

On Thursday, February 18, 2021, 105 participants gathered on a Zoom Call to hear about Franciscan Media and the Association of Franciscan Colleges and Universities!

They were in for a real treat: not only in coming to value the work of these national Franciscan organizations, but also in hearing the Franciscan hearts of the women leading these services.

Sister Kathleen Warren, OSF, a member of the Commission of Regions, was the host of this event.

She began, and ended the session, with a prayer from *Fratelli Tutti*, Pope Francis' Encyclical on Friendship and Social Solidarity, with the backdrop of the sculpture 'Angels Unawares' honoring migrants all over the world over centuries of time. Each of the interviewees shared parts of the prayer with her at either the beginning or the end of the session.

Kelly McCracken, President of Franciscan Media, cited impressive statistics about the ways and means that the Gospel is promoted, in a Franciscan way, through this ministry begun by the OFM Friars of St. John the Baptist Province more than 127 years ago. In 2020, 500,000 people read St. Anthony Messenger Magazine, Franciscan-hearted people purchase 200,000 books each year, 17 million e-newsletters were open and read by subscribers, and Franciscan Media had 8 million visits to their website. They keep up with new means of communication: Alexa and Google Play are also sources of the Good News now.

Kelly shared that she comes from the business management world until being called into the Franciscan charism to use her gifts to share Francis of Assisi's timely message of harmony, joy and simplicity. This message is timeless, and so needs to be shared today!

Sister Kathleen asked about her 'most serious worries about the future' of Franciscan Media, Kelly mentioned the debt that they face due to an economic downturn that resulted in a real drop in sales and subscriptions between 2011 and 2016. The St. Anthony Messenger magazine continued, but its production left a debt to pay. She feels secure about having a good plan and good people to move forward and through this obstacle now. When asked about her 'best desires' about Franciscan Media, she mentioned paying the debt and setting up an endowment to continue this ministry to ensure their voice and witness to Franciscan values.

Kelly excitedly said she is 'super honored' to be involved in the 'invitational' ELFO (Executive Leaders of Franciscan Organizations) sessions convened by the Franciscan Federation to explore a familiar and collaborative spirit that may lead to sustainability for all. Yes, in Kelly, and in many others, there is much tangible hope that Franciscan 'harmony, joy and simplicity' can still change the world!

Debi Haug, Executive Director of Mission for the Association of Franciscan Colleges and Universities grew up in Indiana, attended the Marian University there, and has parish and campus ministry experience, as well as being a wife and mother of four children. Her husband Chris is a Vice President in a Franciscan University and they live outside of Philadelphia.

AFCU has 23 member schools that pay a small fee based on their enrollment to be included in the Association for dialog and collaboration. The total of students in these higher education facilities is

around 50,000. Debi is the part-time Executive Director, with some contracted business assistance, and responds to the Board, composed of five Presidents of the member Colleges or Universities. They usually have an Annual Meeting, and a Bi-Annual Symposium, every even year, which has been pre-empted in 2020 due to the Coronavirus Pandemic. In Spring, Summer and Fall, they have ten webinars planned, with known speakers in Franciscan scholarship, spirituality and service. And she will make sure we get the details to participate! A collaborative virtual College Fair is inviting potential students to these Franciscan institutes of higher education. There are also plans to develop a diversity workshop for the Mission Officers in all of these schools. This organization has already been collaborating with Franciscan Action Network (FAN) and Franciscan Pilgrimage Program (FPP) over some years, but Debi is glad to have met the leaders of other Franciscan entities.

When asked by Sister Kathleen, 'How is the Franciscan Vision made real in AFCU?' Debi responded by saying that these schools are committed to the Franciscan tradition, in which they were founded, and this stance is enforced by each mission officer. Their collaboration leads to common witness to those values.

When asked, 'Why are you dedicated to Franciscan values?' she cited her being taught by Franciscan Sisters in Indiana in grade school, in a Franciscan parish, and attended a Franciscan college. Her husband is a Vice President of one of these Franciscan colleges. God has been a part of their lives for a long time, in Franciscan ways, and she sees the value of passing on this gift with its lessons and ways of life. She made a pilgrimage to Assisi two years ago, and felt so connected to the site and the people, and to all who share Franciscan life throughout the world.

When asked what her 'most serious worries' are about the Colleges and Universities, she cited the small sizes of the schools, as well as their dependence on enrollment for survival. The pandemic has really challenged and changed their way of life: residence halls are not forming communities this year; the fraternal experience of Franciscanism is not as poignant and formative in a virtual setting. Questions about Catholic higher education, in general, are generating discussions among these Franciscan places through AFCU. Are their ways to better collaborate and show their unity through policies that benefit their students?

And 'What is your most important desire for AFCU, Debi?' She hopes that their Franciscan presence stays relevant in the higher education environment. They NEED to survive for our world! If they can be known, even if they are small in stature and number, they can contribute to the mission of their institutes, by impacting students' lives who, in turn, impact our world.

Debi, too, praised the Federation's initiation of the ELFO group as a wonderful experience. She has been able to establish connections with the leaders of FAN, the Pilgrimage Program, Franciscan Mission Service, CFIT, and Franciscan Media, and these will, in turn, influence the lives of their students. Already a daily email by Franciscan Media has been developed for Lent, with the colleges in mind: Pause and Pray. Offered from the FM website to others as well, an additional 1,200 people have subscribed. Together, we can do more and keep the spirit growing.

In response to a question submitted by one of the Zoom participants, both Debi and Kelly shared how they are thinking of ways to connect their organizations more with the Franciscan Federation.

Debi will share information about their virtual Symposium's webinars, and a Franciscan Certificate study program that AFCU offers. Kelly would like all Federation members to look into 'Pause and Pray' for Lent, and all other resources that they offer. Surely, they know that the 13<sup>th</sup> century vision of Francis and Clare of Assisi is timely and timeless, and available to all!

Like a family gathered where all could share their needs, the Zoom participants were asked to pray for Doctor Dennis DePerro, of Saint Bonaventure University, who is hospitalized in critical condition due to Covid-19.

And, on another hand, the question asked of this gathering of Franciscan hearts, 'Is there a pilgrimage site in the United States that is comparable to Assisi?' yielded a preferential 'no' at first, but then the group made suggestions and listening ears made a list: The Franciscan Missions in California, The Franciscan Renewal Center in Scottsdale, Arizona, The Franciscan Monastery of the Holy Land, in Washington DC, The Mission of St. Marianne Cope in Kalipapa Hawaii, and there are virtual pilgrimages to Assisi are available. One such series was just offered at Alvernia University, as requested by the Bernardine Franciscan Sisters. And yes, there is an article in the August 2017 edition of the St. Anthony Messenger magazine about the six replicas of the Portiuncula in the United States.

So many connections among as many Franciscans! Let the 'harmony, joy and simplicity' ring out far and wide!