

April 4, 2025

*"By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way  
and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light,  
so that they could travel by day or night."  
Exodus 13:21*

Dear Sisters:

Gordon Cosby once said, *"When my consciousness reaches up to God, and out to a person whom God loves, I yearn for them to be together. As I hold them together in my imagination, as I hold them in the orbit of my love, I am engaging in intercessory prayer."* You have held each other in prayer and, through it all, you have grown in compassion, understanding, and acceptance of both the gifts you have to offer and the brokenness you carry throughout your lives. In this journey of communal discernment, you are discovering, learning and growing in your love for one another and our God. In this journey, you are becoming more honest, open, and mutual. The risen Christ is among us as we walk this Emmaus journey.

*"From the wilderness of sin, the whole congregation of the Israelites journeyed by stages as the Lord commanded"* (Exodus 17:1). You are moving as a whole congregation through the spiral of transformation in stages, each time growing into a new awareness, each time maturing in your interdependence, each time deepening your relationship with God and one another. Each time you are learning to embrace your vulnerability as well as your abundance. Each time you are shaping and reshaping the kind of leadership and governance you hope will bring forth new life.

As a result of your work on the emerging model of leadership and governance, you have begun to give voice to the kinds of values you hope will be enfolded. You have begun to give shape to the structures that you hope will support these values. During the final day of our Regional Gatherings, you received a synthesis of your work, and you offered additional feedback. All of this will be brought to the discerners during their second retreat. They will work to articulate further what this emerging model might become. Once again, this material will be brought back to you.

At the conclusion of the Regional Gatherings, 18 sisters have *decided* to remain in the process to further discern the call to serve in some role in leadership.

|                        |                              |                           |
|------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Sr. Bernadette Schuler | Sr. Jo Strevia               | Sr. Marinez Arantes Silva |
| Sr. Catherine Cahill   | Sr. Judith Terrameo          | Sr. Melissa Scholl        |
| Sr. Cindy Matthews     | Sr. Kathy Maire              | Sr. Odette Haddad         |
| Sr. Colleen Brady      | Sr. Lilian Cristina Pinheiro | Sr. Pat Klemm             |
| Sr. Goianira Silva     | Sr. Liliane Araújo Costa     | Sr. Patricia Shirley      |
| Sr. Gwen Melhado       | Sr. Margaret Magee           | Sr. Patricia Tyre         |

The four sisters who decided to withdraw from further discerning this call were:

- Sr. Dolores O'Brien
- Sr. Liz Schumacher
- Sr. Lucy Cardet
- Sr. Marlene Weidenborner

All of these discerners were blessed and thanked by all of you for the hard work they have been doing on your congregation's behalf.

Eighteen sisters will attend the **May 15 – 18, Discernment Retreat II in Tampa, Florida**. The goals for retreat will be as follows:

**GOAL I      WE WILL REFLECT UPON, CLARIFY, AND FURTHER DEVELOP THE EVOLVING APPROACHES TO LEADERSHIP/GOVERNANCE BY:**

- Building upon the March Regional Gatherings
- Reflecting upon the purpose, role and competencies needed for emerging structures of leadership/governance
- Asking whose gifts might best meet these desired roles
- Probing the deeper invitation: Identifying the shifts in patterns and values you are trying to embrace in this new paradigm.

**GOAL II      WE WILL DISCERN HOW EACH SISTER MIGHT BEST SERVE THE CONGREGATION IN A NEW APPROACH TO LEADERSHIP/GOVERNANCE BY:**

- Striving to approach discernment with greater trust, interior freedom, and detachment from the outcome
- Reflecting upon, and assimilating, your experiences and feedback you received during the March Regional Gatherings, as well as other feedback given to you
- Exploring understandings, contributions, and interpersonal compatibilities for "teaming" (e.g., expectations; preferred styles, struggles, etc.)
- Reflecting upon your personal readiness to partner as leaders in shaping the future of the congregation.
- Articulating discerned "leanings" regarding your willingness to be available to serve in leadership.

Along with these sisters, please remember that all of you, as *co-discerners*, are in discernment. We wish to offer a few guidelines for how all of you can best participate going forward.

We encourage further conversation: "I haven't had a chance to talk with Sister Sally!"

We have had planned and facilitated processes throughout this journey of discernment. We will have additional conversations during the second Discernment Retreat and during Chapter. These are intended to address specific aspects of discernment. These will address much of what is important to reflect upon, and dialogue about, but not everything can be addressed to every individual's satisfaction or need.

The specific conversations that you might need are important for *every sister to claim and arrange to do* beyond the planned processes that are provided. While the planned processes are intended to assist you, your discernment is up to each one of you to complete. Please continue to pray, reflect, journal, and consult with others as needed. Please reflect upon what you need to talk about, and with whom, so that you do not come to the election saying, "I haven't had a chance to talk with Sr. Sally."

## **Stay in the present moment**

As we move further into this discernment process and Chapter journey, and pieces of the puzzle begin to come together, you may experience strong urges to "put the cart before the horse." In other words, you might try to anticipate, predict, and say aloud to others: "*Well, it looks like so and so is going to be elected;*" or "*I sure hope so and so drops out.*"

Our request is that you *stay in the present and honor the process*. Allow yourself the gift of the present moment. Make room for the Spirit to continue to move within, and among, you. It is natural and helpful to begin to wonder who might fit with whom and how things might progress. Making sense of it all, assimilating and integrating all the new information, imagining, and wondering are all important and very helpful to do...repeatedly... as you seek direction, clarity and wisdom.

What is *not* helpful in discernment is for you to internally *assume* that your wonderings are well-founded predictions. It is not helpful to cajole others regarding for whom they *ought to* vote or suggest that you have better judgment than they about the outcome. This will preempt the work of the Spirit, foreclose any additional wisdom, and abort any further discernment from occurring. Stay in the present moment and let the members of the Chapter continue, and confirm, your communal discernment with the canonical election in July-August.

## **Pray, reflect, and support one another**

We cannot stress enough that discernment is a *faith journey*, not simply a method of decision-making or a job interview. Beyond information gathering, communal discernment provides opportunities to deepen your relationship with God and with one another. Discernment calls you to search for answers to questions about who you are as Franciscan women of Allegany, what you uniquely contribute to our world, with whom you shall partner, and what is your desired vision for the future.

Beyond all the specific questions in this discernment process, these perennial questions of your faith life are fundamental to the process. Please take time, not only to reflect upon the information that is being shared, but also to ponder how this informs your personal and communal faith journey. Please pray to deepen and integrate your understanding of yourself and what God may be intending for you and your community in this process.

You are four months away from Chapter. Many have commented about the gifts that this journey is already offering your congregation (e.g., deeper understanding and appreciation of one another and of communal discernment; new-found connections among the emerging themes, etc.). This journey can continue to yield such gifts, and more, if you let it. Be patient, and let the journey unfold one step at a time.

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We ask that you pray and reflect with all the information that you have gathered along the way. Pray especially for those sisters attending the second Discernment Retreat. Continue conversations with your sisters in discernment. Your support means a great deal to them.

As well, may we continue to pray for one another.

*Ted Dunn, Ph.D. and Beth Lipsmeyer, Ph.D.*