

Presidential Address: AFC 2014 *Edna Michel, osf*

Good afternoon, Good People! How energizing it is for me personally to be gathered with you, to celebrate our common heritage and to cultivate kindom relationships! My address today falls into five areas; I hope you will be able to see how one leads into the next, placing us strategically on the threshold of the 50th anniversary of the Federation, ready to move into the next spiral of our evolving history.

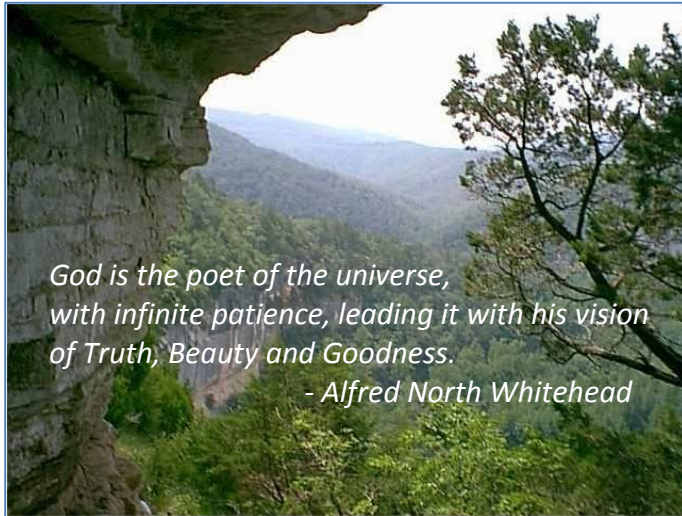
I. Context: Our Graced Universe

Here's a story that is being told more often of late; in fact, just this morning Margie Will gave us another version of it, but it merits retelling, to set the context for where we are today as a federation and what the future might be calling us to.

Once upon a time, 13.8 billion years ago, there was nothing: no matter, no energy, no time, no space. And then, from what can only be a supernatural source, the universe flared into being and has been developing and expanding ever since. The first manifestation of God was light, and that light filled the expanding universe with radiant energy, pouring forth the warmth and love of a Creator God even before there were creatures to receive it. It would take another 9.25 billion years before the earth would be formed, yet all the material was there in the very beginning. 500 million years after the formation of the earth, life emerged here, very humbly in primitive cells. And then, 950 million years after that, or about 3 billion years ago one of the most awe-evoking moments in earth's history came when a primitive cell mutated and began to receive and use light from the sun, in a process we call photosynthesis. Think about it: the Divine Creator was gifting the universe with precious light nearly 10 billion years before the gift could truly be received. What an extravagant Creator we have! Judy Cannato reflects: "Since time began the Holy One has been radiating light toward Earth in one continuous act of grace. Karl Rahner, SJ, calls this grace God's self-communication, an outpouring of the very being of God that not only permeates, but maintains our life."¹ Scripture is full of images of God as light. The first story of creation begins with God's profound command: "Let there be light."² John, with mystical insight, refers to the primacy of Christ when he attributes to Jesus the words, "I am the Light of the World."³

The entire story of creation is a story of unfolding, outpouring, overflowing grace. Judy goes on to say, "Through grace came plant and sea life, amphibians and winged creatures, reptiles and mammals... in an astonishing array."⁴ I like to think that the second great manifestation of God was Life. Our God is a living God who delights in life and who creatively calls forth myriad forms of life. "Grace-filled evolution pressed on until some 2.6 million years ago, the first species that we recognize as human... emerged." ... another great break-through moment in the living world's relationship with the divine. "Then, 2.4 million years later, or just 150,000 years ago our species, *Homo sapiens*, emerged.' As far as we know, for the first time in the 13.8 billion year history of the universe, there was the kind of consciousness we call self-awareness. A little less than 100,000 years ago humans made the connection that there was something bigger than themselves, some mysterious force intricately involved in their lives. At long last, our species became aware and receptive to the radiant grace that had always been

present. I call it the third great manifestation of God: “God is Love.” God is revealed as Love come to earth, Love incarnate in all creation, and then, *par excellence*, in the person of Jesus. We needed to experience this God in tangible form for the incredible truth to sink in: Love has been the motivation for 13.8 billion years of the universe’s development. And more than that, as Ilia Delio points out, Love *is* the physical structure of the universe.⁵ That love will remain



consistent into the future, drawing us on individually and as a people and a universe into fuller light, life and love until we are at last drawn into eternal union with God: God dwelling within us and we within God.

Matter, we are learning, is not composed of basic building blocks as we once thought, but is rather a web of relationships. As the universe continues to expand, it tends toward ever greater levels of complexity; that is, ever more intricate relatedness. The more we evolve as a universe the more conscious

we become of our interconnectedness and interdependence. (*How Franciscan!*)

II. **Metanoia** (*meta* – “change” *noia* – “knowing”) We’re accustomed to hearing it as the call to change our hearts, but first of all it means *a change of mindset*. The call to metanoia is a clarion call to look at the world through new lens: to become aware of the cultural and educational biases we carry and to make conscious choices for truth as it is being revealed to us.

A few more definitions are in order to help us grasp where we are as a Federation and as individual Franciscan congregations.

A closed system is any organism or organization that is self-contained, self-maintained. There is little exchange with the environment, little complexity (relatedness). Closed systems proceed in the direction of increasing disorder, diminishment and eventual destruction. We all know both people and institutions that operate as closed systems.

An open system is subject to more chaos than a closed system, but also experiences greater creativity and emergence. It is characterized by increased complexity (relatedness); it has the ability to self-organize. Someone who is open to learning through trial and error exemplifies an open system. An institution responsive to the conditions and needs of the time is an open system.

A strange attractor is a new form or idea or development which arises on its own, spontaneously and often quite unexpectedly. Strange attractors pull us into new patterns of thinking, acting, and relating. They leave us marveling, “Wow! Where did *that* come from?”

Most, if not all of us, were educated in Newtonian physics (the closed system); quantum physics calls us to a real metanoia – to perceive and receive our world and the universe as an open system. To the extent that we can break through to this new level of consciousness we also experience a kind of resurrection: a new sense of selfhood, of what it means to belong to the cosmos, and consequently, a new and broader perspective on the issues that daily confront us. According to Ilia Delio (but this would be true of John Haught and many other proponents of Evolutionary Christianity), “when the level of our awareness changes, we start attracting a new reality.”⁶

Christopher Fry celebrates the chaos, pain and uncertainty of our time and pleads with us not to miss out on this metanoia opportunity. In his well-known poem, “*A Sleep of Prisoners*,” he writes:

*Thank God our time is now when wrong
Comes up to face us everywhere,
Never to leave us till we take
The longest stride of soul men (sic) ever took.
Affairs are now soul size.
The enterprise is exploration into God....
It takes so many thousand years to wake...
But will you wake, for pity's sake?*⁷



III. Our Response: Cultivating Kindom

We who have been gifted with the Franciscan charism are uniquely fitted to respond to the challenge of quantum physics and the mandate of the Gospel: Love one another. We innately understand the brotherhood and sisterhood of all creatures; we have a Rule of Life that consistently calls us to the gospel ideal of *fraternitas*. In a circular letter dated February 2, 1996, John Corriveau, then the General Minister of the OFM Capuchins, wrote to his brothers, “Fraternity is not only a gift we offer one another; it is our privileged manner of announcing the reign of God.”⁸ This is kindom building!

We can do this! No matter our age or stamina or type of ministry; no matter how few in number our congregations become or how financially strapped we are, we can receive one another and the whole world with the love and respect that is their inheritance from God. Margaret Carney once said that the great sin of our time is not greed, but despair. The antidote, she went on to say, is hope, and she described hope as “the willingness to work for something that is good.”⁹ Building the kindom is good; acknowledging the interconnectedness and dignity of all creatures, human and otherwise is good. Again, let me repeat: it can be done by all of us, and, because “affairs are now soul size” it needs to be done by all of us. No disavowals such as “too busy, too tired, too old, too few” etc. will excuse us. The metanoia we are called to is the humble acceptance of every creature as sister and brother and our consequent reverent treatment of them- wherever we are; however we can.

IV. Specific Challenges for Franciscan Federation Members

- A. To Elected Leaders (CEL):** Keep your vision wide and inclusive. Remember that your service to your congregation is part of the cosmic unfolding. We so easily get trapped by the big and little issues that come before us: property and personnel issues, the investment portfolio, legal issues, an upcoming chapter, care for our aging members, crisis intervention... We get overwhelmed and, of course, feel like we have no time or energy for any involvement beyond our congregations. We start operating like a closed system which is desperately trying to keep afloat. If this sounds like your leadership team, I challenge you to re-examine your priorities. Who is holding before the community the bigger picture, the story of a graced universe, of humanity's common longings and the meaning of religious life, the meaning of Franciscan presence for our time? Who is carrying the torch of hope? Who is building kindom relationships across a wide spectrum of potential partners and collaborators? You can start by spending at least 10% of your time and energy on service beyond your congregation, for the greater common good: our own Franciscan Federation needs your leadership, or the International Franciscan Conference, LCWR or CMSM, or national organizations that promote religious life, peace and justice, health care, etc. After a couple years increase the percentage... to 20 or 25%... more as you seek out other ways of caring for those home responsibilities that really can be delegated. Forming webs of relationships that extend beyond the congregation will bring you and your community new life and energy, and the kind of broad vision that leaders need. There will be some chaos as we make this gradual shift, but it will be for life, not death. Ilia Delio and Sandra Schneiders are just two in a growing company who have indicated that the future may call leaders first of all to the larger vision of religious life, to prophetic Gospel witness, and then secondarily to the concerns of their particular institute.
- B. To the Commission of Charism Services (CCS):** You work closely with lay employees and volunteers who, though perhaps not Franciscan by religious profession, have been gifted with a Franciscan heart, or at least find themselves attracted by the values of Pope Francis. They and their successors are hungry for what we have. And we are hungry to further steep ourselves in our Franciscan heritage. I challenge you to develop a program that can be used in versatile ways by professed members of the Franciscan family or by our associates or by those who have discovered within themselves a Franciscan heart; a program that can be used at regional gatherings or by any of our sponsored ministries or by our elders with limited travel-ability or by a small group of parishioners. I challenge you to find the best way to reach the most people. In many of the 2012-13 survey returns members asked for such programs – day long or weekend long or a DVD or study/discussion/faith sharing booklet. It may take more than a year to develop it, but can you present a plan and share the progress of its development by next summer's AFC?
- C. To the Commission of Regions (COR):** Another frequent comment that surfaced in the surveys concerns the structure of the regions. Many described their region as inactive, others as too far flung geographically to allow for feasible gathering. Your gift to the Franciscan family is your focus on nurturing relationships among Franciscans and

Franciscan-hearted people. We've already talked about the importance of *fraternitas*, of relationship-building. I challenge you to note your responsibility as stated in the bylaws to "establish criteria for creation and dissolution of regions and recommend to the Board the creation and/or dissolution of regions."¹⁰ Will you take a close look at the regional structure, see what is working and what is not, and bring a proposal to the National Board for a regionalization plan that fits our needs at this time, taking into account our more limited ability and desire to travel long distances, and how best to group individuals and congregations for mutual enrichment and strengthening of relationships? Will you accept the challenge and have a proposal ready to share with the National Board by its April, 2015 meeting, or no later than the 2015 AFC?

D. To the National Board When we met last September, we spent a significant amount of time discussing the feasibility of forming one national Franciscan conference. We named an entire page of reasons indicating that now may be the time to begin this conversation. You did your homework diligently. Don't be discouraged by the responses; sometimes a farmer has to replant several times before the seeds germinate. I challenge you to continue the conversation, fully aware that this is a huge undertaking which may take ten years. Be ready for the idea to mutate over the years because you never know when a strange attractor will pop up and surprise us all, but don't lose the core truth that together we become more than the sum of our parts. The OFM Conventuals are ready now to engage further exploration; others expressed interest a few years from now. Let's nurture the little mustard seed of possibility and see what the Spirit does with it.

V. Conclusion

When the *Dare to Image* participants met in Chicago the end of April, they arrived with all the research that had been gathered over the year, summarized in five possible scenarios for the future of the Federation, two of which were to dissolve it. The climate in the room was a mixture of joyful reunion and apprehension, curiosity and trust. As we prayed, a spirit of peace and true discernment came to rest upon all. And then an inflow of divine energy, so characteristic of evolutionary moments, rippled throughout the room. A strange attractor appeared, a new and surprising development. Almost effortlessly an ad hoc committee was formed; in a few minutes we will hear more about the Active Sabbath being planned for 2015-2016.

This a new moment for the Federation, as we approach our Jubilee Year. The sense of anticipation and possibility is rippling out across our membership even without our knowing where God's Spirit is taking us.

Antoine de Saint Exupery once said, "If you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood... rather, teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea."¹¹ If we believe that Franciscanism, as a particular expression of Gospel life, is still relevant in the 21st century, and if we want to see it flourish on this continent, we will need the kind of metanoia that stretches us beyond our individual congregations and yes, beyond the

Federation. Like our brother Francis and our sister Clare and countless beneficiaries of the Franciscan charism, we do long for the “endless immensity” of God. This God who is Light and Life and Love is within us and ahead of us, drawing us into the future in an evolutionary unfolding that has been going on for the past 13.8 billion years (and is not likely to stop now!) So go forward without anxiety, my sisters and brothers, beloved of God, “for you have a good escort for your journey.”¹²



¹ Cannato, Judy. *Radical Amazement: Contemplative Lessons from Black Holes, Supernovas, and other Wonders of the Universe*. Ave Maria Press, 2006., p. 71

² Genesis 1:3

³ John 9:5

⁴ Cannato, op. cit., p. 72, includes other quotes from same paragraph

⁵ Delio, Ilia. “Religious Life on the Edge of the Universe,” Keynote presentation at AFC 2013, Pittsburgh, PA

⁶ Delio, Ilia. Ibid.

⁷ Fry, Christopher. *“A Sleep of Prisoners,”*1951.

⁸ Correveau, John, OFM Capuchin. Circular Letter, February 2, 1996. Brother John Correveau was ordained a bishop in 2007 and currently serves as bishop of Nelson, British Columbia, Canada.

⁹ Carney, Margaret, OSF. In an address to the Sisters of St. Francis, Tiffin, OH, May 5, 2012

¹⁰ Bylaws of the Franciscan Federation, Third Order, of the Sisters and Brothers in the United States. Section 8.3.2.

¹¹ Antoine de Saint Exupery. 1900-1944.

¹² Armstrong, Regis J., OFM Cap., Ed. and trans. *Clare of Assisi: Early Documents (Revised)* New City Press, 2006