning the Franciscan Federation. That task would remain with the Federation Board – to streamline Federation structures to reflect the scale of Federation membership. The Dare To Image Committee had led us in a two-year, contemplative Sabbath process. From that came the input of the AFC 2015 survey (mentioned above), and other promptings from the Franciscan Family, to image a new Franciscan entity that would embrace global and inclusive values.

The new entity would not replace the Franciscan Federation: the Federation would continue on, streamlined, with its own mission and vision. The Dare To Image Committee, along with the Federation Board, then developed the Proposal Toward a New Entity that you have received in pre-conference mailings.

Having said that, let's look a little closer at why a new entity is being proposed and how it differs from the Franciscan Federation, FAN (Franciscan Action Network) and Franciscans International (FI). There is on-going value in keeping the Franciscan Federation alive for its mission is to explore, expound and enliven the TOR charism. FAN and FI are primarily action and advocacy organizations. The new entity would be something different from all three organizations.

So, how to describe the new entity?

Gandhi said that we must become the change we wish to see. With these thoughts in mind, does this statement ring true for you?

“The crises of our time are challenging the world religions to release a new spiritual force transcending religious, cultural and national boundaries into a new consciousness of the oneness of the human community and so putting into effect a spiritual dynamic toward the solutions of world problems.... We affirm a new spirituality, divested of insularity and directed toward a planetary consciousness.” (*Teilhard de Chardin at the U.N. c. 1950.*)

In the planetary consciousness of the information age, the global is the new national; and the national is the new local. Are we Franciscans being called to meet this challenge as an institution?

#### THE MESSAGE FOR THE JUBILEE YEAR OF MERCY

An organization, however informal, of the whole Franciscan Family USA could expand the capabilities of leadership to address the crises of our times. And, this leads me to “The Message of the Franciscan Family in the U.S. for the Jubilee Year of Mercy” that you, leaders and individuals, were asked to endorse and which will be signed ceremoniously this evening before the picnic. The Message project was suggested by its creators, two OFM friars and two OSF sisters, as a possible first step toward the larger goal of creating a new entity for the whole Franciscan Family.

This project has enabled the Family to speak with one, unified voice as agents or carriers of mercy, reconciliation and peace. It also committed the members of the Family to certain actions for pardon and mercy; and especially it is serving as a model of collaboration among the separate Franciscan Orders and congregations, religious and secular, of male-female equality, and of clerical and non-clerical co-status.

The Message was endorsed by the leaders and some individual members of 34 member-congregations of the Franciscan Federation, the seven provincials of the Order of Friars Minor, 3 OFM Conventual provincials, Fr. David Couturier for the Capuchin Friars, the Councils of the two Poor Clare Federations of the United States, the National Minister of the Order of Franciscan Seculars and a married couple in attendance at Celebration 2016, who represent Franciscan Associates and Franciscan-hearted people.

The project truly serves as a model of a united Franciscan Family in the USA.

#### CONCLUSION

It seems to me, in all of this, that we are true to our heritage, that the spirit of poverty and littleness may be seen as the ultimate driving forces behind our Franciscan desire for more wholeness. We sense what is lacking in the world; we need each other and the world needs us, as *minores*, to model familial compassion.

The future is not unknown, it is undecided. As we consider what is ours to do with the Proposal, can we risk the creation of a new entity by a team formed from all branches of the Franciscan Family? And can we let that team and their entity take off with a consciousness, vitality and mission of its own breadth and depth?

Thank you.