

Good Journey: Reseeding Hope, Rooted in Relationship

by Susan Rose Francois, CSJP - Religious Formation Congress – 10.25.25



As religious men and women, and those who accompany and support us, we will be well served to pause, wherever we are on the path, to consider what we need for a “Buon Camino” –or in English, a good journey. This photo is one I took at the beginning of the somewhat steep path up to the hermitage where St. Francis used to pray in the hills above Assisi. I’ll admit, I paused to take some breaths and a sip of water on my way up the hill. It was a hot day, and the shade of the trees and mountain breezes were very welcome.

We are rooted in our shared faith and love of God, as well as the particularities of our charisms, founders, and spirituality. They give us strength for the journey. Likewise, we are sustained, challenged, and encouraged by our relationships, our primary relationship being with God, as well as our web of relationships within our vowed communities and beyond.

If we are honest, however, we get busy with what needs to be done. Tasks tend to take over, even in religious life, and yes, even in the ministry of formation. Sometimes, we can take for granted both our roots and our relationships. Yet, they too need refreshing and tending from time to time, especially during this reseeded era.

Just as someone preparing for a major pilgrimage, like the Camino de Santiago, makes special preparations, even undertaking months of training for the arduous journey, we too need to be prepared for our lifelong pilgrimage of hope. Formation—both initial and ongoing—can help us to nourish our spiritual and community lives and give us the muscle memory we need for the journey.



Hope 2025

In June I had the opportunity to join close to 300 sisters under 65 from 45 countries at a retreat center outside of Rome for *Hope 2025*.¹ Approximately 200 of us gathered in person, the rest through the gift of technology. Some of you were there as well. It was an incredible experience of global sisterhood and synodality worthy of another talk on another day.



It also gave me the unexpected opportunity to travel with two of my CSJP sisters as pilgrims during this Jubilee Year of Prayer². It was my first time in Rome, and I was surprised by the impact of this spiritual journey on my own perspective. I am continuing to unpack its meaning—and challenge—for my own vocation as a Sister of St. Joseph of Peace.

Walking through the Holy Doors, praying at the tomb of Pope Francis, following in the literal footsteps of countless pilgrims over the centuries, some of whom even faced martyrdom for the Gospel, rooted me in our shared Christian tradition in an entirely new way. I even took turns with my sisters carrying the cross through St. Peter's square and into the Basilica on a very hot summer's day. It was a vivid reminder that relationships can lighten our load. Our sisters and brothers help us to discern when and what to let go. We encourage and support one another as we develop our pilgrim hearts.

It was a heart-expanding experience I will never forget—an embodiment of active hope. In the words of Pope Francis: "We must fan the flame of hope that has been given us, and help everyone to gain new strength and certainty by looking to the future with an open spirit, a trusting heart and far-sighted vision."³

God is with us. God invites us on the journey. God brings us to community so we may journey together and take turns carrying the cross, in service of God and God's people.

We walked through the Jubilee doors which had been opened by Pope Francis. He knew that our times need people ready to be witnesses of the promise of hope. Ten years ago, he told a gathering of the Italian Church: "We are not living in an era of change, but a change of era."⁴ Today, as we begin the second quarter of the twenty-first Century, this reality is becoming even more clear. From growing inequality to the decline and destabilization of social, political, financial, and religious institutions, the ground is shaky and the path forward uncertain. Amid all this noise and confusion, God is calling us—YOU and ME—to be pilgrims of hope and prophets of light.

Rooted and nourished by our own institutes and charism families, we embrace the emerging understanding of the charism of religious life and the power of global sisterhood and brotherhood as signs of prophetic hope for fractured times. Following the Spirit's leading, we are called to risk the bigness of smallness as we reseed religious life with an abundance of hope, connection, and possibility in this change of era. The rest, thankfully, is up to God.

So, what is the task of the present generations of religious life, in this, our time? We are called to seek and serve life. Not just religious life, but life in general.

In your ministry of initial and ongoing formation, I invite you to focus on sowing and nurturing the seeds of abundance, charism, connection, diversity, and sisterhood/brotherhood.

What opportunities might emerge when we shift the framework of the conversation from scarcity to **abundance**. We have what we need to do what is ours to do. God's love is abundant. We are enough.



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- Abundance
 - Charism
 - Connection
 - Diversity
 - Sisterhood/Brotherhood

Our particular **charisms** continue to speak volumes, perhaps even more so in today's fragile and fractured world. Moreover, the global charism of religious life **connects** us across porous borders and invites new ways of being and collaborating together for the sake of the Gospel.

Our **diversity** of experiences, ages, ministry expressions, cultures, and backgrounds is pure gift—even as it challenges us to grow in humility as we navigate difference, seeking unity of heart and mind. Think of the image of the prism, God's suncatcher, that Juliet gifted us with this morning.

Because, my friends, we are sisters and brothers in Christ and with one another. In a time of division and polarization, **sisterhood** and **brotherhood** are themselves prophetic.

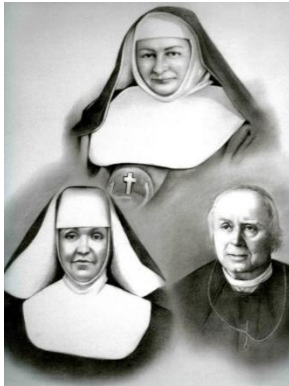
These seeds of hope urgently need to be nourished in our time in a particular way. Yet, if you reflect back on your founding stories, I suspect you will find that these are the same seeds that were sown by your founding persons, in their time. They took risks for the Gospel. "Risk," writes theologian John Paul Lederach, "means we take a step toward and into the unknown. ... Risk means stepping into a place where you are not sure what will come or what will happen."⁵

Our founding women and men embraced a holy curiosity and went on their own pilgrimage of hope into the unknown to serve the gospel. They had no idea what lay ahead. In some ways this moment in religious life is not all that different from our founding stories. We also don't know what lies ahead. Yet like our founding persons, we trust in the abundance of God's love, and we have the rootedness of the legacy of generations of our sisters and brothers. We are here today, because of *their* faith, courage, and witness.

At the same time, we are called to *this* time, NOW. We, the present generations, bring our unique mix of experiences and diversity of gifts to the project of reseeded hope today and

tomorrow. As theologian Bernard Lee observed: “Charism cannot be recovered; it can only be reinvented, and that happens when a community’s deep story speaks effective, felt words to the transformation of some of the world’s most pressing needs and aspirations.”⁶

We must read the signs of the times to be effective in our reseeding tasks, just as our founders did in their time. Reseeding must also be rooted in our histories, our deep stories.



These are the founding persons who planted the Seeds of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace: Mother Francis Clare (Margaret Anna Cusack), Mother Evangelista (Honorina Gaffney), and Bishop Edward Gilpin Bagshawe. At the profession of our very first sisters in Nottingham, England, in 1884, Bishop Bagshawe said to the new community: “You will hope, if God blesses your work, to sow the seeds of peace in modern society.”⁷

The context of their time was the industrial revolution, growing economic inequality, and migration. Bishop Bagshawe was an early proponent of Catholic Social Teaching, writing an economic pastoral a few years before Pope Leo XIII wrote *Rerum Novarum*.

Bishop Bagshawe spoke to the sisters professing their vows about the purpose of the new institute. Remember, this was almost 142 years ago: “To secure this divine peace for ourselves and to procure its blessings for [others] in the midst of the sin, turmoil, and restless anxiety of this modern world is the object of your Institute.” If we as Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace ever wonder about the significance of our charism and mission of peace today, we need only read the signs of the times and reflect on his words. They root us in our purpose and guide our way.

Mother Evangelista was one of the sisters who professed vows that day in St. Barnabas Cathedral. Just four years later, after the tumultuous departure of our founder, Mother Francis Clare, Mother Evangelista became the first Superior General—she had, by the way, not yet professed final vows! Mother Evangelista experienced firsthand the challenging early years of the congregation, which she later described to another bishop as filled with “poverty, humiliations, trials, difficulties, disappointments, failures, etc.”⁸ Chaos, it seems, was very familiar to her. I believe she must have been rooted in a deep spiritual life to provide such steady leadership as she navigated the uncertainty of our early decades.

I find glimpses of these spiritual roots in our congregation archives, especially her last words, reportedly spoken to the sisters gathered around as she lay on her death bed: “Stick to your colours. Uphold the simplicity, unity, and family spirit that have always animated

and been the distinctive character of our Community. . . . Be kind to one another.”⁹ In other words, stay rooted in who we are and nourish one another as sisters with everyday actions.

I imagine Mother Evangelista must have reflected on the Parable of the Sower. She seemed to instinctively know that seeds sown on rocky ground—such as a community experiencing division or floundering in despair—would not and could not flourish. Rather, seed sown on rich soil, nourished by shared values, hope, love, mutuality, and respect, “bears fruit and yields a hundred or sixty or thirtyfold” (Matt 13:23).

As it happens, we do have the reflections of Pope Leo XIV on the Parable of the Sower from a General Audience in May.¹⁰

“A rather unusual sower goes out to sow, but does not care where the seed falls,” he writes. “He throws the seeds even where it is unlikely they will bear fruit: on the path, on the rocks, among the thorns. This attitude surprises the listener and induces him to ask: how come? We are used to calculating things – and at times it is necessary – but this does not apply in love! The way in which this ‘wasteful’ sower throws the seed is an image of the way God loves us. ... This is how he loves us: he does not wait for us to become the best soil, but he always generously gives us his word. Perhaps by seeing that he trusts us, the desire to be better soil will be kindled in us. This is hope, founded on the rock of God’s generosity and mercy.”



Reflecting on this painting by Vincent Van Gogh, *The sower at sunset*, Pope Leo continues: “That image of the sower in the blazing sun also speaks to me of the farmer’s toil. And it strikes me that, behind the sower, Van Gogh depicted the grain already ripe. It seems to me an image of hope: one way or another, the seed has borne fruit. We are not sure how, but it has. At the

centre of the scene, however, is not the sower, who stands to the side; instead, the whole painting is dominated by the image of the sun, perhaps to remind us that it is God who moves history, even if he sometimes seems absent or distant. It is the sun that warms the clods of earth and makes the seed ripen.”

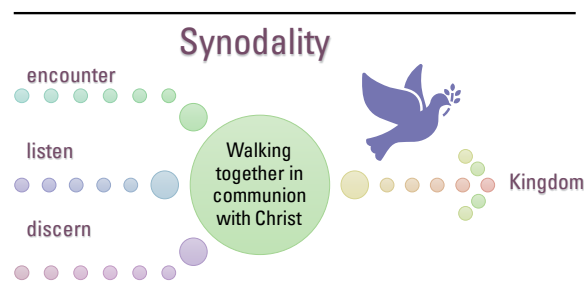
He concludes his reflection this way: “Dear brothers and sisters, in what situation of life today is the Word of God reaching us? Let us ask the Lord for the grace always to welcome this seed that is his Word. And if we realize we are not a fruitful soil, let us not be discouraged, but let us ask him to work on us more to make us become a better terrain.”

How might we help each other to become a better terrain? I invite you to adopt synodality as one way of proceeding during this reseeding time. Synodality can help us to listen to all

the voices and recognize the abundance already among us. Synodality roots us together on our pilgrim journey through relationship.

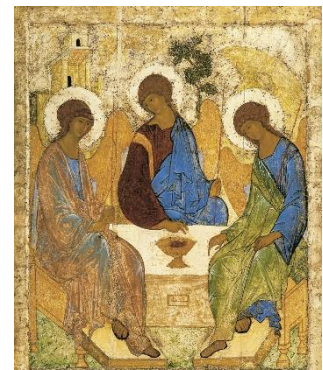
Pope Leo has thankfully recommitted the church to the synodal path begun by Pope Francis, who observed: “The world in which we live, and which we are called to love and serve, even with its contradictions, demands that the Church strengthen cooperation in all areas of her mission. It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.”¹¹

We might be forgiven if we think of synodality simply in terms of the meetings in Rome, or which may or may not have happened in our local churches and diocese. To be honest, it’s not the easiest of concepts to define, but here is my attempt in graphic form.



The 2023 Synthesis report defines synodality as “Christians walking in communion with Christ toward the Kingdom along with the whole of humanity.” Synodality is “oriented towards mission.” Synodal practice, such as gathering at each level for reciprocal listening, dialogue, and discernment, “renders Christ present in the Holy Spirit, each taking decisions in accordance with their responsibilities.”¹²

Or, using the shorthand made popular by Pope Francis, synodality calls us to encounter, listen, and discern. These are the three verbs that he said characterize synodality.¹³ Through encounter, we are “open to solidarity with people who are different from” ourselves. By listening, we are “seeking to understand one another’s perspective.” And with discernment, we are “making space for the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴ We must follow the Spirit’s lead through this change of era. The most important thing to remember is that the Holy Spirit is the protagonist of synodality.¹⁵



The relational dynamic of the Trinity is the model of synodal power. As Fr. James Okoye, one of our pre-Congress speakers, observes: “Synodality translates the trinitarian

dynamism with which God comes to meet humanity into spiritual attitudes and ecclesial processes.”¹⁶

Theologian Serena Noceti expands this understanding with real life implications. “Becoming a synodal church requires rethinking the forms of the exercise of power.”¹⁷ This power is rooted in and for the service of the love of our Trinitarian God. Its source is not human. Given what we know about human beings, this is a very good thing indeed.

I think it is safe to say that our relationship with power is complicated in religious life, whether in deciding who gets to choose the television programs in our community rooms to formation and leadership. Religious men and women are human, and so our lives necessarily involve power dynamics. We also cannot avoid power dynamics in our church and our world. For now, however, let’s honestly consider power in our relationships as religious sisters and brothers.

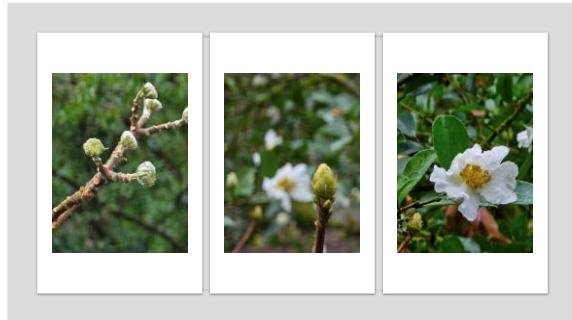
Reorienting our understanding and exercise of power gives us the capacity to build up God’s reign of love and mercy, rather than serve our human agendas. When we center our understanding and participation in God’s love, we can let go of some of our fears and past history that might get in the way or cloud our ability to exercise power in a healthy manner.

Instead of “focusing on the one’s ‘power over’ all; synodality involves enhancing every form of “power with.” At the same time, synodality “does not absolutize the ‘power of one’; instead, it recognizes and promotes the multiplicity of powers in the church and seeks to overcome hierarchical logic.”¹⁸

How might this understanding of synodal power influence and impact our initial and ongoing formation programs? We make a life-long commitment to God to journey with the members of our religious community. It seems to me that for a Buon Camino—a good journey—we need to develop, nurture, practice, and model healthy and life-giving ways of relating and exercising power. This begins with our relationship with God, with ourselves, and with our community members. This extends to our relationships with our family members, friends, partners in mission, and those we serve. Before we can witness to and advocate for the healthy exercise of power in our church and world, we need to begin at home in our own religious communities.

Formation for healthy ways of relating is mission critical. Right relationship is an essential element of religious life, and a seed of hope desperately needed in our world. As Pope Francis observed in *Fratelli Tutti*: “In today’s world, the sense of belonging to a single human family is fading, and the dream of working together for justice and peace seems an outdated utopia. What reigns instead is a cool, comfortable and globalized indifference ...

Isolation and withdrawal into one's own interests are never the way to restore hope and bring about renewal. Rather, it is closeness; it is the culture of encounter. Isolation, no; closeness, yes. Culture clash, no; culture of encounter, yes.” (30)

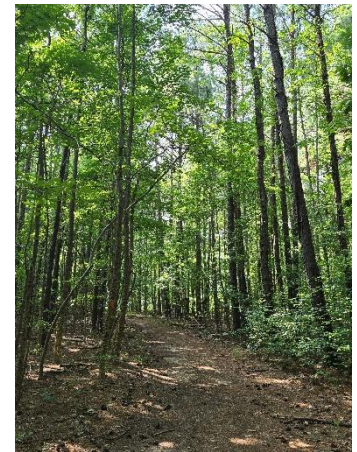


He continues ... “God continues to sow abundant seeds of goodness in our human family” (54). When we leave this Congress and return to our busy community and ministry lives, what seeds of goodness and hope will we seed in our religious families? In our lives? In the lives of those we accompany on their journey?

We continue on paths rooted in the examples of Jesus and our founding persons. What roots will nourish you on the journey ahead?

I invite you to ponder these questions as you go with me on a short walk in the forest. [1 minute video of forest walk]

My sisters and brothers ... I wish you a Good Journey as pilgrims of hope and prophets of light.



Followed by Table Process and Commitment:

What did I hear that surprised or challenged me?

How might this impact my ministry of formation?

Commitments:

- What abundant seeds of hope will I sow?
- What roots will I draw nourishment from?

¹ Hope 2025 was organized by the Leadership Collaborative. <https://www.thelc.global/programs-1/hope2025>

² <https://www.iubilaeum2025.va/en.html>

³ Pope Francis. Letter to the President of the Pontifical Council for Promoting New Evangelization for the Jubilee 2025, February 11, 2022.

⁴ Pope Francis, *Meeting with the Participants in the Fifth Convention of the Italian Church*, November 10, 2015.

⁵ John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 163.

⁶ Bernard Lee, *The Beating of Great Wings: A Worldly Spirituality for Active, Apostolic Communities*, (Mystic, CT: Twenty Third Publications, 2004), 5.

⁷ “The Sisters of Peace in the Diocese of Nottingham,” *The Tablet* (January 12, 1884), 72.

⁸ Mother Evangelista Gaffney, “Response to the Bishops’ Questions,” 1920.

⁹ Sisters of St. Joseph of Peace, *Mother’s Advice to Us from her Deathbed*, 1920.

¹⁰ Pope Leo XIV, General Audience, May 21, 2025.

¹¹ Pope Francis, <https://international.la-croix.com/news/religion/a-synodal-church-for-the-third-millennium/14908>.

¹² Synod of Bishops, *Synthesis Report*, 2023. ch 1, h.

¹³ Pope Francis, *Homily for Opening of the Synodal Path*, October 10, 2021.

¹⁴ Catholic Leadership Institute, Leadership Roundtable, Leadership Conference of Women Religious, and Program for Discerning Leadership, *Synodal Leadership Formation Course Facilitator Guide*, 26. This free six-session synodal curriculum is available on the RFC website, <https://relforcon.org/synodal-formation>.

¹⁵ James Chukwuma Okoye, *Understanding the Synod on Synodality 2023 Session: A Community of Mutual Empowerment*, 18-19.

¹⁶ Okoye, 18.

¹⁷ Serena Nocetti, *Reforming the Church: A Synodal Way of Proceeding*, 83

¹⁸ Nocetti, 83.