Bom dia, Buenos dias, Good morning.

Bem-vindos á todos, Bienvenidos a todos, Welome all.

I am honored to address you today, our sisters and associates, partners in mission, and our friends. We are finally here for our Chapter; we're happy, so happy that we could come together. It is good for us to be here! This address will include information, events, and happenings from 2016 to 2021.

I would like to begin by quoting our Franciscan Rule: “The form of life of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular is this: To observe the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ, living in obedience, in poverty, and in chastity (parenthetically in our time and place). Our mission is to live the Gospel. We do this through the manner of Francis and Clare.”

The Chapter Planning Committee first convened in January 2019 in preparation for our 2020 General Chapter. We cannot thank them enough for their hard work, excellent process, time, and dedication. We followed a consensus model to determine the focus or foci that we are going to address. We decided that our topics would be interculturality, integral ecology, and leadership. The choices we made for these themes were in line with the present needs of our world.

As you know, you received several articles, videos, websites and participated in Zoom calls covering these topics. We also engaged in assemblies in preparation for Chapter. Little did we know that the theme, "Behold, I am doing something new… Listen!” would be so providential. Naturally, we had to become proficient in "zooming," for, in April 2020, we had to begin convening via Zoom for our clusters, assemblies, and meetings. Through this gift of technology, we were able to keep in touch with our friends, family, and each other. With the help of zoom and our translators, we were able to be even more connected to one another. We are incredibly grateful for all of our translators, and we are blessed to have our discussions and assemblies in the three languages of our sisters and associates.

We were able to have annual meetings via zoom with the Chair of the Boards and the Presidents for each of our corporations. This technology also made it possible for the Vocation/Formation team, the Health Care Coordinator, and the FSA Associate Program Ministers to present their annual reports to Leadership. These meetings were a gift to us. The Franciscan-Clarian charism was so evident in what they are doing; not only that, but creativity and innovation abounded. We have two new people in leadership positions, Theresa Collington at the Franciscan Center and Deborah Pollok at the Dwelling Place. We are delighted to have them as partners of the Franciscan Sisters of Allegany.

At the end of our two annual Board of Directors meetings, we invited the leadership of Jamaica, the Councilors of Brazil, and our two sisters from Bolivia to join us for the Leadership of the Whole. We usually hold two meetings a year with them so we can share, for example, what is happening in ministry, in politics, in Church, etc., in each country. These meetings are also an opportunity to share prayer, meals, and conversations on different spiritual topics.

With our combined leadership and council, our theme was readily decided upon, too. In the years before General Chapter, we attend annual assemblies, including the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and every three years the International Union of Superiors General, where most countries participate and engage in general discussions. (There were at least 10 languages being translated at the conference.) Through these meetings, we confirmed what was happening in religious life and that the themes of various organizations going forward mirrored those of our own Chapter. Collectively, we've determined over this Covid experience, even more than we did before, that we are a global society and that this pandemic is a pandemic; it's all over the world. It has brought many different invitations to us, some hopeful and some more serious. We are grateful to the entire Leadership Team, that is, the Leadership of the Whole, and the Board of Directors, who affirmed unanimously that we would do a virtual chapter.

I heard the following poem, and I would like to share it with you. It speaks of choices, the invitation, and paths laid out before us.

TRASNA

The pilgrims paused on the ancient stones

In the mountain gap.

Behind them stretched the roadway they had traveled.

Ahead, mist hid the track.

Unspoken, the question hovered:

Why go on? Is life not short enough?

Why seek to pierce its mystery?

Why venture further on strange paths, risking all

Surely that is a gamble for fools – or lovers.

Why not return quietly to the known road?

Why be a pilgrim still?

A voice they knew called to them, saying:

This is Trasna, the crossing place.

Choose! Go back if you must, You will find your way

easily by yesterday’s fires, there may be life in the embers yet.

If that is not your deep desire,

Stand still. Lay down your load.

Take your life firmly in your two hands,

(Gently… you are trusted with something precious)

While you search your heart’s yearnings:

What am I seeking? What is my quest?

When your star rises deep within,

Trust yourself to its leading.

You will have the light for first steps.

This is Trasna, the crossing place.

Choose!

This is Trasna, the crossing place Come!

~Raphael Consedine, PBVM

Together, we describe ourselves as the Franciscan Sisters of Allegany, an Intercultural Congregation ministering in the United States, Jamaica, Brazil, Bolivia, and soon Mozambique. We found that choices we made two and a half years ago for the Chapter themes were right on. Oftentimes, we, as a Congregation, recognize that it is God who invites us to the next step of our journey. God has been incredibly faithful to us as Franciscan Sisters of Allegany, Associates, and Partners, and I believe we have been faithful to God.

If we reflect, we have all experienced the process of evolution, which we define as a “dynamic process of emerging consciousness.” We are not the same as we once were. We develop in age, grace, and wisdom all the time.

Looking back over the years, we can see our evolution. At times, we can see where we were so caught up in ministry to the detriment of our life of prayer. What we are looking at now is the living, the life itself, as religious women in the 21st century. We had hospitals, schools, institutions, and then we evolved after hearing the invitation that there are other needs to be taken care of. We started moving out of healthcare and moved into the broader concept of the healing mission of Jesus.

I think of an example of CVS, which is a pharmacy here in the United States. They recognized that they were in the health business, and because of this new insight, they took action and stopped selling cigarettes. Then US Air realized that as an airline industry, they were really in the travel business. They changed and looked at travel as a whole instead of just flights. So for us, what we need to look at is not what business we are in, but to look at the life itself of the Franciscan Sisters of Allegany. What does it signify? What does it witness to? How do we live it? What’s necessary for the life itself?

We see these changes happening all around us and have determined that we, too, need to continue to evolve and accept new invitations. From the last five years, I would like to highlight some special events that show how we have grown.

* We established the Jamaican Association, composed of our sisters and other laity, to assure that Franciscan values and charism will be maintained in our schools after we are gone.
* We challenged Wendy's to treat their workers with human dignity, provide better pay, and improve working conditions. This endeavor was presented to the shareholders and had received a 90% approval vote.
* After accepting the invitation from the Bishop of Mozambique, Africa, we are starting a new mission there as soon as we can after Chapter.
* We opened the House of Prayer for All People in Pennsylvania that will support those of Christian, Muslim, and Jewish belief.
* The Sisters’ House in Tampa was opened on the grounds of the Franciscan Center and St. Elizabeth’s Convent for women recovering from addiction.
* We responded to two invitations in pastoral ministry in Brazil, Rio dos Bois and Bom Jesus da Lapa in the State of Bahia.
* We invited two young sisters from Vietnam to be with us in order for them to learn English, get a college degree, and return to their country with professional degrees. There are many stories to share from our Mother House sisters who served as their tutors.
* Our Congregational has also partnered with the Investor Advocates for Social Justice (IASJ). Their mission is "to advocate on behalf of a community of investors whose faith-based values promote human rights, climate justice, racial equity, and the common good."
* In 2019, some of our sisters, along with leaders in our ministries and guests, traveled to Assisi for a pilgrimage so they could catch and interpret the Franciscan spirit.

As a Congregation and with our partners, we also celebrated significant milestones.

* St. Joseph’s School in Jamaica celebrated their 125th Anniversary
* St. Aloysius School, also in Jamaica, celebrated their 140th Anniversary
* Jamaica’s Immaculate Conception High School celebrated their 150th Anniversary
* The Dwelling Place Celebrated its 40th Anniversary
* Canticle Farm celebrated their 20th Anniversary
* St. Anthony’s Hospital in Florida celebrated its 85th Anniversary
* The Franciscan Center celebrated their 50th Anniversary
* AFM celebrated their 20th Anniversary
* Finally, as Congregation, we celebrated our 160th Anniversary.

After David's inspirational, invitational, and well thought out presentation yesterday, I want to highlight the work of Allegany Franciscan Ministries as an example. Eileen Coogan, the President, the Vice President, and the Board created the Common Good Initiative. They chose Overtown, Lincoln Park, and Wimauma locations in Florida to work with over a five-year period. Overtown suffered from poverty and racism; Lincoln Park from violence, gangs, and lack of access to government assistance; Wimauma from lack of access to food security, the need to serve indigent immigrant workers, and poverty. An important part of the Common Good Initiative is HOW they do it – working together in relationship with people in the community. People in all three communities said they needed jobs and financial stability. The impact of AFM’s work has been dramatic. The Board and staff represent diverse cultures and talents and are Franciscan-hearted. AFM also sponsors the ACOR grant, which contributes to our sisters and associate ministries. They have sponsored workshops on community organizing, not only for the local communities but also for the Board. They have sent local people on extensive leadership programs so that they can lead locally. Recently they sponsored workshops on the Laudato Si encyclical and equity, diversity, and inclusion. All of this work was done in our name, in our mission, and in our charism. Through these programs, coincidentally, we learned that equity is a choice, inclusion is an action, and belonging is an outcome. These values need to be integral if we embrace the common good of all.

In the summer of 2019, Sister Carol Zinn, now the Executive Director of the LCWR, addressed our sisters, staff, associates, and partners in mission on the need for Religious life to engage in a transformative process of identity. We taped a video of her presentation when she visited Allegany, and it was viewed at all assemblies. However, Carol made a special trip to Brazil because of the need for translation and for the opportunity to have associates and partners attend. This presentation provided us with incredible insights into what we need to consider deeply as a religious congregation. Transformation is regarded as a process of gradual change in order to become a new entity. It is a profound change and has to do with the life itself and the imperative call to a deeper personal relationship with Jesus in the manner of Francis and Clare. Hence we are talking about our mission, the Gospel, and Franciscanism, our charism. We were all energized by this invitation because deep down, within us, we knew we were being called to "something new." It set the stage for the preparation for Chapter.

Another inspiring presentation was from Dr. Ted Dunn. He made the distinction between change and transformation as the following, and I quote. "Change is an event, while transformation is a process or journey, that takes place over time. Change occurs among externals of life as seen on the surface. In contrast, transformation or profound change takes place beneath the surface within the interior life of the individuals and the community as a whole. The most profound transformation penetrates the very soul of a community.” This is the underlying purpose of our Chapter. Transformation has to be the new normal.

The choice for integral ecology, interculturality, and leadership is our focus for this Chapter and for the next four years. We are also looking at these issues as they pertain to our community life and our involvement in our world.

Let me briefly review our key Chapter topics:

* Integral Ecology:
  + Looking at all of creation with appreciation and mystery.
  + Understand how our sister, mother earth, can teach us about our world and to recognize the connection in Christ, his life, death, and resurrection, as it did for Francis.
* Interculturality:
  + To recognize and experience the other and to help us break down the divisions among us.
  + To hold ourselves accountable in treating everyone with human dignity.
  + Understanding that we live in a global society.
* Leadership:
  + To search the many ways we are gifted and to share those gifts in service of others.
  + To listen and be present.
  + It’s a service – it cannot be done alone – it needs the members to make known what they see, hear, and believe for the sake of the common good.

I firmly believe that wisdom is in the group. The different gifts of each member of the Council builds on the gifts of the other. It’s amazing!

I have a quote on my wall, “When the task of leadership is done, the aims fulfilled, the people will say, ‘We did it ourselves.’”

I would like to take a moment and read to you part of a letter I wrote to you in 2017 after being in Rome.

*“I went to the Portiuncula with the intention of praying for each one of you by name. However, it was crowded; so I decided to go to the Gift Shop. While returning to the Portiuncula, the Portuguese word, anunciar –meaning to announce—kept going through my mind. I find it a gentle, yet strong, word.*

*I went into the Portiuncula, and after spending considerable time trying to find a comfortable seating arrangement, I began to ask God to please give me a message for each of us, as well as for the Congregation. And, as I did so, the word anunciar continued to return to my mind.*

*With head bent, I started going through our directory, praying: “God bless\_\_\_\_\_; may she announce the Gospel by her* ***presence****." That took quite some time because I tried to visualize each of you as I remembered you by name. When I finished this prayer for over 220 of us, including myself, I felt a bit uneasy. Was this God's message? I thought so, but perhaps it wasn't. So then I prayed: "God, please help me!" I looked up and then saw the picture of the angel Gabriel announcing to Mary the Good News of the Incarnation. All my doubts disappeared and were replaced by confirmation.*

*After this blessed experience and further reflection, I realized that no matter how capable we are in our ministries or professional fields, we are remembered first and foremost as women who have a significant* ***presence*** *to those with whom we come in contact, and they, in turn, to us.*

*Thank you for your presence to me at the Portiuncula on that Wednesday afternoon. May we all continue to announce the Good News by our* ***presence****, wherever we are and in whatever we do. Amen!”*

To further delve into the ideals of leadership, let me share with you another poem.

When a Wise Woman Leads

When a wise woman leads, she calls a circle and makes a space

for stories to be shared, hopes to be uttered, revelation to unfold.

When a wise woman leads, she leads from stillness­

where she gathers herself: mines her experience,

and turns her wisdom into story.

When a wise woman leads, she dares to be vulnerable,

dares to be real, dares to speak from a place of unknowing.

When a wise woman leads, the experience of the journey

is as important as arriving.

When a wise woman leads, she thinks with her head,

ponders with her heart, decides with her soul.

When a wise woman leads, she knows when to leave,

when to let go, and when to push on.

When a wise woman leads, she speaks with the intensity

of fire, the freshness of air, the groundedness of earth,

the depth of the sea.

When a wise woman leads, she bears witness to our oneness and

chooses what is best for the common good.

She is a tempest against injustice, a torrent of hopefulness,

a wellspring of wisdom.

She leads for the benefit of all beings,

that life will be sustained, that well-being will prevail,

that goodness will shine over all our days.

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With these guiding topics, we began our journey toward our General Chapter.

Then there was Covid-19. Then our world fell apart. Fear set in, our world was turned upside-down. We began to ask ourselves: When will this pandemic end? Will it end? If so, when?

We needed to work at home, wear masks, and socially distance ourselves from each other. Our time was spent worrying about the essential workers and watching the number of deaths climb inordinately. We experienced the death of loved ones and were not able to mourn the loss and celebrate their lives together. Not being able to visit them during their illness or attend their burial was painful. Though, while we dealt with our own sadness, there was violence in the cities, others suffering from depression, and so much more.

Then we received some hope with the vaccination, and life began to open up again, little by little. We had found creative ways in coping via zoom, other means of communicating, different ways of doing business, and on and on.

This historical event opened us up to relook at everything in our lives and our way of living. We experienced a roller coaster of emotions. As a community and as a congregation, we also had to look at all of this and reflect on our own lives as religious women in the 21st century. "I am doing something new… Listen" became our mantra as we reflected and looked at what our invitation was now. We recognized that transformation is a process; life won't change overnight. We ask ourselves: What is ours to do?

We recognized that we have to be people of hope for our world. We have to dispose ourselves to grace. We have to discern ever more fully, as individuals and as a community. From "I" to "We." We have to look at the Gospel more diligently for guidance and relationship with each other and our world.

One example of this is a quote I found, "At first I was fighting to save the rubber tree. Then I thought I was fighting to save the Amazon Rainforest. Now I realize I am fighting for humanity."

The invitation is clear. Recognize that all people need dignity, to be treated fairly, to be welcomed, and to belong to each other—equity, diversity, and inclusion. We learned, and continue to learn, during this time that when we sense resistance. That resistance is in the cutting edge of grace, pay attention. We have to let it go and listen to what not only needs to change in us but what needs to change in our world. We are one, together, united in our common home.

I will close with a final reading and prayer:

Welcoming a New Time

A new time stands on our doorstep

ready to enter our life’s journey.

Something in us welcomes this visitor:

the hope of bountiful blessings

the joy of a new beginning

the freshness of unclaimed surprises.

Something in us rebuffs this visitor:

the swiftness of the coming

the boldness of the entrance

the challenge of the good-bye.

Something in us fears this visitor:

the unnamed events of future days

the wisdom needed to walk love well

the demands of giving away and growing.

A new time stands on our doorstep.

With fragile caution we move

to open the door for its entrance.

Our hearts leap with surprise, joy jumps in our eyes

for there beside this brand new time

stands our God with outstretched hand.

God smiles and gently asks of us:

Can we walk this time together?

And we, so overwhelmed with goodness

can barely whisper our reply:

Welcome in!

Adapted from Violet Grennan

Closing prayer: From May I Have This Dance by Joyce Rupp

God of this New Time, we are walking into mystery. We face the future, not knowing what the days and months will bring to us or how we will respond. Be love in us as we journey. May we welcome all who come our way. Deepen our faith to see all of life through your eyes. Fill us with hope and abiding trust that you dwell in us amid all our joys and sorrows. Thank you for the treasure of our faith life. Thank you for the gift of being able to arise each day with the assurance of your walking through the day with us. May we be faithful to your Word. God of this New Time, we praise you. Amen.

On behalf of Congregational Leadership and the Franciscan Sisters of Allegany, we thank you for the opportunity to serve.