

Reseeding Hope: *Lessons from the Desert*

Reflection by Susan Rose Francois, CSJP, Religious Formation Congress, 10.23.25

While I have been invited to share some of my insights with you here at the Religious Formation Congress, I'd like to be clear about one thing from the very beginning.

Only God knows what religious life will look like in the future. What was true in the beginning remains true for ever more.

“In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1)—when the Holy Spirit inspired your founding persons – “and when the earth was without form or shape with darkness over the abyss and a mighty wind sweeping over the waters”—think of the tumultuous early experiences of your own institute. “Then God said: Let there be light, and there was light.” The light of your charism shines and continues to shine. “God saw that the light was good.” We religious men and women, and those who journey with us, each of us is created in the image and likeness of God to be good. We are called to thrive, to be pilgrims of hope and prophets of light.



Night Sky in the Sonoran Desert
(all photos by Susan Rose Francois, CSJP)



God is God. Thank God, God is God!

Yet we are human. We can get hooked by the darkness, whether it is the chaos in our world, the polarization in our church, or the demographic reality of our congregations. We are called to remember, and to call each other to remember, that our God is always bigger than our fears, worries, and limitations. Even in our driest times, God seeds hope among, within us, and between us, for the sake of the Gospel.

While only God knows what religious life will look like in the future, we know that it will be different. It already is. Just look around this room. The future is already present here, today, in this time of *both* decline and emergence. While we let go, we are also called to let come. Change draws us forward toward possibility. Vulnerability, which I think just may be our superpower, leads us to build connections and deepen relationships.

I firmly believe that we are called to engage this moment in our world, church, and religious life as a reseeding time. In our religious life context, this is a play on words. Even as the previous structures of large-scale religious life are receding, we are called to reseed the life as we risk the bigness of smallness.



In his message for this year's World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation, Pope Leo built upon the theme previously chosen by Pope Francis for the day—*Seeds of Peace and Hope*. Pope Leo reminded us: "In proclaiming the Kingdom of God, Jesus often used the image of the seed. As the time of his Passion drew near, he applied that image to himself, comparing himself to the grain of wheat that must die in order to bear fruit (cf. *Jn 12:24*). Seeds are buried in the earth, and there, to our wonder, life springs up, even in the most unexpected places, pointing to the promise of new beginnings."¹



Last January, I was blessed with the opportunity to spend time on retreat in the Sonoran Desert at the Redemptorist Renewal Center in Arizona. I gained some insights on reseeding hope from the Book of Creation that I'd like to offer for your own prayer and reflection as we enter into these days together. First, I invite you into the desert with me. [Watch 17 second video of desert.]

The Redemptorist Renewal Center borders the Saguaro National Park. The Saguaro and their friends have a lot to teach us about hope. Much of what I am about to share with you comes from a booklet I picked up at the National Park Bookstore – *Frequently Asked Questions about the Saguaro*. As I offer some lessons from the desert, I invite you to ponder how they might apply to us at this time in religious life, when we are called to reseed hope for the Gospel.

"Small saguaros grow very slowly. At the end of their first year, seedlings are no more than one-quarter inch in height. After another four years, they might be a full inch."²



“Where are the ‘baby saguaros?’ There are more than you might think. ... A careful search is necessary to discover well-hidden plants no larger than a Ping-Pong Ball.”³

In religious life, there are women and men in initial formation. Perhaps not in your congregation or province, but God is still calling and “brave, noble, large-minded and courageous souls” are answering the call.⁴ There are more than you might think, scattered across the religious life landscape, soaking up the various charisms for lives of love to be spent in service of the Gospel. Instead of looking for where they are not, the desert experience invites us to search, discover, and celebrate where life is taking root against the odds.



“Small saguaros mostly grow where they are protected from frost, sun, and hungry animals—thus you find them sheltered by trees and shrubs, tucked among rocks and grass clumps, and poking up amidst fallen branches.”⁵ Our communities of hope are called to provide hospitable spaces for new life to take root and flourish.

On the other end of the cactus life spectrum, we have the ancient giants. “Tall saguaros, with many branching arms can be 175 or 200 years of age.”⁶ ... The Saguaro ecosystem includes all the present generations, from seedling to ancient giant. So too in religious life. In fact, we are blessed with the presence of more generations at this time than in any other period of history.⁷

We are each of us, no matter our religious life stage or chronological age, co-responsible for our present and future. As we say in my Congregation’s Constitutions: “In the faith journey begun in baptism and continued through the vowed life we confirm our desire to respond to the Spirit and remain open to grace and growth throughout our life. This journey entails deliberate efforts to move toward conversion and the realization of wholeness. The responsibility for life-long formation is shared by each sister and the congregation.”⁸



“When saguaros reach about 75 years of age, they might begin sprouting branches or ‘arms.’”⁹ It is this reaching out that leads to new life. “The more branches a saguaro has,

the more fruits and seeds it can produce. As the number of seeds goes up, so does the chance that at least a few will germinate, grow to maturity, and reproduce in their turn.”¹⁰ We too are called to branch out, to sow seeds generously and freely.

The reseeding process of the Saguaro depends on the larger community of life. “Saguaro reproduction begins during ... late spring and early summer. This is when the white-winged doves, bees, and bats travel to blossoms, transporting pollen, fertilizing as they go.”¹¹ The saguaro needs to encounter the other members of the desert community—there is a synodal element of co-responsibility for new life inherent in this process. Life does not thrive in isolation, but in interdependent community.

“Despite heavy visitation, about 40 to 50 percent of saguaro flowers never set fruit. ... A saguaro fruit contains 2,000 to 2,500 tiny, black seeds. An average plant produces about 150 fruits annually, or 300,000 to 375,000 seeds per year. ... Why so many seeds? The large number of seeds compensates for the high mortality rate among seeds and seedlings. ... Over its reproductive lifetime a large saguaro might shed as many as 40 million seeds.”¹²

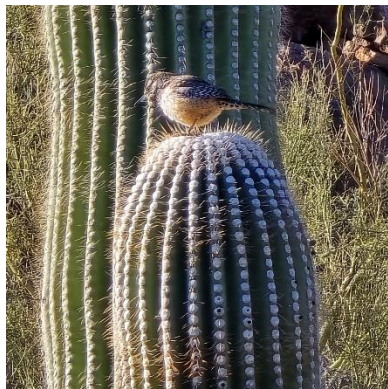
I can’t help but think of the ending lines of a poem by Mary Oliver, “The Summer Day.”

*Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?*

What are we, the present generations, prepared to do with our one wild and precious life?



As I spent time with the saguaro, I couldn't help but invent story lines for my cactus friends. We do not know what lies ahead, but we have the gift of life. A life to reach out and encounter – to share love and concern and hugs. To stand up for justice and to recognize the dignity of the human person and care for all creation. As Hebrews 12, verse 1 challenges us: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us.” Remember, God is bigger than it all. Our task is to live life to the fullest. To bring light and hope and, hopefully, to have some fun and be joyful along the way!



“Gila woodpeckers and gilded flickers drill nest holes in saguaro trunks and branches. ... [O]ther animals use these holes. ... Saguaro holes make particularly good nest sites because they are insulated by the surrounding cactus tissue, which keeps the nests cooler in summer and warmer in winter. They are also inaccessible to many predators. After woodpeckers and flickers abandon their nest holes, other cavity-nesting birds quickly move in. ...[C]actus wrens and doves sometimes construct nests in the crotches formed by

branches and trunks.”¹³ As we live our lives in faith, hope, and love, we too are called to provide hospitable spaces for the flourishing of others.

“Saguaros have an extensive system of lateral roots...”¹⁴ Rooted and nourished by our shared faith tradition and that of our individual institutes and charism families, we embrace the emerging understanding of the charism of religious life and the power of global sisterhood and brotherhood to be a sign of prophetic hope for fractured times.

As a Sister of St. Joseph of Peace, I was delighted to find this statue of St. Joseph with the child Jesus tucked in the corner of the grounds of the retreat center. Nestled at his feet, someone had placed a stone painted with one word upon it: Faithful. God is ever faithful. As Pope Francis reminded us in his 2021 homily for the World Day of Consecrated Life:

“.. it can happen that hope slowly fades as a result of unmet expectations. We have to be patient with ourselves and await in hope God's own times and places, for he remains ever faithful to his promises. This is the foundation stone: he is true to his promises.”¹⁵



May we hold fast to God's promise.



What a blessing that we are gathered here together these days as pilgrims of hope and prophets of light. Each of us is here because we believe in the promise, possibility, and call of religious life in *this* time, whether we are a

member of a religious institute or a partner in mission.

We may have come from our own deserts or dry spaces, ready to be nourished with the living waters of faith and hope for the journey. Tomorrow morning, Father Peter Hill will be our guide, exploring what it means to live the prophetic nature of religious life in 2025 as a truth-teller, hope-bearer, and justice seeker. Our seminar sessions will give us further tools and insights for our pilgrimage of hope. On Saturday morning, Sister Juliet Mousseau and I will facilitate a conversation on reseeded hope through global sisterhood and brotherhood. In these fractured times, sisterhood and brotherhood are themselves prophetic, giving witness as symbols of light in the darkness.

Remember, God said: "Let there be light, and there was light. ... God saw that the light was good." May we be shining lights of hope for the church and our world. Together, may we thrive as we serve our God and bring the Gospel message to people in need.



¹ Pope Leo, *Message for the 10th World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation*, September 2025.

² Janice Emily Bowers, *Frequently Asked Questions About the Saguaro* (Tucson, Arizona: Western National Parks Association), 6.

³ Bowers, 8.

⁴ Margaret Anna Cusack, founder of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace, wrote in an 1887 general letter to the new Congregation: "We are beginning a new Order. We want brave, noble, large-minded, courageous souls."

⁵ Bowers, 8.

⁶ Saguaro National Park, *Seed to Sentinel*, educational sign seen on January 2025 visit by author.

⁷ There are six generations in US religious life: Gen Z, Millennial, Generation X, Boomer, Silent, and Greatest.

⁸ Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace, *Constitutions*, 2023, 73.

⁹ Saguaro National Park.

¹⁰ Bowers, 9.

¹¹ Saguaro National Park.

¹² Bowers, 12-13.

¹³ Bowers, 14-15.

¹⁴ Bowers, 8.

¹⁵ Pope Francis, *Homily for the 25th World Day of Prayer for Consecrated Life*, February 2021.