

Sisters and Associates Gather  
**"Together we are one."**  
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Lay movements, including the phenomenon of lay associates with religious congregations, is the "single greatest inspired movement in the Church since Vatican II," declared keynote co-presenter, Sr. Gabriele Uhlein, Wheaton Franciscan, at the 12<sup>th</sup> Biennial Conference of Associates and Religious of the Midwest Area (CARMA) in Dubuque on April 29. Co-presenter, Jeanne Connolly, Director of the Wheaton Franciscan Covenant Companions and Vice President of the North American Conference of Associates and Religious (NACAR), stated that associates are "called to be instruments of peace, transformation and hope in our own way."

Throughout the day, the presenters unpacked the conference theme of "Intimate Mission: From Charism Partners to Mutual Communion" and led the 170 participants from 13 congregations of vowed religious in contemplative time and small group sharing. A unique aspect the co-presenters brought to the discussion was offering both the associate and vowed religious perspective. "The two voices, speaking from their own place, was very relatable," reflected Dubuque Franciscan Associate Sheri Hosek. "They gave concrete examples from their experience in the Wheaton Franciscan community and not the theoretical only."

Jeanne and Sr. Gabriele shared their understandings of some of the terms used in the conference theme. "The spiritual deepening work that brings you together is intimate work," explained Sr. Gabriele. "It is private work with a public effect, flavored through the lens of a charism. Every private act has a public effect." Both spoke of the evolution of the associate movement from partners to a real communion, a shift from 'I' to 'We'. "We think of 'we' as being partners. The evolution is fully realizing 'we' as communion."

Jeanne took the group on a brief historical review from the ancient prophets to contemporary religious life, highlighting how each were committed to respond to God and the needs of a particular culture and time, building on what had gone before. She pointed out how the times have changed, so the call to meet those needs also changes. The lived concepts remained constant through the ages: love of God, love for one another, shared belief, commitment, prayer and reflection, storytelling, study, and service for the world.

"Vatican II, with its universal call to holiness, showed the co-responsibility of the laity," stated Jeanne. "Today there are over 55,000 associates." Sr. LaDonna Manternach, BVM, found this a helpful reminder. "I was reminded that this call urges us into communion with one another and cooperation with God. A community's charism is an expression of God's call in response to the signs of the times - how we are for others. It is God's gift of the Spirit, alive within us."

Sr. Gabriele picked up this thread. "Associates are a new kind of transformative ecclesial movement. The Church is evolving. Religious communities cannot make connections *for* the associates. They must make the connections together. Lay associates demonstrate the vitality of our collective community."

In exploring the charism, Jeanne defined it as "a gift and grace. It is the spirit of the community resulting from the founder's experience of God. It is a distinct spirit that animates the community and gives it a particular character." It is the charism that challenges us to growth by asking "What is God calling us to now?" She stressed that the associate relationship "is not a social club or service group. It is about call and commitment. We are called to co-create with the vowed community for the sake of God's creation." This resonated with Sr. Mary Ellen O'Grady.

"Understanding the call and commitment of associates rather than seeing it as a club, is a very engaged approach." The associate relationship is a way of life.

Vatican II proclaimed the age of the laity. "We are living on the evolutionary edge," stated Sr. Gabriele. "What we are becoming is not known yet." Participants were reminded that "Ecclesia" in the middle ages was the dream God was dreaming for the Church, which at the time was the world. Today "these new endeavors," she said, "show the aliveness of our church." Contemporary ecclesial movements, including that of associates, are "collective responses to God's love, by individuals and groups that extend beyond the local level and participate in the ecclesial mission and communion. Can we celebrate this diversity?"

The afternoon session looked to the future. "How we move forward is based on common purpose and energies," stated Jeanne. "Individual relationships are not enough to enliven our charism. Associates need to consider themselves as a committed community." Both Jeanne and Sr. Gabriele asserted that it is not so much about how we are structured as it is developing the relationship of mutual belonging, of compassionate collaborators living in respectful mutuality. This entails a healthy autonomy, knowing what we can and cannot do, in order to relate and commune with others in healthy interdependence. "Vowed religious still bear the cultural burden of centuries of canonical hierarchy that stratified them and separated the laity as somehow lesser. To have a relationship with their lay associates that is based on Charism equality and spiritual mutuality is revolutionary," asserted Sr. Gabriele. "And," added Jeanne, "associates are not here to save the sisters or do their work." It is the call of the Spirit to be part of a community, to be one in the Spirit, and that relationship is evolving. Franciscan Associate Marilyn Dansart resonated with this saying, "The significant thing is the focus on relationship and not the 'doing'."

Sr. Gabriele referred to the book *The Rising Laity: Ecclesial Movements Since Vatican II* by Massimo Faggioli as a wonderful look at how these movements are a way the Church is being invigorated. "We are trying to do what has never been done before," she said. "There are no formulas. We are blooming in ways we never knew possible. If it is messy, we should congratulate ourselves as it is only the 'we' birthing and becoming." There is joy and hope in this evolving as Pope Francis has said in *Joy of the Gospel (#130): It is in communion, even when this proves painful, that a charism is seen to be authentic and mysteriously fruitful.* This witness of communion becomes a way of evangelization: "You, too, can have this!"

The co-presenters suggested using the term 'flourishing' instead of 'sustainable' as the latter suggests maintaining the status quo while the former is about thriving, doing well, growing or developing in a healthy way. Jeanne encouraged participants to "think of what is being created now and how it impacts what we want for the future. A legacy is what we leave for the future."

The day came to a close with some encouragements: Be open to new ways of doing things; be proactive in creating your desired future; be invitational not recruitment-minded; keep the charism, mission and purpose paramount; and finally, be a witness to a world desperately in need of examples of community, commitment, call and contemplative living. Sr. Gabriele summed up the day by quoting Thich Nhat Hanh as her final comment to the group, "Together we are One."

Participants left the gathering inspired and energized. Dianne McDermott, Dubuque Presentation Associate, reflected on the day. "I loved the term the speakers' community used for their associates: covenanted companions. It speaks of equality, partnership, and communion. Overall, I left the day feeling more aware of the interconnectedness of associates and the vowed sisters. I realized that the associate process is still evolving, but as Gabe stated, "evolution means the organism is alive, awake, and aware!"