

Presidential Address 2011

Good Morning! During this conference we have been about becoming sacred flames; the brightness here today is noticeable. Our congregations and individuals have made financial and personal sacrifices to be at this conference for the purpose for which we exist: to deepen the understanding and love of the Third Order Regular charism in our lives in order to share this gift with the Church and the world. During this annual conference, we indeed have been blessed with gifts of knowledge, prayer, shared faith and joy in our relationships, and celebratory worship in order to share this gift with the Church and the world.

Imagine that the electricity went off and we are sitting in darkness. We sit contemplatively without fear, no fear. We are the sacred flames that darkness cannot extinguish. Leaving this assembly, enlightened and renewed in the essence of who we are as Franciscans embodying the Gospel, we are returning to the many facets of society where we live and serve. We have awareness of pockets of darkness in our society and we know the names for some of the darkneses that we face: the emotional depression of those who live without hope, the awareness of millions in the world who are hungry and who also need medical assistance, the thousands and thousands of children who deserve quality education but have no schools and/or means to get to dedicated teachers, and the darkness in the hearts of those who have not yet been awakened to their spiritual self and a personal loving God. Our compassionate hearts are aroused with concern when daily the news media puts before us the stories of the unemployed and the homeless. We look around at our membership and are tempted to fear the future with our diminishing numbers while being concerned for the continuance of the ministries that our congregations brought into being in former years. However, together through these days we are emboldened in faith, renewed in energy for mission by the Living Word of God that sends us forth.

Two stories of Jesus' encounter with women found in John's Gospel provide me with further insight about what is ours to do: the story of Jesus at the well with the Samaritan woman and the encounter with Mary Magdalene in the garden.

Jesus with the Samaritan Woman (John 4: 1-34)

Jesus at the well with the Samaritan woman teaches us, bids us to pay attention, to do as he does, to build relationships with those that are different from us. Sister Nancy broke open this text as a pivotal story of our spiritual journey. Our intimacy with Christ moves us to say "I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me." How might the story of Jesus at the well teach us about sharing Jesus' mission? The humility of Jesus begins the relationship by asking for something that He needed, and that the other could provide. This demonstrates the key to building trusting relationships. Entering

into relationships with those different from us requires stepping out of our own comfort zones to open ourselves to the interests of the others, and to find common objectives for further collaboration. Nelson Mandela, who turned 93 this month, modeled that principle for developing relationships with the apartheid leaders in order to work out a way to have a win-win situation, to stop the violence in South Africa. As disciples we are to bridge gaps in societal relationships.

In October this fall we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the interreligious prayer event held in Assisi at the invitation of Pope John Paul II. He prophetically invited religious leaders to come to Assisi in 1986 for an International World Day of Prayer during the UN designated International Year of Peace. The pope was held in high esteem for his initiative for peace, his melting of barriers such as his visit to the Rome Jewish synagogue in April of that year, and it is a tribute to his leadership that religious leaders traveled to Assisi to participate in this historical moment of prayer for peace. Not everyone, of course, welcomed the Pope's initiative, not even within the Catholic community. Some Catholic, ultra-conservative extremists, who reject Vatican II along with its decrees and teachings, were giving out printed sheets, which denounced the Pope as "heretic and apostate" for going against the soundest traditions of the Catholic faith and fraternizing excessively with other religions. The Holy Father wanted to prove that peace is the desire of every man and woman of whatever faith; that peace is a gift of God even though its realization depends at the same time on humanity's generous and faithful response to that gift; that peace, ultimately, is possible.

Participating in significant and sacred historic moments transforms us. The woman at the well did not intend to have her life changed when she went to fetch water. The world viewing the historic moment of religious leaders assembled together in Assisi changed the tenor of interreligious dialog. What is happening to us at this well of God's presence today during our assembly? What will we be telling others—using words if necessary?

Mary Magdalene (John 20: 11-18)

The second woman whose story tells us to be on our way is that of Mary Magdalene as found in chapter 20 of John's Gospel where we meet her weeping at the tomb. Grieving, emotional darkness has blurred her sight. When the angels inquire about her weeping, she replies that her Lord has been taken away. With that she turns around and sees Jesus but does not recognize Him. When He asks who she is looking for, mistaking Him for the gardener, she said: "If you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him." "Mary" Addressed by her name, she recognizes the voice recalling for us that in chapter 10 the evangelist says that "he calls his own sheep by name" and they recognize his voice. Mary's exclamation "Rabboni" identifies her discipleship, the following of the Master. Jesus teaches her the basic post-resurrection message: Do not hang on to my past historical form, but go out

the new locus of my presence – the community of disciples. The new locus of presence is in the community of disciples where we converse with “thick speech” to develop a “we-ness.”

An icon of Mary attempting to cling to Jesus feet hangs in my prayer space at home. It reminds me that I cannot stay in the solitary intimacy with Christ, but am called as we all are to go out as witnesses. During this conference we have seen the Presence of the Resurrected Lord in all the manifestations of wisdom, goodness, joy and celebration.... Reflecting on our combined experience, we gain insights that we name as encounters with the Lord and we will go forth as witnesses.

Recognition of our encounters enables us to see others and situations through God’s eyes and to act confidently with compassion as we will do in affirming the JPIC resolution to work for the elimination of human trafficking. Many of us are already engaged in actions of this resolution such the Franciscan Sisters of Tiffin and Sylvania, Ohio who were mentioned in the National Catholic Reporter story of July 11th with the headline *Visibility aids the Fight against Human Trafficking*. These two Franciscan congregations were named as joining with two other religious congregations to make a corporate statement that they would do all in their power to eliminate human trafficking. This included the innovation of the Sisters of Tiffin, OH to open a house for victims of trafficking. In the film, “Lives for Sale” distributed to our congregations a few weeks ago, we learned that annually there are 500,000 immigrants coming into the United States of which 20,000 are persons trafficked, victims of slavery. The many regional efforts we are engaging in to educate and to advocate for the rescue, safety and justice for trafficked persons is the momentum ahead of us as we go forth to proclaim Good News by our words and actions.

We will meet again as an assembly next summer in Cincinnati, July 27-30, 2012. Our keynote speakers will be Joe Chinnici OFM and Marlene Weisenbeck FSPA whose presentations will focus on our ecclesial identity. Also, next year we will be ready to affirm our amended Bylaws. At the close of the conference we offer gratitude to many who worked to make this conference so wonderful. For now I say “Thank You” to God for calling us to be Franciscan, to be lovers of the Word, to become sacred flames to brighten our world.

Sister Ramona Miller
President