

**Throwing Open the Doors of the Associate Movement:  
Taking Our Collective Charisms into the World  
April 13, 2024 on Zoom**

Romans 5:1-5 The Message

By entering through faith into what God has always wanted to do for us—set us right with God, make us fit for God—we have it all together with God because of our Master Jesus. And that’s not all: We throw open our doors to God and discover at the same moment that God has already thrown open the door to us. We find ourselves standing where we always hoped we might stand—out in the wide open spaces of God’s grace and glory, standing tall and shouting our praise.

There’s more to come: We continue to shout our praise even when we’re hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. In alert expectancy such as this, we’re never left feeling shortchanged. Quite the contrary—we can’t round up enough containers to hold everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit!

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How awesome is this image – of being so welcomed by God, and so free in God’s presence! And today we’re reflecting on **Throwing Open the Doors of the Associate Movement** and what wide-open spaces await us as we cross that threshold, IF we choose to cross the threshold that is.

It seems to be a pivotal time as religious congregations, each in our own way, read the signs of the times and make adjustments, even transformations, in our responses to them, and to God’s call for the future of our congregations and for the charisms we embody. It seems to me that all of us are swimming in the vastness of God’s grace and glory. The possibilities seem limited only by our imaginations.

In October I invited us all to consider the charism of each of our congregations as the Mother Drum that provides the foundational rhythm for our shared way of life. Whether it’s the Ursuline,

Dominican, or Charity drum, or any of the at least 10 other drums represented in this group, its beat remains constant amidst whatever changes are happening around it. The instruments (that's us!) and their complementary rhythms (that's our ministries, the ways we live out and express our charism) may change over time in response to what is needed, but the Mother Drum of our charism holds them all together. To paraphrase the reading from Romans today, *we can't round up enough [instruments] to [express] everything God generously pours into our lives through the Holy Spirit!*

There is no hierarchy of importance of our instruments because it takes each one individually combined with the others to complete the whole sound most fully, of the Mercy or Passionist, or St. Joseph charisms. Vowed members collectively might (but not necessarily) be living out their rhythms in the traditional or historical ministries of the congregation – like education, or health care, for instance, while Associate members might be carrying the same foundational rhythm into new venues, like the corporate world, or political service for example, places where vowed members usually are not going. It's challenging, I have no doubt, to live a life, for instance, in the spirit of the Humility of Mary in this ego-driven and “we're number 1” world. Or, in the midst of a “throw-away” culture that has profit as its hallmark, to embody the Franciscan values of poverty and reverence for and care of creation. And yet, it is the charisms of our congregations that do and have always animated the lives of us as members – either vowed or associate. Living them out in our communities and congregationally sponsored ministries and institutions where the charism is expected to be front and center is one thing, but throwing open the doors and extending our vision well beyond them is something else. Those places out in the wide-open spaces are just as much in need of what our charisms offer as the more traditional, safer ones. Are we up to the task? Are we willing to move outside of our comfort zones?

These are the adventures of the Starship Charism. Its ongoing mission:

To explore amazing new worlds,  
To bring new life and our unique gifts to new civilizations,  
To boldly go where no Passionist or Spiritan or Notre Dame has gone before.

It's an exciting time, and a bit scary if we're honest. But as our reading says, *“We continue to shout our praise even when we're hemmed in with troubles, because we know how troubles can develop passionate patience in us, and how that patience in turn forges the tempered steel of virtue, keeping us alert for whatever God will do next. In alert expectancy such as this, we're never left feeling shortchanged.”*

So, what will God do next with us? That's part of what brings us together today. To discuss, discern, share our collective wisdom about how we have felt and continue to feel God's nudging, or pulling us – within our own congregations and as a collection of congregations.

If we really mean it when we say that we're ready to throw open the doors of the associate movement and take our collective charisms into those wide-open spaces, we also must be ready for the challenges we'll face first within our own membership. It will take passionate patience with those who aren't as ready as we are to acknowledge and affirm the gifts of our associates. You know they're there – those vowed members and associates who don't really understand what associates are, that it's a true vocation, that there is a mutuality between vowed members and associates. Some vowed members feel threatened by associates' presence and rising numbers. Some associates are hesitant to claim the charism as their own, a part of who they are, and their responsibility to keep that foundational rhythm alive in themselves and in their community whether there are vowed members present or not.

And we must be ready for the challenges in those wide-open spaces. The sound of the Mercy drum, or the Dominican drum may not carry as far out there, so we may have to listen more closely, change our volume, or the pitch, or the kind of instrument we're using so that sound of the Mother Drum is always resounding in our hearts, grounding us deeply in what we're really about. Even in, and maybe most especially in the midst of those challenges within and without, we cannot afford to be discouraged or lose our connection with our Mother Drum. We need to expect it to continue making its presence known.

*In alert expectancy such as this, we're never left feeling shortchanged.* So says our reading this morning. This is a counter-cultural stance these days. There is so much focus on "lack" in our world – not enough food for the people in Gaza, not enough weapons for the Ukrainians to fight the Russians, not enough money in the American budget to cover essential social programs, not enough bi-partisan support of any bill in Congress to get anything done, not enough time for us to spend some of it taking care of ourselves and our relationship with God.

We are called to something different. We are called to peer into our future not feeling shortchanged but expecting abundance! We are called to trust that the Divine Spark within each of us and each

of our congregations will continue to grow in ways we have yet to imagine and it's our job to allow God to fan it into flame in whatever ways will be most life-giving to our world.

I recently went to see the movie "Cabrini." WOW. If you haven't seen it, find it in a theater or watch for it on a streaming service or on DVD. Frances Cabrini is, in my experience, representative of every founding Mother or Father of every religious congregation. She encountered incredible resistance from Church leadership at every level, from the Pope to the local bishop to pastors. Yet her vision for her own call remained constant and unwavering. If she couldn't go forward *through* and *with* the Church leadership, she went *around* them, and consequences be damned. She vowed obedience to God and refused to let anyone or anything get in the way of that. She heard the Mother Drum of her charism clearly though the naysayers did their best to drown it out. And she held on to it even as she switched up her own cadences to be faithful to it. I left the movie feeling enraged, deeply inspired and profoundly proud of every congregation of vowed religious. I was reminded of the founding Mothers of my own congregation (of which there are 7 – the number of congregations that came together to form the Dominican Sisters of Peace) who each faced similar and equally daunting challenges from church leadership and the social conditions in which they began their various ministries. No doubt each of you could tell stories of the genesis of your congregation that would sound much the same

We, each of us, stand on the shoulders of spiritual giants. Their legacy has been handed on to us – both vowed and associate members – and we are charged with honoring that legacy by enfleshing the charism that began with them to the best of our ability in ways that they could never have imagined, staying alert for whatever God will have us do next. It seems to me, as God continues to increase the numbers of associate members of virtually every congregation, that it's time for leadership, especially those of us gathered here, to not only encourage but challenge all Associates to hear, recognize and claim as their own the charism Mother Drum of our congregations. It's time for Associates to feel that rhythm beating deep in themselves and to understand how their unique gifts and ways of living are the complementary rhythms of that charism and represent the future development of the vitality of its life and its presence in the world. We Associates are the ones we have been waiting for. It isn't fair or just for us to depend on our beloved, aging and diminishing numbers of vowed members to tell us what to do. It isn't helpful or faithful to the commitments we made as Associates to simply sit back and wring our hands asking each other, as

motherhouses are closed, “what will happen to us when the sisters are gone?!” It’s time for us to grow into the adults we know we can be, grasp the Mother Drum with both hands and, as the reading from Romans says, take it “*out in[to] the wide open spaces of God’s grace and glory, standing tall and shouting our praise.*” God is increasing our numbers for a reason and we need to be just as strident in our faithfulness to our call as were our founders. There is desperate need for each of our charisms in the world. Frederick Buechner tells us that our vocation, “The place God calls [us] to is the place where [our] deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” It’s time we Associates grow up in this vocation, for the future of our charisms and the good of our world.

If not now, when? If not us, who?

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